

# DESPITE ALL OBSTACLES

YOUR MOTIVATIONAL PARTNER THROUGH THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES IN LIFE, DEDICATED TOWARD STRIVING TO ACHIEVE LOFTY GOALS. BYLINES ON FAMILY ISSUES, OUTDOOR ADVENTURES, ART, NATURE, ENDURANCE RACING, WORLDWIDE TRAVEL, FOOD & SPIRITS, TOBACCO, AND VARIOUS HOBBIES.

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MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2009

## **A Thousand Failures**

I was on top of the world, with my family in trail. Alpha male, trophy wife, great job, beautiful kids. Then came the separations. And war. And jail. No job. Bankruptcy. Foreclosure. Failed business. Loss of friends. Our family remained strong; my wife was the emergent rock. And now we're picking up the pieces of our life, one small victory at a time. You know what? We're winning. Stay tuned for more.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2009

## **Patton, Roosevelt, and the apostle Paul**

"Success is how high you bounce when you hit the bottom." A lot of us can relate to the 'hitting the bottom' part. This simple phrase by Georgie Patton is one of many I turn to to keep me motivated after a heavy blow. Teddy Roosevelt says that "The boy who is going to make a great man must not make up his mind merely to overcome a thousand obstacles, but to win in spite of a thousand repulses and defeats."

I find these quotes to be paramount to my positive psychological development.

Patton stresses the importance of self-confidence in a letter to his son. He defines courage as "the fear of holding on a minute longer." Pretty profound man.

The Biblical apostle Paul was no stranger to ill fate. The man was spat on, jailed, and eventually beheaded for his faith. He says to "count it all Joy when you fall into diverse temptations (various trials); knowing this, that the trying (testing) of your faith works patience." He also says that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Next is probably my all-time favorite, also from Teddy Roosevelt. He talks about the 'man in the arena,' who I envision as being the blue-collar worker, or the person who continually puts out (I hear you, chuckling perverts) or puts their neck on the line in the accomplishment of daily activities. "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, who strives valiantly, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Ladies and gents, jot them down and put 'em in your pocket. Your notebook. Your wallet. And your fortune cookie reading of the day is: "The essential conditions of everything you do must be choice, love, & passion."

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2009

## **American Dreamwriters, LLC**

Today I published the Organizational Charter for a non-profit writing company, the 501 c(3) package for which is still pending. Simultaneously, I registered a for-profit contract writing company locally. The nonprofit idea started when two individuals talked to me about helping them write and publish their books...it grew into an idea to assemble a team of writers--local, remote, whatever--and start

interviewing folks to keep an ongoing history of key US events through the eyes of the beholders, so-to-speak. Present target: The Greatest Generation; they're dying off at the cyclic rate. With a good marketing plan, a loud voice, and a little fiscal backing, this could be a go. Hey, I may spit out a lot of new ideas, but I'll bet Thomas Edison achieved looney status in his locale before he perfected his contribution to society. Roll on, dreamers!

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2009

### **A Veritable Smorgasbord**

The Hungarians have this great snack food. Okay, they've got lots of them. But this one, THE one, is called Langos (pronounced "Lahn Gosh" with a long O in gosh). Now, I'm not gonna pretend to know what kind of magical ingredients go into the fried pancake that the treat's flavorful empire is built upon, but the gist is this: toast something (bread, bagel, pita, whatever), rub it down with a little butter, okay alottabutter, then with the sliced end of a garlic clove. If you're like me, you'll run the garlic through a press, or dice it finely, then salt it, let it sit, add a few drops of EVOO and work it into a spread. Slather the bread. Now cover in a thin layer of sour cream. I like to sprinkle a pinch of sugar over the top of that. Now pour a glass of Cabernet and keep your dukes up to ward off two-legged household scavengers. If you're a guy, don't forget to bust out your Sham-WOW! and wipe down the mess you just made. And slap yourself if you have a Sham-WOW!

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2009

### **The Musical Spice of Life**

Variety in music? But of course! Don't limit yourself to two or three genres; broaden your musical horizons. Here's a list of my favorite songs...paired with my

favorite "best" activities (or not).

Dinner music: anything Dean Martin.

Moonlight Serenade, by Glen Miller

Running:

Calabria, by Enur (Genre--Funky?)

Smack That, by Eminem & Akon (Rap)

Gimme More, by Britney Spears (Pop)

Promiscuous, by Nellie Furtado (Pop)

Let it Rock, by Kevin Rudolf & L'il Wayne (Hip-hop)

Love Lockdown, by Kanye West (Hip-hop)

Dancing: Dance Like This, by Wyclef Jean (Dirty Dancing Havana Nights Soundtrack)

Mueve la Cadera, by Proyecto Uno (Spanish Pop)

Drinking song: The 8th of November, by Big 'n' Rich (Country)

Um, yeah:

Slow Motion, by Juvenile & Soulja Slim (Rap)

Stir it Up, by Bob Marley (Reggae)

Aggressive 'make up' song:

The Chemicals Between Us, by Bush (Alternative)

Feel Like Making Love, by Bad Company (Rock)

Karaoke solo: Cumbersome, by Seven Mary Three (New Rock)

Karaoke male / female duet: Killing Me Softly

Karaoke buddies / group: What I got, by Sublime

Spinning / cycling: Maneater, by Nellie Furtado (Pop)

Fighting: Bodies, by Drowning Pool (Hard Rock)

Stupefy, by Disturbed (Rock)

Best new country music: Kenny Chesney. Phenomenal songs, stories, music videos, concerts.

"There Goes My Life," "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problems," "Anything But Mine," "The Good

Stuff," "Back Where I come From," "Don't Blink," "I Go Back," "Live Those Songs,"

"Down

the Road," "When the Sun Goes Down..."

"Nothing" song:

No Rain, by Blind Melon (Alternative)

Round Here, by Counting Crows (Alternative)

Christian song:

Slow Fade, by Casting Crowns

Missing Person, by Michael W. Smith

In the Light, version by DC Talk

Reality Prayer, by Mercy Me

Best mixed song: Boulevard of Broken Songs, by Green Day / Oasis / Aerosmith (Alternative)

Tear jerker: Sweet Jesus, by Gary Chapman (Christian)

Gospel: Shackles, by Mary Mary (New Gospel)

The River, by Noel Gourdin (New Gospel)

Stomp, by Kirk Franklin aka God's Property (New Gospel)

Disney song: Bella Notte, from Lady & the Tramp

Thinking music: Fire & Rain, by James Taylor

Cruising Music:

Anything Chuck Berry

Song from a musical:

Edelweiss, from the Sound of Music Soundtrack

Love song:

I'd Die Without You, by PM Dawn (Wierd genre)

Just Another Day Without You, by John Secada (Spanish, Pop)

Everything I Do, by Bryan Adams (80's / 90's Pop, Rock)

Old rap song: Passin' Me By, by the Pharcyde (Rap)

Rock ballad: Have You Ever Needed Someone So Bad, by Def Leppard (Rock)

Smooth relaxing:

By Your Side, by Sade (Jazz, Lover's Rock)

Daughters, by John Mayer

Last song: The Dance, by Garth Brooks (Country)

Indie: Good Man, by Indie Arie (Indie Pop)

Cool apologetic: Cold, by Crossfade (Rock)

Classic American:

Jack & Diane, by John Cougar (Mellencamp)

I'm on Fire, by The Boss  
Folsom Prison / Ring of Fire, by Johnny Cash  
Face the Flag / Ballad of the Green Beret, by John Wayne  
Mustang Sally, by Johnny Lee Hooker

Lullabye:

All the Pretty Little Ponies, by Catherine Raney (Flicka Soundtrack)

All time Favorites:

Fuel--In My Hands

Bob Marley--Mellow Mood, Could You Be Loved, No Woman...

Creed--What's This Life For, My Own Prison, One Last Breath

Puddle of Mudd--Blurry, Psycho

Anything Louis Armstrong

Inspirational:

Wind Beneath My Wings, by Bette Midler

Chariots of Fire, by (Avengelis?)

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2009

## House Rules

We have four rules in our house, that apply to our kids. (1) Love your siblings more than your toys & stuff, or the stuff goes out the window. Loving, sharing, and giving to each other is mandatory, no exceptions. (2) Respect momma. She eats first, she's attended to first, her doors are always pre-opened, and her coffee's fixed first. (3) Eat everything. That doesn't mean to finish your plate; it means to eat whatever type of food is set in front of you. I tell the kids that daddy doesn't like eggplant, but mama does. If she decides to make eggplant, I'll eat it. As a result, our kids like garlic, onions, tomatoes, ethnic foods, spicy stuff, you name

it. We pray before we eat, we follow the basic rules of etiquette and heavily enforce tableside manner--except for elbows on the table in a relaxed environment--and we can take our kids to any pricy restaurant with pride. (4) Movies and video games are reserved for Friday nights, which over the years have become a virtual free-for-all of pillow forts & pillow fights, a cornucopia of candy and snacks, and a stay-up-as late-as-you-can-handle night, with some exceptions.

Everything else in the house is negotiable. A little trash talk is encouraged. Wrestling is allowed, most of the time. Coffee and wine are allowed. Supervised cooking is allowed. My boys have carried pocket knives since they were each about 4 years old. The boys, 6 and 8, drive vehicles whenever we have wide open spaces (like grandma & grandpa's field). Lily puts on mama's makeup. We're not scared of markers and play-doh. Our kids know better than to misuse these.

When raising kids, different strokes for different folks I suppose. Looking at our own, I'd have it no other way.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2009

## Terciera Island



The Azores are a small collection of Portuguese islands isolated in the Atlantic, about 2/3 of the way across the water from the US to Europe. The islands are fun and enigmatic, with rock-cliff coasts and quaint fishing villages, azure pools and hidden coves, Mediterranean-esque fields of cultivated wine grapes and wild Anise, and a ridiculously low volume of tourism.



Terciera Island is home to Lajes Air Field, which is the official airport of the Azores (or *Acores*, per the locals), is shared by a small US Air Force base of the same name (Lajes). It was here that we would often stop during "mac" hops when I was kid growing up overseas as a military

brat. The Military Airlift Command (MAC) later became the Air Mobility Command (AMC), but it still offers a great--and free--way for US troops and their families to travel worldwide. Later, as a crew member on Marine KC-130 cargo tankers, this would become one of my watering holes.



The island looks incredibly quaint from the air. Fields are sectioned off with stones, and drop in tiered or stepped fashion all the way to the water. Sheep gather in small flocks. Unlike other islands around the world, the water surrounding the Azores is very deep and dark blue, which provides excellent contrast to the white wave tips as they slam into the weathered sandy cliffs all around Terciera.

On base, the aviator-types hang out at the bowling alley. Still in their flight suits after a long flight, my crew would taste the best of both worlds, washing down some of America's best mushroom-swiss burgers with Portugal's own best, Sagres beer. After the beers, Steve Cheatham and Reuben Hill would inevitably prey on local yokel Air Force girls, others in the

crew would head back to their rooms and shut the roladen, blocking even the slightest light from entering their windows. After burning a \$50 on the poker slots, and in blatant disregard to the crew concept, I'd steal a walk down the steep zigzag path overlooking the airfield and make my way out the gate, too cheap for a cab and too lazy to don running shoes to make an adventure out of it.

Out the gate, I stay straight through a few rows of houses. A peddler's selling liquor. I buy a local's cheap version of Ouzo, which warms the chilly wind coming directly at me from the water; I also make a note to pick up a short, squat bottle of Mateus (the typically rose-colored Portuguese wine that bears my name) on my way back. A short trip across a steeply-tapered field brings me to a small harbor to my right, and the start of some beautiful cliffs to my left that wrap around the island for several miles. I explore the cliffs from boulder to boulder, collecting trinkets of nature and occasionally grasping the knotty cliff face as a boulder I was standing on gets swallowed up in white foam. The discolored rocks ten feet overhead mark what I presume to be the high water line. This could turn into a dangerous situation very quickly, so I decide not to venture too far.

After exploring for an hour or better, I made my way back to the small harbor. Three small fishing boats were in port, and one of the boat captains motioned me over. What he had was absolutely astonishing to me. Wrapped in a large piece of leather was a collection of assorted whalebone, each having intricate, authentic, and original scrimshaw art on it. If only I'd been carrying an extra \$30...there was no known ATM for miles, I was walking, and his crewman was readying the craft to de-port and make way. I took a mental snapshot and hoped to catch the vagabond artist again at a future date...several trips later, I never found him, or any authentic whalebone for that matter.

When you find yourself in Terciera, or St. Miguel, or Lisbon on the mainland, grab a seat and a nice view, down some cold Sagres, and save me a label. Until then, follow some of my stories around the world in blogs soon to come...

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2009

## The Snozzberries Taste Like Snozzberries

My coffee cup has just been reloaded and set to "stun." It is black and free of sweetener, not because I think I'm John Wayne, not because I have a penchant for the plain, and not necessarily because I like my women black, hot, and bitter.

I'm not entirely against foo-foo. I'll do hot cocoa, or powdered-cocoa-in-my-coffee mocha, a hot toddy, hot spiced cider, or hot German gluwein. In my hot tea (my household prefers tangy wild Sumac), I typically use cream and sugar in the tradition of the Brits. Two lumps for me.

My coffee cup, which is an old and crackle-bottomed piece of Polish pottery, always has room for a little nip. I keep my shelves stocked with every alcoholic flavor that could even remotely be considered an acoutrement d'cafe.

But there's something about black coffee. Brewed correctly, the liquid can harness the very aroma that wafts through the house and wakes other members of the family, reminiscent of an early Folger's commercial. Add cream and sugar, and the whole flavor changes. The simplicity of pure water trickling through a mound of ground beans, drawing the essence of each bean through the filter and ultimately into my cup...it's what I look forward to each morning, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2009

## Treasure Hunting in North Carolina



Near the end of the Neuse River, where it meets the Intercoastal Waterway, there is a 200' strand of beach where recurring favorable tidal conditions regularly unearth thousands of fossil shark teeth. These range in size from a few millimeters long to the size of your hand, and come from several different types of sharks. Some teeth are long and skinny, some are almost barb-shaped, many still have perfectly serrated edges. My wife and I used to head out after heavy rains and collect them up by the handfuls. The strand also produces fossil antlers, whale bone fragments, porpise inner ear bones, the jaw plates of skates, and in one instance, the full-sized molar of a mastadon. The shark teeth that emerge in this area are pitch black and very shiny, and can also be found sparsely (very rare finds) from the Carolina coast to Delaware's Calvert Cliffs. A yellowish-white or brown type of fossil shark teeth can be found on Florida's Sanibel Island, Texas' Corpus Christi, and have reportedly been unearthed at inland locations such as Smithfield, VA.

The Croatan Forest of Eastern North Carolina has a large black bear sanctuary, where by chance I have observed black bears, red and gray foxes, and a family of unreal-sized Delmarva Fox Squirrels in their natural habitat. I would collect pignolas (pine nuts) from the forest floor for snacking, and have encountered some beautiful wild orchids. One of my favorite tidbits of knowledge about this forest, is the locations of various carnivorous

plants. Venus flytraps, pitcher plants, and sundews can all be found here.

The Uwharre State Forest is the first stretch of terrain, when approaching from the coast, that one will experience rocks and small cliffs and areas that foster gold and precious stones. Break out your pan or sluice, find an uprooted tree along one of the streams like "Dutchman's Creek," and start carefully sifting through buckets of soil or mud. Dry or clear, shallow stream beds are a good place to look for Native American spoor...my buddy Natcher found a nice hatchet head out there. A week's worth of panning has the potential of filling a small vial with gold. While you're at it, drop a trotline off your canoe and snag some monster catfish for the fire later. If you're lucky, you might see a few wild hogs.

Chunky Gal Mountain is out past Asheville, nestled in the Smokies a little ways from the Appalachian Trail. It is freely accessible and not well-known, and the waters flowing below the mountain are filled with garnets and occasional sapphires & rubies. Emeralds are found in the area as well, but not on this mountain. My wife and I made a fantastic find on this mountain years ago, when we uncovered a vein of rubies after cracking boulders all day. It was enough to give some geologists that we showed a collective hard-on.

With that, I hope you'll start studying up, and that you'll plan a trip to Carolina soon. Don't forget your hat and whip, Dr. Jones.

Thursday, February 19, 2009

### **(Lead, Follow,...)**

..."Get the hell out of the way!" I was paraphrasing G. Patton while traveling I-664 yesterday, heading home to Chesapeake, VA from Yorktown with my work partner Larry. A pickup truck 500 yards in front of me loses his left front wheel (not just the tire), and someone slams their little gas sipper into it at 65 mph, disabling their vehicle instantly. The wheel bounces a good 25 feet in the air, over the concrete median wall and into opposite oncoming traffic. It bounces over two cars and clips another, sending it soaring

back over the center wall.

So anyway, I'm now parallel to the airborne wheel, changing lanes and shouting an unheard warning to the second small car that was about to get slammed. I glanced through my rearview just to watch the entire front and windshield of the car behind me get annihilated.

Everybody stopped to help, everyone was okay by the Grace of God. Bringing me to my point: people, don't be idiots. I know you're trying to 'go green.' You, your mother, and the rest of the world. I'm proud of you. We all are. But sacrificing the safety (and potentially, the lives) of your loved ones and yourself--just to save a few bucks on gas and reduce carbon emissions? Seriously???

Bad things happen when you're stupid. I'm not saying that we should all drive tanks to work, but those little one-seater turdmobiles and Prius hybrids have GOT to go!!! Hit a pebble in the road, let alone a West (by gosh) Virginia buck and you may have just bought a one-way ticket off the planet. Yay, low energy effect on the atmosphere!..SPLAT.  
Happy Trails.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2009

## A Tickler, a Teaser

The following is an excerpt from a youth fiction series I've been working on for a while now. Enjoy.

### Chapter 1

Stephen Brower followed the familiar sandy bike trail to his favorite fishing spot, his fishing rod pushed out in front of him like a knight's lance. He rounded the bend and ducked through the bayberry bushes, and jumped off the side of his bike while it crashed on the beach.

“Hey,” said Kyle. “Hey,” Stephen responded. It was the closest thing to a conversation that had been shared between the two ever since Stephen kissed Catherine at the Sadie Hawkins Dance in November. Both boys were, to be perfectly frank, head-over-heels hot for Catherine.

But here they were now. No girls, no kissing, no drama--just two nine-year-old boys, their poles, some bait, and a rare sea of glass. The Brego Bay pier (pronounced ‘bray-go’) was the best spot to not only catch fish, but to see the fish you were casting for.

Brego Bay is located on what is today known as Long Key, south of the small town of Layton near the center of the Florida Keys. It is largely unused for fishing, or for anything for that matter--and the low-lying pier was aged enough so that the wood was nearly white, leached by the sand on the wind and the salt of the sea. Nevertheless, the pier was strong and sturdy.

Kyle was already set up at the end of the pier, a spot reserved for the ‘early bird’ among them. Stephen baited his hook and cast in, being sure not to cross Kyle’s line. He kicked off his flip-flops and sat about ten feet away from Kyle, letting his tanned feet dangle in the cold water.

The boys had eagerly awaited the coming of Spring. It still wasn’t here, but today was the first day that Stephen’s mother agreed that the weather was good enough to let him go to the pier. It was still winter, but it was warm outside. Kyle had been out to the pier twice already, with some single-serving friends of opportunity.

Kyle has a pretty good life, Stephen thought as his eyes traced the fishing line from the tip of his pole down to the water where it terminated. No, he has a really good life. For starters, both of his parents are still together, and they actually like it that way. Then, he gets to do pretty much whatever he wants. He has a brother, he has a sister, and he has tons of friends. And he’s got lots of cool stuff...

Stephen was so lost in his thoughts that he barely noticed the splash. He was vaguely aware of the wooden planks rocking underneath him. Then he snapped out of it, and looked up. Kyle was wrestling the fish of his life! He had kicked the bucket of cut bait into the water and barely had a foothold at the extreme end of the pier. Stephen jumped up and grabbed his shirt in an attempt to pull him back. It was then that he felt the strength of whatever was pulling Kyle.

In an instant, Stephen was gripped with fear. Fear that he had never felt in his life. Without thinking, he let go of Kyle's shirt and fell hard on his butt and hands. "LET GO!" he pleaded with Kyle. "I can't!!!" Kyle attempted to look back at his fallen friend. It all happened so quickly, Stephen's mind could not clearly recall a thing beyond that moment.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2009

## **Mistaken Identity...(from My Small and Mighty Corps)**

### FOREWORD

I didn't punch him in the stomach. I simply poked him in the gut with a "thbbt" fart noise and said "hooHOO!" like the Pillsbury Doughboy. He punched me, though. And my face was covered in spit. "WHO THE \*%\$#! DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!?! DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM? I'M THE &%\$#@\*! SERGEANT MAJOR OF INFANTRY TRAINING BATTALION!" My four-month career in the Marines was over, I just knew it. I mistook the shadowy figure standing beside my rack for my assistant machine gunner, Mike Strobe. Only I could screw up this badly, and on the eve of graduation, of all times. "HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF SOME A-HOLE JUST WALKED UP TO YOU AND SAID (and there's the punch) 'THBBBBT, WOO-HOO!!!' YOU LITTLE..." The whole squad bay was awake now. The halogen lights warmed to life as the last few guys stood on line. What the heck is the base Sergeant Major doing here, anyway?

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2009

## Gaining and Holding Ground

"Dig! Dig! Dig!" These words resounded at football practices in high school. Coach Lambson was hard tac, and he had two simple rules: no grabassing or showboating, and while the ball is in play, do not stop moving your feet. If you're running a trap play, a counter, a sweep, a QB sneak...dig your position. When you experience physical opposition, point your body in your intended direction, get low, get aggressive, and dig dirt. Keep your feet moving at all times. Inches count.

Many years later, I become an urban operations instructor in the Marines. One fundamental concept of assaulting (in order to occupy a building) is to "hold your space." Once you have physically or visually cleared an area, and your weapon is covering the area, do not give that space back by ducking behind a wall. 'Holding space' is an aggressive maneuver that exploits both the mental and physical weakness of your enemy, by driving forward into him. You are the lord of all you survey. *You* control the situation.

These fundamentals, applied to life in the real world, have remained largely unchanged. Hold on to what you have achieved. Hold on to those you love. When times are tough, do not buckle to ambient situational pressures. Hold what you've got, and dig dirt. As long as you're breathing, you're moving forward. You must continue to strive and achieve. Excel. Ever onward and upward.

Me? I buckle. I fail. I lose motivation. I become extremely apathetic, especially of things I consider to be menial in nature. Most of the time, I feel that I'm carrying the weight of my entire world on my shoulders. But my failures aren't for lack of trying. And the devil won't pin me down. I am determined to continually attain new heights in this lifetime, hold my ground, and help others along the way.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2009

## Coffee to Go

I am a black coffee aficionado. This morning, I took the rare opportunity to actually sit and enjoy my coffee, at home, on the couch. I have my favorite brands, my favorite blends, and my favorite methods and machines for brewing--but these days, I seem to settle for less.

The average morning will find me at 7-11, where busybodies from every walk of life flock to the eight continuously-brewed pots like cattle to a salt lick. Don't reach for the "Heavenly Blend," no one touches it, so it becomes old and hellish to drink.

Starbucks makes a great 'dressed up' coffee, but the company is proof positive that if you put enough sugar on a turd, you could probably eat it. Their (naked) black coffee tastes horrible. Don't believe me? Try it against any other black coffee, and even if you're not a coffee drinker, I guarantee that you will find it to be the least palatable.

Hardees, Burger King, and even Dunkin' Donuts each produce Joe that can situationally be either good or bad, depending on a number of factors: who is working on that shift, whether they're coffee drinkers, and what type of food is accompanying the coffee, for instance.

Wawa makes good coffee, but I don't think they can be found everywhere. My top pick? McDonald's. Their coffee is the most consistent among fast brews. Tastes good naked, or if you like it sweetened, it doesn't require 30 packets of sugar. You know what? I think I can see the golden arches from here...

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2009

## England as a Kid

I had just hopped the last fence on my regular shortcut route from school. I was seven. Some guy was driving off with my golden retriever, Thor, tied up in the bed of his truck. I screamed out that some man was stealing my dog, dropped my bookbag, jumped on my bike, and trailed the vehicle through a steady stream of tears while Thor's bark became more and more faint.

In their infinite adult wisdom, my parents did not tell me that they were selling my best friend to some random farmer. They did not tell me that we were moving overseas. They thought it would be in my best interest to just rip the Band-Aid off quickly. When it comes to raising kids, it's trial and error, I suppose.

London, England. Weeks later. We left Heathrow Airport for our bed & breakfast, a stone's throw from the Charles Dickens Museum on Doughty Street. I could only vaguely understand what anyone was saying...within two days, I was yelled at by an old man who accused me of 'oldin the lift (keeping the elevator door open too long) and I was doted on by every woman I met, who collectively called me (and everyone else) "Love." We visited a castle where I pissed on my first electric fence, behind a pear tree near the moat. We visited the Cotswolds, where the thatched-roof houses weren't nearly as cool to me as the fields that were home to swarms of colorful pheasants.

Fish & chips? Keep 'em. As a kid, you could've stuck them in the place where the sun don't shine...along with break-my-teeth British scones. It took years before I developed a taste for those delightful pleasantries. I loved the double-decker buses, I loved the sights and smells, and I was intrigued at seeing holly bushes for the first time. I enjoyed watching my dad get frustrated at navigating the roundabouts. When the adults were pissed about the blizzard of '86 (airport, train stations, vehicle traffic...all shut down), I had the time of my life in a month-long wonderland.

The Dover cliffs were white with chalk and seagulls. Until the Channel Tunnel was

completed in 1994, Dover docks were the gateway to Europe from the British Isles. I probably made that roundtrip transit ten times growing up. And that's where I fell in love with slot machines. Drive your car onto a ferry at the B&O terminal, and play slots in a smoke-filled hallway until you hear 'Bonjour' in Calais. There was something really cool about holding a 1 Pound coin in your hand. It was small but thick, and heavy. Win 15 pounds, and you actually feel like you've done something.

Of course, the tourist traps were great as a kid. Big Ben, the new bridge, brass rubbings at Westminster Abbey, and the classic changing of the guard at Buckingham. I'd love to explore England these days, but back then, you could've crapped on the world...just gimme my freakin dog back.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2009

## Veal Saltimbocca a la MJ

So you're having company over. Or maybe cooking for someone special. It may be that you just want a nice meal without leaving home. Here's one of my favorites; it was top choice at one of our Italian hangouts in Wilmington, NC. It took many evenings as a guest before I could replicate the flavor in our own kitchen. It's a 30- to 40-minute meal, and you'll need veal, fresh peas, a moderate to bold red wine, some fresh sage, sliced cheese of choice (must be compatible), 8 oz. fresh mushrooms, two cloves of garlic, salt, pepper, extra-virgin olive oil, one tbs.(-ish) butter and some unbleached flour.

Most of the time I make this using large (unfrozen) chicken breasts, not veal. The fresh peas may be replaced by asparagus tips, snap green beans, broccoli, baby carrots, or any combination of these. My cheese of choice for this recipe is thick-sliced provolone or swiss, but (1) do not use the swiss on veal, and (2) the traditional Saltimbocca calls for fresh mozzarella (white and in water, as used in Caprese) and Marsala wine, though I'm partial to (1) Cabernet, or (2) Merlot...basically, whatever's on our counter that day. Use a big pan (or two separate pans) if catering a group larger than four people, so that your meal can be prepared for everyone at once. It takes too long to cook in waves.

Prepare your veal or chicken by pounding it. Slice each piece across the breadth so that it may be stuffed in Cordon Bleu style. Open each cut and lay a thin slice of prosciutto, topped with a slice of provolone and fresh sage leaf. Fold the veal back together, dust in unbleached flour and saute in olive oil over medium heat until browned (both sides). Drop a basket of fresh mushrooms and stir them around for a few minutes. Add a spoonful of butter. Finely chop or press your cloves of garlic, add to the pan and stir around for about a minute. Add wine. Granted, some drinking wines are not meant to be cooked with, but I never followed that rule and my meal turned out great every time. When cooking with wine, as a rule of thumb, don't use any bottle that you would not drink as a stand-alone glass.

How much wine do you add? If I'm cooking for two, I'll pour from a full wine glass. If it's a meal for, say, 6 to 8 individuals, I'll drop half a bottle. And a splash as needed. Cook until wine thickens into a sauce, then add baby peas or asparagus, e.g.

Pre-serve aperitif: Ouzo (resist the urge to do flaming body shots). Antipasto: freddo lumaca (chilled snails) or mussels, bowl of olives (not pitted), warm crostini. Iced water and a slice of lemon. Serve with the same wine accoutrement, and in the tradition of pocket Italy, let no person at the table pour their own glass. Alla vostra salute!

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Our Life in Letters



*"Dear Petra,*

*I have safely arrived at Parris Island. My Senior Drill Instructor is taking good care of me. I am in good health and good spirits..."* this force-fed letter, or others like it, are written en masse by Marine Corps recruits moments after

they touch down on the infamous yellow footprints. It was the first of an eleven-year relationship in the Marine Corps that was largely long-distance.

We wrote each other every day that was possible. We were separated for nearly four years (accumulated) within our first eight years of marriage alone. Most countries and missions wherein I was operating were either



non-permissive to electronic communications, or phones and internet were not available.

The letters were usually free for me to send, and when paper was not available, I'd improvise. Postcards from early in the current Iraq campaign were made from Iraqi documents, worthless currency (old Dinar) MRE cardboard and ammo boxes. I've written letters on barf bags, napkins, and wood shims.

My wife would taunt me in boot camp, where recruits were made to physically 'pay' for sweet-smelling letters, lipstick marks, and envelopes containing barely-there women's intimate wear. I should never have told her. She wanted me to get big and strong, so she would send all of the above, usually in an envelope that said "1, 2, 3, 4, Get my husband on the floor..." or 'SWAPU' (sealed with a push-up) or had the word "PUSH!" written all over the envelope (knowing that I would do hundreds of push-ups in order to receive the letter). My drill instructors loved her.

My wife's letters would chase me around the world during deployments. We continued to write daily. I spent a year in jail. During this time, distance and visiting limitations allowed only one visit from my wife and kids every two weeks. The daily letters continued.

We struggled, fought, cried, and coped through letters. Our hopes, dreams, and passions were transcribed and illustrated. It was tough, but made our relationship stronger with every stamp. Someday, it will make a great testimony to pass to the grandkids.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Man Letter 1 (2006)

MAN LETTER

No. 1

“Telling it how it is”

Wednesday, August 23, 2006

Well, good. Looks like women, and the rest of the world, are finally getting fed up with limp-wrested ‘metrosexual’ weenie men. Being a real man is once again stylish. Between you and me, it never went out of style, but that’s neither here nor there. I decided to post an addendum to the family letter, which has been going seven years strong. The man letter is long overdue.

In case you’ve been so ‘in touch’ with your feminine side over the last decade, that you forgot that you’ve got a pair, here are some general man rules to help you get back on track. You may be a little rusty, but you’ll get back into the groove in no time. First, let’s get rudimentary. The HANDSHAKE. It should be firm, real, not overpowering, and not right after you pissed. A slight thumbward cant may be included, but a forceful attempt to

muscle your hand atop the opposing man's hand can be construed as nothing other than a challenge and an insult. Do it to me and I'll punch you, you cocky, arrogant bastard. When you shake a man's hand, look into his eyes and give a slight nod. No hand jive. A handshake is stronger than a verbal agreement, and in the South, it's stronger than a written agreement.

When you shake a woman's hand, be firm enough to let her feel that you are a man. That's it. The only other rule when shaking a female hand is to make sure your own hand is clean. Otherwise, tip your hat, nod, and say, "Ma'am."

Here are some other basics. We'll get advanced in the next letter. Around women, spitting, belching, farting, and chewing your nails is unacceptable. Be nice to everyone around you. Don't fight. Walk on the curbside, walk down the stairs first and up the stairs last, enter last into a vehicle and exit first to help her out, stand up when she approaches or leaves your table, open and hold the door, hold her umbrella, hell--hold her purse even...you won't have to worry about what people think, if you really look and act like a real man.

Now, when it comes to conduct in the household, that's another story. Marital problems? There are three simple rules. 1. Do NOT go to a marital counselor. These types of people are statistically anti-male, no matter what. They will either make you angry or feminine. They will ruin your marriage. Remember, a street bum can give good advice too, and even the greatest family counselor cannot keep his or her own family from fighting, rebelling, or harboring ill feelings from time to time--all natural things. 2. As long as either drugs or a third party are not involved, you can save a dying relationship. If you consistently suck it up, and spoil her rotten with backrubs and dinner and flowers and house cleaning and anything you can possibly think of, even throughout the bickering and nagging and smart remarks, eventually you will nice her to death, and win. Win her friends and family, and you will most certainly be victorious. Yes, this usually means less sleep for you, and more work after a long and stressful workday. Bite the bullet and stop being a Sally. 3. Finally, if all else fails, then your wife needs a good old fashioned dose of submission. Show her who's boss. If you're laughing right now, then that means you've already lost this battle

and that is even more imperative that you reclaim the pants. Only YOU are married to your wife, and that means only YOU can figure out how to do this. My suggestion is to use the force. If you're still too scared to put her in her place, tell her I made you do it.

Conduct around other men: in the presence of real men, I've found it best to know as much about every subject in the world to be considered an expert for about two minutes. This is especially true when it comes to cars, trucks, tools, guns, the outdoors, MASH, and a few historical heroes. Know the general parts of an engine, know how shop tools work, know how to do just about everything, or be willing to try. Your cupped hands work just as well at unclogging a nasty toilet, as does a plunger (when one is not available). Don't hesitate to give a guy a ride. Don't be afraid to lay down on the dirt. Your shirt is good for a week's worth of toilet paper. So are big leaves. Knowledge about sports is not nearly as important as the ability to play sports, unless it is baseball, which (because it's our national pastime, among other things) you can never know enough about. Never turn down a beer, a chew / dip, a puff off a cigar, or a chunk of biscuit without good reason. "I'm full" is NOT an acceptable reason to turn down food. Meat should be as rare as you can take it, and that goes for pork, chicken, and seafood too. Just kidding. Seriously though, any edible saltwater fish can safely be eaten raw. Any edible reptile can safely be eaten raw as well--has something to do with pathogens in the blood. For goodness sake, know how to use a compass. Do not use a brush or a comb; that's why God made fingers.

Know the language of the Old West. Generally, this can be done by interjecting any of the following words into a sentence: ain't, salt, tack, powder, gum, hitch, jerk, reckon, holler, aim, fetch, maw, paw, folk, right-good, wallop, and yes'm. Give or take a few. You also need to have a few heroes to follow. For starters, may I suggest Theodore Roosevelt, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, Steve McQueen, Charleton Heston, and Lance Armstrong. Of course, we can't forget Chuck and Bruce.

Nobody wants to hear you talk about your fights or your tae-bo dojo experiences. If you wanna be a bad dude, just plant your elbow in someone's face, knock over his Harley, and spit on him for no reason whatsoever. That's what I'd do. Besides, fighting is what makes two real men become bestest buds.

To test a man for manliness, tell him he's got paint on his fingernail. If he straightens his fingers and pushes his hand out away from him (like Diana Ross, "Stop! In the name of love...") to view his nails, he's a suspect fruitcake. Steer clear of him, or square him away and hope for a change. If however, the man turns his palm toward his face and curls all five fingers inward to inspect (like he's holding a hockey puck), he's good to go. Buy that man a Yeungling. If he performs the latter, but his thumbs remain extended, he may or may not have a touch of fairy in him. That's where the term "half-a-fag" comes from. Also universally acceptable among real men: PBR, Corona, hard cider, or root beer if he ain't drinkin. Careful not to buy a Rolling Rock, Sam Adams, or Killians if you don't know the man and can't size him up fer sure. Budweiser works with American real men only. Bud, Miller, and Coors light beers are good at a get-together, and there's no rule that says you've gotta drink at all, if you've got an acceptable excuse (like an upcoming powerlifting competition). Black coffee, root beer, and sweet tea are the preferred alcohol-exception drinks.

In the presence of a homosexual, do not freak out. Calmly and collectively tip your hat at the gentleman and simply say, "Ma'am." If he winks, clobber him. Another tip: the term "homophobic" is only used by homosexual sympathizers. If you find yourself associated with such people, simply remove them from your Christmas card list. If they wink...well, you know what to do.

Kudos to Hardees, for bringing beef back into the American diet in a big way. Piss on Spike Lee the mega racist--the U.S. government did not send white frogmen to blow up a levee in the middle of a hurricane to purposely kill tons of black people in New Orleans. Congrats to all of you who are re-devoting yourselves to being REAL American heroes...MEN. For you lost, pathetic, hopeless weenie-men--"choke yourself on a sesame soy crouton."

Siempre Testiculae,

MJ

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Man Letter 2 (2007)

Wednesday, February 7th, 2007

If you're a guy, reach between your legs and squeeze. If you grab air, don't worry, you're no different than 90% of the guys I come into contact with daily. When was the last time you DID something? You drive to work, you drive home, you're a lousy driver and a lousy lay. You suck as a father, you suck as a husband, and you're all wrapped up in your video game-playing self. Dude, you're a freakin' turdbucket.

Try this on for size. Take a dip in a half-frozen lake, or take up Tae-Bo, or carve your name in the forehead of a Samurai while he's sleeping. On second thought, don't do that. Um, don't do Tae-Bo either. Actually, Sally, here's the key: be a mentor. Be a leader. Step up and take command of your crappy week, your family, and your life. You don't have 'Restless Leg Syndrome,' you're not addicted to nicotine, and 'the way you were raised' does not beget who you are. Your past does not determine your future. You are, however, weak.

So here's your challenge. If you've ever thought about doing something, Do it. Don't stop until you have! Learn a language, an instrument, or how to tango. Work your butt off, you nasty fatbody. People will notice...and when they see you, they'll see a Jack Stud, a man's man, a guy that doesn't need to compensate by eating his steak rare. Be the best friend, lover, husband, and dad in the world. Be the hardest worker. Be sincere.

Sweat dries. Blood clots. Bones heal. So man up, girlfriend.

--MJ

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Man Letter 3 (2007)

Man Letter 3

Sunday, December 16th, 2007

"MJ, what gives you the right?" Well, I'm no Chuck Norris, but I've got a good nose for sniffing out softies, and it's in my best interest to insure that the testosterone-yielding types of this country don't flake out. So here's my ongoing manifesto against the Nellies...

Today's topic: Vegans. Now, from time to time it has occurred to me that I am too hard on vegetarians. Everyone has the right to eat the way they please. Well, then this vegan thing pops up (I still think it sounds like some life form off Star Trek) a year or two ago and spreads like wildfire. Next thing you know, a vegan couple kills their newborn baby by refusing to feed it anything but organic soy milk and apple juice. Then I went nuts.

People, we are mammals. By definition, our females produce nourishing milk that is essential for our survival. There are elements found in breast milk that cannot be scientifically replicated. Heck, breast milk is being used in adult cancer treatments now. So I believe milk is an essential part of our diet.

Then, Aunt Edie went vegan—although she's an amazing cook, I realized something... an awful lot of time went into making vegetables taste like hamburgers, sausage, and pepperoni. Now I'm going to go out on a limb and say that if a group was conceived in this country (assuming it doesn't already exist) that called themselves "fleshians," who ate nothing but meat, they would not go to such great extremes as to make their meat look and taste like asparagus. "Ooh, that looks delectable. What is it?" "This? It's a pork carrot. You've GOT to try one."

People please, can we leave meat alone? We have canine teeth and strong molars that help us tear and chew the wonderful stuff. Our bodies have been digesting it for eons with no problems. Man up, weenies. If you've fallen by the wayside, non meat-eating

progesterone man, give yourself a literal gut check. Dust off the old molasses jar and cook up a ham this Christmas. Here's watcha do:

Drop \$25 on an uncooked ham ON THE BONE. Fresh, never frozen. Grab a knife and pull a Jack Nicholson / Shining (or a Hitchcock---"Reeent!---Reeent!---Reeent!") and stab that thing to death. Put your oven on about 175, drop the ham for several hours and put whatever fixins' on the ham that you want at various stages of the cooking process (what, you didn't think I was gonna give away one of my recipies, didja?) Use a turkey baster to fill the holes as it cooks.

Hey, gotta go...my Turducken is overcooking! Slay the Whales, assert dominance, pee on everything,

MJ

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Seat Belt Laws--Live Free or Roll Over (2007)

SEAT BELT LAWS--LIVE FREE OR ROLL OVER

Friday, June 8, 2007

Recent seat belt laws have me all spun up. I am a husband and father of three, and a seat belt advocate. Before I was any of those things, however, I was an American, and an advocate of personal freedom. Recent escalation in the enforcement of seat belt laws has made me question the rightness of the same.

It all started two years ago; Virginia Code changed and seat belt infractions became 'primary' violations...then came the occasional seat belt checkpoint, followed by the biweekly seat belt checkpoints, followed by Federal and State radio and television

commercials right out of Red China. "You WILL wear a seatbelt, or you WILL get a ticket. EVEN if you're just driving around the corner. You WILL get caught..." Having been to fifty-plus countries in my lifetime, I can recognize propaganda. It all has a familiar tone, one that instills fear. My wife, born and raised in a communist country, can also recognize it all too well. Makes you think that not wearing your seat belt is like being a sex offender.

I started scouring the internet. Alaska, the last frontier--they implemented the primary seat belt law recently as well. Kind of funny, they posted an informative brochure on the internet ([www.dps.state.ak.us](http://www.dps.state.ak.us)) telling Alaskans that the law was NOT an infringement of their personal rights. "Oh, okay. Glad they told me." What headless voice determined this? Will someone please justify this statement, and show me why it is not an infringement. Oh, wait...maybe it's because that would be a direct violation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

Then, last week, there was a break. New Hampshire legislators shot down the federally-pushed State Primary Seat Belt law, because it infringed on the personal rights of its citizens. The "Live Free or Die" State's lawmakers didn't feel that it would be what their constituents wanted. Imagine that. Then, CNN reported that New Hampshire was one of the only States who, in ousting the seat belt bill, also turned down significant funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration for State-wide road maintenance. I suddenly felt altogether proud of New Hampshire for not accepting such a bribe, and ashamed of the overwhelming majority of States, namely ours, for buckling to coercion. I was also ashamed that an arm of the federal government would unethically apply such pressure on the States.

With our country's Two Hundred and Thirty-First Anniversary fast approaching, I look to the Declaration of Independence. It was spawned, as explained therein, by the King of Great Britain having established "absolute tyranny" over all states in England. One of his tyrannical actions was "invasion on the rights of the people." If our lawmakers derive their powers from the consent of the governed, then why wasn't there a big push for an opinion vote upon the primary seat belt law? On an issue this big, there should have been a major public opinion poll or campaign.

Devil's Advocate: "Un-belted motorists cost taxpayers an estimated 26 billion dollars a year in health care. That is the greater infringement on personal freedom." Good point, albeit flawed. First of all, the numbers are skewed so as not to reflect those drivers who would require extensive healthcare regardless of seat belt use (i.e., a head-on collision with an oncoming vehicle or a stationary object). Second, think about how much it must cost for police to pull over drivers simply for not securing themselves inside their own personal property, not only in terms of taxpayer dollars but also in lives lost or damaged due to real crime on the streets? Every night I watch the news to see between about five and fifteen kidnappings, burglaries, sexual assaults, or murders in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. Every night! And every day, I see taxpayer dollars being wasted on misuse of police assets.

Presidential hopeful Senator H.R. Clinton, among others, is trying to enforce a national seat belt law. At the same time, she is pushing to socialize health care. If this in fact happens, healthcare will take up a fixed amount of government money, and fluctuations will no longer be a taxpayer burden. Will seat belt laws then be repealed?

Rethinking the issue, is it really about life and limb, or is it about money? If this is truly a safety issue, then why do some states enforce the primary seat belt law, yet have conflicting 'no helmet' laws for motorcyclists? Less than half of the States in the U.S. require helmets for all riders, per the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's website. Or what about the lack of seat belt enforcement for limousines, classic cars, taxis, and school buses?

What's next? Hockey helmets required for riding the escalator? Or here's one--since the majority of all nonviolent domestic injuries occur in the bathroom, how about in-home surveillance to ensure that you don't use your blow dryer in the shower? Isn't the warning label enough? Likewise, there are warning labels inside of most vehicles, on the belt or on the sun visor, reminding drivers and passengers of the importance of seat belt use. Inside of your personal vehicle, these should also suffice. We don't need big brother holding our hand when we cross the street.

Like parts of the Patriot Act, the law of imminent domain, and President Bush's increased surveillance measures since 9-11, the primary seat belt law is one more stepping stone toward total control of all other aspects of your personal life. In the name of "safety," your rights disappear. Dear reader, I implore you to think of the consequences of idly standing by as our personal freedoms are stripped away.

This is the grand experiment. Our nation is immeasurably more prosperous and technologically advanced than any other in history, but we are still in diapers. Granted, cars were not around when Jefferson signed the Declaration of Independence, but he--and the other freedom-loving founders of this country--had the foresight to leave an effective charter, a guiding light for all future laws to be based upon or checked against, and at its very root, the basic personal rights and freedoms of us all, which "shall not be infringed upon."

MJ

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## [Archive \(2000\)](#)

### **State of the Speights**

Volume III, 1st Edition; other editions are published monthly in Botswana and Suriname

Friday, December 30, 2000

Dearest Family and Friends,

How are you all? Hope this letter finds you well. Figured it was about that time again--- with so much happening around the holidays--time to write another letter. First of all, love you and thanks for swamping our mailbox in the last couple months! It's great to know you all think about us. Each and every one of you is uplifted in our thoughts and prayers constantly. Don't let it go to your heads.

Okay, now that *that's* out of the way, I'll give you the scoop. For those of you who don't know, we've been out of our house since the beginning of October. We're renting it out to some friends who have wanted to buy it for quite some time, so we included a purchase option. They have (with permission) been making some major adjustments to the place, moving and removing walls and everything. The tenant and his father are both professionals, and the place looks great. We miss it a lot, and I'm honestly jealous of the improvements that I never had the time to make.

Petra has since been living here at the nuthouse (mom & dad's place), where there are 50 yapping girls at any one given time and the incessant echo of a distant telephone (one of three) which never materializes...>>>insert clip of sister Renee: "*Where's the phone? --ring-- MOM! --ring-- Where'd you leave the phone?!!*"<<< At first we thought it'd be a great idea. When we checked her into the military hospital up here, the OB/GYN/pregnancy clinic thing was all booked, so we got referred to Chesapeake General, under a care group called "The Group for Women." **GOOD DEAL**. If she doesn't have to be seen by a military doc, GREAT. She's even doing the fitness thing. "Moms in Motion," twice a week, in addition to her brave neighborhood walking excursions in this frigid weather. While it is nice for Petra to be here with all sorts of things to do and lots of family support, she's ready to get into base housing. We've been on the housing waiting list at our new base, Camp Lejeune (also in North Carolina), since mid-September, and have moved from #450 down to like #120. Petra will likely be having the baby here and then moving down there, and I'll drive up here on the weekends to see her.

As for me, I'm just a vagrant Marine without a home right now. Just graduated from Amphibious Reconnaissance School, described as "the last He-Man school in the Marines." Nearly three months long, and 16 graduated from a class which initially had 48 students! Last few weeks of it were in Kew West. It was nice. Learned a lot of cool stuff, now I get to apply it at 2nd Force Recon Co. and in the real world. Still got a bunch of schools to go to, probably starting in the next week or two. Jump, Scuba, Ranger, Sniper, the list goes on. I'm pretty psyched. Please pray that I get to be home in early March, when the young Joshua is due. I'm so pumped about this whole 'dad' thing. It's gonna be great. Even all the messy stuff. Poopy diapers, baby puke, **BRING IT ON!!!** Can't wait.

Petra and I had a great holiday. I took two-and-a-half weeks off of work; we seriously needed that. We dutifully sent Christmas cards to all of our loved ones...What's that? You

didn't get one? Stinkin' Postal Service. Actually, we didn't send cards or deliver cookies this year, or sing Christmas carols under an open fire with mistletoe nutmeg hot cocoa in a sleigh snowing and all that crap BAH! Hope you'll forgive us, but I was gone 'till Christmas Eve and Petra was busy. We spent Christmas with mom, dad, Renee, and Jared (Renee's hubby-to-be). Then for New Year's, we got all spiffed up and went to a formal ball at the local University (Regent) with mom and dad. They tore up the floor until 3 AM, and Petra and I did the best we could to keep up (being mindful of her belly).

The rest of the family here is doing great. Here's a rundown:

Dad -- Mr. "Atkins Diet," he's shed some poundage and has kept on it for several months with no signs of quitting. Favorite saying: "What are all these lights doing on?" or, "Don't touch my protein bread, it's \$12 a loaf!" Loves: working on cars (does nothing change?)-- the AMX is screamin!

Mom -- Mrs. MOO-DY. Don't tell her I said that. Just got short haircut, looks great. Favorite saying: "Matt, don't let them brainwash you," or "Where's the phone?" "Everybody come here and drink your echinacea tea!" Loves: praying, praying.

Renee -- Wedding Bell Blues... "Did Jared call back?" "How many bridesmaids am I allowed to have?" "Has anybody seen the phone?!"

That's basically it. We've been doing great. Petra is also taking voice lessons again, at some big school of the arts here in Chesapeake. I'm still chipping away at a baccalaureate degree, course by course. Given enough free time in the evenings to study, and 15 mornings away from work to take tests, I could have it in about six more months. That's the plan, anyway. Petra wants to wait on any educational advancement until Joshy's born. Right now she's working on painting for the Marine Corps Marathon poster contest. It looks really great so far. I'm painting again too, and have another collage / painting similar to my "Strength of a Nation" print (same style, all-Marine theme).

Well, we'll sign off for now. Take care, enjoy this new year, and write when possible,

Matt, Petra, Joshy-on-the-way, and the cats

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Archive (2001-1)

The Speights Family Letter

North Carolina Edition - June 2nd, 2001

Disclaimer: Not all stories contained herein are 100% true. It is the reader's responsibility to 'chew up the meat and spit out the bones...'

Dearest friends and family,

Howdy-do? We're just great. Figured it was about that time again, so we took a moment out of our important busy day just to give back to you - the little people - and let you know what's happening in our life. Now seriously, I've locked myself into the bedroom in an effort to escape the terrifying beast that is our child. The hot baths are no longer working for Petra; she has (sadly) resorted to drinking her Calgon. But really, no, REALLY, we're doing great. Lord forgive the grossly over-exaggerated and vivid portrayal of our son, Josh, who is a total angel.

Isn't God good! First news, Joshua (i.e. 'The Prince of Poop') has been growing like a \_ \_ \_ \_ [RHYMES WITH SWEDE; IT CAN BE SMOKED BUT IS NOT A FISH OR A TIRED HUMAN]. Did that throw you off? Sorry, just trying to make the letter more interesting. He's eating big-boy food now, like bananas and rice cereal (Chex). Occasionally he'll spit out a word, like 'anesthesiologist,' but we don't think he's quite grasped the concept of word-object associations yet. Amazing news! Our next-door neighbor (no joke) works with dolphins as a communicator, using some high-speed sonar receiver-transmitter thingys. Well, they just had a baby, and this guy developed a (dead serious) BABY TALK COMMUNICATION DEVICE! The only problem is that the baby has to be completely submerged underwater for long periods of time. Petra and I are debating on whether or not to give it a whirl. Grandma, I was very, very kidding.

Marine Corps life is great as usual. I have not been trained to say that. Hours are weird and unpredictable as ever, but lately I've had plenty of time off. For those of you that

don't know, I broke my leg and ankle while attending a school for my job, then got into a vehicle accident at the following school which totaled my truck and put the other Marine passengers in the hospital for an extended time. My new nickname is -you guessed it- "Lucky." I was able to become an EMT recently and am the Assistant Team Leader for my 6-man Recon team. Although we cross-train in all areas of our job, Recon teams are broken into several categories, such as: dive team (made up of primarily divers for dive missions), jump team, Ranger/long-range recon team, sniper team, etc. I'm the survival expert on the Ranger/LRRP team. Next week I'll be attending the HRST Master School, to be a rappel/fastrope/SPIE master.

Petra has been doing great, also. She does all the actual work in the family while I'm off playing. Her mom got to come visit for a month and they did all sorts of stuff, like canoeing, shopping, tennis, and playing with baby. Just recently, Petra and Josh came up to visit me in New York during a big training exercise. We stayed in Manhattan at the HoJo on Eighth Ave., just a block west of Broadway & Times Square. We went up in the Empire State Building, hit a Mets game, saw Lady Liberty, went to Madame Tussaud's wax museum, saw Disney's Beauty and the Beast on Broadway, and went to a bunch of other cool places and restaurants. As you might've figured, it was our first time actually in New York City. Sound fun? Get this: The trip cost us 10% of what it would usually cost.

The city of N.Y. hosts "Fleet Week" every Memorial Day, basically as a way of thanking the U.S. military generally, and the Navy and Marine Corps (and Coast Guard) specifically, "...for upholding justice upon the ramparts of our democracy!" or something--I just like saying that. All military personnel are required to wear their uniforms, and everywhere the three of us went was either free of charge or at least 75% off, thanks to the city, the USO, NYPD & FDNY, and various business owners. For two weeks it was front seat, front of the quarter-mile-long line, at-your-service treatment. Needless to say, Petra and I had a blast. The whole trip was worth it to her when we saw the Broadway musical, and later she got to meet and talk with some cast members that also play in movies and current-running TV shows with star roles. And yes, we have watched Beauty and the Beast every evening since our return.

As for the young warrior, his NY trip marked the beginning of what will surely be an adventurous life. He fared extremely well and experienced everything that we did. Granted, he's only three months old, but his exceptional attentiveness is scary. He watches everything with awe-filled eyes. He laughs aloud now (very often)--most of the day he's smiling--and sleeps all night. He falls asleep by himself without the aid of soothing devices and other fu-fu baby crap. Oh yes, and he rarely cries, which makes his mother love him that much more. Great baby. We all have fun together.

Petra and I will be celebrating our five-year anniversary in July. Though we won't be able to get away, we're ecstatic. Five whopping years! That's, like, a whole bunch of dog years, right? Uh, right. Petra's parents and little brother should be coming over just after that; they're lookin' to stay! They're tying up loose ends in Germany right now while I wrastle the INS. It'll all work out. Tentatively, they'll be staying in Ohio at (my) mom & dad's place there in Clayton. Istvan (Pet's dad) is a printer by trade, but can also morph into a number of different office machines and household appliances. He was even a refrigerator at one point in time, I think. Seriously, though, he prints things (lithographs, photos, etc.). [Karl] is looking into a printing job for him, as well as a soccer coach job or any type of construction-type labor (in which his skill is well refined and multi-faceted).

Mom and dad are doing well. Busy as always, but now the house is somewhat empty and things should be a little more peaceful. Meanwhile, back in California, Renee, cleverly disguised as a sponge, is soaking up information...kidding...is PREGNANT and is experiencing the full effect of morning sickness. Men, let us all now bow our heads and thank our Heavenly Father for making us so... Jared (Renee's hubby) is enjoying his job, last I heard. Of our other two sisters (who have been living with mom & dad while they earned Masters degrees at Regent University), Sarah moved back down to Florida to marry her man Jeremy (a.k.a. Bruce Lee) and Alesia is in Virginia, single-handedly keeping sanity in the House of Speights.

Well, that's about all that's happening with our immediate and extended family. Please be encouraged: when you write to us, expect a return. *When* you expect it, however, is an entirely different story.

Love you all, (blah, blah,)

Hoosier Daddy, Mama Bear, & L'il Bus

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Archive (2001-2)

The Speights Family Letter

7 October 2001

“Friends, family, countrymen--lend me your cash!” Well, well. It’s time, once again to warm all of your already shining faces with a lovely letter from your annoying friends in North Carolina. If you’ve read this much already, you’re batting above average. We truly appreciate those of you who do not take offense to the sarcastic tone of our letters and shred them before even getting to the second sentence.

As I’m sure most of you have assumed, our sad state of affairs (referred to in the opening line of this letter) is due in no small part to Princess Petra’s shopping spree yesterday, and the day before, and -you guessed it- the day before that. The plug was pulled on our bathtub of cash, and all I have to say is Thank God. Lord only knows what we would do if there was an abundance of cash in the bank. On the other hand, she needed clothes and she did buy me a cool leather Dundee-style hat.

We are doing extremely well. The boy is growin’ like a weed; he crawls everywhere and goes from prone to kneeling to standing (when given something to hold onto) in no time at all. Petra is the epitome of a good mother, and dad does his best when he’s home. Lately the work schedule has been work all week, come home on weekends, and that stinketh for everybody. I work for a real dork, which for the longest time added to the grief.

Eventually though, I conceded that all people work for a dork at some time in their life, and now I grin & bear it.

We have all been saddened and touched by the events which unfolded recently, but at the same time cannot help but notice all of the patriotic sentiment which affects pretty much the whole country, and it feels pretty dang good if you ask me. Our flags have been flying the whole time and I'm loving it. I think it's cool how e-mail notes / jokes / messages have helped to spread anti-terror / anti-Bin-Laden beliefs around the country, much in the same way advertising campaigns during WWII focused on the war effort. My favorite so far is "What President Bush Wished He Could Say," the beginning of which goes something like this, "My fellow Americans, first I would like to say that my and Laura's heart goes out to the families of the victims of the World Trade Center Tragedy. To the people of New York, and Mayor Guliani, you're doing a heck of a job. Your incessant efforts to recover the victims in this time of tribulation is a light for all to see; the citizens of the world know that the resolve and solidarity of the American public is strong. And to those who committed these cowardly acts of terror, and the organizations which harbor them, are you freakin' kiddin' me? Don't you know who you're screwin' with? I think maybe y'all got your daggone turbans wrapped around your heads too tight. With a single bomb we could nuke your butts off the friggin' planet, but your country ain't worth one of those bombs...blah blah blah." Anyway, I thought it was hilarious for the mere fact that I could imagine each of those words rolling off the president's lips.

Petra and I are up here at my folks' place for the weekend. They love being grandparents. Says dad jokingly, "It's the easiest thing I've ever done." They babysit for us while Petra and I go play. We did the dinner and a movie thing last night, then came home and played Alesia's 007 game on Nintendo. We're hoping that Petra's parents will be able to move here soon so we can visit them and give them a good dose of grandparentage. Petra will take her citizenship test by December 1st (we're awaiting the appointment date from the INS), and nary a soul was more prepared. Petra could teach American History or Government at the high school level right now.

Speaking of education, I received an AS from Excelsior College (New York) early this year. With that and some transferred Embry-Riddle credits, plus work experience and a few Clep credits, I'll have a BS with a major in language from the same college as soon as I get 9 more upper-level credits. I'll order some courses and have my degree requirements

complete by January. While I intend to drop officer packages to each of the service branches, Petra and I both know that I wouldn't be happy unless I were to become a Marine officer. Hopefully everything pans out the way we plan.

Speaking of jokes, here's one I heard recently: A lady from the DEA or some other crackdown organization boards a plane with her dog. Once seated, she tells Fido to "go sniff." Her faithful mutt trots up alongside a teenager, sits beside him, then returns to his owner and places a left paw into her hand. A curious man sitting beside the agent asks, "What's that mean?" She explains that the youth is in possession of marajun--maraguan--crack cocaine and will be arrested upon arrival at their destination. "Fascinating," the man said. She then told her dog, "Go sniff." The dog left, then moments later scrambled back to her side and let loose his bowels in a runny spray, much to the discontent of the other passengers. Startled, the man asked, "Eww, what's that mean?" "We'd better leave," she replied, "he just found a bomb."

Currently, we're having a lot of fun and are heavy with the anticipation of upcoming events in our life. With the September 11th events--which again strengthened this country beyond belief oo-rah--there's the possibility of deployment for me. Hunting season (gun) starts in 6 days, so when you wake up at 3 A.M. to relieve your bladder on the 13th of October, take assurance in knowing that Matt Speights is out there--somewhere--with a big bad gun and a lot of ammo, to wage war on the communist creatures of the woods (and the Boogieman, if I find him). North Carolina's Sportsman License has tags for deer, bear, turkey, pigs, terrorists, waterfowl, etc., all for 40 bones. That also includes fishing license. A few weeks later is the Marine Corps Marathon. I plan on being dead last, so as to lessen my chances of being a target in the 25,000-person crowd snaking its way through the nation's capital. Petra has been doing lots of craftsy stuff, which will facilitate the transition into my next paragraph...

--AND NOW, A WRITER'S MOMENT--

Don't you hate that? I can't stand when I have a lot of stuff to talk about under a specific point (note the beginning of the last paragraph--blah, blah, upcoming events--I actually

had a lot more to say, but, being one who writes often, I'm bound to the laws of syntax and composition and iambic pentameter and, as it turns out, sentence structure. You'll also find that I use a ton of commas, I like to make my sentences way longer than they should be, and I am a stout believer in the dash (-), the double dash (--), and the semicolon (;). And, by the way [interrogative], which is better for beginning a paragraph: block style (this letter), or traditional (using indentation)? Please send feedback.

--THIS HAS BEEN A WRITER'S MOMENT; THANK YOU FOR YOUR DEVOTED ATTENTION--

Anyway, where was I?

Ah, yes. Petra has turned into a real 'outdoorsy' type. We bought an edible plant identification guide at Books-a-Million (which we refer to simply as "Booshka," short for Booshka-Gazillia, and no, it doesn't make sense) and have been busy making wines and teas and jellies of all sorts from the wild grapes and passion flower fruits and persimmons that we collect. She also caught the scrapbook fever once again thanks to the Stapleton women, who were spreading that horribly contagious disease which affects the wallet--all while me and the Stapleton men were out catching sea bass along the Carolina coast.

I'm making a scrapbook too. It contains the skins of many poisonous snakes, some spiders, scorpions, rattles, talons, hairs, teeth, claws, meat-eating plants, and photographs, all that I've captured around the world. As you can imagine, it's a rather lumpy album.

Well, aside from all that craziness, we do have some normal things in our life, too. Despite the fact that we're new parents, we do make it out as a threesome every few nights, even if only for the occasional chocolate fudge caramel heart attack with a cherry on top, the best of which is found at Ruby Tuesday's (for the very few of you who did not already know this). Thanksgiving's coming up and we'll probably be up here at mom & dad's again, or else we'll be with some friends in Jacksonville (don't know, it's up in the air). Christmas--again, don't know, but it may be Germany if Pet's folks are still over there. Then we'll be in Florida sometime in December for Jeremy and Sarah's wedding. That's about it.

Well, all, please drop a line. We love to hear from everyone. It was so nice to see so many of you (family) at the get-together at Lake Erie. Semper Fi, give blood, love you all and God Bless.

Love,

Matt, Petra, Joshua

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Archive (2001-3)

The Fall of the House  
of Speights

December 2001

PART I

'Twas the best of times, 'twas the worst of times. It was the era of poop, 'twas the dawn of disobedience. One may assume -nay, 'tis correct- that the young man child doth even yet grow to be more and more restless. The teething, the growing, the whiningscreamingyellingfood-throwingcraziness has begun. In other words, he's becoming quite like his father is today. Petra and I have finally come to the realization that we are now bona fide parents. It's great, actually, and we're having a good time.

Where to start, where to start. Well, let's see. Our last letter left off just before hunting season and, more importantly, just after the September 11th attacks. Since our last family letter was sent out, a large part of our life has been removed, leaving a void that will never be filled.

Stephen Gaffney ("Gaff") is one of my very dearest friends and always will be. He was my

big Irish gator-huntin,' fishin,' all-out-adventure buddy from the time we met. Many of you may remember earlier "Family Letter" editions which detailed long and hilarious misadventures of the 'Two Mooks,' in our business endeavors (as fix-it men, general laborers, lawn care 'specialists') or our out-in-the-bush tales. Gaff died instantly in a car accident on October 16, and I watched, standing outside my vehicle on the way home from hunting, as the twenty-or-so EMT's and firemen, the jaws of life, and the paramedic/helicopter crew diligently worked to save him. I didn't know it was him until several hours later.

Petra and I were blessed to be invited to participate in his funeral, and stayed, along with several other Marines and their families, under the hospitable hand of the entire Gaffney family. We would have considered 2001 to be a completely horrible year of loss had it not been for the gain of our newest friends and additions to the family: Mr. Edward, Mrs. Mary Ellen, Eddie, David, Jenny, Betsy, Rosemary, and Emily Gaffney. Gaff was buried near Ft. Dix, New Jersey, and received full military honors from start to finish. It made those of us who knew him in uniform, to include his Leatherneck dad, very proud. Plans are currently underway to honor him with a memorial fund and annual run (he was a stellar athlete and a no kidding A+ student in high school and college).

Here's a brief rundown on how we finished the year. John (high school, best man, joined Marines together -- most of you have heard his name a lot as well) and I ran the Marine Corps Marathon together once again; more patriotism was displayed there than you could imagine--complete with terrorist-bashing shirts ("Yo Mama, Osama!") and "United We Run" temp tattoos on everybody. Then came some training for me at Quantico, VA for a few weeks, Thanksgiving with family in Atlanta, Christmas here in the 'lina and New Year's in Chesapeake with ma & pops.

Work is "worky" for Matt. Lots of field time, just home on the weekends, preparing for a 6 to 8 month Med 'float' in June. That is, unless he gets picked up for Officer Candidate School just before that. His degree requirements have been fulfilled, but his January conferral/graduation got pushed to March instead. Oh well, at least the work is DONE! The recent field exercises have been strategically planned so as to impose the worst weather

conditions possible on the Marines. Soaking wet rain (the wettest rain there is) and very chilly temperatures equate to a less-than-desirable weeklong training evolution, and generally, we do not bring tents or shelter along with us (the “travel light, freeze at night” philosophy--what bonehead thought that one up?) Those weekends off have been spent doing taxes, building and promoting mom’s new Christian art website [check it out - [www.kerenmessages.com](http://www.kerenmessages.com)], and, as it turns out, writing this family letter.

Petra is dabbling with the idea of taking jazz/tap/ballet classes. She did all of the above for years, and now she wants to get back into it. She’s also looking forward to taking part in the Crystal Coast’s sea turtle conservation program, which kicks off in two months. Now that Stinky is walking and is somewhat independent, mama is getting out more. The local gyms have been frequented by Petra often; she takes advantage of the weight room in our apartment complex and the Corps gym at one of the housing areas. The latter provides free child care services in an impeccably clean and health-conscious environment [an important plus for Petra, the cleanest ‘neat freak’ I know].

Recently Petra was distraught over a mouse-rat-critter that was sneaking into our lower kitchen cabinets and eating all of our potatoes. After “calling in the guard” [the exterminator] and turning down all traps, snares, or baits which might harm the smallest whisker of the ferocious and elusive tater tot, she finally resorted to purchasing the super-duper high-speed oo-rah silent plug-in electronic jackhammer-noise maker thing to scare the beast away. We have yet to see our cat since that day.

Okay, so the cat was a joke. She plugs it in, and not two hours later, she hears scratches coming from the cabinet. With the trusty cat Sylvester at her side [and we are NOT cat people, I keep telling her--we’re DOG people on a temporary diet], she opens the door quickly. I’m in the other room doing taxes, and I hear “A mouse! I mean, a rat! No, it’s...it’s... a hamster?!” Little guy just stands there, pees his pants, and goes, “Oops-I’m busted!” Belonged to the neighbors, who were very grateful to have him back.

Joshua is awesome. He says ba-ba, ma-ma, da-da, pa-pa, poo-bah, foo-fa, moo-tai, wu-tong and Zsa Zsa. He can effectively write them in cursive and is proficient in using this

vocabulary, although limited, in seven different languages. He can graph and plot points, is studying Linux and, most importantly, knows where his pee-pee is. He was standing in his 6th month, walking by 8, and now at ten months he runs everywhere and waves bye-bye to everything. There's not a wrestling hold around that he can't get out of, he hates green beans, loves water, and he loves his mama. He also loves 'grammy and grampa' who spoil him rotten and nullify all of our hard work in disciplining him. Really, though, they're great grandparents, and we can't wait 'til he learns that he's got more coming! G'ma and G'pa Kasaroczky, along with 10-year-old "Uncle Sven," will be here in less than 2 months [I know we've been saying that for years, but it's REALLY happening this time!].

Speaking of uncles, I'm an uncle! Let's POLKA!!! Okay let's not. I got my Uncle Certificate back from Uncle School, which started 9 months ago. It took a lot of hard work and perseverance, but in the end, I knew it would be worth it. Petra jumped on the bandwagon too. "What the heck," she said, "I'll be an aunt!" Renee (my sis) and Jared (her hubs) had a baby girl on January 8th [MAZZELTOV!(SP?)], and named her Aubrey Nicole [Thomas]. She's cute as a button. A cute button. We can't wait to see her.

Josh loves playing with the cat. The cat shows reciprocal love by making his eyes bulge and crapping whenever Joshua squeezes him, which makes the baby laugh. Actually, Matt is just a sicko in need of help. The baby and the cat get along like two jarheads in a foxhole. Our cat Sylvester is "special." He was not named after the cartoon cat as most people assume, but rather Sly Stallone, who is not known for being the sharpest axe in the shed. Sly the cat has been known to, among other things, jump into the bath with me (he LOVES water--seriously!) or fall off the couch and land on his head on more than one occasion. It took a while, but now he lets Josh grab all over him, and Sylvester just goes back for more.

It turns out that we did indeed know one of the Marines in the KC-130 that crashed in Afghanistan -- Scott Germosen went through aircrew training and aircraft mechanic school in Pensacola with me. Though we did not "hang" together, he was a familiar face and I can associate several stories with him. The Marine KC-130 aircrew community is extremely small, and we were relieved to hear that no other friends or acquaintances were killed.

Our hearts go out to the families of the deceased.

Basically, that covers the “short” of things. The big events ahead are: Joshua’s birthday on the 9th of March, Petra’s folks moving over here before that, our six year anniversary in July, Petra becomes a pop Christian singer next summer, Matt will be a famous novelist by 2006, we move to a log mansion in the back woods of Montana some time shortly thereafter. In reality, we have been financially blessed to the point that we were able to get out of debt with the exception of our house (rented out), and it should be sold to it’s current tenants sometime this year. When that happens, we’re taking a month of leave and going to the Northwest to stake a claim. And we will be living in a big log cabin someday, period.

Speaking of Matt’s wrist, yes, we’re afraid that he has developed something that the doctors have never seen before. It appears that this will be the last family letter. That is, of course, unless the money rolls in from somewhere to fund his wrist therapy and the medical research of this terrible, uh, thing. Hey, I have an idea! You don’t suppose you could send...no, no. That would be wrong. I couldn’t possibly ask you for, no. But if you happen to have the extra cash, maybe you could send a little extra for the future research of Matt’s LYING DISORDER...

Ho ho hee ha ham. Ham? No thanks, just had some.

Well, everyone, thank you for listening, NO, I don’t have a wrist problem, or a lying disorder, and NO, I did not have a speaking part at the end of Jurassic Park III. And yes, Petra will someday be a famous Christian music singer [not to be confused with Petra, the Christian music singers]. At least if I have anything to say about it. Love you all, keep in touch, Semper Fidelis, Lachaim (sp?)!

Until the next episode...

Matthew, Petra, Joshua, cat

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## Archive (2002-1)

May 2002

CONGRATULATIONS, RESIDENT ! We here at the Yousucka-Werich Associates have just been informed by our prize patrol that the RESIDENT whose name appears on the outside of this envelope has POSITIVELY, ABSOLUTELY just been chosen to receive this, the latest in a series of long-winded, stupid letters from the Speights family PRIZE VAULT!!! Don't be confused! This letter is YOURS TO KEEP! THERE IS NO CATCH!!!

OKAY, so there's a catch. You must read this letter in its entirety without (1) falling asleep, (2) getting mad and breaking something, or (3) pawning this letter off on another family member to read. Simple enough? We'll see.

Well hello Speights fans, and thanks again for joining us for another exciting letter of Speights happenings. I'm Matt, and I'll be your host throughout the pages that follow. We left this game off in January, so I'll commence with the fill-ins.

For statrers, or starters for all you non-lysdexics, Petra is working again. Working on 'dash two,' that is. That's right, we're having a baby! Another one! Yes, one, two babies! Yes! 'One in the bullpen!' It's fantastic news, I'll tell ya. We're going nuts. Nuts, that is. Now for the exciting news...

We're having a baby! Isn't that exciting? Well, we think so. We don't know anything else yet. We found that out within the first few hours of this long Memorial Day weekend. Matt just got back from two weeks' training in Macon, Georgia on Thursday evening, then got cut loose Friday after work. We would've gone to Ohio to visit PETRA'S PARENTS, but seeing as this has been Matt's only time off since January (and only time being home for more than two nights out of the week), we decided to be selfish.\* NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH SHELLFISH, WHICH, WHEN EATEN, MAKE PETRA NOXIOUS AND JOSHUA SWELL UP LIKE A BLIMP. WE DID NOT LEARN THIS BY EXPERIENCE, IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING.

Speaking of being pregnant, Petra's folks and younger brother flew in just after Joshua's birthday in March. They stayed with us for a few weeks, and then headed to Virginia for two weeks, then moved into the old Clayton house in Ohio, where they'll be living permanently (Lord willing). The few weeks that they were here were as good as anyone could expect for living that long with family in a small apartment, in fact, things went very well. Because of them, Petra and I have been playing more sports outside (along with Joshua, of course). Initially we were drawn outside because they are heavy smokers; in order to continue a conversation with them you'd have to 'take it outside.' They have got to be, however, the most athletic smoking family I've ever known. Petra's father Istvan is a hoot, and although I've never actually seen one (a hoot, that is), I've heard they're quite lovely. Istvan (Hungarian), when translated, literally means "very, very old toddler." The man attracted many of my work buddies over to the porch on a nightly basis for long bouts of chess over le plus bottles of domestic carb-laden beverage. Needless to say, Petra was ecstatic.

Guess what? We're having a baby!!! Cool, huh? Petra is excited. I'm elated beyond measure. I'm certain that the difference between our feelings lies somewhere within the understanding of our individual roles during the pregnancy. While I'm off on a seven-month pleasure cruise (beginning in August), Petra will be once again forced to face this one alone. Kinda like won-a them ol' frontier womans, yep [spits terbackey in a can] ("Spit-tooeey---ding!") No husband-wife lamaze classes, she'll probably live with the folks again, etc. If I could sit this float out, I would. Please remember Petra in your prayers, and pray that I'll get to be there for the big day--I should be cuttin' it real close. Petra will be outta here when our lease expires in mid-August, and will likely be staying with her parents in Ohio.

MARINE CORPS - 2 MATT - 1. That's right, I'm dukin' it out against the Corps. I hate to do a thing like that, but all-of-a-sudden-like, my Corps is taking back large sums of money that was rightfully paid to me because I went Recon out of an aviation occupation. This 1/4 pay cut will continue throughout my current enlistment, which ends a year from August. I have all the tools to fight this legally and absolutely no time to fight it. My

predeployment schedule keeps me in the field until just before my ship date of August 17th. I would be really, really, really upset, but I just found out yesterday that I am at the top of the promotion zone for Staff Sergeant (E-6, in the Marines), which means that I should be 'pinning on' by October if everything goes smoothly.

You know what's next? That's right, its the Josh report!!! As hard as we try to not be like the stereotypical parents of a young child, we really cannot help it. I can honestly say that I, like Petra and probably many others, self-righteously assumed that I knew a lot about kids and their parents, and the way child-rearing works. Petra was 13 when her brother was born, so years of experience made her believe she was 'in the know.' Most parents honestly believe that their child is the cutest, the smartest, the most talented, or something. And the funny thing is (if you're like me), you think you're the only one that sees it. Especially when you're sitting in a waiting room with other first time parents (so that your child can get his monthly strand of, like, 50 or so shots), and you overhear two couples 'trumping' eachother. "She's so cute. How old?" "Six months. How 'bout yours?" "Wow. And she ain't walkin' yet? Our widdow Jo-Jo puffs was walking when he was three weeks old! (HA!) Ain't that right, Joey?" "Wow, that's amazing. Our Tabatha here still has a hard time with that, but she's been playing the violin since she was four days old. (TRUMP THAT!)" Now comes the part where I try to convince you that my kid really is better than yours. Here goes:

Joshua is the cutest, the smartest, the most well-behaved, the most talented, ya-dee ya-dee ya. This little guy is awesome. He imitates everything, loves going to the pool, picking strawberries, playing piano (we finally got one -- a Baldwin upright), dancing, and trucks. Trucks, trucks, trucks. You see, we thought we'd make it easy for him. At first, everything was a truck. If it had wheels, from a bicycle to a golf cart to an airplane, it was a truck. I find it amazing, but somehow, God must instill in every little boy the ability to differentiate between a truck and everything else. Josh will let every Geo Tracker and Harley Davidson drive past, but as soon as he sees an old Ford F-100 chuggin' past, or a big-rig tractor-trailer, he'll point and excitedly proclaim, "Chuch!" Josh runs circles around 2-yr olds (literally), he's almost potty-trained, and has about a 20-word vocabulary (mama, daddy, puppy, light, kitty-cat, airplane, helo, teddy bear, juice, etc.) The

scariest thing yet, and I kid you not, is that he understands us perfectly. Every day, we tell him to do something new, like “go pick up that towel and fold it,” or “go put that in the top drawer of your dresser,” then we’ll follow him and watch him do just that every time without further clarification.

We started teaching Josh that way about two months ago, when he turned one. We were sitting on the couch and Petra handed him a banana peel, jokingly asking him to “please throw it in the trash.” We watched in amazement as he executed an about face and marched his way to the trash can, pushed the lid open with one hand, and threw in the peel. We praised him so much, that for two weeks, we went through the daily routine of digging the remote, the phone, pots, pans, books, videos, and toys, yes, out of the trash.

About that same time, Josh stopped calling me da-da, and resorted to calling us both mama. He called the bald guy at church da-da. One month and a frustrated Matty later, Petra, being the wife of a trained observer, she saw something that I didn’t [gee isn’t that a surprise]. It was my hair. Hair, that is. I had been growing my hair out for the first time in six years, and ergo ceased to be daddy. Conceding that Petra is usually right about, well, darn near everything, I scraped the grape and viola! Problem solved. Now we’re going through the “Put on your sunscreen, buddy--GOOD BOY!--awww, he’s so cut--HEY, stop rubbing peanut butter all over yourself!” routine.

The cat is still alive, despite the fact that my colleague, working partner, and fellow member of my profession who lives next door has killed off every other cat in the neighborhood. I say that only after seeing him sneak around at night with a blowgun and a quiver of feathered darts, while simultaneously at the same time seeing fewer cats. Our cat is in no danger, but please, some one, anyone, save me from this sick job with these sick people. We eat live llamas! WE EAT LIVE LLLLLOkay I’m joking. About the llamas, that is. If you can find all of the sentences in this paragraph that were repetitive, redundant, and repeated themselves, give yourself a cookie. Next slide.

Here’s the junk drawer of happenings: Petra got back on a volleyball team that was not nearly as dedicated as Petra, and as a result of multiple game forfeitures, the team was

disbanded. The cat's tail doesn't writhe around and wiggle all over the place now, due to a cat fight. Now it just flops. We listen to country music on a regular basis--(Father forgive us, we've gone country). "The Rookie" is our choice for movie of the year--not a single cuss word, yet every roughneck I know can't wait to own the video/DVD. We're belly-button-deep in baseball fever. I've fallen into the 'Speights man boots' of reading Louis L'Amour books out the yingyang (just like dad and g'pa used to). Petra won a big prize for Josh at the carnival after successfully scaling the rock wall like a champ. Though daddy was climbing a different route, he failed to do so (twice). Petra got the breadwinner award that night.

Well, all, it's time to go. We'll update you again soon, hopefully before I ship out. We love you all and keep you uplifted in prayer; please understand that this is about the only way we find time to communicate with everybody these days, as our op-tempo is pegged. Take care and write back. Semper Fidelis.

Love,

Matt, Petra, Josh, Belly baby, Sly the Cat

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## [Archive \(2002-2\)](#)

The Speights Family Letter

August 19th, 2002

Dearest friends and family,

This will be the third and final family letter that we send out this year. We have been doing this for a couple of years now, and would first like to thank you all for the wonderful responses and replies. We hope that these might inspire more people to do the

same. Our heartfelt apologies to those whose names fall to the bottom of the alphabetical listing in our address book. Several of you did not receive our most recent letter from a couple of months ago, because our schedule has changed a lot and our operating tempo was raised to level 3-cuckoonuts. You did not miss much, with the exception of (1) We're having a baby, and (2) Petra's parents moved from Germany to Ohio.

Much has happened since then. Our Independence Day vacation was great, but all too short. We stayed in Ohio for a few days with Pet's parents. Matt has been home through July and August, which is nice for all of us. Petra was sworn in as a naturalized American citizen on July twenty-fifth, and she received her passport on August twelfth. Matt received his bachelors degree and ordered his first courses for his MBA through Liberty University. Joshua is repeating everything he hears. That's not always a good thing. He does a great "Dirty Harry."

We just got back from a really, really enjoyable vacation. Comfort Suites has been offering amazing rates to military families since September eleventh. We were finally able to take annual leave and get away from our gorgeous, happy hometown of Jacksonville, the crapital of North Carolina (no pun intended). After a brief visit to Ohio, we headed down to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina for a week and splurged. We went to every theme attraction, museum, dinner show, theater, water park and fun activity that Myrtle Beach has to offer. The suite was really nice and right in the middle of everything, and the continental breakfast included Belgian waffle makers with pre-mixed batter so that guests could make waffles for themselves...every morning, I awoke to Petra's best imitation of Eddie Murphy/the donkey in the movie Shrek, "I'm gonna make some Waffles!"

Feeling like eediots for not jumping on the zero percent car financing that swept the country several months ago, we made sure to jump on the band wagon this time around. Because we're not rich, we bought the ugliest vehicle on the market, the Pontiac Aztek (Yes, it's the one with the high back that looks like a Back to the Future prop that was rejected). Actually, ours looks pretty good. Sounds good, too--we got the Pioneer sound system supreme with ten speakers and tailgate compact disk/cassette control. We like it a lot.

Matt just had his wisdom toofs removed, and as Matt's luck would have it, the fourth tooth required a jackhammer, vise-grips, jumper cables, a seven-pound small mouth bass, and some hydraulic cement. He is now incessantly ridiculed by Petra, who jeers and taunts him with "Mr. Cheek-ums," "puffy face" and "Heemster Boy!!!" The toothless wonder is set to deploy on Monday the 26th. After a busy two-to-three weeks, he will be cranking out letters to everyone to keep from going loopy on ship. If you intend to write (which would be greatly appreciated), please don't ask or speculate about any foreign locations or destinations, or any U.S. or allied military operations. Letters to and from Matt will need to be as normal as possible in case the mail is searched or scanned. The same goes for e-mails, should Matt's ship be afforded the opportunity to correspond in such a manner. Christmas cookies and miscellaneous letters to Marines or other military members abroad would also be appreciated, and will be distributed accordingly. Matt can receive mail at the following address: Sergeant Speights, M.J., 24 MEU det A, Unit 74056, FPO AE 09502-4056. Mail on average takes a week, but can take as long as a month.

Now for the big news...We just found out that our next baby is going to be a boy! We're really excited. Due January 1st! This was perfect, because now Petra says we can eventually try to have a girl still. Matt wants as many kids as Petra can handle having (up to about five). Three would be great with both of us. Right now, we're elated to be having a second. We're leaning toward either Ethan Alcandor Speights or Caleb Conlan Speights. We're pretty sure we'll keep Speights. We're open to suggestions (manly names only, please).

Here's wrapping up: our movie pick would probably have to be The Master of Disguise with Dana Carvey. Sorry to all who we said we would write to and haven't. Sorry to all those we would love to see yet we couldn't. Congrats on all, past and pending-- on the weddings, the new romances, the babies, the return home, the recoveries, the graduations, the promotions. You know who you are. Sorry we could not celebrate with you in person, but know that we talk of you and cheer for you aloud. To those of you in difficult times, I promise that you are in our prayers. Those of you who have helped us, our friends, or our family in one way or another, Thank You and bless you, you too know

who you are. Thanks to the faithful--in praying, in writing, in calling. We love you all, God bless you all, Semper Fidelis and have a great school year, holiday season, first year of marriage or parenthood, etc.

With optimistic regard towards all our futures,

Matthew, Petra, Joshua, Ethan?

P.S. Two guys walk into a bar...the third one ducks.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2002-3)

“SHAKE YOUR DJIBOUTI”

The Speights Family Letter

Thanksgiving 2002

Published, printed, and distributed from the Gulf of Aden

Seasons Greetings, friends and family! As many of you are aware, the Speights family is currently spread to the four corners. I'm writing from Camp Lemonier, in Djibouti, l'Afrique. Though not my first time in Africa, it is the first time I've been to Southeast Africa (the 'horn'), and it's very different. Djibouti is a province between the countries of Ethiopia and Somalia. The main language is Somali, the average natural lifespan is 51 for females and 47 for males. They have goats and camels wandering in the desert for hundreds of miles, and there are whole cities made out of cardboard and rags. Come to think of it, I believe goats are one of their chief exports... The articles of clothing that the local women wear are very brightly colored, and stand out in stark contrast to the drab surroundings of the country. Definitely a photographer's world. Anyway, things are going exceptionally well for me here despite the circumstances, or at least, things could

be a lot worse. Here's a poem I wrote for you, our faithful friends and family members , to sum up my float so far:

I flew on a plane to Rota, Spain (where the rain falls mainly on the plain), we trained in the water, the weather got hotter, and we all left in crisp sun-burned pain. We boarded a boat bound for Greece, where I then had to break out my fleece, 'cause to my surprise, the clouds in the skies, and the cold rain and snow did not cease. Eight thousand feet above seas, we protected the world and the trees, from illegal wood-choppers and cross-border hoppers and girls smuggling wool socks and cheese. All through the Balkans and back, we boarded a boat for Iraq, but then plans got changed as we crossed the Canal and I spent many days in the rack. In Aden's Gulf-waters we stopped, and then back-and-forth our teams hopped, from Africa's sand, to the ship, to the land, 'till our 'fun meters' pegged and then popped. In-between Ethiopian borders, and Somalia's same, we got orders, to a place called Djibouti (JabOOty)--that place was a hoot--and we blew plastique, claymores, and mortars. Okay maybe it wasn't that bad, since I took the one humvee we had, and drove through the desert through herds of gazelles, though my marksmanship (when driving) is sad. And now I am back on the boat, and I hear that we'll soon be afloat, in Persian Gulf waters and Middle East ports, "but that's still speculation," she wrote. [badda-boom]

Petra is doing well; she's staying with Karl & Karen for the duration of the float. Karen returned from Israel a few days ago, and Karl got back a day or two later from his second stint overseas in the last month. He's working on the same operation I am, from a higher echelon and in a different country. Petra just got back from a month-long stay with her folks in Ohio, and she had a really enjoyable time. She is excited about the new baby (we both are, but this is Petra's paragraph!) and is glad to have two boys. Okay three boys, counting me. She'll be having the baby at Portsmouth Naval Hospital, among the most highly-esteemed military medical centers in the world. They'll take good care of her there. We'll be taking a break from having kids for a while after this, because Petra's anxious to get in shape, explore some school options, and participate in more activities in general. She's interested in radiology. Good on her. We'd still like to have a girl, but we can wait a couple of years. Besides that, she's been pretty wrapped up with Joshua, and

she writes to me every single day. What a faithful and wonderful wife! Baby Caleb is pounding away at Petra's kidneys, and Petra and I are both extremely excited about the little squirt. Did I already say that? He's due anytime now (January 1st, officially), and there's another Recon guy on float with me whose boy is due the same day! I have a feeling that our platoon is going to be partying like it's 1999. Petra's health is great, and she's happy about her weight gain, which is actually less than what it should be at this stage. Our relationship is stronger than ever, proof that "absence makes the heart grow fonder," though we could never have imagined that our hearts could grow much more fond of each other. We have been very fortunate to at least have e-mail communication every day for the most part for the last month. Sometimes we get to talk on the phone, but not often.

We are planning some drastic life changes (for us) in the months to follow float. I'll be getting out of the Marine Corps long enough to breathe a little bit, and I'm currently exploring different officer options throughout the military. I'm also looking at jobs in Alaska and Maine, and searching possible places to settle down someday, to include land and log cabin packages, etc. We need to slow our life down a little bit, and enjoy being a family; I don't want to miss watching my boys grow up. It's hard enough to stop talking to Joshua on the phone after he realizes he's talking to me, and gets all excited and babbles... "Daddymmboat. Boatwaterdaddyhome. Daddy, mommy, Joshy. Truck mm-buh mm-bumbelobelobel daddy and daddy and daddy hi daddy I love you daddy home. Bye-bye daddy."

Joshua is getting huge. He's going to grow up and become a real beefcake at this rate. He's picking up Hungarian and English at the same time, and is really developing proficiency in sentence structure, humor, and EATING. He's pretty stocky. Josh has also been going to a playgroup once a week. Every week, a different mother or father hosts the get-together at their house. Petra and Joshua both have fun doing that. Josh has been doing all kinds of stuff lately. He regularly feeds himself with a fork and spoon. We always noticed that he's particularly keen on being neat; he doesn't like to get messy when he eats. Petra says it's even more so now. I'm excited about everything he does, but I feel that I'm missing so much, he's going to be a totally different person when I come back.

Let's see what other miscellaneous news there is. Petra's dad got his work permit and social security card from the INS. Then he went and got his Ohio driver's license. That's exciting news in the battle to get "Permanent Resident" titles established for her family in Ohio. They are adjusting to their new surroundings quite well -- Sven (Pet's brother) is 10 years old and began local public school at Northmont Elementary in August. True to form in his family, he picked up the English language with speed and ease, much like his big sister. His stories of laughter and fun amongst teachers and students, which is unheard of and is grounds for punishment in most German schools, astonish his parents. Istvan and Maria (Pet's parents) are taking English classes, which are provided free of charge by the State of Ohio. Renee has taken over mom's website, and is developing marketing and sales strategies for both mom's, and my own artwork. And now, a joke from Cholo: what do you call two Mexicans playing basketball? Juan on Juan.

As for me, I could write volumes on the stupidity which abounds around me--it has no end. I've chosen to assume a comical stance when faced with stuff on a day-to-day basis. We received word from our Sergeant Major, while staying in a makeshift tent city, that "lights out" was to commence at 2000 Hours (that's 8PM to you normal people)--he was adamant about it, and even though he lived there in the camp with us, he failed to realize that we had no electricity, ergo no lights! Ever have brown lettuce? It's a delicacy here. Certainly preferred over the usual black, moldy lettuce that finds its way into our 'salads.' Okay, that's not fair. I must admit, the chow is actually pretty good. Don't know exactly what it is most of the time, but I guess that goes to show you, if you add the right spices, a little salt, and some bouillon, you can make anything edible. Reveille is at 6 every morning, and the first 4 hours of every day are dedicated to cleanup. On ship, there is a very limited number of heads (bathrooms). All of these, and just about all the other rooms on the ship, are connected by narrow passageways, or 'P-ways,' which are adorned with crapwater pipes, hydraulic lines, and electrical cables in conduit. The P-ways adjoin to other floors by way of narrow, steep 'ladderwells,' or stairs. On any given day, due to the taped-off and blocked passageways and ladderwells (for cleaning), it is not uncommon to climb seven flights of stairs and then work your way across and down seven different flights, just to get to a usable head that was only 15 feet from your point of origin. This time of

the day is usually the best time to crawl into one of the limited hiding spaces/caves/holes on the ship and take a nap, if someone else isn't in your spot already.

You read a lot of books on ship. Okay, maybe a WHOLE LOT of books. One of our favorite pastimes, though, is reading and responding to kids' mail from schools and churches around the States. Here are two actual letters, give or take a few words:

“Dear American Patriot, My name is Billy. My brother is in the Army. Do you know him. My grandpa died in the Army. I hope you don't die. My favorite color is lime green, sky blue, regular green, red, purple, orange, fire orange, hot pink, and bananana yellow. What plane do you fly? I have a dog and two cats. I don't like the cats, though, especially Midnight. My mom is afraid of the water. Do you like school. I'm in football. Everyone says it's a good sport for me because I'm always angry and I just need to learn to walk away. I don't know my own strength yet. Well, remember the eagle and 9-1-1. The strength of the eagle is with you and be united. Your Friend, Billy”

“Dear Soldier, Thank you for dying for your country. I'm Gwynn from Indiana. Do you have any children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren? I have an Uncle Monkey. I heard that you don't eat very good over there. Don't worry, you haven't missed much. Yesterday was dry cheeseburgers for lunch, and today I don't know what. I have triplet sisters and two other sisters. My mom is having a baby. My dad wants it to be a boy. Do you have many sisters? I got three glow stars this week. Last week I only got one. Well I hope you eat better. I am praying for you. We had a tornado here so pray for me too. My grandma's house got a tree in it but she's OK. Well take care now, by.” (--Gwynn)

Have you ever been on a ship in rough water? Even better, have you ever been in a gym on a ship in rough water? Better yet, have you ever watched people running on a treadmill, in the gym of a ship in rough water? I've seen people spill off of those things running at 9 mph, and watched stacks of weights fall from one side of a bench bar while someone was pressing. I'd swear that one side of my body gets worked out harder every time. Besides working out, I've been entering writing contests online and playing guitar (learning, but it's coming along pretty well), taking college courses, eating and sleeping, and writing or

emailing Petra. Three guys are walking, shine in sand, it's a lamp. Pick it up, rub-a-dub-dub, "poof," genie pops out, three wishes, one apiece. First guy: "I'm sick of all the flaming faggots in the world. I wish they would just vanish." "BAM! Done." Second guy: "I wish all the gun-shy, tree-huggin,' save-mother-earth hippie liberals\* would be gone too." "Wha-BAM!" Third guy: "Okay genie, let me get this straight. You mean to tell me that, just like that, all those queerbaiters and pansies and sannies just freakin' vanished off the face of the planet?!" Genie: "Yeahman. Just like that." Third guy again: "Huh, ain't that somethin.' Well, in that case... I guess I'll have a Coke!"

\*No sea snails were killed during the ink-making process which contributed to the printing of this letter, and this paper is made from recycled soy products... and nothing against gun-shy, tree-huggin,' save-the-planet hippie liberals.

Since I diddle a lot, these letters sometimes get started, put down, and then added to a few days later. Today we celebrated Thanksgiving. It's Sunday, the 24th, and I believe the real Thanksgiving is in another 4 days. To Celebrate, we had fun and games all day. Skeet shooting competition bright and early in the morning, I did well but didn't place. I would've been a more serious contender in the marksmanship competition (I'm one of Camp Lejeune's high shooters), but it got cancelled. Instead, we went deep-sea fishing! Besides two whopper Mahi-Mahis that gave a spectacular show but got away, no one caught anything notable. I, like the majority of the 30 or so fishers on the WWII-era fishing yacht (a storm-the-beaches "LCU"--landing craft), caught 2 things...Jack and Squat. After the 7-hour adventure and a nice sunburn, we drove back to the ship and went up to the flight deck for steaks and a rock concert. All the while, there were tug-of-war competitions and golf driving competitions over the water, batting cages, wrestling, hackey-sack competitions, chess, checkers, spades, basketball tournament, and a bunch of guys tossing the pigskin or playing catch. Our platoon took first, second, and third place in the chess tournament, out of forty-some competitors. It was actually a good Thanksgiving. Non-traditional, but good. We'll supposedly still have a traditional meal on Thanksgiving Day, but no festivities.

Well, I suppose I've about bored the crap out of all of you. We love you guys and all that

sweetness, and white puffy Charmin clouds with cuddly Snuggle bears dancing around dolphin-friendly rainbows and happy rays of sunshininess and all that jive. Seriously though, have a great Christmas and New Year. I'm really looking forward to seeing how Santa's sleigh makes it into our airspace without radar detection, let alone into my berthing area. I've always wondered about that. Write me. [speightsmj@nassau.usmc.mil](mailto:speightsmj@nassau.usmc.mil). Write Petra too. [queenofspeights@yahoo.com](mailto:queenofspeights@yahoo.com). See yous!

Love, God Bless, Seasons Greetings and Semper Fidelis,

Matty, Pet, Josh, and Caleb-on-the-way

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## [Archive \(2003-1\)](#)

The Daily Floater

Published aboard the Amphibious Warship "Nassau," aka Her Majesty's "Good Ship Lollipop"

February Edition, 2003

Bonjour et salutation, voyou singes des terre! Welcome to the world of Speights, where nothing at all is ever what it seems, not even to me. I know what you're all thinking—didn't we just get their last letter not too long ago? I say that these letters are spaced out every three or four months and it really is true; it only seems like you just received the last letter. Actually, I pretty much only get the urge to write when sufficient things have happened to make up a meaty letter, and lately, I've felt I could write novels. Plus, I get a kick out of writing these things. So sit back, throw your feet up, relax and get a laugh at my expense while I vent, or at least, take pleasure in the thought of me copying the entire contents of a thick address book to envelopes—yes, I very nearly have all of your addresses memorized.

Blessings unto all of you who have so faithfully written, and thank you for the encouragement, the jokes, the cookies and the reading material—all items of “the essential deployed.” I think of you all often. To those of you who haven’t written, that’s okay, I hope Santa leaves you a big fat steaming turd in your stocking next year. I’m only joking. It truly is the thought that counts, and if you’re any friend of mine, you probably can’t stand writing. I love you all. Please keep reading.

The Marine Corps has been busy lately. First of all, all active-duty Marines are being involuntarily extended for one year (they call it “stop-loss”). Second of all, the USS Nassau (that’s me) gets to sit out here and pollute the Persian Gulf for an additional few months, turning a seven-month float into a nine-month float. Exciting. We were in the United Arab Emirates when we received all this news, along with a coke, an orange, a slice of white bread and a small bag of Arab potato chips (to compensate for the crushing blow to many of us who had planned on getting out this summer). I’m dead serious. “Hey, we’re going to play with your life for about a year. Here, have an orange.” Actually, it pretty much worked. Then, when we weren’t looking, the “big cheeses that be” magically extended our float until May. That almost really stunk, but then they said “Hey look! A superbowl party!” And everybody was like, “Woo-hoo! Let’s stay out here forever, man!”...or something like that.

Last week was media week. Rolling Stone Magazine, a couple big-wig newspaper people, and the Good Morning, America TV crew were all out here asking us questions. Oh yes, for all of you big Rolling Stone readers, there will be a piece on the Nassau’s Recon platoon—don’t bother looking for me; I’m nocturnal and I was sleeping during the interview, along with a few other guys. Our official pass-down was “No one will speak to the media without stating that ‘morale is high and we are ready for whatever the Commander-in-Chief will have us do,’” or something along those lines. I specifically remember the ‘morale is high’ part. Good one.

The new Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Hagy or Hagee, not sure which is correct spelling, came to visit us yesterday and shake everyone’s hands, and then we all took off to enjoy a few days’ liberty in Bahrain. Bahrain is Arabic for “country with the worst souvenirs.” Amazingly, most Marines don’t know that, and spend hundreds and

thousands of dollars on ugly jade elephants and marble chess sets made in Pakistan. Looking at the postcard racks will actually put you to sleep. It's like there's a nationwide ban on quality or color or something, I don't know.

The weather is great out here. We have missed out on all the lovely cold fronts that most of you experienced this winter, and many, many days have been spent fishing off the back of the boat, where I caught the ship's record fish this float! A grouper, who fed five hungry men until we all nearly popped. Don't know exactly how many pounds he was, but I fought him up from 100' below for about 10 good minutes, where he died on the surface from getting 'the bends,' fish-style (decompression sickness--bubbles form in the blood and body fluids, air cavities expand, eyes pop out). Got a few great pictures on a digital camera, cleaned him up and went back fishing; ironically, I dropped the camera and it bounced overboard and sank to the bottom like no other lightweight plastic object ever did, destroying the only proof I had. Oh well.

Won \$450 playing bingo, and won \$1400 by successfully guessing the ending score of the superbowl—anyone who watched the last minute and a half of that game would never have believed it, but I actually said that two intercepted touchdowns would be ran along with extra points about a minute before it happened—me and my buddies were slapping high-fives in midair and missed each other every time, we were so excited!

Like many Marines and sailors here, I'm making the most of the forced isolation. I've become a knowledgeable stargazer, a better guitarist, wine and cigar aficionado, and a more proficient photographer/graphics designer/communicator (we work with some really high-speed cameras, radios, and imaging equipment; it's the meat and potatoes of our job). I've also become a better auto mechanic and become more knowledgeable about the human body, thanks to pretty much unrestricted access to a decent library and lots of time on my hands. I guess you really have to make the best out of every situation, and now every morning I wake up with the library in mind... "Today, I'm going to learn how to cook Creole." "Gee, I always wanted to know more about Paul Harvey," or "How many leagues have we traveled so far?" (20,000 is quite a long way). Never would I have dreamed of having so much time to spend in a library reading about every interesting subject possible, but I'm glad for that much, and I'm reminded that I get paid for this. It

is relaxing. Other than that, I still just work out, eat, sleep, and continue to (as a good friend put it) perfect the art of standing in line.

Vaccinations and vitamins—we all got injected with the smallpox vaccine last month, and most of us still have festering, pussy, bloody wounds at the inoculation site. I'll skip all the gory details though. Only two people on the ship have died so far. Several others are sick from the family of rats that were thoroughly cooked into our baked beans last week; the cooks didn't find them until they were scraping the bottom of the serving vat. I've resorted to taking tons of vitamins and minerals to fight off ship-borne diseases. The rats and dead guys were both lies. You're such a sucker.

If you do not know by now, Petra gave birth to a beady-eyed munchkin who looks just like me. His name is Caleb Conlan. Amazingly, I had just returned from an all-day shore patrol duty and rushed up the stairs to see if Petra had him yet. Within 5 minutes of being on the phone, I got the play-by play from Petra's mom, from pre-birth to post-birth in real time! I heard him cry for the first time and heard all the nurses in the background "Pushpushpushpushpushpush!!!" It was about as close to being there as I could've been. I got to talk to Petra both before and after the ordeal, and she sounded so calm and cool both times that I was really shocked. About 10 minutes passed between those two conversations. Oh yes, and the due date was right on the money...January 1st.

Petra learned that living with my folks while I'm away will never work again. Then she learned that living with her folks while I'm away will never work again. Now she's learning that being a single mother is far from cool, so I'll remind her of that if she ever wants to divorce me. "Besides, who'd want you? You've got two kids! Excess baggage, woman!" No, I'm not heartless. Somebody punch me in the kidney, please. I love that woman!!! Them little squirt boys, too. Josh is pronouncing his "R's" now. "Car, near, there, etc." He can count to ten unassisted and says his A,B,C's with some help. His birthday is in March but we'll be waiting until I come home to celebrate it. Petra's living back in Jacksonville, NC. New address: 3562 Chosin Circle, Tarawa Terrace, NC 28543.

This letter has been written bit-by-bit over the month of February. This paragraph is one

of the newest additions. Josh is really sick right now, the baby hasn't been eating or sleeping right, and Petra fears she is coming down with something too. She really has no one to help her and could use some support in the way of encouragement or prayer, so if you get the chance please pray for her strength and mental endurance. She's been having a pretty rough time but has been a real warrior so far. Phones are shut down for the duration of float and email is sporadic. Never have I felt so helpless being on this ship.

I grew my hair out to Ubange (you-bang-ee) length over the last few months, but then a funny thing happened. Josh reverted to calling the bald guy at church "daddy." Poor boy's so confused. He knows me by my shiny head, so I scraped the grape once again. I believe I will grow it out once I'm home. In other news, we spelled out "24 MEU PROUD" on the flight deck today for a photo taken from a helo above. While the rest of the Marines prepare for war, we spent six hours today perfecting the number "2." We are consistently told that our ship is the "tip of the spear," but lately we've been more like the "neck of the plastic spoon."

A few days ago we conducted an "underway replenishment," or UNREP. The whole ship forms into one big line of people, then the contents of about 400 pallets of goods (frozen beef, liquid soap, reams of paper) are distributed to their respective storage areas. When the boxes of ice cream bars passed by us, they were quickly tossed out of the line and into our berthing. During a 10-minute break (UNREPs are an all-day event), we ate every single ice cream bar (to destroy the evidence which would have been caused by 40 lbs. of melted Klondikes). I believe it worked out to like 6 bars per man. Upon returning to work, lifting heavy objects for another 3 or 4 hours, we (of course) got sick. Ice cream might happen once a month if we're lucky, so we decided that the good out-weighed the bad.

Just what is a grape-nut? I always wondered. Anyway, my walk with God is getting stronger. I'm ashamed to say that, like so many people, I turn to Him most often when I'm at my wit's end. He knows my heart, though, and knows that I think of Him often. There is one chaplain here who is really great, and he runs a Bible study every night on the boat except Wednesdays. The crowd gets bigger and bigger every night. It's really encouraging to be around good Christian guys who are also immersed in an environment that harbors

extreme foul language, pornography, violence and the like. Which brings me to my next point.

All of the above applies to most Marines I know, but I would have to say that, generally, those same men with such 'morality flaws' are the most selfless and caring and publicly well-mannered and disciplined people I know, bar-none. Oh yes, and they're real. Less drama and more "in your face, that's how it is, point-blank" mentality. In fact, here's the (long overdue in my family letters ) composition of your basic Marine:

The guys I work with consistently give away personal belongings like motorcycles and guitars, write to children across the world and send their paychecks to their parents. They have excellent attention to detail and can make any metal object sparkle. Keeping very well in line with tradition, they are all fighters by day (every day) and real "Don Juans" by night, help the elderly across the street, cuss up a storm to each other (most insults are actually compliments), and drink each other under the table at every chance they get. Every one believes differently than the other and is very strong in his individual beliefs, but a few arguments, harsh words, or black eyes don't even put a nick in the friendship. After a recent heated fight, one guy stitched up his "opponent's" eyelid for him. Casual conversation consists of a mixture of human anatomy, ammunition ballistics, and the best way to make an omlette. I've watched these guys rip a rubber dummy to shreds with a bayonet and save a sparrow from a heat stroke. Need a hand with your car? Order a pizza and a few beers and she'll be running in no time. "Hey dude, get this pimple on my back, it's killing me!" "Can't reach it, huh? Let me guess, just work out your triceps?" Why do I yell "kill" when I put on my socks in the morning??? "Another year, huh? Man, I guess Colorado University will have to wait. Hey, these are good oranges!" Every one of them has at least one tattoo, and the majority of them have at least 20% of their body "inked." Several have college degrees and only three others are married. Most consistently do things of superhero magnitude and don't bother talking about it.

Nate is 25 and is our doc. A Navy corpsman for our 22-man platoon, he dishes out sutures, IV bags and needles, and drugs like candy. He is paramedic and Special Forces qualified, and is our field surgeon with only a high-school diploma. He is apt with a scalpel and pair

of tongs. He saved one of our guys after he drowned and had no pulse. Crazy Eddie is a raving lunatic that goes off like “Old Faithful” at least once a day. Threw his \$4000 laptop off the ship because it beat him in chess. This was not the first time. Clayton Martin has long denounced all ties to his family, who is anti-military. We are his only family. He’s a real wardog snake-eater type, one of our best scout-snipers and a mushball around females. Huge Britney Spears fan. Tyrone is the “token black guy.” He sleeps with his eyes wide open and listens to country music. Hillbilly is true to his name and can nail a gnat to a tree with his throwing hatchet. Craig DeWitt is our master barber. Chris Sanchez, aka “Cholo McTavey,” is no kidding half and half Irish-Mexican. DugaldTonn, said like Mr. Miyagi’s “Daniel son,” is a JapanAmerican jiu-jitsu ninja who spent his whole life in Japan. He’s half my size and can tie me up like a pretzel. “Chainsaw” Poulin is a former snowboard instructor who designs, builds, and sells custom Harleys to guys throughout the Recon community. He’s from Maine, and talks with a thick New England accent “I’m wicked mad thirsty, guy. Let’s go grab som biiz at the bah and get wAsted.” His current project bike has cost him over \$45K. Chunk is one of the biggest guys on ship. He can bench more weight than I can add with a calculator. Any one of these or the other guys (I’ll continue the introductions in a future letter) would give you the shirt off their back even if they didn’t know you. Oh yes, and everyone’s a comedian.

Well, I suppose I’ve tired you with three pages of worthless information. Thank you for being a good sport about it. I ask of you to pray for the sanity of my wonderful wife and our adorable little bean sprouts. I will certainly return the favor. Enjoy the attached photos, God bless, Semper Fi, vote Republican, and may each of you receive large tax refunds. Love you all.

Living the Dream,

Matt, Petra, Joshua, Caleb

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2003-2)

Lunacy

One Family's Continuing Saga

July 12th, 2003

Wow, it's another Speights family letter. Woo-whee. How exciting. Too bad I don't get one of these EVERY FOUR MONTHS!!! To accommodate you whiners and old people who say that I need to use a larger font, I decided to write to everyone using Times New Roman size 11.5. This will equate to more pages. Ha. If you're lazy like me, just skip to the end of the letter and read the last paragraph, because as you all know, the happy foo-foo sprinkles and warm fuzzies usually settle to the bottom of a family letter, just like the chewy drops of shiny goodness in Raisin Bran.

Well, as usual, a lot has happened since the last letter. The city of Jacksonville, North Carolina experienced a massive deficit in bed sheets, spray paint and yellow ribbon over the last two months, and there are signs everywhere welcoming Marines and Sailors back to the area. Local businesses offer free vacations, tax-free shopping, and free oil changes to spouses of deployed service members. The 24th MEU returned on May 31st, and I returned two weeks before that on "advance party." Baby Caleb was just shy of 5 months old when I got home, and Josh just over two (years). For those of you who didn't know, I was able to hear Caleb's birth over the phone. Being home and having our family reunited is beyond words, so I'll leave it at that.

Iraq was sandy and we were there for just over a month. We went in on day 8 of the ground assault and controlled the area just south of An Nasiriyah to just north of Al Kut, which is about an hour south of Baghdad. The 24th MEU was assigned to Task Force Tarawa, and our primary area of operations was a crucial intersection of two main highways near Al Hayy. There sure are a lot of Al's in that country. Did some cool stuff, brought back some cool stuff, and had a pretty good time. Didn't lose any buddies or anything, so all is well.

Okay, here's the roller coaster of events that have taken place since our reunion...hang on! Okay, at first, having not seen each other since last August, Petra and I spent weeks locked away inside our pad with the phone unplugged, enjoying each other's company, playing with the baby, and trying to convince Joshua that his dad wasn't still on the boat. Petra moved from Virginia back to North Carolina in January, into base housing. We have successfully evaded base housing for seven years, and I remember why. The actual housing units wreak of the 50's, combined with a nightmarish color and style of an Edward Scissorhands neighborhood.

Surprisingly, we love the place. The house itself sucks, but ah, the location! There's a gravel trail directly behind the patch of woods in our backyard, which leads to the Inner Coastal Waterway in less than 5 minutes walking time. There, the locals cast for jumbo jumbo shrimp and collect fossil shark teeth. The small cliffs above the brackish beaches contain casting-quality clay that fires a bright red, similar to terra cotta pottery. There's a shady boy scout bivouac area nearby which overlooks the water and is well kept year-round, perfect for picnics. Our backyard is a virtual nature preserve. We have a cornucopia of wildlife around the yard all day and night, to include a small herd of deer that routinely takes afternoon naps in our backyard not ten feet from the house, undisturbed by barbecues and block parties in the neighborhood. Every time I do dishes, I resist the hunting urge to lean out the window and throw knives at them, or lasso one and pull him straight into the freezer. Such a tease must be the Lord's way of teaching me to be civilized. Our whole housing area is being leveled and rebuilt, house by house. The new places are beautiful, but won't reach our street for another year. Small price to pay for free housing and utilities, though.

Hopefully, you all had a wonderful Independence Day weekend. We spent ours in the Dayton area, where Ohio kicked off a two-week "Festival of Flight" to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Wright brothers' first successful flight. The Wright brothers, you'll remember, were from Dayton. President Bush was there on the 4th to kick it off, and entertainers such as John Travolta and Harrison Ford were there to host the festivities that weekend. The weather in Ohio was miserably enjoyable. Hotter than two squirrels by

day and torrential downpours and tornado warnings by night. This backs my theory that all of the bad weather we experience in North Carolina actually originates in Ohio.

Our July 4th was spent at the annual Buchholz family reunion (that's all the family on my mom's side), at Deer Creek State Park. Both the Speights and the Buchholz families are the only ties to normalcy in my life, although probably like your own family they are nowhere near normal. We had a great time, and that's a pretty cool place to vacation. It rates a worthy recommendation. Like anything worth doing on an annual basis, the reunion had all the right elements. Screaming kids, bee stings, an hour-long waterfight, a big lodge with an indoor and outdoor pool, 800 pieces of leftover chicken to snack on in the evening, oh yes, and of course the aunts that still squeeze everybody's cheeks... "Oh come here you little schnooks! (squeeze)..." During our stay in Ohio, we were able to see some of our friends, and we made a trip to Indiana to see the Speights family.

Unfortunately, the majority of our two-week visit was all business. The BCIS (Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, formerly INS) has had Petra's family jumping through hoops, and we provided translation services for these and other issues the whole time (when I say we, of course, I really mean Petra).

Having recently seen the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," I realized how much I can relate to the boyfriend / newlywed husband in that movie. Have you ever sat at the dinner table of a family who refuses to use black pepper as a seasoning, because it is the major competitor of red paprika in Hungary? "Hey Apu, can you pass the salt and paprika?" Did you know that everything that Hungarians make is 10 times more durable than similar products produced elsewhere around the world? Hungary would be the richest and most powerful country in the world if all the up-and-coming Hungarians didn't move to the United States (this, of course, is why the U.S. is so rich and powerful). I have become a walking, breathing, Cliff Claven's fact book of worthless Hungarian information. Okay, seriously, we spent hours...HOURS...playing the opening hand of a game of Rummy, and no cards were laid on the table by any person in the first hour. I'm not kidding. This of course is due to the fact that I don't know the rules to Rummy, even though I've been playing it every day for the last 10 MONTHS IN A FLOATING METAL BOX with hundreds of different people (including variations of the game). I dunno. I guess somewhere between

the North American continent and Europe, the rules of Rummy have changed so much that they became two entirely different games. One of them is fun, and the other is very, very, very boring. Boring even to a boring person, boring among a million boring card games. May it be smitten from The Official International Book of Boring Card Games. But yes, I love my in-laws ever so dearly. Go Hungary!

Now about my own parents. Because they will, in fact, be reading this letter, I'll be a little less harsh. Okay maybe not. They spoil their grandkids rotten. If we stayed with them for two weeks, our children would be irreversible nightmares. Ice cream to spoil dinner. Midnight visits to the bedroom to spoil sleeping habits. Oh yes, and a spank-free environment. I don't pay attention to that last one though, and Joshua is "loved" thoroughly on the backside, regardless of grandma & grandpa's scorn. His behavior in public or otherwise, as a result, reflects. Other than that, it is impossible to reach my parents; I'd leave their phone number but it won't do any good, because they never answer anyway, even if they are home. And they're likely not (home, that is). They are building a beautiful house to their specifications in Suffolk, Virginia, just south of their current Chesapeake home on the North Carolina border. It's a 7,500 sq. ft. living quarters or something like that, right on a huge lake. Beautiful. I am proud of them; they've come a long way from saltine cracker dinners and the beat up station wagon with enormous holes in the floorboards. To this day though, they haven't lost their garage sale-spirit. Oh yeah, speaking of "these days," dad hit the big 50 on the 12th. You didn't hear that from me though. Petra turned 25 on the 14th, and our anniversary was on the 18th. Big 7 for us, and we reserved Labor Day weekend at Disney World! We'll be staying at the Grand Floridian Disney resort. We're stoked! We're stoked! Twice for emphasis. No kids though, and we'll probably feel guilty about that later...no we won't! We'll take them there when they're both old enough to enjoy it.

I feel horrible. Istvan and Maria deserve a better paragraph. I do enjoy playing basketball and talking with my father-in-law, and I enjoy helping him conduct business transactions, such as securing a lower loan rate for his new Ford F-150. I can relate to my mother-in-law in one area (and only one), plants. We both share an interest in and a knowledge of wild plants and their various uses, and during my morning runs I would stop occasionally to

collect roadside mints, plantains, chickory, wild carrots, you name it. I'd bring them back so she could check them out and become familiar with their English names. Also, if ever one of you needs a partner in criminal activity, call Maria. She totally baffled immigration officers who spent an hour trying to fingerprint her. Apparently, the notorious superclean freak has spent 50 years scrubbing the fingerprints right off her hands. Pet's brother Sven changed over to his middle name, David, and he thinks I'm a walking talking GI Joe. He's always fascinated with my military stuff. He's adapted well in school in just a year's time, as evidenced by his report cards and his little girly friends that visit. Great family, just not quite Americanized--yet. Maybe that's a good thing. I would still like to leave the boys with them for a couple weeks when they're a tad bit older, so that they can get some Hungarian language immersion. I do love the family, and I especially like Maria's cooking. Fresh baked bread daily and always something good in the oven.

I'm an uncle again! You know what I mean. Connor Landon Thomas, born to Renee (sister) and Jared (bra-in-la) on July second. We're really disappointed with Renee for not holding out 2 more measly days. Her baby wasn't born on the 4th of July because she was SELFISH. Oh well, close enough I guess. What the heck, we'll keep him. Yes, Ren & Jared and Petra & I are in a race to see who can have the most kids in the shortest amount of time. The girls don't know it, but mom says that she want's 8 grandkids; she doesn't care how we split 'em up. That being said, here's our big news...Petra's PREGNANT! Nay-sayers, save it; I know what you're thinking... "For crying out loud, don't they have a cure for that?!" I'm kidding about her being pregnant, however, as Petra and I move up the financial ladder in our life, we may just take on a small herd (flock?) of kids ourselves! Don't tell Petra. No, seriously, we may even adopt a couple someday. We're taking a seventh-inning stretch for the time being, but we're adamant about having a big family.

Okay, the recent gouge on each of us and I'm done. Petra has been re-doing our wardrobes. Okay, she's re-doing her wardrobe and starting one for me. I believe her new motto is, "if the shoe fits, buy it." For mother's day, she was "Queen for a Day" at the high-falootin' ladies-only spa uptown. With the kind of treatment she received over those EIGHT HOURS, all I could say was, "Slap me in a skirt and call me Suzie!" Petra has been exercising with me lately in our last-ditch effort to change our home lifestyle into a

healthy one. She runs with me on the weekends and we alternate with each other riding bike / babysitting in the evenings (free child care on the weekends at the base, so we can run together). She's excited about my unit's upcoming Jane Wayne day, when all the wives get to come out and play with their boys and get muddy and ride on helos and stuff.

Petra's also picked up some habits while I was away...she cooks these huge meals every night that are absolutely amazing; before we went to Ohio we must've had different friends over on 10 separate occasions to share these feasts. She developed this infatuation with gourmet cooking, along with a taste for wine to complement my own (I started regularly drinking wine [primarily red] 4 years ago on doctor's orders, to help increase my HDL ["good cholesterol"] levels. This evening habit aids in the prevention of heart disease and stroke, among other illness). She also picked up cigar smoking, banjo, and a boyfriend named Juan, but she only smokes and plays the banjo when she's drunk, and Juan (who left before I got home) will keep his butt in El Salvador if he knows what's good for him. I made Petra promise to take some college courses if I re-enlist.

Petra's Play of the Day (when calling to find out the number to the pizza joint) -- 411: "Directory Assistance, how may I help you?" Petra: "Yes, do you have any specials, like a large 2-topping or something?"...and that's why I love her, folks! I teased her about it, but she does the same to me when I goof up. A couple of days ago, Petra went butch on me--chopped her hair down--looks great! Like a totally different woman! Ha ha, ha...ha....haha, ahem...

As for myself, I was having a hard time trying to decide which way to go for a career, as the end of my enlistment fast approaches. I boiled it down to the FBI as a surveillance specialist, or another four for the Corps. After an interview with the FBI in Washington, D.C., I determined that we wouldn't make enough living in the D.C. area; it would be a step back financially. The military has a lot of great things going for it, namely 100% college tuition (I'm chasing an MBA now), 100% family medical coverage, free flights for family to and from overseas (even on vacation), 30 days paid leave annually, and a 50 or 75% pension dependent upon either a 20 or 30 year retirement. I'll hopefully be adding a stripe within the next few months, and I'll be going to sniper school and a couple others

before dropping an officer package and really making a career leap (Lord willing).

The latest change to the Marine Corps is a new non-press digital-style camouflage utility uniform, and tan rough-side-out boots. Within another year or so, the traditions of 'highly polished boots' and 'crisply starched cammies' (or as often said, "spits & starches") will be ended. The Marine Corps martial arts program (affectionately referred to as "Semper Fu") is knee deep and in full swing, and before you know it, every swingin' jarhead will be a Super Duper Mega Black Belt Kung-Fu Ninja Warrior. Well, that's the idea anyway. As with any new program that's forced down your throat...I'm sorry, I mean "implemented"...in the workplace, there's a split between those who love it and will go far in the world of Chi, and then there are those who think it's just plain gay. I personally think it's about as much fun as a mouthful of bees. Besides all that, there's still normal Marine Corps PT, just another of the many ways that the Marines keep each other in shape. Every morning I start off my day with a rigorous physical training regime, and then the rest of the day I'm a soup sandwich. You see, despite the horrifically muscular body I carry around on me, I'm actually quite a weenie. Most people have an epidermis, a dermis, and a subcutaneous fatty layer covering their muscles. I, however, have an epidermis, a subcutaneous fat layer, and a sub-subcutaneous fat layer. It's really weird, I know, but true nonetheless. When I go to the gym, all I do is sculpt my fat. I don't lose weight, either, I just move it from one place on my body to another. I also have a chamber in my stomach that is reserved solely for the digestion of homemade fudge, which is my form of kryptonite. O-kaaaay.....

"Joshcapades:" The boy is growing. And growing. Here's the nutshell. He speaks extremely well, not only for his age. The exception to that statement is bumblebee--he says "bubble bambi." If ever I lacked proof that he was my son, his imagination would attest. According to Josh, every crevice, hole, dark place or puddle contains alligators, snakes, bugs, trucks, or dinosaurs. He'll look into an air-conditioning vent and say, "Mom, look! There's a gator in there!" Mom, putting on her eyes, asks, "Oh yeah, what's he doing?" Of course, Joshua's answer is, "He's eatin' cupcakes!" Logically. Same with the "dinosaurs that jump on mommy's bed." So that's how it gets messed up. A jumping Joshosaurus. We play along. He's got a great imagination. He's a typical boy and can

spend endless hours throwing rocks at water. He drinks wine as well; we put it in his juice every night to help him sleep. No we don't. Gotcha. We are, on the other hand, keeping him old school: Old Yeller, Mr. Rogers, Shirley Temple and Looney Toon style. I think that some of these kids' cartoons on TV nowadays promote too much whining and backtalk. Call me old-fashioned, but the I'd say the proof is in the pudding.

Hey, if you're buying birthday presents for kids under 3, do the parents of those kids a favor: don't buy one of those little rolling 2-wheeled popcorn-ball poppers with a carrying handle. We call it "the cart of insanity." Whoever invented that thing should, well, do something. I know they've been around since the dawn of toys, but I will continue to write letters to the Fisher-Price company until every one of those things is recalled due to some safety hazard or something... "Look here, ma'am, I'm telling you, the lid just popped off the thing and balls were everywhere. My kid, my cat, and my two dogs were all choking on them at the same time!! I'm calling 9-1-1, my wife's looking for an emergency vet..." Yeah, anyway, here are two of Joshy's quips that I noted to add to this letter. The highly conservative and proper mother-in-law is preparing the evening meal, when Josh comes around the corner and tugs on her aprin. She looks down at him while he says, "hey Anyu, wanna wrestle?" We're visiting Josh's great grandparents and he runs up to them while sitting outside. "Hi great grandma! Hi great grandma!" Turning to my aunt (to whom he had not been introduced), he added, "Hi great lady!" We're listening to the Christian music station when the call letters are announced "You're listening to One-oh-six point whatever, K-love." Josh corrects, "Hey! It's not K-love. It's Ca-leb!"

Caleb is also doing great. Six and a half months old. They say that the internal disposition of a family can be measured by the happiness of its children. Rating our family by this statement, we're pretty proud. Both of the boys are happy, smiling and laughing all the time. They really love each other, and it shows. Caleb tries to do everything his big brother does, and gets frustrated because he can't walk yet. He's trying though. He sits up, stands with minor assistance, and in the last two weeks has perfected crawling. We play "go fetch" with him, throwing his toys down the hallway until his knees are bruised from all the crawling. He also gets bruised up sometimes when we box. I just hope nobody sees the bruises and thinks we're abusive.

Caleb is a water baby. He doesn't swim, but he takes drowning really well. I guess you could say that he does swim, but only straight down. Actually, we haven't tried teaching him to swim yet, but he absolutely loves the pool. Even when it's colder than usual. He has two teeth! He says 'mama' and 'baba' like a champ, and he says all kinds of other words but they're so high at the top of the voice octave scale we don't understand them. Okay, so it's just rant screaming. But he's so good at it! Anyone know of any "loudest baby" contests around?

Okay, last minute stuff. "And the Grocery Store of the Year award goes to...Kroger!" During rainy Ohio days, the cart-pushers and the baggers of the Englewood Kroger store escorted the customers to their vehicles under protection of humongous beach umbrellas, also carrying groceries for the elderly. Is it just me, or is radio air time just crammed with commercials these days? "Your listening to WXWX, your station for one song in a row, every hour, guaranteed..." Oh yeah, I got published in some writer's magazine! Big triumph for me. Patriotic poem named "34 Lines." I'll attach it to a shorter version of the family letter sometime. Uncle Steve, family celeb founder of Super Subby's, the best sub restaurant chain ever, hit it really big with Certifichecks.com. He landed a government contract, so his are the only authorized gift certificates at military exchanges across the globe! Oh yeah, there's a Speights brewing company in New Zealand, and Speights beer is the unofficial brew of the New Zealand rugby team. I got the shirt off some rugby website, but the beer itself isn't exported off the island.

Grandma Speights' cookies were so popular on float, that when a box of them arrived at the ship (1 of 3) in crumbs and powder (it looked like the box was kicked around the world), the guys dug them out of the trash three days after I tossed them. I saw my buddies grabbing handfuls of crumbs out of a box while playing cards. Me: "Hey, where'd you guys get that box?" Friends: "Dude! Would you believe someone threw it in the trash?!!!" Mother-in-law's poppy seed cake was scrutinized at first: "Hey man, the chocolate in that cake is bad." "That's not chocolate, it's ground poppy seeds, according to the letter." "Oh, okay, in that case this cake is great!" If you're within listening range of Kicks (Kix?) 96 FM Country out of Richmond Indiana, listen in the mornings for radio

personality Dave MacKay. We're old rompin' buddies from back in the day. The last bit of radio news: "One up for morality"--Petra's church hang-out friends from before she met me, Christian band Mercy Me, not only topped the charts at the Dove Awards and in the Christian music world last year (Petra was screaming in the car when we first heard them on the radio), but their big hit "I Can Only Imagine" has for months consistently topped the request charts of the (non-Christian) pop music stations of North Carolina and, we're told, most of the U.S. I officially feel like a retard whenever I'm holding a VHS tape in Blockbuster. Paranoia? I don't think so. Just try grabbing a VHS tape when the DVD's are sold out, and I guarantee you'll receive at least one glance that screams "pity." Even from an employee. Oh yeah, whenever I caught a glimpse of satellite news on TV before the war started, I saw that pathetic shift of popular opinion among anti-war liberals. Though this was not a war proportional to others in our nation's history, here's a comparison. In the Viet Nam era, protesters held the troops in disdain. These days, the popular opinion among like protesters was, "We support the troops but not the war," or "the troops but not the president or the Bush administration." Nothing made me more upset. It's all or nothing, baby; don't hide behind the troops. I'd rather not have your support. This opinion was largely shared with me by my peers and the other five thousand or so people on that ship. And as for those trying to stick it to the president right now? Shame on them. They missed the pie for the sake of the cherry. I watched a whole country, scared to death of one man, get changed. Yeah, there's gonna be an aftermath. So what. We should've gone in after Milosovich before his day. We should've nailed Hitler before his. Let's stop the bullies. Good training for me and my guys, too. Anyway, there's my 2 cents.

If you skipped this letter down to the last paragraph, here's the man version. I'm good, Petra's good, the kids are good. Petra's pregnant--not. Extended family's good. Sis Renee had baby. Mother-in-law. Another 4 for the Corps. Mother-in-law. Cowboys and Indians. Hunting season in 6 weeks. Now the happy stuff: We love you all (only those of you who received this letter; everyone else disregard), thanks for letters and packages and words of support during float if it applies, if it doesn't, we still love you, and you're all in our prayers. Have a great next few months. We'll write again around the holidays. I won't ask any of you to write back, but if you're feeling froggy, jump. This family letter has been brought to you by my mother-in-law, the letter "Q," various generic and nonexistent radio

stations, and “coffee: the breakfast alternative.” As always, God bless you and Semper Fidelis, and drink plenty of water.

Love, hugs, and peanut-butter slugs,

Petra, Matty, Joshy, and Caleb

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2003-3)

"Great Enthusiasms"

Published by Speights Press

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November-Decemberish, 2003

Lorem Ipsum Dolor Sit Amet

I have no clue what that means. It was part of the template that this computer has for writing newsletters. If I had to guess, the above title probably translates to, "Stinky Weasel Pudding Feet."

Well, once again, greetings from the armpit of the United States. Without any assistance from the retarded and sarcastic side of my brain, here is a rundown of our current events: Boys are growing, ages two and 11 months. Petra is keeping busy with church and a work-at-home type business. Matt is in his “school phase” of training and is always tired. Merry Christmas to everybody.

Okay, you know the deal. The above paragraph is the short and sweet version of this letter. You may skip to the end (we love you, blah blah), or for you devoted, noble, and wonderful people--our TRUE friends, please read on.

Family events: Petra and Matt had their 7-yr wedding anniversary in July and celebrated it in August, when we had some bonus money to spend (Matt re-enlisted for four years again). Our two big gifts to each other were (1) “Petra” and “Matty” tattoos on our ring fingers--this is great for Matt, who has not been allowed to wear a wedding band in the last seven years due to safety when working on aircraft and due to shine in a field environment. (2) A trip to Disney World!!!

Petra had never been to Disney, and it had been about 10 years since Matt was last there. We went all-out, taking advantage of Disney’s ‘military appreciation’ specials. Stayed at the Grand Floridian Disney resort/spa, linked up with some friends, hit every park that we could in three or four days and ate at every theme restaurant we could in the same time. It was our first-ever big splurge vacation, and though short, we got really spoiled.

Good thing we took that vacation, because after that, our life kicked into overdrive for a couple months. Petra attended the first annual Recon “Jane Wayne Day,” along with all the other wives (about forty in all). In addition to rappelling, climbing, racing, eating MRE’s, and doing various Marine-type things, Petra received a certificate for the highest M-4 Carbine assault rifle shooter, the highest M-9 service pistol shooter, and the overall marksmanship award. Her shooting was a hot topic around work for the week. She even made the front page of the paper’s ‘local’ section, as “Duke for a Day.” Moral of the story: mess with Petra and it’s “Light’s out, Meatball!”

Shortly after the season opener (in our household vernacular, this refers to hunting season, not football, baseball or basketball), Matt bagged his first deer, and Josh tried like mad to get past barricade mommy to help daddy clean the deer up, but ended up settling for watching from the window. For those of you who are wondering, Josh was perfectly normal about it, and kept telling mommy that daddy killed the deer because it was a monster. I have no clue where he gets this stuff, because we filter what he watches like crazy.

Caleb grew two fangs (canines) as his first upper teeth. It was so cute! Only lasted about two months though, now he has two more in the front. That’s all he’s getting for

Christmas (his two front teeth). He started saying his first words: “mama,” “dada,” and now “car” and “Joshy.” In recent weeks, he started walking.

We’re making friends all over Jacksonville, and we’ve become really close to some of them. We started going to church home/cell groups on Sunday evenings, but haven’t been in a while. Our next door neighbors are great. They recently got a dog, and they trained him to crap only in our front yard. It’s quite amazing, really; he won’t go anywhere else. So this Christmas, all I want is a dog. A really big one capable of pooping ‘by the pound.’ Then, late at night, I will bury an underground electronic dog fence that is channeled in a path directly to the neighbors’ doorstep. I’ll let you know the results.

Remember Vieques, Puerto Rico? The place where all those selfish people raised a big stink about the U.S. using their homes as targets for bomber / naval gunfire training? Yeah, well, now they do all that training here. Josh has got to be the only two year old in the country that knows the difference between thunder and naval gunfire. I honestly think he learned the word “bomb” before he learned the word “thunder.”

Prior to receiving our bonus in late August, we found ourselves in a money fix for a few weeks, and after a garage sale, Josh had to bail us out with his \$80 piggybank contents. Can you believe that? 80 big ones as a two-year old. That’s a whole lotta Hot Wheels or Matchbox cars. We’re debating letting him control our budget and balance the checkbook, but first he needs to learn how to count past twenty.

Petra has been selling Partylite candles, similar it seems to selling Tupperware, Mary Kay, Avon, Pampered Chef or Longaberger baskets. She likes it, she’s motivated, and she’s doing well. She is also rehearsing for our Church’s Christmas Cantata. Somehow, she still has time left every day to cook up a meal, clean the house, handle the munchkins, and decorate all that we own in a Winter Wonderland motif. I call her “Supermom.”

September passed quickly for Josh, the month being hallmarked by his first “Slopty Joe.” These days he talks about everything, and is really smart, but still little-boyish enough to say things like, “Mom, I don’t have to wash my hands, they’re nice and toasty!” He got to ride his first horse at the huge church picnic we had over labor day, and he attended

“Hallelujah Night” at church in lieu of Halloween trick-or-treating. He had a blast. Can’t pull the Santa Claus blinds over his eyes, though...this being a Marine base with a good interracial mix of people, the base exchange (where we usually shop) sometimes has a white Santa, sometimes a black Santa, sometimes a Hispanic Santa and sometimes an oriental Santa hanging around inside. It’s hard to convince him that they’re all the same guy.

Okay, got a ton of stuff to say still but don’t want to bore you, so I’ll spit out the serious stuff quickly and end with a laugh--hurricane Isabelle crushed a lot of houses in our neighborhood, but not ours. Popular radio show covering the Eastern quarter of the US declared our city the most pathetic and horrible place in the United States “How do you people smile?”...We refinanced our house at 4.5% while the rates were super low...10-point buck teased me forever but I never got him...I spent last three months at sniper school--didn’t teach me much about shooting, but with all the ‘cool guy’ pictures on the walls, I can draw skulls really well...

Caleb experienced joy of first tootsie roll pop...Petra and I made front page in a bunch of papers nationwide--something about ‘life after Iraq,’ the story was really gay and we were misquoted a few times, but hey, the photo’s all right (you can find it online)...Had the inevitable “Rules of Engagement” speech with Josh, i.e. “don’t hit girls; don’t bite unless the boy is four years older, 100 lbs heavier, or you can’t breathe; etc.“...No McMarathon this year (Marine Corps Marathon, in Speightstalk)...been playing guitar a lot...lots of friends play...mom & dad’s house in Suffolk is coming up (7000+ square feet!) and they’re all moved out of old house in Chesapeake as of 10 December...spent Thanksgiving with them and took 7 Marines with us (wrecked the place for 4 days, ate a lot, helped carry heavy things around the building lot, saw “3rd Eye Blind” concert at this cool place called “the Norva;” definitely a good place to check out if in Norfolk/Va Beach area.

Sister Renee and hubby Jared moving to Charleston, SC from California in a couple months...they have 2 kids that uncle Matty met for the first time at Thanksgiving...we’re going to spend Christmas with Petra’s folks and brother, either here or in Ohio...grandma

Speights playing jokes on everybody, scaring us all with an amazing 30-minute breath-hold when her lungs collapsed and she went to the hospital for a week; yeah, she's a jokester...with grandma and grandpa Speights' help, Petra's folks finally got their green cards and Petra's 50-some-odd year old dad is working manual jobs like he's 20, great work ethic pushing him steadily up the ladder...we're planning to help them when we can...they're experiencing a heavy hand of bigotry from jerk-off deadbeat punks that drive by their house in muscle cars all the time throwing stuff and cursing and shouting profanities at Petra's foreign family...hopefully it happens while we're visiting so that I can toss a couple gas canisters in their car as they drive by, or hose them down with mace or something. Just kidding, I'd never do that, not ever...*not me!*

I'm going back to Iraq in September for six months (unless I can become an officer before then); already begun the work-up training for it--unfortunately there's no 'deployment value meal' in the Marines and you just get whatever's being dished out at the time. No biggie...At least, if I go as a sniper, I'll know all kinds of great ballistics information, like the effects of a round on various types of fruits and gelatin. Knowing what a bullet does to an avocado at 1000 yards will be really valuable in combat...other news--I hate base housing, but it's great for Christmas--everybody makes the most of free electricity and burns billions of lumens of twinkle lighting...our neighborhood is a sight to see, and the housing area gate guards should be charging admission soon...speaking of gate guards, Petra will be making a ton of sugar cookies this year to give out to everybody standing duty/standing guard over Christmas, that's always fun...

Crazy thing happened--KFC started makin' burgers! No seriously, I got run off the road at 80 MPH and spun in a series of 360's like a maniac, spinning toward the trees and then right back onto the road and rolling along in original direction like nothing ever happened...probably happened because tires are SCREAMING bald, so bald that they shine. If one blows, the other three will probably blow just from the vibration...that's my car though, not Petra and the kids.' I am growing dangerously close to becoming uncool, not owning a truck for two years now and having been driving a gold, bubble-looking Ford Taurus since the last truck...I refer to the Ford Taurus as the Fox Tango, but even a smokin-cool name like that has begun to lost it's fizzle, so I need to either ditch it for a

wicked monster Jeep, or else flame-out the four door beast with a sweet paint job...I am not serious...well, Matt had 20/575 vision in both eyes, and allofasudden, "Hiyaka!" 20/20 vision thanks to the marvels of modern science and courtesy of Uncle Sam and the American taxpayer...Buddy John getting married in January to sweetheart Charlina, South Carolina wedding, really happy for both of them!...Our housing area is under Federal Investigation due to the lead content in our drinking water which was the result of contamination 40 years ago; this prompted Petra to start writing her first book, "Cooking with Lead." Should hit the shelves this spring...

And the bumper sticker of the year award goes to: "If we're not supposed to eat animals, then why are they made out of meat?"...Three worthless bits on info: 2 Barbie dolls are sold every second at some place in the world; "baking soda and Cheez Whiz" is the ultimate carpet stain remover; Petra was neighbors with Oksana Bajul (the sHEmale ice skater) when he was a young boy (and when Petra was a little girl). Best advice we could give anybody this Christmas based on our own personal experience: "Don't buy the Soy-Nog!" Best internet laugh: "I'm better than your kid" child-artist grader...Matt is waiting on approval from the U.S. Patent Department for a phenomenal food product he developed, he's calling it "pudding."

...Armed services boxing championship starts here at Lejeune next Tuesday, I used to wrestle on the boat with one of the Marine contenders...wish we could get some snow in this area--heck, I'd settle for an autumn-colored Christmas, everything's still really green around here...went to the post office and asked them for some warm and cheerful holiday stamps..all they had were the evil snowmen series and the psychadelic Santa line of stamps...the world's going to poop...Hey, check this out. Say the answer to each question out loud. What's 4 +2? Okay, what's 3+3? 7-1? 5+1? 8-2? 3x2? 6x1? 10-4? Okay, now say "six" to yourself repeatedly for 30 seconds. Now quickly, think of a vegetable...

Okay, I know that was a lot of crap to read. Thank you for your patience. Have a great Christmas, New Year, Football season, tax season, and everything else. Bake cookies for your neighbors, donate blood, watch out for black ice, and as far as your immediate family is concerned, appreciate each other and don't take for granted the time that

you're together!!! For those friends that are headed to the Ghannie or to Iraq, "Cowboy up, cock diesel and keep your butts tucked in!" For those of you alone on Christmas, our cell # is 910-381-2679. Give a ring, you're family if you got this letter. Be a role model, buy her flowers, give him a back rub, and write the Speights family a stinkin' letter, you lazy, worthless friends. Love you all, Semper Fidelis and God bless you.

Fair Winds,

Matty, Petra, Josh, Caleb

P.S. Do not rub Cheez Whiz on carpet

P.P.S. Was your vegetable a carrot / carrots?

Joke of the Day:

Two older couples got together for the holidays. While the women were hanging out in the kitchen, the men in the living room strike up a conversation. "Bob, I really want to thank you for having me and the wife over for dinner. That was big of you. Heck, we haven't been out of the house since, well, I guess it was about a month ago; we went out to eat at some fancy place...gosh, what the heck was the name of it...you know that flower, it's real popular, got thorns on it and all?" (Bob) "What, you mean a rose?" (Joe) "Yeah! That's it! HEY ROSE, WHERE'S THAT PLACE WE WENT OUT TO EAT THE OTHER WEEK?"

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2004-1)

SPEIGHTS LITE

The ZERO-CARB Family Letter

September 27th, 2004

In This Issue:

\*How to dispose of your neighbor's dog

- \*Covering up bruises on your children
- \*Scamming the government
- \*Building a car with half the parts
- \*How to tap into your neighbor's cable
- \*Dealing with your wife's addiction to crack

Motivation for the Day: "Press On" -- Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts...persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

Area Events: The North Carolina Seafood Festival kicks off in waterfront Morehead City, on 2-4 October.

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Greetings Family and Friends!

Is it just us, or is the US going ridiculously crazy over these low-carb, no-carb diet plans? We finally bought off on lowering our fat intake, and now fat is okay! CARBS are the devil! Petra and I have resorted to simply eating toothpicks. Occasionally, for a treat, we cover our fingers in honey and chew our nails. We are so pathetic.

So, how have you been? We've been good. Gas prices haven't gotten us down yet. So, what are your excuses for not writing? Tell me in your next LETTER.

Well, here's the skinny on us. Petra is looking gorgeous as ever; she's been working out every day for about 7 months now, running an average of 2 miles prior to each workout. She's been feeling great and I'm really proud of her. She's been raising two fine boys, and I say that only because I'm never home.

I have had a really bad year. As you may well know, I turned down a job with the FBI last August (twice, like an idiot), just to re-enlist for a cash bonus and a coveted Scout Sniper

School guarantee. I failed the School, which is about 3 months long, by shooting 8 yards out of range on my final graded stalk. I had only days left, and I was, no kidding, set to be the Honor Grad. My unit issued me a sniper rifle anyway, and dubbed me a sniper. Then, I picked up a new team and started training them to be the best team in Recon. We were doing great. I was sent to California to become an urban operations instructor. My officer package finally made it to HQ Marine Corps, and then...

BAM!!! Just like that, a search warrant appeared. Apparently, Matt the gear guy was suspected of stealing government tents. Well, they found no tents (I don't steal), but they found a ton of other stuff that I've accumulated and wasn't signed for (much like every other Marine I know). My hunting weapons weren't registered with the base military police, which made them instantly "illegal." They searched the hard drive of my computer and linked me to Ebay, where I had sold MRE's, uniforms, and more recently, factory-refurbished weapon lights (that I sent in myself) and extra flak jackets (not SAPI). I was very honest and forthright with everybody, and had tremendous support from my command. I eventually lost my team to a (very junior) team leader and they headed to Fallujah without me.

I waived my 'Article 32' investigation at the advice of my Marine Corps-appointed attorney, and will be standing trial at a General Court Martial on October 5th, facing charges of the theft and sale of government property, dereliction of duty, and disobedience of a lawful order. The latter two charges are a catch-all because I could have been 'funding terrorism.' Funny, under higher orders, we buried tons of body armor, chemical suits, and other equipment smack-dab in the middle of Iraq because it was too much for our unit to carry and we didn't have enough vehicles. That's funding terrorism, officially. Anyway, it may well cost me a few years in the Camp Lejeune brig, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, reduction to Private and a Bad Conduct Discharge. Mom & dad Speights are prepared to take in Petra and the kids.

Besides all that, things are very good. The Lord will be my judge and jury, and I will honor and respect his judgement in this trial; and no, I won't slander the Marine Corps either way--I've had a great time serving. I was nominated for Recon Team Leader of the Year despite the charges, and my Commanding Officer could have held back my promotion to

Staff Sergeant (E-6 in the Marines, right below Gunny), but he and the Sergeant Major were in agreement, and didn't. Our house should be sold on the day before my trial.

The boys are doing great. They recently got to watch daddy jump into the beach from a C-130, on the return home from a month-long training event at Ft. Polk, Louisiana. Now, every time Josh sees a plane, he looks around for parachutes.

Joshua is a hoot. We're trying to bottle up his fast-fleeting speech impediments into our memory bank. "Hey mom, let's go play a kite!" He has a name for every car, stuffed animal, and book in his bedroom. He knows his colors as such: red, orange, green, blue, purple, black, and cheese. Recently, Petra explained to Joshua that, "When you drive too fast, the policeman will pull you over and give you a ticket." Josh replied, "Don't worry, mom, we can just take the tickets to Chuck E. Cheese's and get toys!"

To Caleb, everything is a telephone. He will not hesitate to pick up a shoe and talk into it. He also loves to rub food in his hair. His latest funny habit is to clap and say, "Woo-hoo!" every time lightning strikes and it thunders. He learned to do this at the Independence Day fireworks show. Caleb was clapping when lightning struck our house and blew up our air conditioner and refrigerator (10 minutes after we returned from a big food shopping trip--yeah, we lost the food). He was clapping when it started an electrical fire in the attic. When the fire truck arrived, there were two boys clapping in the front yard. "Woo-hoo!"

Just in case you were wondering (and I understand that I am probably going against the grain with many of you), an overwhelming majority of Marines are pro-Bush. I am sick and tired of hearing Bush critics use the troops as an issue. I keep hearing Kerry refer to troops as America's "sons and daughters..." or as so-and-so's children"--everyone is overlooking the main point-- Every single swingin' person in uniform read the papers, made a decision as an ADULT and swore an oath to defend the nation. I hate being a friggin' ping-pong ball for Senator Kerry, or Michael Moore, or anyone for that matter, to bounce around as a bartering tool.

Also, we picked a fight with Germany to oust Hitler, when our fight was with Japan; Kennedy picked a fight with N. Vietnam in our best interests--in both cases tens or

hundreds of thousands of men died annually. In Iraq, we've lost just over a thousand in a year. The president's doing a great job by those numbers...oh yeah, and think about this-- thousands of INNOCENT NON-COMBATANTS are killed in the U.S. every month. Let's focus on dropping those numbers somehow. Either way, leave the troops out of this. From where I'm sitting, it looks as if Senator Kerry is using the views of a small minority of troops to drive that angle of his campaign.

Now I'm sure I made half of you pretty angry. I'll wrap it up.

Well, if everything goes miraculously well next Tuesday at court, I'll still be trucking in my uniform, doing good things in the Corps. We'll then be requesting accompanied orders to Okinawa for a breath of fresh air.

If things don't go well, next week will see Petra (who has been tremendously strong but can still use the prayer and support) moving out with the boys, and I'll be in an orange jumpsuit scrubbing macaroni out of large vats. If the latter is the case, you'll receive the jailbird edition of the family letter around Christmas time.

Congratulations to the Class of 2004, and to everyone that got married---we are so sorry that we couldn't show for all the weddings and graduations, but we really have been SO busy (where did this year go?). As always, love you all, miss you, thanks for the support, and please keep in touch.

Semper Fidelis and God Bless each of you,  
Matty, Petra, Josh, Caleb

P.S. I would love to personalize each of these letters, but the truth is that it's an all-day event just filling out the envelopes and putting on stamps (not because there are so many, but because I'm unbelievably slow)...writing individual notes these days would take YEARS...

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2004-2)

The Jailhouse Crock

24 November 04

Friends, family, and those of you who received this due to erroneous address; opening other people's mail is a federal offense.

Hey! Good to see all your bright smiling faces. I'm having a great time here at Camp Cupcake. The family's well and 2 months have passed -- oh yeah, for those of you who didn't know, I'm in the brig.

This place is comical. They have all these statutory rapists, armed robbers, and assault & battery convicts in here, living together, and we all have to take anger and stress management classes that actually make you angry and stressed out. Then, of course, our uniforms are made of the brightest, most anger-provoking blaze-orange material on earth.

You'll think I'm joking, but just look at the seriousness on my face --K--sometimes, they run out of food. We're not allowed to stand up or lie down, only sit at a desk all day, and read or write. The guards are corrupt, you can't pass TP to the guy on the toilet next to you without getting punished for "aiding and trafficking," and heaven forbid you need medical attention in this place. Prisoners are regularly sent to Special Quarters (solitary confinement) for no apparent reason (as I was, for telling a joke). There are always major problems sending or receiving mail--photos of prisoners' wives end up missing, etc. There's no gym, and though we're supposed to get 15 minutes of sunshine per day (for happy golden warmth and vitamin D), it usually only happens on Sundays.

Crazy Willie is infatuated with himself. He will stare at anything that shows his reflection --mirror, toilet water, butter knife-- for hours, talking to himself, making faces, reciting demonic chants and psychotic poetry. He is working on a crazy cokehead Nazi satanic death animation movie, and he tries to tell you about it for hours every day. He says it

will be better than Pink Floyd's The Wall, which he has never seen nor heard but knows everything about it. He is apparently in here for "supposedly stealing a TV set through a seven-inch hole which converges into a five-inch hole and for possession of two tablets which may or may not have been Ecstasy." Thanks to Willie, every one of the 300 prisoners in this brig can recite that line verbatim.

Besides all of these and countless other gripes, things are going exceptionally well, Glory be to God! Petra comes to see me every other Sunday, and though we can briefly kiss, we pack the passion into our two-second window. Her letters and actions keep me going, and our relationship, though neither of us believed it to be possible, is only getting stronger. I've seen the boys twice, but as long as they're content to hang out with grandma & grandpa, I'd much rather they do so, and not have this chapter in our life burned into their memories.

Petra has turned into a real-life "House-Builder Barbie;" it's evident in her vocabulary these days (she uses words / phrases like "conduit" and "rip lumber"). She's been laying hardwood flooring, painting walls, running a dozer and everything--of course I'm so proud of her and am so glad she's got something to keep her busy (besides the boys).

Okay, some prayer requests: My grandma and grandpa Speights are staying with mom & dad at the castle, and grandpa's dying of cancer...for my sake please pray that nothing serious happens to him while I'm in here; I'd really like to spend some time with him.

"Natsy" Nate Bernache, who was mentioned in a previous letter (either Shake Your Djibouti or The Daily Floater), was the Special Forces doc (enlisted Corpsman) in my last platoon, and a close friend. While working on somebody in or around Fallujah, he got shot in the back a couple weeks ago, and is currently in Bethesda with a machine breathing for him. The bullet clipped his spine, tumbled through his lung, and wedged between his diaphragm and his aorta. Please pray for him too.

Finally, several members of my unit have been wounded or killed in the An Anbar province of Iraq. A guy I trained was shot in the face and died, some others have been seriously

injured, and a very close friend of mine and Petra's was killed (Kevin "Jack" Dempsey), along with one of my old Gunnys (Javier Obleas). Jack better have went to heaven, cause he owes me some money and I'm not gonna let him off that easily. For those of you in Ohio, he alone is the reason that all flags in the State will be at half-mast sometime this week (whichever day his procession falls on), according to the Associated Press.

I have been busy. Sending me to jail with nothing to do besides read & write is like sending a kid to his or her room with nothing but a Nintendo and a ton of games. I drew 12 pictures for Petra which form one huge collage drawing--that alone took the better part of a month. Then I went on a solicitation campaign, requesting information from 13 different universities regarding their various Masters programs. Because I have no access to a computer or typewriter, I've been handwriting everything, carefully explaining that I was incarcerated and was hoping to get started in something. The only positive reply I got was from Purdue, who didn't even bother writing a letter...I was so excited to open the thick packet, only to find a scribbled Post-it note: "Sorry kid, this is all you qualify for." My smile turned to a frown, then tears, then laughter. I did not receive enrollment packets for their Master of Industrial Engineering program or their Masters in Global Business. No, what I qualified for was (1) a Janitorial Services Certificate, (2) a Waste Disposal Management Course, and (3) the prestigious "Pest Removal Engineering" Certificate! Can you say, "LOU-HOO-HOO-HOOSER!?"

Well, forget them. I started writing a book. A couple, actually. I'll have at least one done before I'm outta here. I'm also one of four guys in 300 who work in the wood shop, making year-round furniture and toys for the Toys-for-Tots program.

Well, I'm not about to exceed three pages, so I'm out. Have a great holiday season, God Bless and Semper Fi,

Love,

Matty, Petra, Josh, & Caleb

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## Archive (2005)

“Together”

The Speights Family Letter -- August 2005

Well, well, well... It certainly has been a while. I really don't know where to start so I'll take it from the top. For the last six years or so, we've sent out a family letter roughly every 6 month. This helps us keep contact with our friends and family. As the number of friends and family on our mailing list continues to grow, it becomes more and more difficult to write to everyone individually. I'm sure most of you can relate. For many of you, this is the first of a lifetime of Speights family letters you'll receive. Hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

Okay. So I'm out of the brig. And the Marines. Here's a recap... ..I went to the brig for almost a year for selling government property. It really stunk. I wrote a family letter while I was in there, around Thanksgiving, but Petra never had the time to make copies for me to send out to everyone. I learned a new trade (woodworking / furniture & toy making), wrote up business plans on three different future business ideas that I've had for years, wrote a book about funny times in the Corps, and co-authored and co-illustrated a children's book with my new buddy Marcos. No publishers contacted yet.

It's tough being out of the Marine Corps, 'cause I really loved my job and I was good at it. I'll miss it. My guys sent me off right, though...better than I could've imagined. When a Recon operator leaves the reconnaissance community, he is given a paddle (like, for a boat; an oar), highly decorated and personalized. My boys threw me a huge party, and 40 guys said some of the nicest things about me that have ever been said. Though I don't feel I deserved it, I was very moved--I know they'll miss me as much as I miss them.

So now, I'm searching. The Hampton Roads (Norfolk/Virginia Beach--7 cities) area of Virginia is screaming for builders, and the pay is good. I landed a construction job making more than I did in the Marines, so Petra and I are sitting good and building up some

'transition' money. In the meantime, I've pumped out about 50 resumes and job applications in the physical security management and logistics fields. I've also posted my resume to monster.com, careerbuilder.com, hotjobs.com, and about five other job search websites. A couple bites (including an upcoming telephonic interview) but no solid leads yet.

As many of you know, Petra and I have been on a quest to find a home. Not a house, but rather a location on this planet where we can plant ourselves & raise the kids. At least until our Alaska window opens up someday. So we visited another website together, findyourspot.com, and based upon about 10 pages worth of questions (weather preferences, desired home cost, political affiliation, etc.) we learned that five of the top twenty places for us to live are right in our target area. To make it short, we set our sights on Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Not only does it appear to be a great spot for us, but its location relative to surrounding big cities is amazing. We'll be within comfortable driving distance of DC, Philly, NYC, Baltimore, and Atlantic City. We'll be close enough to visit the ocean, the mountains, the Great Lakes, and Canada. And we're equally distant from both sets of parents (close enough for weekend visits, far enough to have our space). So this weekend we headed up to recon the area, and we're pleased. True, there are some trashy and unattractive areas along the highway, but we fell in love with the Hershey and Carlisle areas (yes, we went to Chocolate World [amp; the factory tour] at Hershey), and we had a great time at some downtown festival too. Josh and Caleb had a blast riding a full-size mechanical bull, and Petra and I enjoyed the city's Susquehanna River Walk, including a bridge and 'City Island' which are decoratively lit year-round and are motor-free zones (only foot, bike, horse, and city train travel).

Being together with Petra and the boys again is a phenomenal feeling. For all of us. Nine years of difficult separations have taught us that being together is more important than anything else on earth. We've been basking in our togetherness, and we've done some cool stuff since being back together. My best buddy John's mom (Aunt Rose) hooked us up with a couple nights at the Renaissance in Portsmouth, Virginia. We got to see Lynyrd Skynyrd chilling at the hotel, and got my shirt autographed by Johnny Van Zant. Petra and I celebrated our birthdays together by taking each other to the sold-out Kenny Chesney

concert in Virginia Beach (got the tickets last minute on ebay). We took the boys to see Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Herbie. It was so fun to watch them get excited at the theater and gawk at the big screen. Petra and I sneak away on occasion, once the kids are down, to go out to eat or catch a movie ourselves (mom & dad are home). We saw War of the Worlds and thought it was great. We all went to the Moscow International Circus and met the scariest-looking Batman you've ever seen.

As is usually the case, Petra bought a pet while I was away. This time it was a fish named Samson. I would never have believed this if I hadn't seen it for myself, but the fish is in love with Petra. All day long, people could walk past the aquarium, and he just sits there (duh, he's a fish). But I kid you not--when Petra gets near him or talks to him (she speaks fish, it's her 5th language), he snuggles up to the glass and his fins get all wiggly and excited. I've never seen anything like it.

Joshua is such a smart kid. We have always talked to our kids like adults, and I think it really paid off. The boy has some class when dealing with other adults, and talks like an adult. He's still my boy, though, and we do lots of fun stuff together. Recently I bought him a BB gun, and almost nightly I take it out and teach the boys to shoot. After only one week, Joshua can now safely handle it to daddy's standards, and can no kidding shoot plastic cups off a brick wall at 15 feet. Yeah, that's right. That's my son. 4 years old! Cute story: I'm in the brig, reading a letter from Petra (we wrote each other every single day, as we always do), and my jaw dropped. Apparently Joshua, 3 years old at the time, dug up a Sassafras root and excitedly took it to Petra and asked her to make some tea with it (that's one of our family traditions). How he identified it or found it, we'll never know. Petra saved the root, and I got to check it out when I got home. It was, unmistakably, Sassafras.

Caleb is cute as a button. He's got a list (normal, 2-year old type), and it's so adorable when he gets excited and tries to blurt something out. He is his brother's shadow and the two do everything together. He even goes to the big kid Sunday School class at church, just to be with his brother; it's gonna be tough on him when Josh goes to preschool this Fall. Caleb's major accomplishments currently revolve around the toilet. He's been potty-

trained for several months already, but now he's just tall enough to get his pee-pee up over the rim of the toilet bowl and urinate like a man. Sadly, Caleb is entertained at the expense of other people's lives. He cheers every time he sees an ambulance rushing to the hospital. It's contagious. We all cheer now. We all spent last weekend at the beach, and Caleb had a blast in the surf and the sand. We got some great pictures of both of them. Petra and I swapped off between watching them and swimming, and finally got some tans.

Okay, anyway, I hope I didn't make you all sick blubbering on about how much I love my family. Keep in mind that, if you're getting this letter, our family is your family. Is 'blubbering' a word?

We love you, miss you, and think about you all often. Be blessed, and for those of you in distress, stay strong and encouraged. Never hesitate to hesitate to ask us if you need something--if it is within our means, we will help. With that, I'll sign off.

Love,

Matty, Petra, Joshua, Caleb, and Sampson the fish

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

## [Archive \(2006-1\)](#)

The Fat Lady has Sung

Another Glorious Speights Family Letter - January/February 2006

Well, that's it. Another scratch on the wall of the cave. 2005 zipped by and left each of us older, fatter, and balder. So now it's the big Oh-Six--year of the llama, I believe. Happy New Year, everybody!

Since our last episode, we bought a house, Petra joined a band, and Josh is knee-deep in

preschool. Caleb and I are out of the limelight for this letter.

So, yes, we bought a house in Chesapeake, about 15 minutes from Virginia Beach. The house prices here are ridiculous...our North Carolina brick ranch, 1200 Sq Ft, 3 acres, great area, cost us \$53K in 1997. This place, a vinyl ranch, 1400 Sq Ft, barely a yard, in a decent area, \$247K. Ouch! We're hoping to sell it this summer for a little profit.

No more kids yet. It certainly isn't for lack of trying! We both want a girl to complete the package. We'll see—all in the Lord's good time.

I missed hunting season. Bought a license but never so much as donned an orange cap. Did get my dose of the wild, though, my "fix." A whole family of beavers was killed, one by one, on a low bridge near my parents' house. I was able to obtain three of them within minutes of their deaths, thanks to mom & dad's phone calls, and I tanned their pelts. Tanned a fox hide as well, collected and froze two beautiful owls which were killed, shook and shucked several bags of black walnuts, and bottled some sassafras concentrate and some pear wine.

In December, I huffed and puffed and squeezed into my old uniform, to collect toys for the 2005 Toys for Tots campaign at Joshy's school. Thankfully, no buttons popped. It was fun for everybody; Petra says she's not sure who got a bigger kick out of the dress blues and the sword, the kids or the teachers. I am actually still on Active Duty status, pending the outcome of my case's appellate review. My current job as the GM of Integrity Builders, my dad's company that the two of us started together, keeps me busy. I'm scribbling away at two other books: Matty's Recon Operators Handbook, and a youth fantasy tentatively called Underneath the Oceans. I've also been pounding away at this big report to send to 200+ government, media, and interest group recipients exposing some serious military corruption issues, namely in the supply system, the justice system and the correctional facility at Camp Lejeune.

Petra joined a Christian band, called "Stronghold." They perform at local VA Beach coffee houses and churches. Their last coffee house performance drew a crowd of about 65 people. They're halfway through the production of their first CD. The boys and I go out to watch her sing sometimes. She really stands out; I can't see much of a difference between

her singing and some of the famous folks on TV. I've been bugging her to get herself some studio time (aside from the band). She's really taken a liking to country music recently, and her husband has written several songs over the last few years that can swing to either the country or Christian genre. Hmm. Anyway, Petra's an amazing singer and she really needs to shine. She loves doing this and it shows.

For Christmas, the gorgeous one got a 1-year all-inclusive membership to Gold's Gym...personal trainer, massage therapy, unlimited tanning, and full day care for both of the boys...the works, baby! It was probably a rather selfish gift for me to get Petra (with the tanning and all that), but to be fair and mutually appealing, I'm planning on getting hunkified this year myself, dusting off the weights and all that. Petra has been running about 15 miles per week, and she loves working out and tanning every day.

In addition to being extremely hot and talented, I—I mean Petra—has been busy!!! You see, the day after we closed on the house, we gutted it. Every bit of carpet and vinyl flooring, gone. All the kitchen cabinets & counters, the sink, the stove, the dishwasher, the water heater, the bathtub, the showers, the bathroom sinks & cabinets, all the light fixtures, all the vents, the wall outlets & switches, all the interior doors, all the trim, the toilets...all tossed and replaced/upgraded. All, for the most part, thanks to Petra. She pounds away at the house while I'm off fixing up other people's houses. She has become a plumber, an electrician, a cable installer, a painter, a tiler, you name it! I'm so proud of her.

We went to see Keith Urban in concert in November. For you non-country music types, he's Nicole Kidman's current beau. It was, bar none, the best concert I've ever been to. Petra said the same, as did the guy sitting next to us (we'll call him Bob) and scores of callers on the radio the following day. The guy read every sign aloud that people were holding up in the audience. He called up 20 or so random people to sing with him and goof off on the stage throughout the show. He was a total hambone. The coolest thing, though, was when he swung with his guitar on a suspended mechanical cable, to the middle/back of the auditorium, and said, "Here's for all yous that waited till the last minute to buy tickets. Now you got front row seats! (He was right next to us then)" Yeah, okay, you got

me. Maybe he didn't say "yous."

Joshua is extremely bright. His reasoning ability is through the roof. Right now, though, here are some of the sillier things he does, that we get a kick out of. First, I heard him teaching his brother that "Jesus lives in the sky, and he also lives in our stomach..." He's picked up quite a bit from his friends at school, and right now he's in his "future girlfriend" phase. "Daddy, when I grow up, I don't want a wife or kids. I just want six girlfriends, a Harley, a '69 Camaro SS, and two dogs, 'Psycho' and 'Killer.'" Now, dear readers, please don't formulate opinions on my children based off of what I write. I have no clue where he got the idea of what to name his dogs, or how to plan his lifestyle. I had a lengthy discussion with my four-year-old son about the laws governing marriage, polygamy, and the physical dangers derived from sexual promiscuity. So now, he just wants two girlfriends. Daddy gave him a black eye when we were wrestling yesterday, so we'll see what kind of phone calls we get when he goes back to school tomorrow.

Caleb is full of wondrous vocabulary blunders. When asked (this morning at breakfast) whether he liked pineapples, he replied, "Yes, I like your nipples." He calls sawdust "baby woods," their babysitter, his "baby sister," and when he saw a bleubird (that's a French bluebird) he got all excited... "Look, mommy, a blueberry bird!" Like his brother, he is ALL BOY, and while playing with a daddy longlegs (granddaddy longlegs; a spider-like insect), he asked why we never see any mommy longlegs. Finally, he asked the eternal question, "Mommy, why do ladies got lots 'n' lotsa boobies?" He hasn't yet been tainted by his brother, and when he grows up, he doesn't want any wife or girlfriends, he just wants to be a fireman and he wants a rocket spaceship.

We are having a great time together as a family. Since November, we've been together longer than we ever have before without interruption (flying, deployment, training, war, jail, whatever)—right now we're at a solid six months and counting. We're all having a blast. Between the busy tempo of daddy's work schedule, we find 'pockets' of fun by making the most of every opportunity. Last weekend, we all went ice skating. Our longstanding family tradition of Friday Fun Night (movies, snacks galore, pillow forts, games, lightsticks) has bled over into a lot of our Saturdays as well, and we refer to it is Friday Night II, or Friday Night: the Saturday Edition.

My folks are good, Petra's folks are good, our siblings and nephews and nieces are good as well. Many of you know my brother John Martinez; he and his wife are doing well, preparing for his next deployment in a month or so. Thank you all for continued prayer, and for your letters, emails and calls. We'll drop another letter later this year.

To finish this letter out, I'm including a brief introduction to the rest of your extended family—the ones you don't know—through our family letter. Yeah, it may be kind of weird for me to do this, but here's the reason. When my buddy Gaff died in 2001, I remember meeting, for the first time, all the people he used to talk about. His sister Rosie, his mom, etc. I wish he could see us today, now friends with his family. I'd like to think of the attached list as 'the people you might meet at our funeral.' Read it if you want to, or toss the letter. We could care less either way.

Love yas,

Matty, Petra, Josh & Caleb (RIP Sampson the Fish)

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

## [Archive \(2006-2\)](#)

From Deep Within the Crackpot  
The 2006 Speights Family Letter

Ha! Just when you thought you'd escaped. "Hmm. Matty & Petra haven't sent us one of their weird letters in a while...maybe they forgot about us...WE'RE FREE!!!" Well, dust off your 'Welcome' mats, sweet cheeks, cause here we come!

Great year for us. We've been having such a great time as a family! Being out of the Marines, though I really miss it, is amazing. I can take a few days whenever I feel like it,

and believe you me, I feel like it all the time. Our summer was been packed with swimming pools and beaches, theme parks, water parks, concerts, blacklight bowling and putt-putt golf, fishing and cookouts and baseball. To the Sunday afternoon ice cream truck, we're the most faithful customers on the street. We've been to a few parties and linked back up with old friends. We also really locked in good with the neighbors (all of them) in this highly active neighborhood. We got into a water balloon war with our neighbors across the street, and spent the following day un-toilet papering our house. We built a huge deck/patio area with a covered grill outcrop, and playground / tree house for the kids, complete with a zipline (not quite finished yet). I got the Corvette running, then the wheel ripped off when I was driving (took the fender with it), then I fixed her and she now patiently awaits a screaming paint job. Now mama and daddy have a "datemobile."

For my birthday in August, Petra took me on a dinner cruise, on The Spirit of Norfolk. It was a blast and the food was excellent. We were seated with another couple at a table of four, and as it turned out, the wife's name was Mattie and she was celebrating a birthday too! Ironically, she was a writing hobbyist like myself. We made some friends and had a great time. On August 13th, we went to see Kenny Chesney perform at Virginia Beach, for the second year in a row. This time, we did it right, and brought ten of our close friends with us. Everybody had a blast, and buddy Travis didn't get sloshed and punch everybody, which was a bonus. Next year, we're inviting everybody in the world. Buy your own tickets this time, though. Another concert, also in August...my sister Renee and bro-in-law Jared got us all row 4 seats to the Goo-Goo Dolls / Counting Crows concert. It was a lot of fun.

Just before the temps dropped, we had a great family camping trip. Petra & I spontaneously took the kids to the mountains for some fun. We saw Natural Bridge, one of the seven natural wonders of the world; we saw an Indian village (living display); we went camping at Cave Lake Mountain State Park and swam in a nice mountain lake; caught some salamanders (or "salamaters" to Caleb); daddy piddled with some prospecting (no joy); and we had a day trek on the Appalachian Trail. Of course, the brand spankin' new expensive tent let about a gallon of rain through the roof...but after eating dinner in the car for an hour, the rain completely stopped and the rest of the trip was wonderful. Even though I'm gonna tell you this, you won't believe it--there were NO mosquitos, NO ticks,

and there was nary a poison plant along our entire weekend adventure. The temperature was so nice, that being outside at night felt like we were sitting in our living room.

This year is the “Big Ten” for Petra and I. July 18, 1996, we were married in Petra’s hometown of Budapest, Hungary. I still find it hard to believe that the consummate ultra-feminine has managed to stay happily married to Mister “if it’s stinky, slimy, disgusting, greasy, or fattening--I’ll take two.” To celebrate this momentous occasion, we enjoyed a 5-day all-inclusive Sandals vacation in St. Lucia, complete with a deluxe swim-up honeymoon concierge suite. We could literally swim to our room from the lagoon pool! Enjoyed a cornucopia of excellent food and drink 24-7, Karaoke, concerts, water skiing, kayaking, and set off on our own snorkeling adventures. We discovered a huge bed of conchs, plus octopi, squid, different types of starfish and urchins (don’t touch the big black ones, or you’ll spend a week digging out the painful barbs--uh, so I’m told), barracuda, trumpet fish, parrotfish, angelfish, and lots of other cool stuff. Even had a gourmet meal prepared from one of the conchs Petra caught (yeah, we kept some nice shells). Met some new friends, Mandy & Tim, who also live in Virginia; we hung out together most of the time.

Work--that’s a different story. I went from being the General Manager of smalltime Integrity Builders to being a deck and foundation crew leader for BetterLiving Patio Rooms. This company is amazing. Excellent 8-year track record, big incentives, full benefits, annual company family trips, and company-issued truck, tools, cell phone, credit card, and blank check for tools and materials as I see fit. Hours are long, but weekends are optional, and best of all, the people and the pay are excellent. I’ve worked there for three months, LOVE it, and they’re already talking about creating a new management position for me. Best of all, my helper Mark is a retired Navy Chief who really keeps me sharp (and vice versa), mentally and physically. We speak the same language, and we’ve been recognized for being the hardest workers in this (largely former military) company.

Over the summer, I turned some classic cars with my dad. Starting with profits from the sales of dad’s ‘67 Camaro convertible and his ‘57 Chevy Del Ray, we bought six other classic cars, and we wrenched on them, overhauled them, painted them, etc. So far,

we've sold the '56 Buick Special Riviera, the '61 Cadillac convertible, the '67 Galaxie 500 (.390 / convertible), and the '69 AMX; we've still got the '70 .455 Skylark GS-1 and the '70 SS .396 Chevelle. It's fun, and it's lucrative, but requires time that neither dad nor I have right now, so our current projects are on hold.

Petra, who is faithful to continue whatever she starts, has been a Gold's Gym maniac. She runs three to five miles a day and makes me feel like a weenie. She's made some good friends there, and has her regular work out crew. She also runs into both the pastor and associate pastor of our church at the gym. These guys are the real Hans and Franz. Have you ever gone to church, and left feeling like you just played a football game? Me neither. But it almost feels like that at our church when these guys are preaching.

Just tonight, Petra quit as the lead singer of her Christian band, Stronghold, because of the toll this pregnancy is taking on her. Oh wait, did I forget to mention that? (Ya like how I just slipped that in on you?) Yup. Petra's 13 weeks into our little souvenir from Santa Lucia. We're hoping and praying for a girl ("Lily"), but the way Petra's been so tired and noxious for the past several weeks, I'd bet that she's got a warrior lad inside that's just sucking the life out of her--a little Genghis Khan. Either way, we're stoked. As for Petra's band, she finished out strong after a year of coffee house gigs and small concerts, and they just cut a CD. The band was taking her away 3-4 days a week, and she wants to focus on being a dedicated momma.

We had a scare a couple months ago when Petra woke up "frozen." She was partially paralyzed from her neck down, for a few hours. She woke up whimpering, with her neck turned to the side, locked in place. I tried to calm her, massage the back of her neck, apply a hot compress, give her Motrin and water through a straw, but in the end, had to call an ambulance, because every time I touched her or barely moved the bed, she would cry or scream through clenched teeth from pain and near blackout. After a doctor administered some injections and prescribed strong muscle relaxants, she had full movement except for her head, which remained mostly to the side for almost a full day. The diagnosis: partial paralysis induced by a pinched nerve bundle at the top of her spine, likely from a bad sleeping position. We bought space monkey pillows shortly thereafter,

and a space monkey mattress is next.

To prove to Petra that I've still got it, I ran the Marine Corps Marathon on a whim last month. My time stunk (4:35), but that's okay because I was running it under some girl's name anyway. This was my 6th Marine Corps (sort of a tradition), my 11th marathon, and probably my 20th race or so. Also keeping with my marathon tradition, I did not train--in fact I hate running and I haven't run in nearly a year. I even started off my race morning with a pound of fatty bacon, a few cups of coffee and some chewing tobacco. It's kinda my way of sticking it to all those super athletic, vegetarian, calorie-counting types.

Politics? Who needs 'em. With the exception of supporting the marriage amendment (which I support only because I find something altogether wrong with gays and homos and fags and queers--no I don't hate them), I had a hard time finding any reason to vote this year. I think I'm just getting fed up with the government--I just want freedom. I'm so sick of the bickering back and forth, the incessant division and childish mudslinging. I really hope that there will be an upward sway of Americans that share the idea of promoting unity and good old-fashioned patriotism (pro-America vice pro-party), especially in times of crisis when the country needs it most.

Josh (5) really broke out this year. 2006 marks the year that he learned how to ride a bike (training wheels off), swim, whistle, hock a loogey, snap his fingers, skateboard and boogie board. He loves to ride his bike, skate, box, wrestle, and swim every time he gets the chance. If it's a challenge, Josh is all over it. Yesterday we went ice skating, and Josh was skating laps around us. Highly determined, in a nutshell. He's also our snuggler. Craves attention and involvement in everything he does, like his daddy. Oh yeah--he's reading up a storm now, too. Reads everything. He's really shooting up quickly.

Caleb is like his mom--he could care less what anyone else is doing. He's an Army of Caleb. He's 3, he's in preschool, and he won't let you kiss him if there's a chance his 'girlfriends' will see it. Caleb got bit by a spider recently. He cried for days. Not because of the huge welt under his arm, but literally because he couldn't shoot webs like Spider-Man. He still has something cute to say every time we turn around. One day we were

driving past a cornfield. He saw the tall stalks and said, “Hey guys, lookit all those corn trees!” (Okay, for those of you in Ohio, keep in mind that there’s not a lot of corn growing around here; mostly tobacco and cotton--corn sells for \$.50 an ear most places!) Caleb’s not the only one to have a brutal brush with death. His dad got bit by a copperhead this summer--drew blood but didn’t inject venom. In fact, it bit me, and it died. Maybe my manliness overpowered its venom. Or maybe it died because I cut its head off. Either way, didn’t hurt me; Petra, on the other hand, saw it latch on and almost had a heart attack.

We have a red Doberman named Ace, but he hasn’t been born yet. He won’t be born, in fact, for a few years, when we figure out where we want to live and can afford to build a house with sufficient tiled or hardwood floor area that can accommodate an indoor / outdoor dog. Petra’s dreading the day we live with such a beast, but it’s-a-comin’! Then again, so is the Klondike and our monster log home, I keep telling myself.

This summer, our long-lost friends the Natchers (pronounced “Nature”) moved up here from Dallas, and we’ve been able to hang out a few times. One weekend in July, we walked the trails near Ft. Lee and saw the re-enactments marking the 130th anniversary of the Battle of Petersburg. Natcher is some kind of nuclear / biological / chemical response agent for the government and they’ll be living about an hour from here. They stayed with mom & dad at the monster house for a few weeks before moving into their place in Blackstone. When some good buddies died this spring, Natcher came down to help me build their shadow boxes and drink a few in their honor. I anticipate many more days together with Natcher tanning hides, making knives, knapping flint, carving pipes, panning gold, gigging flounder, 4x4 mudding, shooting, making wine, digging and casting clay, hunting for fossils, or something along those lines, which we’ve done in the past.

Yeah, lost a few more buddies, along with grandpa (lost his cancer battle this Spring--he was 87). The cool thing is that Kevin “Jack” Dempsey (Airborne school, drinking buddy, great guy), Javier Obleas (Gunny), Alessandro “Carbomb” Carbonaro (good friend, wife also friend to Petra), Cory Palmer (I was his 1st Team Leader, and we were the A-Team), Scott Germosen (KC-130 aircrewman and buddy, crashed into a mountain in Afghanistan) and several mutual friends as well, were all interred in the same small grid of headstones,

and all right next to grandpa (WWII-Korea-Vietnam).

Mom and dad are great. For their 33rd Wedding Anniversary, we made them a DVD of their life together to date, in a nutshell. They loved it. If anybody wants to see it, let me know and I'll email it to you. They've been busy with their house lately, and do something cool to the place every time we turn around. Sis Renee was up here with her kids, and with the work generated between her, Petra, mom, Aunt Cheryl, cousin Ami, grandma and mother Natcher, that place is bangin.' They've repainted several rooms, done more decorative tile work, and created a wrap-around broken slate courtyard. The house is ginormous, and that's where our friends usually stay when they come up to visit. I just go for the fishin.'

A matching pair of 30-inch catfish were pulled from mom & dad's dock two months ago...didn't get to weigh them, but let's just say that I had a hard time carrying the two of them up to the house for filleting. Last weekend, Petra and I helped mom & dad build some steps up to their second-story wrap-around deck, so that dad can move some of grandma's stuff down from storage. Grandma bought a house about two miles away from them, as the crow flies. She moves in next week, and she's excited. This weekend, we went over there again, so I could play Chef Boyardee, and entertain their household with a Saltimbocca dinner. Included was a salad with a dressing three years in the making, a creamed cauliflower soup to match that of a German gasthaus, and baby red potatoes topped with wild pine sprouts and herbs. Recently I bottled several gallons of Strawberry dessert wine, but forgot to bring them this weekend. Note: if you haven't already rented Nacho Libre, don't. My movie pick of the week is The New World. It's intense! Just kidding. Don't rent that one either. You can put that one on your list with Seabiscuit and Radio.

Petra's parents are doing great. Apu (Istvan) is loving his job as an independent trim carpenter--this is the best of their four years here in the States, so far as work is concerned. They just moved into their first house, a model home in Union, Ohio. It's a two-story with a full basement, and a real looker. It's great to see them living the dream...it's still what I love best about this country (that, of course, and the fact that there are no cats). Did you know, that in Germany (and probably many other small countries) there is an age cap on purchasing property? You can't buy a house if you're

over 45! We visited them over Thanksgiving--sorry everyone in Ohio, we barely had enough time to visit them, plus help them into their new house, and didn't get to see yas.

We'll be spending Christmas with my folks here in Virginia, along with grandma Speights, Aunt Norma, Aunt Edie, cousin Lorrin, Renee & Jared & Co., and several adopted family members. For the boys, Petra and I are building the boys each a monster toy back in Santa's workshop. Caleb is getting a pirate ship, and Josh is getting a C-130 cargo plane. They're gonna be stoked. Heck, we're pretty stoked. I almost don't want to give them to 'em! I've been wanting to build a wooden sailing ship ever since my Uncle Ken built a small one with me when I was little (after years of moving back and forth, it was unfortunately destroyed). Hopefully, the time and love put into these gifts won't be lost on the boys when they're older, 'cause they'd make nice heirlooms.

Well, I think you all got your money's worth on this one, so I'll bounce. Happy holidays, birthdays, engagements, anniversaries, and trails to you all. Congrats on new love, new weddings, new babies, new grandbabies, new wrinkles, and new achievements. Our best to every one of you--love yas and go with God.

Your family,

The Speights'

P.S. Sorry this one was so late, it sat around for a while before I had the time to mail it!

P.P.S...Ultrasound results...It's a girl!!! (Lily Ava Speights)

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

## Archive (2007)

“MUCHO GUSTO”

The (MAR) 2007 Speights Family Letter

\*Man Version, bottom of page 2...

WARNING: THIS LETTER IS KNOWN BY THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA TO CAUSE CANCER...

Good thing we don't live in California! Happy Women's history month, everybody. Sorry it's been so long. I wrote a family letter for last year, but never sent it.

This letter is sadly written two days after the death of Uncle Ken, who had a heart attack while he was driving. He was honored in the last family letter as I recollected his inspiration for the wooden pirate ship I built for the boys, and we honor him again now. He, like his wife Aunt Cheryl, was a retired police officer. He was a dedicated husband and the father of three beautiful girls. He was a 'gentle giant.' I can only imagine how difficult this is for his family, so we have been praying for them every day.

Wow, a typewriter. It's been a while since I've used one of these puppies. Our computer is broken and in the process of being fixed. Just in case you were wondering, no it didn't break because I punched the thing and shattered the LCD screen.

We are doing wonderfully. Petra is plump with "dash three" and is due in June--in direct conflict with the family reunion (sorry). "Lily Ava Speights" is the punchiest, kickiest baby you'll have met. We're in the process of getting her room ready right now.

Sorry about last year's family letter...it was actually written but never sent. Our big news last year was Petra's band cutting their first CD, the Marine Corps Marathon, a few good concerts and camping trips, a lot of sun at the beach, my hiring and subsequent promotion into a killer job, and (our 2006 culminating event) an all-inclusive Sandals trip to St.

Lucia, complete with a swim-up concierge suite. Met some new great friends there, which was a solid bonus.

Busy, busy, busy. Like the rest of you, we hustle and bustle between the important places in our little world in a mad attempt to contribute to global warming (whatever that is). Been listening to a lot of AM radio lately, with all those political debates and such. I'm the manager and head coach of Joshua's baseball team, and Petra is the official team mom. Deep Creek (a section of Chesapeake, home to American Idol Chris something-or another) is absolutely crazy about baseball. This baseball association has turned out numerous pro ball players.

Aside from work and baseball, I turned our extra (detached) garage into my man castle, and sneak away to build things, lift weights, smoke my pipe, etc., whenever feasible. The two-and-a-half car garage, with its peanut shell-strewn floor, full bar and a few old couches, was the site of this year's Superbowl party, and the probable site of an Independence Day bash. Current projects in the garage include a vat full of fermenting applejack, a table top fashioned from a dated (1929) crate belonging to a local bank (I found it on an island on mom & dad's lake)--complete with inlaid old coins, a beaver and fox hide in solution, a huge ball of clay awaiting attention, and a fleet of wooden pirate ships.

I volunteered to teach survival training to a Virginia Beach Boy Scout troop about two months ago. We had an absolute blast. I took the boys with, and Josh out-shot a 14-year-old that was qualifying for his marksmanship badge! Thought that was great. Last fall, Petra and I took the boys hiking on the Appalachian Trail. We also saw Virginia's "Natural Bridge" and found a nice camping spot near Lexington (Virginia) called Cave Mountain Lake State Park.

This Year's Superbowl Party was pretty good, but not as good as the 4th of July shebash we'll be hosting. In fact, the year will be packed with such festivities as it appears now. On Cinco de Mayo, we'll be at a huge pig pickin' hosted annually by my boss' parents. Then, there's the company pool party followed by a big block party hosted by two of our

adjacent neighbors. We'll shoot for Kenny Chesney's fall concert as well, and invite anyone in the area to join us.

Over Patty's Day, I ran the 2007 Yeungling Shamrock Marathon at the beach. 4:20 wasn't bad for me considering that, once again, I didn't train--or even run at all this year for that matter. I wore a shirt that said "Sponsored by Bacon." It's kinda my way of sticking it to all those super fitness types. Okay, I lied. I actually run every Saturday morning--at Joshy's pace. For several weeks now, we've been waking up early and going for a little jog, usually down to the grocery store to pick up breakfast for the rest of the crew.

Petra has been a gym nut for the last year and a half. Every morning, seven months pregnant or not, she's at the gym running 3-5 miles, lifting light weights, or taking spinning classes with her gym girlfriends. She's even thinking of becoming a spinning instructor.

Caleb has a crush on his classmate at preschool. Her name is Sammie and her name is a common one in our household. Josh could care less about the opposite sex unless she wants to jump on the trampoline with him or play catch. The boys will be sharing a room to free up space for Lily, which alludes to forthcoming days when we will outgrow our house. If we stay in this area, we will have to build our own, because we would not find a 4-BR house for under \$350K. I would still like to move to the mountains, preferably Alaska, but who knows if or when that may happen. I hate the traffic congestion of America's growing cities and metropolitan areas. It's particularly bad around here because all landmasses are connected by tunnels and bridges. If an accident occurs in one of the tunnels or on a bridge, it may be literally impossible to get home, or get to work, etc.

I understand that most of you have had a good bit of snow this year. We had summertime temperatures through the winter, and alternating hot and cold days all spring. No white stuff until Easter Day, when we had a day-long blizzard that didn't stick. The day before Easter it was 85 degrees.

We have the oddest ice cream truck in the area. He doesn't play "Do Your Ears Hang Low" or "Frere Jacques" over his loudspeakers. He plays reggae and death metal and drives about 80 MPH down our court. Those fat kids sure get a workout. No, seriously, the guy actually does everything that a normal ice cream truck does, except that he does it at 10 PM!!! I think he's a rapist...one of these nights I'm gonna trail him.

Well, enough of all this typing. I'm gonna go build stuff. Merry Happy everything, blah blah. Love you all, write back.

Matty, Petra, Josh, Caleb, (Lily)

Man Version of this letter:

Uncle Ken see ya in heaven. Huge impact on my life. Baby girl future kick boxer. Killer job. Baseballcampingmarathon. Hot wife rock band Gold's Gym. Independence Day bash Aooah Aooah Aooah! Yeungling. Maybe Alaska. Ice cream stalker. Shmoozy-foozy woo-hoo, the Speights fam.

P.S. Don't be a Sally.

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

## Archive (2009)

### SMALL VICTORIES

The 19th Speights Family Letter, January 11th, 2009

It was about 7PM, the last Saturday before Christmas. Mom & dad were on their way over with a tub of pulled pork, which was the bleed-over of some festive catered occasion. By the grace of God, we had a small, scantily-clad pine in our living room, the tangible fruit of my sister's good will by way of a phone call to Lowe's. This was to be our worst Christmas ever.

"Take your shoes off!" --It's Petra's common plea with a direct link to the level of her sanity. The level of her morale is conversely related to the amount of dirt that accumulates on her carpet. Mom & dad come in with a spread. "Hope you don't mind," mom says after the kisses & hugs are dispersed, "we're gonna eat with you-- your father and I are starving!" Now, for those of you Northerners...that would be me...a real, Southern, pulled pork barbecue is something to be had. No sweet red sauce in the Arby's fashion. We're talking about a vinegar-based marinade (or one of half-a-million secret family recipes), topped with your brand of hot sauce and a hearty helping of cole slaw, sloppily placed on a Texas-sized bun. While any good mom & pop shop along the Southeast coast will offer this fine fare, we personally look forward to Danny & Romaine Byrum's annual pig pickin' in May, a huge local event.

Dad ducks out to grab some coleslaw. He returns in two minutes with my sister, brother-in-law, and their entire church cell group. I don't think they call them cell groups anymore, unless they're terrorist church groups. So it was their home group, or whatever. Each of the ten people squeezing into our small apartment with an armful of wrapped



presents that ultimately choked our poor dead tree to, um, death. Both our fridge and pantry were overfilled with groceries. Stockings were packed with knickknacks and goodies. We received about \$500 in Wal-Mart gift cards alone. And restaurant gift cards. And cash. And we couldn't have been more speechless if Ed McMahon walked in and stroked us a grossly-oversized posterboard check. Three days earlier, I had made up my mind to pick up my old poaching habit, because I felt ashamed that my family had no meat for nearly a month. We had literally been starving for the umpteenth time in the latter part of the year. Now we're rolling deep in turkey and ham. "God bless us, every one!" The caravan of Bedouin do-gooders drove 7 hours to see us, crashed at mom & dad's for the night, then drove back in the morning. We followed up by spending Christmas Day and the following few days with them in Charleston.

We've visited Charleston several times before, but this time Petra and I got the full-blown



Notebook movie tour, took so many photos that our camera was smokin,' and enjoyed some hand-dipped shakes dished out by a no-joke soda jerk in a blast-from-the-past, real-deal, two-proprietor, hasn't changed-a-lick-since-1930 soda fountain and drug store, the Pitt Street Pharmacy. We were there for over an hour, and I drank coffee with a black author who grew up there and wrote the history of that little town of Mt. Pleasant, on the outskirts of Charleston.

This year sucked hard. That's the prudent term for it. Traditionally, my answer to the age-old question would be along the lines of status quo: "If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't change a thing." But 2008 is a year that I would gladly allow to be stricken from the annals of my life, at least where work and money are concerned. We started the year with bankruptcy and foreclosure. With no bills, I figured my decent-paying job would put us back on top in no time. Last summer, after watching my company struggle with a changing economy and holding out as long as I could, I jumped ship to pursue my own good fortune. The company crashed within a few months, and is now left picking up the pieces.

Speights Construction did well right off the bat. My work portfolio over the last three years shows that I'm capable of building every part of a house or commercial building with quality results. I built a team, established a D&B credit profile, established a merchant services account so that we could accept credit card payments, and schooled myself on the government's RFP and contract negotiation process. We landed our first government prime contract, nothing more than office furniture modification and office renovations. It was a short contract. Then we subcontracted for a big local homebuilder. They were great until they started going under, not paying us and leaving us over \$10,000 in the hole. Yay! We settled for a drastically reduced payment, just enough to pay my materials and my guys. They paid yesterday (two months later). Yeah, it hurt. I hear these horror stories constantly from contractors, and I'm convinced that it's because most of the construction

trade is slimy. On top of that, I'm the only guy I know that works double-overnighters to complete a job, do it well, and do it for peanuts. And with that, I'm determined to gracefully bow out of the construction industry.

Now for the good news. We're pregnant! Well, when aren't we. We are stoked about it! OF course, by "we" I mean "me." I'm not the one who works my butt off to get in shape, only to be smacked down again with a butterball in the oven and the fat arms, huge boobs, back pain and mood swings to go with it. Oh well, should've been a man. This will make 4! Anybody know a good Branch Davidian compound we could move to?

Anybody who knows us, and knows our kids, know that we do things a little different than normal people. I want our kids to be just as independent as I was by the time I was a young teenager. That means that I tolerate, heck--encourage, light sarcasm and wry humor. My boys say words like 'nuts,' 'fag,' and 'freakin.' I want my kids to be cool and cocky. On the flipside, they daren't stab a morsel on their plate at supper, before every lady present has first taken a bite. They will sacrifice their body to hold the door open. They are chivalrous and polite, and most importantly, they love each other more than anything in the world. I would tolerate nothing less. TV and movies are expressly a Friday night event, and a sometimes Saturday event. Spankings have been very few in the last year, except for Lily, whose butt is in training.

Lily started walking, then running at 8 months--par for the course around here. She had her 1st birthday on June 19th, preceded by getting her ears pierced. She is gorgeous like her mama, loves her brothers, and calls everything "dada." Yes, I'm flattered. Mama's biggest Christmas present was when, three days before the holiday, Lily said "mama!" That girl is cute as a bug's ear. She climbs everything. EVERYTHING. Broke her arm last summer when she fell off the boys' bunk bed. That move really put a dent in her cage-fighting training regime (it's tough to do one-arm pull-ups at that age). She's got about a 30-word vocabulary, and she's a DANCER (this is the part where you Google "SNL John Belushi dancer")!!! And what a girl...she gets into mama's closet the other day and walks out with a pair of stilettos and a Louis Vuitton handbag. Mama says, "LILY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY CLOSET...Oooh, grrrrr! Nice shoes! Good choice, and way to accessorize!" That girl loves me no matter how crappy my attitude is. She's not phased by daddy's loud commands. And my heart, as a result, has grown three sizes...

Caleb turned six on January 1st, and traded his training wheels for swimming skills over the summer. He played T-Ball and I managed / coached his team as I did for his brother last year. Against mama's better judgment, we introduced the boys to Star Wars and Indiana Jones last year (filtered). Caleb speaks Star Wars as if it were a bona fide language. He still carries some effeminate qualities--loves jewelry, hates loud noises, eats his meat cooked--but I'm working on all that. He's sweet-natured and gullible, still cracks us up, and he can build the Taj Mahal out of rice (he's a serious architect / builder). My favorite story about Caleb thus far: He invites his mama to a tea party along with his brother (grandma's house has tea sets & girlie stuff for cousin Aubrey). Mama asks, "Omigosh, son...DID YOU PEE IN THESE TEA CUPS?" He replies, "Yup!" Then, as you could imagine, the rest was history. Petra spanked his butt from here to Mexico and called me up to tell me that my son has some serious issues. Of course I disciplined him over the phone, but to this day can't help but think how incredibly large one's balls have to be to do that, when you know full well you're going to seriously pay with your backside. He

doesn't know it yet, but he can cash that story in for beers with the old man someday.

Joshua is the sarcastic coolguy of the family. I made a pot of coffee the other day, and the easily-distinguishable aroma wafted throughout the house in familiar form. Petra says, "Smells like somebody made some coffee!" Josh retorts, "You can smell that? You have a gift!" Josh will be eight on March 9th. He actually does have a gift--the propensity to be an all-star gymnast, based upon his ability to stand on his head for an hour, spin on it, walk on his hands, and flip and jump and be limber and stuff. From a largely non-sports fanatical family, Josh has sprouted into an athletic nut. He watches football, baseball, Nascar, golf, and a bunch of other things on TV that the rest of us could care less about. Oh yeah, and he's a news buff. News and weather. He played coach-pitch baseball this year, and I managed / coached his team as well (simultaneously with Caleb's--talk about a full-time job). Then I coached his All-Star Team. Both of the boys are home-schooled this year, and mama's a fantastical teacher.

Mama is, as previously stated, pregnant...she wanted two, I wanted five, this will be four, now she hates sex. Just kidding. We're amped about the baby and hope it's a girl so Lily has a buddy. Petra's six months along--baby's due sometime in May. My beautiful bride turned 30 on July 14th, following which was our 12-Year Anniversary on July 18th, followed still by my 30th birthday on August 14th. Petra completely quit Gold's Gym and joined the more fam-friendly YMCA. She sings in the choir of what is becoming a formidable-sized church in the area. Watch her live on Sundays--Google "Faith Alive Ministeries." Last January, the church rented out a whole movie theater (multiple screens) for the Superbowl, and catered the whole thing. Petra and I ran the Fort Story 5K together, then she later tackled the Virginia Beach Rock & Roll Half Marathon! We ran that one together too. She did really good, considering she followed the lead of her husband who doesn't believe in training (it's boring). The most she'd ever run, prior to pounding the 13.1, was five miles.

Petra took the kids to Indiana to represent for us at the annual Buchholz family reunion. Once again, I had to work (c'est la vie). We were together for a number of other events, though. Petra and I attended the HQ Joint Forces Command Winter Ball, where Petra won a shnazzified coffee pot during some singing trivia game. Petra and I saw Pat Benatar VIP and I got a guitar pick from her lead guitarist hubby! The drummer couldn't take his eyes off of the hotness on my arm throughout the concert. I put a dead fish inside his bass drum afterward. Twice this season, we got to see a slam-packed Norfolk Admirals hockey game from the Budweiser VIP box, directly behind the goal. The boys got game pucks. Mama got some bloody good close-up shots with her Nikon. My company sponsored the local baseball (Orioles AAA farm) team, the Norfolk Tides, so we had an upper box game and unlimited tickets. Caleb's T-Ball team was chosen out of 120 possible local teams (different levels, different leagues & divisions) to join the Tides on the field (at their respective positions) during Field of Dreams night. It was pretty cool.

Our family cheered Michael Phelps through each of his gold medals from our couch. We're still fans of PrisonBreak and 24 on TV. I'm convinced that there will never be another show for Petra besides Friends; Jeopardy for me. We still have an older, small- to medium-sized TV that weighs 800 lbs. We have 12 channels on TV and rarely watch anything.

We watched another set of bald eagle hatchlings take to the trees and skies from the deck above mom & dad's backyard, watched a baby albino squirrel mature and thrive at the same location, and watched Caleb nearly get run over by a reindeer. Or a deer, anyway. Oh yeah, and a great spectacle at mom & dad's place: about 20 young bucks, by day or night, dancing and prancing and sparring and playing, for the better part of three weeks.

As for me, my year started with a business trip to New Orleans during the Ohio State game last January. Ohio fans were piled on every corner of the city. I had a good time & won a little money. My former boss, Matt LeBlanc (the owner of the company I worked for) and I linked up to become race partners this year. After running the Virginia Beach classic Shamrock 8K (2nd place team, corporate division), we ran some short 5K's and bought some road bikes, then froze our butts off at the Virginia Duathlon (run-bike-run; sleet stuck to us the whole time, I'm wearing next to nothing, competing against uber-athletes). After that, we rode in the Eastern Shore 150 mile bike event, which smoked our bags because we treated it like a competitive race...it's a cool race because they break it into two legs with free beer and chow and pools and camping and crap overnight between each leg. Petra and I took the kids to Nashville, stayed the weekend with friends (thanks Mark & Melissa!), where I ran the Country Music Half Marathon accidentally and ran back to finish the Country Music Marathon. I got two medals out of that one, as well as a 3:18 PR! We fell in love with Nashville while we were there (we almost moved there a few months later).

Matt & I drove up to Northern PA, just above the Poconos, to run an adventure race (the Cradle of Liberty Sprint, paddle/mountain bike/boulder run). We got third place out of 70 teams. We came back and ran the Little Creek Mud Run (I think it was an 8 or 10K). Company collapse caused us to forfeit another adventure race in the Triangle area of VA, and a similar situation made me forfeit San Antonio's inaugural Rock & Roll Marathon in November. We did make the local "Turkey Trot" though. That's a great tradition to have...instead of relaxing with family on your Thanksgiving morning, wake up at 4:30AM to fight traffic and find a parking spot, stand outside with thousands of people you don't know who, like you, are wearing next to nothing, and freeze your balls off until the gun sounds. Then run in a 5-mile circle for no reason and go home hurting and cold while the rest of your family is barely waking up, drinking hot cocoa in their PJ's on the couch, and you miss the last bit of the Macy's Day Parade while you're in the shower. And some do it every year, across the States.

Earlier this year, an F-3 or F-4 tornado touched down 500 feet from mom & dad's house, then cut a swath through the city that annihilated several neighborhoods and commercial properties (leveled a strip mall, flipped cars into trees up and down the highway, etc.)...I ran chow/coffee/battery/tobacco resupply to the search crews and police checkpoints (self-deputized), and eventually ended up being the only non-uniformed mook with my own operations section in the 7-city police/fire Command Post. I ran the aerial photographs, blown-up maps and grid matrixes, event timeline, and communications log, and did not sleep for FIVE DAYS.

A largely shirtless summer for me has once again proven that I am impervious to the sun's tanning rays--my butt simply gets whiter and whiter. I could swear that Petra's still sportin' a tan. I dropped weight from 230 pounds in January to between 200 by February (I just stopped eating for a week). My appetite has been really weird this year...one day I'll eat a \$30 Taco Bell meal on my own, drink gallons of liquid, then the next day I won't eat

or drink a thing. I regularly gain or lose around 10 pounds in a day (205-215), every day. One year later, my weight is a steady 210.

This last Spring, I dug a large underground fort for the boys, on the high banks of mom & dad's lake. We camped under it and read the Chronicles of Narnia by firelight (big fire pit at the end). The boys' favorite toy has continued to be their huge wooden pirate ship (complete with accoutrements) that I made for them in the Christmas of '06. Keeping in line with this tradition, Santa's workshop is again in full effect. I'm working some big projects as we speak, and since my shop is all packed up right now, an older man from church has been kind enough to let me blow the dust off of his huge shop full of wood tools and limitless stores of red oak in exchange for some work around his property.

Last year's batch of scuppernong grape wine turned out to be smacktacular (adjective of the day)! There were two batches, a sweet one and a medium batch (not too dry, hint of sweet--it was perfect), and I added a bottle to this year's muscadine grape wine to keep it alive... "Since 1997." I'll get about 6 gallons out of this year's batch, as well as about 8 gallons of peach wine. Winos, drop a letter--I don't sell my stuff, but I'll save a bottle to give you.

My old beater Jeep left a trail of parts across the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. So I went and bought a huge Dodge Ram V-8 4x4 so that I can suck more gas than the rest of you. It's a great work truck, and I've adorned it with stickers and pistols and dangling talons. It's white, so I'll probably paint a tattoo job on it in the spring. Petra wants to trade in her GMC Envoy for a minivan, but we have a strict 'no-minivan' policy in this household. She's got to get a big SUV or nothing. Fluff it up, put flames on it, call it your "Mike Victor," but it's still a minivan; and while it would suit Petra, I would rather bleed to death than be driven to the hospital in one.

As far as our game plan goes for this new year, if the good Lord wills it, daddy will find a J-O-B and we'll be taking the kids to Disney before year's end. I'd like to run the Budapest Marathon while we stay with family there, but at this point, everything is job-dependent. I've also been wanting to steal Petra away to the Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, NY.

Oh yes, not to forget...I just finished Matty's Recon Handbook! It's a 722-page not-for-profit manual that I wish I had years ago when I was operating. The Marine Corps has --admittedly-- badly needed this book. It's jam-packed with photos, drawings, diagrams, and templates relating to demolitions, weapons, airborne and waterborne operations, fighting, radio communications, sniping, tracking, survival, extreme weather and environment, NBC, urban ops, and a whole lot more. Should make some waves. Visit [www.mattysreconhandbook.com](http://www.mattysreconhandbook.com), password "rope." "Permission to view or purchase may not extend outside of the recipients of this letter and other specific invites." I don't make a dime off the book, but I am trying to get copies purchased for operators at no cost to them, either through corporate advertising in the book or through personal sponsorship...for instance, one 6-man Recon team can be outfitted with these books, shipping included, for \$135. My marketing proposal is to allow an individual or organization to have one full page at the beginning of each book that they order, for advertising or for a personal letter. You see, since the publisher is a "print-on-demand" company, I can modify the content without changing the book edition. Also, it's important

to note the effect of a book like this. Marine Recon men have what are called “required pocket items.” Examples include a compass, a folding knife, a small survival kit, and the Ranger Handbook. All items are waterproofed and “dummy corded” to the pocket to which it is assigned. The Ranger Handbook has been around since the 50’s, and is carried on the person of every Recon Marine to this day. It is largely geared toward Army operations, which differ from Marine Corps operations. Nonetheless it is has, for generations of Marines, been the most field-worthy pocket handbook to carry as a reference...until now. Mine blows the Ranger Handbook out of the water. If you know someone who is interested in sponsoring a team, please let me know. I’m right in the middle of marketing this idea to various companies.

My personal goal for this year is to write and publish three more books. I’ve got a list of 15+ books to write, but 3 of them are at stages of completion that make the goal feasible. Unlike the previous two, these will be inexpensive, publicly available books.

Well, I’ve got to go. My sons are trying to teach me what “beer boobs” are. I cannot help but wonder how a new term or phrase makes its way into our seemingly-impenetrable boxed-in life. No TV to speak of, they’re home schooled, and they don’t surf the internet. Maybe such a phrase spontaneously evolves from our sinful human nature. Then again, church kids are looking highly suspect. “Gee Billy, what did you learn about in Sunday School today?”

Anyway, we’d love to hear from you all...please drop a letter in the mailbox, or email, or send a pigeon.

Carpe Diem!

Matty, Petra, Joshua, Caleb, Lily, Baby Speights

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

Three Samplings of Art (1)



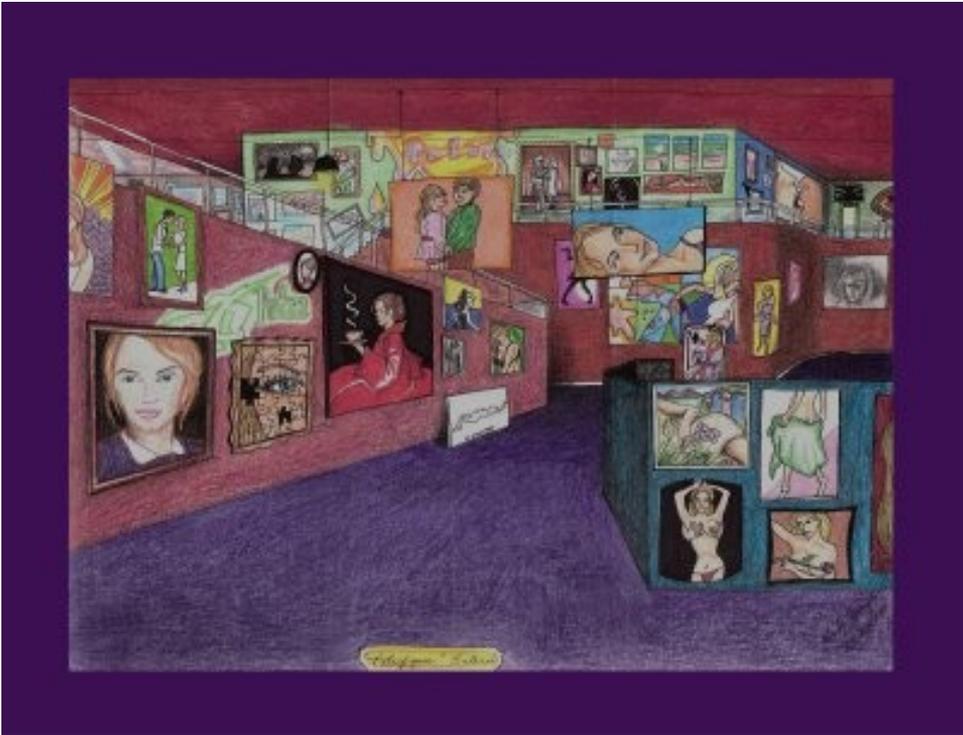




SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

### Three Samplings of Art (2)

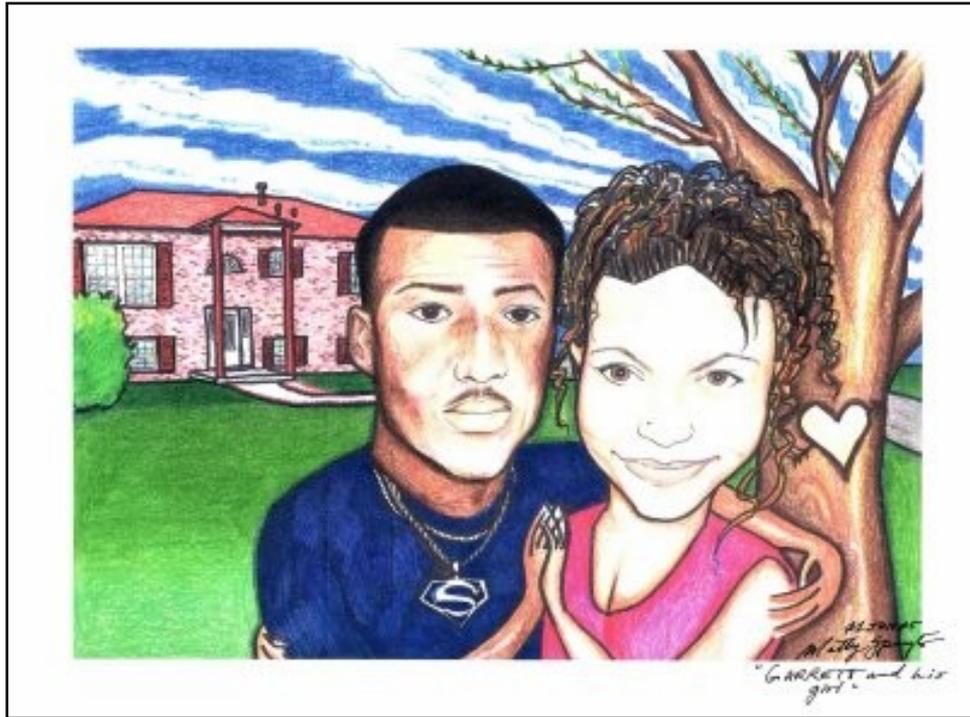




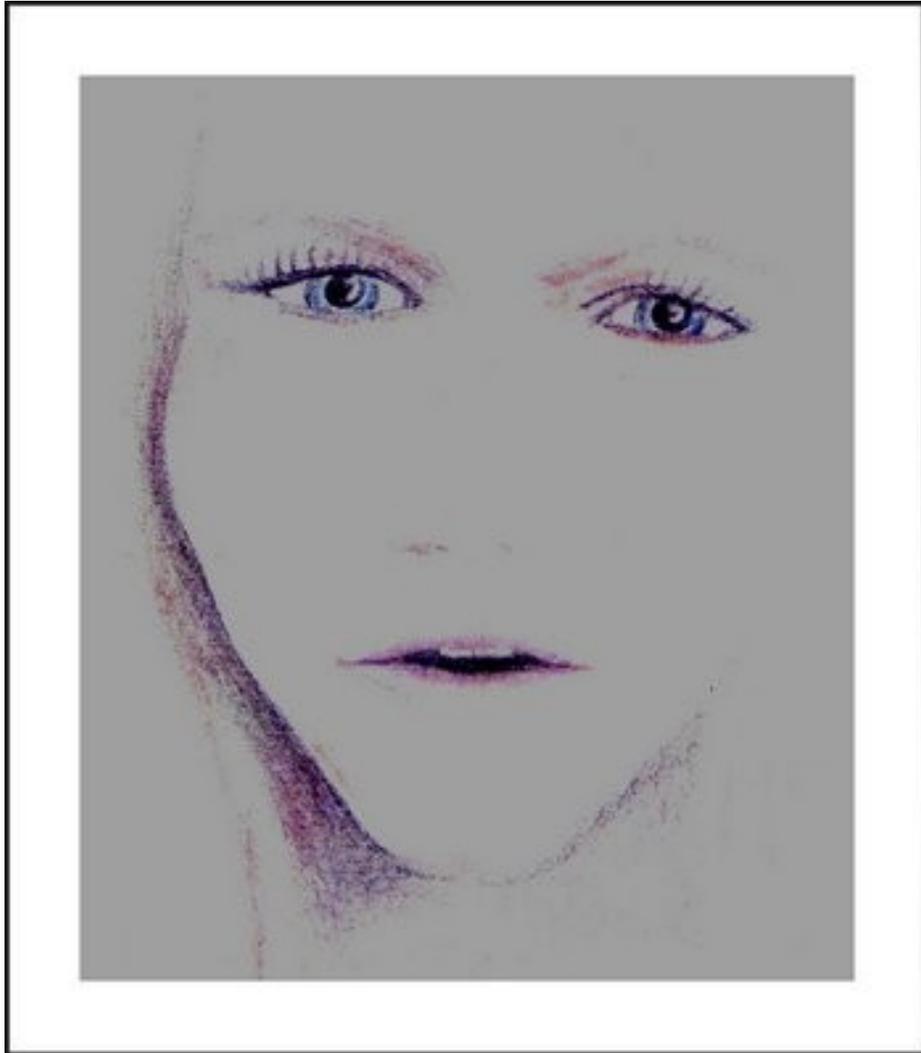


SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2009

Three Samplings of Art (3)







TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2009

## **Wisdom of Shel Silverstein--Sleep Late & Everyone Wins**

I was reading to my boys tonight, from a book written by by favorite childhood author, Shel Silverstein. The book is "Where the Sidewalk Ends," and it contains two simple poems for your kids (and yourself) that I'd like to share:

HUG O' WAR

I will not play at tug o' war.  
I'd rather play at hug o' war,  
Where everyone hugs  
Instead of tugs,  
And everyone giggles  
And rolls on the rug,  
Where everyone kisses,  
And everyone grins,  
And everyone cuddles,  
And everyone wins.

#### EARLY BIRD

Oh, if you're a bird, be an early bird  
And catch the worm for your breakfast plate.  
If you're a bird, be an early bird--  
But if you're a worm, sleep late.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2009

### **A Healthy Fear of Flying**

When you tally the numbers, I have over 740 flight hours as an aircrewman (on KC-130 tankers) in the Marines. I easily have another 150 hours in the air in the Recon community of the Marines, either in a plane or on a helicopter. If I had to guess, the stamp-laden passports I've had since I was five years old are probably worth another 400 flight hours, easily. So, with over 1200 hours in the air, you'd think that I wouldn't get nervous about flying...and you'd be wrong.

I hate flying. I mean hate it. And not just because it's stuffy, your ears pop all the time because of improperly calibrated aircraft pressurization systems, and the meals suck. I







Well, I've been here in St. Laurent for nearly two weeks now. Life here is reminiscent to me of the days of my youth, where Peter would deliver milk by the liter in aluminum cans--fresh from his cows--for 1 D-Mark (DM, Deutchmark). This place is nearly a mirror-image of Weselberg, Germany.

I'm working at the EDF power plant by night, walking the towns and villages by day, and running and working out in-between. I'm disappointed at the food... the French cusine in this area can't hold a candle to the French bistro, "Caprice," in Wilmington, NC. The good thing is that my cooking is a hit, and I'm the Thursday chef at our hotel, le Relais des Sapins. In fact, the restaurant manager is out buying ingredients per my list as we speak. Dinner for 50. The weekly honor reminds me of Bari Palese, Italy, when I traveled to the local towns jamming with a reggae band from Morrocco on Wednesdays.

The nuke power facility is a joke where security is concerned. Every day I walk through 5 checkpoints, an X-ray booth, contamination booth, metal detector, card scan stations, key code stations... and I do it all with a huge freakin' CRKT serrated pocket knife, a pipe, a lighter, and pretty much anything else I want to keep in my pocket. No problems. Wandering aimlessly inside the heart of the plant? No issues. Security is lax at best. In my photos, one cooling tower is free of exhaust--that reactor is shut down because it's the one we're working on--we're re-tubing the condensers inside. Progress is a game of 'red light, green light,' because the French inspectors and our American equipment have issues

with each other. Oh well. The pay is good, the guys work hard, and the atmosphere is relaxed.

I ran across a bunch of pheasants on a run yesterday, an old windmill house, and a couple new places to check out in the evening for chow. A mangy dog got out of his fence and tried to eat my face while I was running through the neighboring village. I walk to the store twice a week to buy bread, cheese, meat, and other local fare to keep me sustained through the week without spending a ton of Euros. The locals are cool; no one speaks English so you have to work at your French, which is a blessing in disguise.

Well, I'll sign off for now. Time to refill my coffee and slip slowly into madness...

--Matty

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2009

## Hitting the Reset Button

It never fails. The rush of something new in your life burns out and leaves you longing for something real, something sustainable. I'm in France for a while, and when the newness faded, I started to focus on where I belong--not merely in the physical sense but in every area of my life.

It's no secret that I was less than excited about leaving my family, but the initial excitement was born of a new and potentially promising career path in the power industry, a bit of travel for old times' sake, and the thought of having occasional time to write books. In this tiny town there are few distractions, and after nearly three weeks I have pondered on all my personal, familial, and friendship-related shortcomings... and now I am setting up my mental checklist for a clean slate, a fresh start, a total system reboot. In the fighting world, this is known as "coming to base;" returning to the position which is most conducive to both offensive and defensive maneuvers. In essence, returning

to the position in which you are potentially the strongest.

I like to think of it as hitting the reset button. As in my past, it has taken separation to make me better appreciate togetherness. I realize that my days are less stressful when I go for a run. So I run. I walk. I drink water. I forgo sweets. I read books. I return inwardly to the position in which I am the strongest outwardly. I know that it may seem to be an impossible feat, but I implore everyone to shock their life with a little excitement, preferably outside their comfort zone. When the dust settles, come to base. From there, you can follow your passions and achieve your dreams.

THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 2009

## Chateau de Chambord





Well, it took long enough, but I'm finally familiar with my AO here in France. When you look at France, I'm slightly to the left of center, about 30 to 40 miles Southwest of Orleans. Our town, St. Laurent, is one of several small towns and villages along the LThe Loire River Valley produces some fantastic wine, and is evidenced by a plethora of local producers and distributors. The castle shown above belonged to Louis XIV, and was used as his hunting lodge. It was frequented by many famous individuals including Leonardo da Vinci. I just left the castle a few hours ago, and I'm off to visit some other locations within a close driving distance...Au Revoir for now!



THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 2009

## A Return, Some Perspective, and a Day to Write

Touchdown! My feet kissed US soil on Friday around Noon, at the Atlanta Port of Entry. It's great to be back with the family. I still hate flying, I'm iffy about the company I just worked for, but my resume just grew by one experience and I carry a nice little slice of France in my pocket.

As it was for me and my sister growing up, daddy's jubilant return from another country marks an evening of gifts, trinkets, postcards, cool-looking foreign money, and candy of all sorts. For us though, the bags of candy usually rode for several hours or days alongside the stinky socks in dad's suitcase--I was sure to wash all my clothes; my kids don't know how good they have it! It was Josh's turn to pick out the Friday night movie, so I took him to Blockbuster. Pirates of the Caribbean. Petra held back 'Marley & Me' from being turned in... "We'll turn it in late," she told me. "It's a good movie and I want you to see it." Good movie. My follow-on blog today will be a sidebar on dogs.

So I'm back with the family, the kids are watching their movie and I'm ducking back out to grab milk for Petra. Food Lion milk is \$2.50 / gallon right now! Down from over \$4. As I make the 750 meter drive to Food Lion (yeah, I could walk, but I'm soaking up family time), I notice an old black guy in the parking lot, propped up against his car, barely illuminated by a streetlight, smoking a cigar. You know, he's out there every night. I realized at that moment that I never slowed down enough to appreciate small things like that right here in my own community, until I went to France and there was nothing better to do. Over there, the idea of capturing small moments in people's everyday lives felt romantic--a deep cultural experience. Back here, the idea had never occurred to me. Have you seen the Disney / Pixar movie Ratatouille? Near the end of the movie, the esteemed food critic made interesting use of the word "perspective." That's what popped into my head at that moment. The revelation put some things into perspective.

Boy, I wish I could write. I mean, for a living. I envy those whose passion and provision are the same. My passions are mere footnotes in my life; stolen moments, tidbits of thought

and mental photos that are sewn together and scribbled onto paper by pen or by brush when the midnight window opens.

Well, there's more to write, but not here. Turn the page.

--MJ

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2009

## A Sidebar on Dogs

[Petra held back 'Marley & Me' from being turned in... "We'll turn it in late," she told me. "It's a good movie and I want you to see it."] She's right, it was good, but it took me through the emotional journey of dogs in my life...

I remember a time when there were only a handful of movies floating around to watch. Everybody I knew those days had seen Old Yeller. Old Yeller was my first experience with losing a friend. Mom & dad had Bailey (Irish Setter) and Rags (Cocker Spaniel)... I barely knew them. Samantha (Great Dane) got it on with a stray (German Shepherd) and gave birth to Sampson. He tried to eat my face off but I loved him anyway and was sad when he died. I watched Pepper get killed on I-70. Horrible memory. Pierre was grandma's French Poodle. I couldn't stand him! Glad he's dead.

Thor was my best friend. He was a beautiful Golden Retriever who chased butterflies with me, caught crawdads with me, protected me, dragged me and alerted mom when I acted injured, and slept with me in the papasan chair. He loved bubbles. He'd cry when I headed to school, he'd meet me halfway up the street when I came home. I watched some farmer drive off with him tied in the back of his pickup truck as I walked home one day. I chased that truck on my bike for two blocks, crying. I resented my parents for it for years.

Uncle Mark was my "man's man" altar ego. He hunted and trapped and built big wooden structures with his bare hands as a carpenter. He Jesus in every Christmas play, tanned and sinewy and strong. His deep voice and persona are probably best captured in the

Disney classic, Beauty and the Beast. Uncle Mark was Gaston. Well, I watched him cry like a little girl after he put Zeke, his faithful beagle, down in the backyard. Zeke ingested poison, possibly antifreeze. Mark took the gun to him, and was never the same. He stopped trapping and hunting shortly after that.

Petra and I had our dog stories before the kids. I watched someone throw a dog out the window and onto the highway, and stopped to grab him before he got run over. Named him Highway. He was snarly, snappy and mean. We couldn't figure out why. Gave him up to a kennel. Judah was a young mutt--probably lab/chow and something else that made him small. Petra's prodding me with "Labradoodle" right now. I think she just likes saying it. Judah ran off down the railroad tracks one day and never came back. We went camping one time and I was forced to put a puppy out of his misery... that was tough. Watched a dog slowly die of poisoning when some jerkoff Marines fed him a peanut-butter (moisture-activated) chemical MRE heater... he crawled into a hole under the some tent platforms and I couldn't reach him. No clue who did it.

Petra and I had two cats. One yellow female tabby named Bo (Petra's cat), and a water-loving, bath-soaking, screws-loose black and white cat named Sylvester (my cat). Bo lives with mom & dad, along with grin-and-bear-it Tony the tiger cat (thinks he's a dog). Sylvester was dropped off in a field in the middle of nowhere by my mother-in-law, while I was in Iraq. Thanks. We also had a cool lovebird named Simon-Peter. Gave him to a good family from church... he was too loud for a newborn baby. Hindsight, I will never give a pet away again. I'm an American, and in this country, pets are family. Yes, they're still animals and have different rules, but family nonetheless.

Buddy was a "Marley." Chesapeake Bay (Yellow) Labrador. Huge head, big build, alpha dog, dragged you everywhere. Ran off for days. Rolled in crap, dead animals, and some mean old lady's flower garden. Swallowed his food hole. Inhaled it. Regardless of the size of morsel, he always made a fast, distinctive sound when you threw it at him... "suckchomp." Then it was gone. Chicken wing...suckchomp. Orange slice...suckchomp. Peanut butter sandwich...suckchomp, chomp, chomp, smack, smack... Ate veggies. Loved bananas. Hated grapes (suckchomp... ptooeey). Ate a T-bone steak, got the "T" stuck deep

in his esophagus. Dad got it out with channel locks. Didn't deter Buddy from inhaling T-bones. Buddy humped everything. Got stuck inside a beagle for two days!!! They wailed the whole time. Couldn't get them unstuck, and she was a biter. Finally they freed up. He tried her again the next day. Buddy tainted the championship bloodline of a neighboring farmer's Shelties. We were supposed to get one of the Sheltie pups as a friendly gesture one Christmas; instead, dad got a call from the farmer, saying he would shoot Buddy on site. Apparently, the Sheltie pups all came out looking like Labs! Buddy got hit on the autobahn in Germany. I heard it happen and was scared to open my eyes when I got to the shoulder (we were visiting a lake adjacent to the highway). Dog strike, screaming dog, long screeching brakes, brake smoke, guy driving off slowly. No dog! Found Buddy limping, 10 miles away, three days later. Used to drop muskrats by the door like a cat would mice. Got along great with our cats, chickens, cows, horses, ducks, turkeys, rabbits, etc. DOMINATED other dogs. No manners. Wore a choke collar with inward spikes (not sharp...German dog training tool). He'd still drag you a mile to get to another dog. One time, he jumped into a pond to chase some ducks. The ducks just swam in big circles. Buddy paddled after them for over an hour, nearly drowning himself in the middle of the pond. I was ten or eleven at the time, mom was bawling her eyes out on the shore, holding his collar and screaming herself hoarse at the retarded dog. Finally, some nice German guy pulls his shirt off, jumps in and grabs Buddy, dragging him back to shore. I could write a book of stories about Buddy, but to sum it up: he traveled far, lived long and was put down easy in Suffolk, Virginia, where mom & dad have settled.

Petra and I haven't ventured beyond a fish named Sampson since we've had the kids. It's not fair to the kids, and that will change the minute we get out of this apartment and back into a house. A Red Doberman, yet to be born, shares our name somewhere in the near future. Until then, we'll live vicariously through movies like "Marley & Me."

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2009

## An Interesting Diet Plan

I typically weigh in these days between 210 and 220. Some days, I have a voracious appetite and won't stop eating and drinking, and the scale change from morning to night will be close to ten pounds. Other days, I eat nothing and the scale drops two or three pounds. When I left home 5 weeks ago, I weighed 216.

When I arrived in France, the sticker shock on everything almost floored me. A simple meal will typically cost \$50. In the most expensive instance, two huge mugs (64 oz) of beer and a huge mug of Coke cost \$80. No typo. So I went cheap. Ginormous loaves of French bread at the bakery were 43 cents a loaf. Sweet butter to top the bread. Tap water tasted fine. Red wine was cheap! Average bottle was \$5, out of probably 1000 different types. I fared well on the 2.40 Euro (\$3.25-ish) Chateau Bouffevent 2007 Bergerac. Never saw a Merlot, or a Cabernet Sauvignon, on the shelf. Cheese! Same way. Much cheaper than in the States, but outside of goat cheese, Brie, Gouda, Swiss, Parmesan, and Camembert, I could not identify the 60 types of provencal cheeses on display at any given store. Avacado, anyone? They were 20 cents apiece each Friday at market. I would fill my aviator bag with them, and snack on them daily. Crackers, sardines, pickles, lemons, oranges, banana juice, UHT whole milk, salami, calbsleberwurst (liver pate) and salt to top the list.

I would eat a little of everything, every day, including probably a stick of butter. I drank lots of water and coffee, had one multivitamin a day, and ingested no sugar or sweets (a feat of enormous proportion, given my human nature). I walked everywhere, including up three flights of stairs daily. I ran about 3 times a week. When I came home after 5 weeks, I stepped on the scale, and weighed in at 201! Skin remained clear, color was good, circulation was good. I received a thorough exit physical at the plant, and everything was great.

So I continue to eat the yolk. I love bacon. I hate anything other than whole milk, or whole fat cottage cheese, or any dairy product, for that matter. I put unsalted butter on

everything that is complemented by butter. I salt everything else. And I consider myself to be in shape.

I say eat what you want. Easy on the sweets (and fats, I suppose). Walk a little more. Now smile. You look great to me.

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2009

## The Last of the Pink Things

This weekend, I'll hopefully be running the local Dismal Swamp Stomp half marathon. The run takes place on the same trail where I get my wine grapes. These days, if I'm running alone, my level of motivation is directly proportional to the amount of battery charge on my ipod. Well, my ipod is toast--doesn't hold a charge worth a crap.

It's been a faithful little booger. It's pink, which draws curious looks from time to time. I got over the shade a long time ago, when the cooties wore off. You see, it used to belong to my wife. A typical girl, with bouncy hair and scrunchies and a bubble-gum lollipop smile, she loved all things little and pink. Her tastes have changed over the years, accompanied by a more mature color palette. Pinks are now an accoutrement to brown, it seems, in the chic style of Roxy or Picci Petra.

The ipod was a gift of those bygone days. I bought it for her for some reason or another, along with her pink phone, her pink camera, her pink pens and pencils and notebooks and coffee cups, etc. Well, I inherited the camera, which might as well have been disposable in my hands at the time. Petra is ready for a new camera after a few scratches. It looks new to me. I use it for progressive photos of construction projects, and lost it, presumably in the muddy trench of a residential footer. My cell phones usually last about a year. First, all the paint wears off. Then, the #7 button stops working, or something like that. Then the hinge breaks, so the phone just flops open and closed. Yeah, well, that's how I inherited her pink phone. For some reason, it felt really gay, and I'm not gay, so I just couldn't do it anymore. The ipod? Well, I do most of my running early or late, when no one

can see what color my ipod is. Then someone sees it. And another, and another. Eventually, I didn't care. Now, I don't even tell the "it used to belong to my wife" story. I just say, "yeah, that's my ipod."

The ipod was the last of my inherited pink things...and now it's gone. I believe I have just matured into a big girl.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009

## French Pop Music -- Stop Laughing!

This may be the most difficult thing I've ever felt compelled to say in my life... I like French pop music. Every morning in St. Laurent, I'd waken to my wide open window and the Virgin 17 French Top 20 or top 50 Countdown. I'll be brief--you can check out the music or videos on YouTube or streaming live at Deezer.com. Following is MY list of their top songs, based upon the French and Brit top charts.

1. Pep's -- Liberta (very chill)
2. Calogero -- C'est Dit (emotional)
3. Les Enfoires -- Ici Les Enfoires (extremely popular)
4. Kid Cudi & Crookers -- Day 'n' Nite (top dance club song in Europe)
5. Tryo -- Ce Que L'on S'aime (cute video)
6. Indochine -- Little Dolls (annoying, then catchy)
7. Helmut Fritz -- Ca M'enerve (annoying, then catchy)
8. Charlie Winston -- Like a Hobo (chill)
9. Alesha Dixon -- The Boy Does Nothing
10. Madcon -- Beggin'
11. Christophe Mae -- Mon P'tit Gars

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2009

## Lions and Snappers and Crepes: The Week in Review





Saturday afternoon, a week ago. I hadn't been home 24 hours, and we had some catching up to do. First order of business was Taco Bell for daddy. Then to Pixar's Monsters vs. Aliens at the Regal Greenbrier matinee...we were an hour early so we walked to Michael's art store to kill some time and blow more money. The movie wasn't as good as other Pixar flicks, but we snacked to the max and it was a good time.

Easter Sunday, I watched Casey playing Jesus in the church play. As Mary held him in an emotional [just removed from the cross] scene, I watched her inadvertently stroking his nipple and wondered how he could lay there without busting up laughing. What was going through his head to remain so incredibly cool? WWJD, perhaps?

Monday, I wrote a Jerry Maguire manifesto and gave it to the division President of the company I just worked for in France. There are grave issues that need to be addressed before I would consider returning for part 2 of the project in June. No one has the moral courage to address the issues, from the bottom to the top... including, I fear, the

recipient of my report.

Tuesday and Wednesday, I stayed home, updated my resume, and applied to several companies for a new job. Took the kids to the playground. Worked on a new painting in the evenings. Stayed up really late both nights to catch up on episodes of 24...

Thursday, we all went to the Chesapeake Arboretum. We walked the woods paths for a couple of hours, venturing off path to spy a Great Blue Heron doing some fishing up-close. When he flew off, we checked out his fishing hole. The creek at the Arboretum is probably 12' wide, and is 6 to 10 inches deep at best. It's one of the few clear water, sandy-bottomed streams in the area. The Heron's fishing hole is at an obscure bend in this creek. It's the diameter of your kitchen table, four feet deep, and loaded... LOADED with huge freshwater fish of all sorts, writhing all over each other. 12" was the smallest fish I saw. A net and a few buckets, and you can eat for months. As we were watching, a huge alligator snapping turtle crawled out of the fish hole. I jumped in the water and wrestled him to the shore so the kids could check him out. I couldn't even lift him. We identified about 40 types of edible plants on our walk.

For dinner, I made a salad of collected fern fiddleheads and Spring Greenbreir shoots, a seasonal treat. Traditional dressings are forbidden on my salads! For dinner? Mint vinaigrette chicken breasts and creamed schwarzwurzel (German--a personal favorite from my youth. The French call it 'Salsify;' it looks like white asparagus and tastes like heaven), which I brought home from France in large cans (can't find it in the States). Great meal.

Friday, crepes for breakfast, Red Lobster for lunch, the Norfolk Zoo for the afternoon, Wal-Mart for groceries, then Blockbuster for movie night. Return of the Jedi (AGAIN) for the boys. Lily already had some princessy movie to watch. For us, The Day the Earth Stood Still and Died of Boredom (yeah, it's that bad). I never rent an 'iffy' movie without a backup. Slumdog Millionaire is a great movie, and I wanted Petra to see it. Maybe tonight.

Today, I skipped out on the Dismal Swamp Stomp to work with Matt. We're building a small log cabin at the Norfolk Botanical Gardens. Made good progress, then I stopped in

for some beers. Home for some of Casey's (Jesus') chili... he won \$2500 today for First Place at the chili cookoff (2nd Year in a row!), and won some other chili-related awards. The kids are asleep, I got a beautiful girl on my left, a decent cup o' joe on my right, and it's been a good week.

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2009

## A Polish Survival Story





It's probably not noteworthy to you or anyone else, but I love my coffee cup. It took several years to earn the crackles in this simple piece of Polish pottery from Petra's collection. The cup is classy in its own right-- the sophisticated side of my brain can appreciate the design, the color tones, the ergonomics of the handle's contour... The immature mannish side of my brain sees frontal-viewed boobs painted around the rim of the cup. It has withstood the rigors of belonging to me, and amazingly outlasted an enamel blue-on-tin camping mug, two rugged Stanley classic silver thermos cups, and my old Marine lifer's mug. The old friend can randomly be found on the back porch, half filled with rain, or rolling around on the floor of my truck. Something tells me that this survivor has many stories and crackles to earn yet.

SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 2009



## Snausage Fingers and Tongues of Fire

Every morning this week, Petra has woken up with carnie hands and Hobbit feet, sans hair. She whines, "my fingers are chubby...waaaah" This is not new to me. I've seen her on more than one pregnant occasion try to cram her Anastasia-sized pregnancy feet into the Cinderella slippers in her closet before church. "It fits!" (folds her hands, cocks her head, bats her eyes) It doesn't fit. But I know better these days. They look great, Babe.



I only say this in jest. The reality is that she's absolutely gorgeous and carries well. She always busts her butt to find her figure after giving birth, too, which is more than I could do in her shoes.

Matt and I finished the small log cabin at the Norfolk Botanical Gardens. We signed up for some triathlon in Maryland in July. Matt signed up for the Eastern Shore MS-150 bike ride again, and I'll be doing same here in the next week or so. It's a fun 2-day ride, May 30th / 31st.



I met up with a gentleman named Don, who along with his partner has finalized a 25-year weapon optic that I'm convinced will revolutionize shooting. It provides no magnification, rather, it combines sight alignment with sight picture, providing clear view at 50 or 500 yards without need for human optical focus. Uses same lens technology that alleviates effects of macular degeneration and other eye diseases... he



allowed me to take a few pictures and spread the word... it has long been patented and should go 'green light' on the civilian marketplace soon.

The week for my family was otherwise uneventful. A beautiful luna moth flew into an open window at our place. Petra's choir buddies at church threw her a big shindizzle baby shower. We hung out with old friends by a fire, ate s'mores and told stories. Extended Friday movie nights for most of the week. Woke up every morning with guacamole dip /

banana split hangovers. Is it just me, or are movies getting worse and worse? In a word, "forgettable." Couldn't tell you a single flick we watched. Maybe it's just me.



Today, we went to the Botanical Gardens to let the kids see the log cabin. We joined the herd of stuck-up pro photographers to capture a farther-view picture of the bald eagle nest (visit [wvec.com](http://wvec.com), click the 'camera' tab to see the live baby eaglet cam), then let the kids play in the water area, then saw the cabin, teepee, flowers, bugs, more water, ducks, turtles, goldfish, and 20 local schools competing in Crew competitions. Paid \$50 and my

birthright at the cafe, for a couple sandwiches and some cold drinks. After we all overdosed on vitamin D, we grabbed some Italian ices from Rita's, then came home to watch some more movies.



The family's still mad at me. You see, I've been feeling guilty lately about not involving my family, specifically the boys, in simple-yet-meaningful adventures. While at the Gardens today, I found a Jack-in-the-Pulpit plant growing near the water. I dug up the tuber and explained to the family that the potato-flavored root is really good once briefly cooked, but when ingested raw, will fire your mouth up like you're chewing a mouthful of small needles.

It's a delayed and slowly progressive reaction. Okay, I didn't exactly explain it in those details. I simply told Josh, and Caleb, and Petra, to try a very small bite, chew it up, and not swallow (just spit it out). For the three hours that followed, my family HATED me!!! My boys were drooling like a couple of Zombie window-lickers, my daughter kept saying, "I want some!!!" My wife's bottom lip reacted by swelling up like Professor Clump's... but I know the drill. "Your lips look great, babe." ...And the couch is looking awfully comfortable tonight.

P.S. Check us out at church! Streaming live, [famchurch.net](http://famchurch.net).



MONDAY, APRIL 27, 2009

## Fight Club Lite



Yes, Ma'am. I'd like a #1, extra sour cream on the burrito, big Mountain Dew a Baha chalupa, a cheesy bean & rice burrito, a #3-- soft tacos please--with another Mt. Dew, a taco salad, a Mexican pizza, and a large Pepsi. That will be all, thanks."

It was in the middle of one of these lunches that Matt & I made the preliminary plans for our next two races. We aim high, but both lack the motivation to train. He at least makes an effort... called me today after a killer swim. I was on the couch all day, hunting for a dream job. Can't feel like much more of a slacker than that. I, however, am horrible at maintaining a training regime. I'll do two



days, then I'm physically pooped and mentally bored.

I can't run the same route twice in a week without falling asleep, you can usually talk me out of doing anything physically challenging, and I eat lots of garbage that's not good for me... all day. Matt's busy during the week, so I decided to seek out anonymous run/spar/bike/swim/climb training partners during the week. My first choice? Craigslist. "Platonic personals," right? No, wait...

ah, yes. "Community Activities." Within two hours, I attracted a wierdo, a gay guy, and a young Gung-Ho Marine that wants to get me ship-shape so I have what it takes to join the Marines. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I already did that 14 years ago.



So Matt & I get to talking on the phone today, and we hashed out a game plan to help prepare for our forthcoming races. This Saturday, I'll go over bright and squirrley for a few hours and he will proceed to kill me with his super-secret, pre-planned funky workout. I'll do the same for him the following week. We'll inevitably pick up some stragglers...

...Which brings me to my point. If you can run a couple miles at any pace, or if you have a bike (a competition Trek or your son's Huffy), or if you want to box, or rock climb, hike, swim, or wrestle in tapioca pudding, maybe you'll want to join us at some point. Or join me during the week. I might just take a walk sometimes. No egos, no embarrassment, no pressure, no problems. Just bring some heart. I'll let you all know how well these meets go... and Matt, I'll see ya Saturday! You bring the tapioca.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 2009

## Family Entertainment 2009: Pass Go and Pocket \$200

You know, we Americans have really let the price of our entertainment get out of control. Despite a failing economy, theme park tickets are still through the roof. Concerts, races... even a night of bowling will cost the average family of four better than fifty bucks. Simple outings and evening indulgences rarely come without a hefty price tag.

Here in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, we come in just over the national average in

movie ticket prices... I can only assume that Jane and Joe American in Nebraska also fork out \$8 for 30 cents-worth of popcorn. With my family of five, our most recent movie outings have been pre-empted by a stop at Wal-Mart for sneak-in snacks. We save enough to eat lunch at Olive Garden the next day. If only they made butterproof purses big enough to carry gallon-sized popcorn buckets...

Today, if I took my family to our favorite local water park (Ocean Breeze in Virginia Beach) it would cost us exactly \$100 just to get in the door. Where I grew up in Germany, at the 100 acre, year-round, indoor/outdoor waterpark near Stuttgart, it would cost my family 9.20 Euros today, or just over thirteen bucks... in an "inflated" European economy. Oh yeah, and we could bring our own food and beer to the park if we wanted.

How's about this one... when the circus comes to town, thousands of tickets get distributed. "SPECIAL OFFER--KIDS IN FREE!!! One per purchasing adult. People, are we still that stupid? Don't patronize me. Adults are nearly \$30. Cotton candy and chemlight necklaces will put you out another \$40. Then a photo with a 65-year-old scary Russian guy in a Batman suit costs \$25. And people are actually lined up for photos! The carnival? Even worse. In my travels, I have found that American carnivals cost almost twice what they do in other countries. Isn't it disgraceful, how we have been suckered into paying so much for what should be inexpensive family entertainment?

The Pursuit of Happiness is apparently not a God-given right in this country anymore. It's a privilege reserved for the wealthy; reserved for those who are not affected in these times economic distress.

The topic of pricy entertainment is a personal hotbutton issue for me. You know what, though? I've rediscovered the joys of Monopoly and Battleship with my family. We've blown the dust off the old chess set, and my kids know when to fold 'em. Well, I've gotta go... our popcorn's done!

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2009

## Strawberry Rhubarb Pie

Well, May is here, and that means one thing... Strawberries!!! For one month, the fabulous fruit is in season in the Southern US. Up North, the season is typically in June. Rhubarb season comes only slightly after strawberry season, which is probably how the two ingredients first came to be mixed into a pie. And oh, whadda pie! It will take you 30 minutes to prep and 45 minutes to bake, so if you think you might need two pies, make them simultaneously.

This particular pie launched me into familial stardom. I don't know why--all I did was follow a recipe off the internet about 6 or 7 years ago. But with kitchen fame comes repetition, which spawns innovation, which begat an offshoot recipe of my own. And here it is:

\*\*\*For the pie filling, you'll need 2 eggs (yolks), cup sugar, pinch salt, 2 tbs flour, 2 cups of diced strawberries / rhubarb. Not to insult anyone's intelligence, but rhubarb leaves are poisonous. If you buy from a grower, discard the leaves.

\*\*\*For the pie shell and top, you'll need 2 1/2 cups flour, pinch salt, 2/3 cups shortening--I use straight unsalted butter for just about everything, but I've used Country Crock spread from a tub as well. It all works fine. You need a glass of ice water and a glass of red wine.

\*\*\*For the pie glaze (which creates a semi-glossy, slightly sweetened pie crust), you need two egg whites, 1/4 cup sugar, and a small splash of vanilla (1/3 tsp).

Now, you can pretty much make any kind of fruit pie this way, I think. For this one, I've used rhubarb marmelade when the fresh stalks are out of season, and it tasted pretty good. I adjusted for sugar content.

Separate eggs. The yolks are for the pie. Set the whites to the side for the pie glaze. Beat the yolks, add sugar, salt, flour, and fruit. Mix well and set to the side.

Now make the glaze. Beat the egg whites until they form soft peaks. I'll be honest, I don't have the first clue what that means. I beat them with a fork or wire whisk for about two minutes. Slowly add sugar & vanilla. Continue beating until stiff peaks are formed--yeah, no clue here. Just know this, you cannot screw it up unless you let the egg whites form heavy pools on top of the pie crust, cause then you'll have a thin layer of cooked egg on top of your pie... or so I've, um, heard. Just beat the egg whites another minute or two. Set the glaze to the side. Preheat oven to 450 F.

For your pie shell and crust, stir your flour and salt together in a bowl. Cut the butter / margarine / shortening into pieces the size of peas with a fork--into the flour mix. Or just mix it with an electric mixer until the butter is in pea-sized pieces. Now, add the ice water, one tablespoon at a time (IMPORTANT!) Don't add too much water. Should take between 6 and 10 tablespoons. After each tablespoon, toss the mixture gently with a fork. Push mixture against side of bowl to ensure all flour is mixed in. Add water, toss mixture. Add, toss. Dough will form into a ball. Separate the ball into two equal portions. One will form the pie shell, one will form the top crust.

Roll out both with on a floured surface. The one used for the shell should be a little bigger than the pan in diameter, at least an inch all around. When ready to move the shell, fold in half, then in half again. Unfold in the pan and form it up. With the other rolled dough, cut strips and set aside. Fill the shell with the pie mix. Now use the strips to basket-weave the top crust. Trim and crimp the edge with a knife or fork. Whip up the egg whites again, then apply to the top of the crust with a brush, or spoon onto crust and spread with the back of a spoon.

Place pie in the oven. Bake at 450 for 15 minutes, then reduce to 350 for 30 minutes or until mix is tender.

Seems like a lot of work, I know. Make a few and you'll be a pie pro in no time. It's a really good dessert. Serve hot with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, or cold with coffee (top with whipped cream). Now drink that glass of wine and relax.

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2009

## The Bush is Calling

Whenever I visit a large municipal center, I usually forget to remove my pocket knife until I get to the metal detector. I'll walk to the nearest garbage can and stuff the knife in a McDonald's bag or something, then return to the security checkpoint. When my business is done inside the building, I'll retrieve my knife.

So the other day, I walk into the Hampton courthouse. This time, I remember to lose the knife. I get in the door, take five big boy steps forward and empty my pockets into the basket. "Sir, you can't bring your cell phone into the building." Oh, okay. Five steps in the direction I just came from, open the door, briefly scan for observers, toss the cell phone into a bush. I re-enter the building and make my way to the second floor, in plain view of the bush the entire time (the inside has high vaulted ceilings).

So there's this guy outside the building, smoking a cigarette. Ratty lookin' clothes, beat up jacket, mussed hair. He's pacing the front of the building. *I should've turned off the ringer*, I thought. I reached the front of the line, paid money to someone, then made my way back down the escalator. As I'm descending, I see the man walk to the bush, lean in towards it with his ear, then get down on his hands and knees at the base of the bush. He grabs the cell phone, opens and closes it, and walks away with it. I exit the building and follow him.

He handed the phone over without an argument, stating simply that he found it and was going to walk it to the police station. I looked down and... it wasn't my phone! I walked back and found mine resting in the high branches, right where I threw it. Apparently, I'm not the only one who leaves phones, knives, and other contraband precariously placed outside of public buildings!

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2009

## Peaks and Valleys--Life as a Heartbeat

Early in the mornings, mom has coffee with Jesus, much like you and I might chat it up over coffee at the Waffle House. She's done it my whole life. Well, one day she asks the Lord, "Why is life so hard?" The Lord tells her, "Karen, your life is like a heartbeat. If you don't have peaks and valleys, you flatline. You're dead." It's one of the many poignant insights that mom passes on from time to time.

Well, I've been feeling a bit flatline lately, especially when it comes to physical fitness. My fit lifestyle is very 'blah.' Perhaps you can relate. As with anything, it took an active and conscious decision to do something about it. Matt and I linked up late Sunday morning to PT. We ran 4 miles on the Dismal Swamp Canal Trail, tossed the idea of swimming because the water looked, um, dismal and swampy, and biked about 17 miles. The back half of our ride was accompanied by a steadily-increasing downpour that ended the minute we got back to our vehicles. I used Petra's hairspray on my hair that day. The rain pushed it into my eyes, and I was riding blind. Matt inhaled a bug and stepped on a snake. It was a good session. The blood started flowing again.

Last night (Monday), I linked up with a fellow Marine at the Kempsville Rec Center. Rode the bike there, feeling every bit of the previous day's ride in my butt and shoulders. Kevin and I met, shook hands, donned gloves, sized up and threw down. His wife Michelle provided commentary on our 1-minute bouts (--hey, it's been a while--) with three-minute rest time between bouts. I think Kevin knocked my nose straight again. We had a good time. Circulatory function in my fitness life is slowly but surely being restored.

What's next? Well, Kevin and I are set to link up again Wednesday and Friday for body-hardening. Matt's got a thrash session lined up for this weekend. I'm sore and smiling. If you're feeling blah, make the committment to liven up your life, kick things back into high gear. Peaks & valleys, baby... peaks & valleys.

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2009

## Rita's: The New Starbucks?



I'm not a Starbucks fan. Their coffee tastes sour to me. I can appreciate the establishment's role in defining a generation, the general nostalgia of the same, the indie-pop artsifartsiness, and its boundary-busting effect on the ever-growing language of American English ("barista," "grande nonfat decaf caramel marble moccha macchiato," e.g.)... and of course, who doesn't love free WiFi?

Their coffee stinks though. They should change venues and become a hot cocoa company... they can dress it up the same way as their coffee, but (for plain Janes like me) the base product tastes great too. It's tough to screw up milk or water.

Here's a beverage experience that doesn't stink: Rita's Italian Ice. Rita's is currently the #1 fastest-growing franchise in the country. Frozen

eats are cheap and the drinks are comparable to, um, heaven. On Hawaii's North shore, there's a guy with an often-imitated, world-famous shaved ice shack. I'll bet if he visited Virginia Beach, or one of the Rita's locales in 19 other States, he'd quit his job.

Rita's makes their flavors fresh every day. The daily flavors change around a bit. Purely in the interest of, um, science, I've tried each flavor of ice that they offer. The mango is by far my family's favorite, though I'm partial to strawberry. I love striking gold on a chunk of frozen watermelon or cherry as well. Cotton candy in icy liquid form tastes great if you're

six, or if you're me. Grape is great (Grape Ape, Grape Ape) anytime in my book. Theirs tastes like grape candy or soda. Still can't figure out how they make that flavor fresh. I have yet to taste a fresh grape that smells and tastes like grape candy.

I'm a serious anti-diet-flavor guy. I can smell saccharin, Splenda, and diety foods a mile away. Well, in order to provide a thorough report, I even tried Rita's sugar-free lemonade ice... and liked it. Another thing: Rita's costs less. I mean, for real, I know we all love tipping two bucks after buying a 5 dollar coffee. Who doesn't, right? But it gets old buying fu-fu espressos for yourself, your better half and fifteen kids after a ballgame. Kinda hard on the wallet. For sour coffee. Incomplete & run-on sentences. And beginning with conjunctions (and, but, yet).

To summarize, Starbucks is nice but their coffee sucks. Rita's doesn't suck. Their products cost less and taste better. And don't start a sentence with 'and.'

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2009

## Copperhead!



Well, 'tis the season to watch your step when walking in the woods. Took the boys out yesterday and stumbled on two copperheads. They blended in well with the freshly-mulched wood chip path. A new challenge--to catch two at the same time. As I was

thinking about how to do it, they both slithered away... one into a bed of pine needles, one into the poison ivy. I only caught one. Gave it to a friend, who is holding it in a nice environment for his other friend, who has a large (live) snake collection up North. Well, I'd better get back to tending my poison ivy.



TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2009

## Why I Love Wal-Mart, Food Lion, Lowe's

There are many reasons to love Wal-Mart. Low prices, 24-hr access, wide selection of products. My reason? The Wal-Mart Greeter. Now, I know what you're thinking. This is the part where I make some wisecrack remark about old people. Wrong again, Captain. Here is a company that, even in a struggling economy, values the older generation so much that it maintains two continuous greeter positions at every Wal-Mart in the country. Think about it. Nobody has "greeters." It's a seemingly pointless position, a waste of money. For some reason, however, the Wal-Mart hierarchy thought it important to give back to the senior citizens of this nation, by offering viable post-retirement employment options... creating jobs and smiles in spite of a penny-pinching corporate world.

Not all of the people in internetland can benefit from the the next store. Food Lion grocery store can only be found in eleven States on the East Coast. It does not offer a

plethora of beers by the can, like Bloom (another local yokel spot); it doesn't have the ambience or the international flair of Farm Fresh (yet another). The reason I love Food Lion is simple. These days, we burn up a gallon of milk every two days, sometimes faster. **\$2.50** per gallon! Thanks, Food Lion.

Lowe's was the first home improvement store to offer pretty much everything for both the contractor and the do-it-yourself homeowner-type. Here and there, you can spy the familiar shape of an old Lowe's that didn't make it, likely in a depressed strip mall, now bearing the name of a generic bulk wholesaler. You see, Lowe's had to learn the hard way. They conducted their own market research and analysis to determine viable locations in which to potentially open new stores. Some of them didn't work out, but they tried. Success through failure--through trial, error, and 'slow, steady growth.' Finally, just as they nestled themselves into strong consumer communities, along came a spider... Home Depot! They didn't need to work as hard on determining store locations. Instead, they took up residence in every area where Lowe's flourished, often right across the street. They offered lower prices in some product areas and instantly stole a large portion of Lowe's customer base. Then came the era of rapid expansion for Home Depot. Hundreds and thousands of stores nationwide, seemingly overnight. Well, when the economy started sliding, Home Depot was the first to liquidate assets and close stores. I'm not rejoicing in anyone's demise, but I'd like to think that I have some loyalty, and respect for self-made a company. So, to make a short story long, I'm a Lowe's guy.

Crap, we're out of milk.

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2009

## Kryptonite Cookies

I have a serious Achilles Heel. Had it since I was a pup. "No-bake cookies." You know those peanut-buttery chocolate oatmeal turds that are wrapped in cellophane and sold by local cookiemakers at the counters of side road gas stations? Yeah, those ones. I can smell them or spot them a mile away, they give me horrible snack-hangovers, and my wife goes to

great lengths to keep me away from them. I usually make three batches... one batch will last my family three days, the other two batches find their way to my belly over the course of a movie. Here's the recipe:

1/2 cup milk, 2 tbs. cocoa powder, dash salt, 1 stick butter, 2 cups sugar, 4 cups oatmeal, 1/2 cup peanut butter, 1 tsp. vanilla

Mix milk, cocoa, salt, butter, sugar in a pan until bubbly. Time for one minute. Take off burner, set aside; add oats, PB, and vanilla. Mix. Spoon onto wax paper or foil. Let cool if you can resist the temptation. Don't forget to pour yourself a glass of milk!

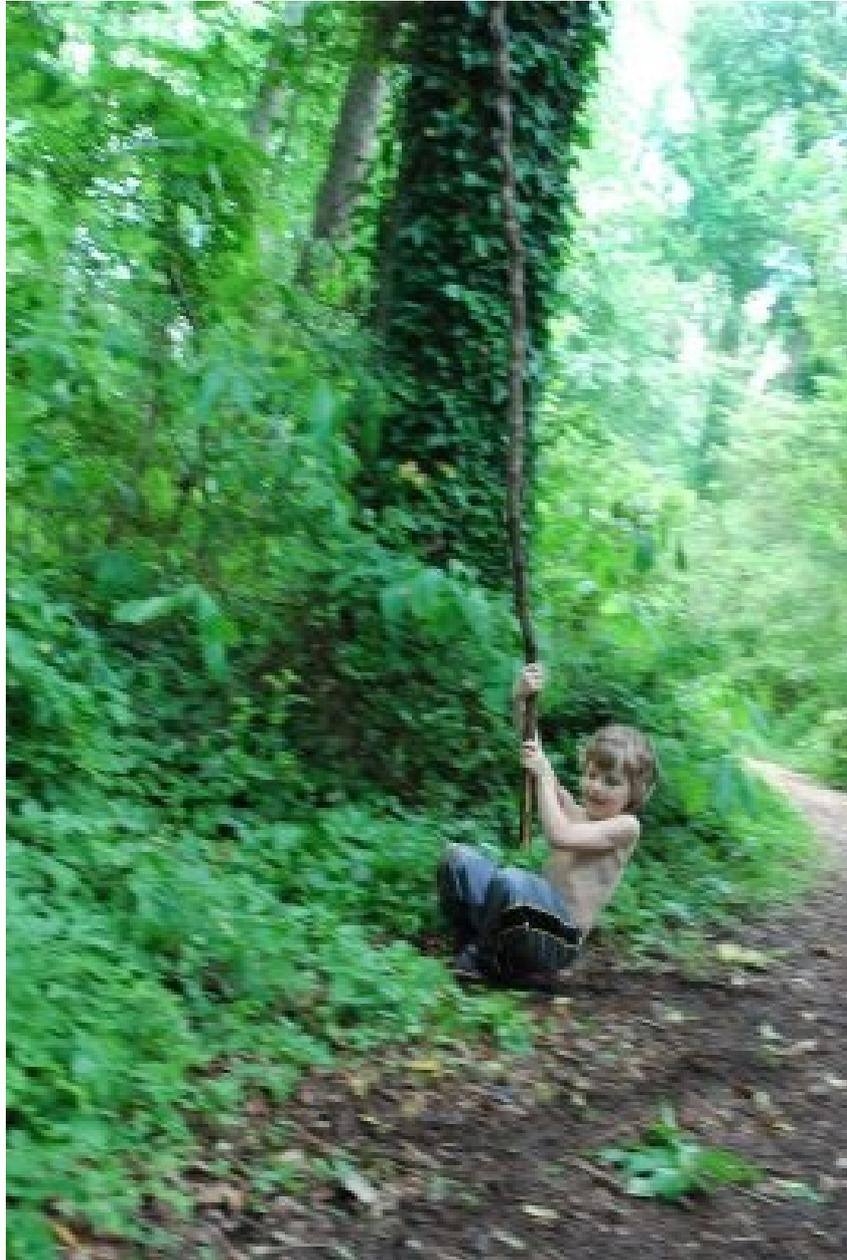
THURSDAY, MAY 7, 2009

## **April Showers, May Showers, Baby Showers**

Petra had a surprise baby shower at church two weeks ago. It hasn't stopped. Every time we go to church, or she goes to choir practice, she comes home with another gift bag. The baby is set! We are presently at Due Day + 1, with no indicators of impending birth. It's nasty outside, the kids are done with school for the year, and it's the perfect day to huddle up inside our cocoon of a place, watching movies and waiting for baby Ayla!

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 2009

## Boys in the Woods





Well, the weather cleared up enough yesterday to get the boys out again. We headed back to the woods to dig up critters and exercise and take pictures. Daddy caught a snake (go figure), Caleb caught a big 'ol frog, and Josh caught a big skink. We ran and swung on vines and ate wild plants like cave men. It really doesn't take much to pique their adventurous spirits, or mine (you got me).



SATURDAY, MAY 16, 2009

## Panama City, Panama



"Captain & coke, por favor." "Captain?" asks the bartender, puzzled. "Sí, señorita. El Capitan Morgan. Captain Morgan rum." "We do not serve that here, señor." Steve looked puzzled. Right about then, Pablo filled us in. Pablo was a Pan-American US Army paratrooper, whose unit was conducting jungle warfare training at Ft. Kobbe, here in his hometown of Panama City. He gave us a history lesson--turns out Captain Morgan was a

pretty bad dude. He and his pirates set fire to Panama City a few hundred years ago, ruthlessly killing men, women, and children. For that reason, some old-time bar owners don't carry his liquor.

The Plaza Patilla Inn is not an over-the-top classy joint. In fact, it's dwarfed by neighboring hotels, and does not offer much more than clean rooms, friendly service, and basic amenities. It is, however, situated right on the San Sebastian cape of Panama City, Panama, and is close to everything. Used to be my regular place to stay. That's me on top of the hotel in the photo above, looking down over my running route to the Canal... the long mosaic kneewall along Balboa Avenue (Pacific in the background). Right now, you can find a room at the Plaza Patilla for about \$115 / night.

American tourism in Panama has waned in recent years, due largely to American military withdraw from Ft. Kobbe and Howard AFB, and the handover of the Canal back to the Panamanian government. The height of American influence in the latter half of the 20th century was in the two years that followed *Operation Just Cause*--the 1989 US military move to oust Manuel Noriega (a corrupt dictator) from power. If you've never been to Panama City, I'll tell you what you're missing.

Panama City is one of those few places I classify according to gender. Typically, men like it and women could care less about the place. It appeals to bigtime golfers and casino gamblers. Some of the world's best sailfishing takes place here, and less-ambitious sportsmen can take advantage of the abundance of peacock bass, which were seeded in the Canal's *Lago Gatun* in the 60's. Men typically associate Panama with beautiful women--simultaneously a blessing and curse to the country, which is equally well-known for its illegal human trafficking and sexploitation. Me? I love Panama for one reason: due to their strategic maritime feature connecting two oceans, the Panamanians maintain regular--and *fast*--trade with Cuba, making Panama a portal for aficionados of the finest Cuban cigars, at half the price of those sold in other Latin nations. I'll cover tips on selecting and purchasing the right cigars in another post.

All visitors to Panama City can enjoy drinking tapwater without worry; the city boasts its

drinking water to be among the cleanest and best-tasting in the world. The US also takes pride, in having built the first-of-its-kind potable water system there in the interest of Canal workers' health. The water is drawn from an aquifer beneath the Madden Dam Reservoir on the Chagres River... whose ebbs are the result of clean, heavy rains over the Panamanian rainforest.

In the interest of would-be adventurers like myself, Panama offers a plethora of weathered nooks, caves, and thick terrain in which to get lost and explore the flora and unabashed fauna. Sloths are abundant (careful, they stink), as are different types of monkeys and oddly-marked rodents. The birds are gorgeous, as are the flowers. Dangerous animals include venomous pit vipers, jaguarundi, and Andean black bears. Never saw the latter three in any of my visits to Panama.

Finally, the beer report. When I travel, I eat and drink according to local custom & fare. The local beer of choice in Panama City is a toss-up between "Panama," and "Atlas." I like them both... I'm not really choosy. There's another one, called Balboa, but you don't see as many locals drinking it. Then again, you don't see them drink the water, either.

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 2009

## The Barbie Years

I can almost quote the movie, line-for-line. Barbie plays Rosella, friend of the animals, in *Island Princess*, my daughter's favorite Barbie movie. It's so fun watching her grow up, and I'm proud of each feminine rite of passage that she attains.



Now I'm a guy, and as such, was adamantly opposed to childhood dress-ups and tea parties. I had no freakin' clue about girly things. Our daughter is almost two, and now I'm proud to admit that I can expertly place a barrette in her hair or paint French tips on her tiny



fingernails. We dance to everything, so she takes uninhibited pleasure in cutting loose to any tune!

I love that my boys are wild, and I love that my girl is not. She shivers and cringes at the sight of bugs, toads, or anything that resembles a creepy-crawly critter. We have no clue

where it came from...it was hard-wired into her from the beginning. Who knows, maybe she'll become a Tomboy down the road. Right now, I'm basking in her Barbie years.

SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2009

## For Honor. For Chickadees.

"You'll shoot your eye out!" The phrase was immortalized by the modern holiday classic, *A Christmas Story* (1983). In the movie, Ralphie is desperately wishing for an "official Red Ryder carbine-action two-hundred-shot range-model air rifle!!!"

Well, that's what the 10-year-old kid behind me was thinking. As I handed the BB gun to the cashier at Wal-Mart, I heard him ask quietly, "Mom, is that a real shotgun?" She explained that it was not a shotgun, but a BB gun, for beginner shooters. To his follow-on request, she firmly replied "Not until you're 16." The cashier said to the boy, "You're lucky. My son won't own one until he's grown and moved away." I smiled, thanked the cashier, and walked away. The devil on my shoulder rolled his eyes at the conversation he'd just heard, and I headed home to give the air rifle to my 6-year-old. This sudden surprise would keep him from always having to borrow his older brother's (identical) gun.

So we're at grandma and grandpa's place (my parents). It's a literal fun zone for kids of all ages; nearly 7 acres right on a big lake. Huge house, hidden play rooms, lots of trees, you name it. Well, grandma loves her birds. Bluebirds, purple martins, nuthatches, whatever. For the first time, a family of chickadees has taken residence in one of the birdhouses. Their babies were just hatching, and you could hear the 'peep-peeps' as their parents took turns feeding them.

I was going over weapon safety rules with the boys, which they were not unfamiliar with. "Treat every weapon as if it were loaded..." They had just finished reciting and explaining their fifth safety rule when everybody on the porch started making a ruckuss. "Shoo! Shoo! Get outta here!" A starling was trying to force his way into the chickadee house. We'd seen their dirty nature manifested just last week, when the new hatchlings of a robin's nest

were tossed from a tree onto the sidewalk, and the nest was taken over by starlings. "Get 'em, boys!"

It was a showdown. The starlings were taking turns trying to force their way into the birdhouse. The chickadees were frantically diving into the starlings, to no avail. Along came Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickock, aka m'boys. I positioned them together at one flank, so that their BB's would not enter the hole where the babies were. They gave 'em hell with a barrage of piping-hot lead (okay, okay, I'll rephrase) ...gave 'em heck with a barrage of room-temperature copper BB's, which flew so slow you could see them impact the target. They clipped two nuisance birds and stood guard from a safe distance, ready to blast more homewreckers for the sake of the defenseless nudeked baby birds. Interestingly, as if sensing that we were on the same team, the chickadees launched their diving tactics from a perch within two feet of us, turned away from us in trust. My wife saw that and was touched.

The boys stayed there all day, watching chickadees fly in and out of the house a few times. By the end of the day, I received the full report that the chickadees had not been seen for hours. I jumped on a ladder and checked the nest...it was gruesome. Apparently, the starlings had already done their damage. To the defense of my boys, there was one unhatched egg still standing. The lone survivor. Two days past, the chickadees never returned...but I'm proud of my boys for standing up for others that were weaker than them, even if they were simply birds.

THURSDAY, MAY 21, 2009

## Our Newest Addition







As if the world really needed another princess... Our daughter Ayla Charis was born today at 12:16PM. She is a healthy, gorgeous baby. Mama checked into the hospital at 8, reached 10 cm by Noon, and pushed for less than ten minutes. That was her first "smooth" labor and delivery. Baby latched and started feeding instantly. Good sleeper. 8lbs, 2oz.

Daddy was fortunate enough to pick both the names this time. Her middle name, Charis (a Greek form of the word 'Grace') has been on my mind since I was 14, doubtless the name of another baby that I'd heard of then. Ayla, however, is the name of the heroine in one of daddy's favorite book series, 'Clan of the Cave Bear'. I hear that the movie was horrible, but the books by Jean M. Auel have been enjoyed by three generations in my family.

The kids couldn't wait to meet her. Lily especially--as the lone daughter of a stay-home mom, Lily has become quite the "mommy's little helper." She's been eagerly awaiting the birth of her baby sister, keeping one-way contact via the 'baby telephone,' aka momma's belly button. Well, I'm pooped. Giving birth is hard work for a dad (snicker). Enjoy the photos (taken over the last three days).



FRIDAY, MAY 22, 2009

## Bittersweet Times: Celebrating Life, Remembering the Fallen

Three years ago today, Cory was buried at Arlington. Allesandro was buried the following day. With little to do in this hospital room on a Memorial Day weekend, we spend time with our new baby and think on those who paid the price so we can live the life we have.

So we had our baby yesterday. By "we," of course, I mean Petra; I just watched. It was *really* hard. So we're reveling in life and in the design of our Maker, and the joys of parenting.



I woke up after an hour's sleep, with a kink in my entire body. We're crammed in this tiny hospital room in the mother-baby ward of Chateau d'If, where my ogre feet bump into everything, the TV has no volume, and the VCR doesn't play DVD's very well. At least there's a view... of bricks... thousands and thousands of bricks surrounding a pebble and tar rooftop courtyard, just like your friendly neighborhood State penitentiary (for cryin' out loud, people, plant a tree or something). The nurses generally have a short sense of humor when it comes to babies up here (I play the part of the clueless parent during one shift, the overzealous male figure during the next--it

keeps them on their toes). Anyway, Petra and I have been sharing stories of buddies past: some of them died during combat, some during mishaps and heart failures. All of them were heroes.

Some were acquaintances: **Top Ramos** who retired and died under worsening physical health conditions later... he was funny, yet feared by every new guy that checked into

252. Two gunnys went down of heart attacks--one was an old-timer loadmaster that I flew a few training sorties with (**Mangan**), the other was my chief instructor at the C-130 schoolhouse. One guy I was with in Pensacola, named **Poole**, died in a motorcycle accident. A well-liked young navigator shot himself in the parking lot of the New Bern Wal-Mart. I have single-serving memories of all these men, but remember each of their faces well.

**Scott Germosen** and his California-based KC-130 crew died when their plane crashed into a mountain in Afghanistan in January of 2002. He and I attended Naval Aircrew school together. He was also an acquaintance, but bears reverence in being counted among the first of casualties in the war on terror.

I hated Myler. Learned a lot about the word 'hate' when he died. We got in two big fights during our 24th MEU deployment on the Nassau, which both ended on a sour note. You've heard about how some guys can have a knock-down, drag-out and then become best friends? Yeah, that wasn't us. When we got back to Lejeune, he headed to California and slammed into a guardrail with his motorcycle (September 6th, 2003). Killed him. When I got word, I said, "Good. Glad he's dead." Then I read and heard about all the great things he did in his lifetime. Little things, even. Read the words of people who dearly loved him. His name was Christian. I never knew that. I simply knew him as F'ing Myler. My opinions of him began to soften and change. I can see his face in my head and imagine him being this good person now. I wish that I had never hated him. He knew that I did, and now I can't take it back.

**Kevin "Jack" Dempsey** was a great guy. Over-the-top, yet one of the nicest guys you've met. He and I went through Airborne together at Ft. Benning. Fondest memory? Taking Jack on, shot-for-shot, at an Applebees in Columbus, GA. We were sitting at the bar, grabbing a couple steaks, when Jack said, "All right, Matty..." I followed his eyes to the overhead shelf around the inside of the bar... "You wanna start on the left or the right?" We went from left to right, bottle by bottle, and the next day had to run an Army PFT for score. As we were running, Jack would slide in behind me to sucker-punch me in the kidney. Another fond memory was during 2d Recon's first Raider Night, where 20 guys took

turns punching each other in the face until one man was standing. There were 6 of us who never fell... Jack and I amongst them. Jack was into juicing up (steroids), and I covered his butt by breaking into his room and clearing it of needles, e.g., when he was in the field, to keep the 1stSgt from busting him on a random room inspection. I don't do drugs, but I won't see a buddy go down for trying to jack his muscles. It was a moral faux pas that today I'm proud of. Jack died in an An Anbar Province IED incident in November of 2004 (Nov 13th). Petra and I joke about how he still owes us a lot of money.

**Javier Obleas** died on December 1st, 2004, after sustaining wounds in An Anbar November 25th. Gunny Obleas was the quiet, reserved professional with a healthy yet subtle sense of humor. What I loved about him was his sense of selflessness and his silent "emulate me" leadership. He was the Platoon Sergeant of our sister platoon in Alpha Company, 2003-2004. My platoon, under Gunny Abel, shared an office with his platoon and Captain Lombardo. We were a pretty tight unit, albeit green (lots of young, newbie Recon men). Obleas and I swapped some gear back and forth... he was all about hooking up the platoons with gear to keep it from coming out-of-pocket. He and Abel assembled a group of guys to head up to Virginia Beach for a gear swap with one of the SEAL platoons; we got the better end of the deal, and ended up with a bunch of tactical gear that he distributed freely amongst our platoons. We miss you, Gunny.

**Cory Palmer** was one of the freshly-made Recon 'pipeliners.' Gone are the days of seasoned Marines testing their mettle for a chance at the official title "reconnaissance man." Now, boot Marines are selected and pre-screened right out of Infantry School. They go to Amphibious Recon School. SERE. Airborne. Marine Combatant Dive School. Maybe even Ranger and Sniper. Then they arrive at an actual Recon unit, and are assigned to a team. They are pipelined into Recon. When Cory arrived at 2d Recon, he and 5 others were assigned to me. Cory had spent more time on the Appalachian Trail than would-be adventurers like myself, and it was that fact which afforded him my initial respect. In a short period of time, my team spent many hours together in the bush and in the urban environment, honing skills and developing SOP's. As a Team Leader, my goal was to create 5 more Team Leaders. Cory was already an independent leader and solid asset to the Marines and the reconnaissance community. He just needed time and experience under

his belt. In the meantime, I helped him develop his own personal procedures and TL binder to aid him once he would become a Team Leader. Cory was hit by an IED near Fallujah on May 1st, 2006. He was transported to Landstuhl, Germany; then to a burn treatment center in San Antonio, TX--he died enroute, forcing an emergency landing in Nova Scotia (May 6th). I used to razz Cory about his "Got2B Glued" hair spiking glue, which he let me use once. That's all I use now.

**Allesandro Carbonaro**, aka "Car Bomb," died on May 10th at Landstuhl Medical Center as a result of injuries sustained May 1st of 2006 (along with Cory, paragraph above). Ironically, we lived in Landstuhl for a couple years when I was younger, and I used to take cookies and cards to the wounded soldiers of Desert Shield / Desert Storm. I would never have believed that my future friends would breathe their final breaths in that same hospital across the ocean. Allesandro was a junior Sergeant who was also new to Recon. When he was still proving his grit, trying to become a Recon Marine, he sought me out to tell me that I was a source of inspiration to him, having gone Recon out of the air wing of the Marine Corps. This phenomena is not just rare, it's pretty much unheard of. Allesandro, or Alex as we called him, is survived by his wife Gilda (also his mother's name). Petra's heart was broken for her friend when she heard the news. The moment that I recieved word on Alex's and Cory's deaths, I got to work on their shadow boxes. I didn't have much time to make them and travel to Arlington with Petra. I bought the red oak and glass at Home Depot (better quality of oak), the crushed blue velvet and blood stripe ribbon at a fabric store, and other essentials at Wal-Mart. The plates were made on a rush order within an hour, by a couple whose son was at that time serving in Iraq. At each location, the question "What are you making?" came up. As I gave the solemn answer each time, others in line would move aside to let me pay. And I never paid. Cashiers, locals, even the plate-makers... they each paid their respects out-of-pocket--who was I to deny them; each small gesture was a great contribution for great American men that these citizens never even knew. John Natcher drove a great distance to help me create these large displays (for a folded flag / medals), as we have done with similar projects in the past. He is a man who thrives on honor, and on the passage of tangible and intangible items between warriors. Cory was buried Monday, Alex on Tuesday. A whole row of graves had filled up between them in just a day's passage.

I'll never forget the day I got Fergal Cagney's letter. Nasty Nate ("Doc") Bernache had been shot on the battlefield, and was undergoing a difficult surgery at Bethesda to remove the bullet from between his aorta and his diaphragm. I cried like a girl in that 6 x 8 cell. Nate lived, and is doing well today. For the men of Bravo-Two "Hateful," our other short-lived, much-loved doc was not so fortunate. **Luke Milam** was very much a coolguy. He thrived in the single male lifestyle, along with other buddies like Cholo, DeWitt, and Roach. Everybody liked him. Luke was fortunate as a Columbine High School Senior to not get killed during the infamous shootings. He lost his close buddy instead. We lost our buddy Luke on September 25th, 2007, during a fight with Taliban forces in the Hemland Province of Afghanistan (near City of Musa Qula). He was among the first to join the newly-established Marine Special Operations Battalion.

If you Google "**Lion of Fallujah**," you will come across a man named **Major Douglas Zembiec**. He is the real-life modern version of General Maximus from the movie *Gladiator*. He was the officer in charge of killing me and every other student during morning PT at Recon School. We would be up at 4 AM, with the sea to our back and the sand to our flanks, and he'd spout off a motivational speech before running and swimming us to our deaths. Usually it began with a deep and somber "Good Morning, Men." He would blow the dust off of Medal of Honor citations that he'd memorized long ago, or read patriotic poetry aloud, or tell a true story of a person or group who overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We laughed the day someone mistakenly grabbed his pack, which was light as a feather (ours all had sandbags inside), but it never detracted from his sincere pride, motivation, and ability to lead men. He was a Captain then, and we called him Captain America. Not exactly an original title, I'll admit, but it should have belonged to him first, and to him alone. He volunteered to return to Iraq quickly to continue to lead men in "the war of his time," and spoke about the ferocity of his fighting men as that of lions. The title earned him the nickname, and there was word for a long time that Harrison Ford was slated to play his character in a movie about the Battle of Fallujah. Major Zembiec went out like a warrior on May 10th of 2007. He simply would have had it no other way.

There are two men whom I hold in highest regard, who were not mentioned above. The first is my grandpa, **Frank N. Speights**, a WWII / Korea / Vietnam Veteran who was laid to rest at Arlington just months before my friends started filling spaces there. He and they are all within 300-yards of each other; I would like to believe that it was by Divine design. We love and miss grandpa (Opa, to my kids), and hope to see him again someday.

The second man is **Stephen Peter Gaffney**, a very close friend. I called him Gaff. I do not have the time, nor the space, to write about him in this posting. He, along with my grandfather, was *MY* hero. Petra and I miss him dearly. As I hold my youngest child tonight, I know that she will know his stories. My great-grandchildren will know his name.

SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2009

## Jimmy John's Naked

"We'd love to see you naked," says the sign at Jimmy John's. Closer inspection reveals the continuation, in small-set type below... "but State Code requires shirt and shoes." It's one of many in-your-face signs at the hip sub joint, a wildfire franchise that boasts the "World's Greatest Gourmet Sandwiches" and "freaky fast" delivery service.

A thick stack of napkins appears on the table. The gentleman hands us a bag. "Here you go. Cookies for the kids. On the house." It's Justin Rogers, owner of a Jimmy John's here in Chesapeake. We know Justin because he's our neighbor, and the owner of a beautiful Blue Doberman, aptly named "Blue." In a flash, he's gone. My eyes catch the back of his shirt. Big words: SOUPS, SALADS, HOT SANDWICHES. All the words are crossed out, except for "SANDWICHES."

Jimmy John's has a great menu. As an amateur sub aficionado, I'd rate them as #3 out of ten establishments in the flavor factor (for 'Standard Day' / theoretically perfect vacuum sub testing, use the Italian sub), bested only by Super Subby's in Ohio and Firehouse Subs (18 States, mainly East Coast). With 690 stores open across the States (and growing), JJ's is proof positive that a good idea with a fresh spin and a little attitude is a recipe for

success.

My kid Caleb is running through the sprinkler at grandma's house. He's 6. He wants to get naked. "Go ahead," I was about to say. Mama beat me: "Nobody wants to see you naked." "Yu-huh," he replied, "Jimmy John's does!"

FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2009

## Jerald L. Jackson, the Rock of Deep Creek



[As published in the Virginian-Pilot's Chesapeake Clipper, 5/29/09]

by MJ

Not every community can boast a commonly-known local hero. The Deep Creek area of Virginia, however, is home to a man who has been publicly fostering safety and smiles for three generations of Chesapeake residents.

Every weekday morning at a quarter-past Seven, a vehicle parks at Deep Creek Central Elementary. The driver exits, adjusts his uniform, dons his hat and white gloves, then purposefully steps and assumes his post on Cedar

Road, near the intersection of Shipyard and Moses Grandy Trail. The impressive-looking man is a School Crossing Guard for the Chesapeake Police Department.

Jerald L. Jackson is a fit, middle-aged black gentleman with a commanding presence. Three times a day, he takes to the street and expertly directs traffic flow between two

schools near the busy intersection. His movements are exaggeratedly crisp and sharp; he has the ‘snap’ and ‘pop’ effect of a military drill platoon member. It is refreshing to see such pride and professionalism in one’s job, yet these traits are not what make him a micro-celebrity in these parts.

He has an aura about him--he makes it a point to smile and wave to everyone he can. Kids excitedly wave to him out the window. Men and women in business suits honk and yell cheerful greetings. Uniformed veterans sit a little taller behind the wheel when Mr. Jackson, a former Navy man, gives a slow and deliberate salute.

Yesterday I caught Mr. Jackson when he was wrapping up his morning shift. Before he could enter his car, a dusty work truck drove past and honked. Two construction workers gave him the peace sign. He smiled and waved back. “Those are my boys from Herndon Construction. I try to catch them for coffee in the mornings.”

“The morning crowd keeps me on my toes,” he continued. “I’ve got heavy traffic and busses full of kids, then there are your walkers, joggers, & bikers. I’ve got one gentleman in a wheelchair, two guys on skateboards...” Over the last thirteen years, Mr. Jackson has watched familiar faces driving their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren back and forth to school. “He’s the best--we all love him here,” said one mother of Mr. Jackson as she was walking out of the school to her car.

As I write this simple article, I think about how small of a tribute it is to a man who makes his community brighter every day. I often wonder whether he ever has a bad day, because you’d certainly never know it. My kids point and shout with the hope of his reciprocal “back-atcha” magic. Heck, I won’t lie--I do the same thing. I honestly believe that his genuine smile can warm even the most depressed passers-by, or soften the tone of a heated cell phone conversation. These days, individuals of such motivation and positive inspiration are in short supply. I truly feel that my family, and others around him, are safer and better off because of him.

Mr. Jackson resides locally. He speaks well of Virginia, and regarding Deep Creek, says, “I’ve been to New York, Chicago, L.A., and around the world. There’s no place like this. I

really love this community.” And the community loves him back.



FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2009

## Back to France... On Wheels, Baby!

Yeah, it is no more fun leaving this time than it was last time. I will, however, be taking the bike with me on the plane tomorrow. It's the least I can do. While Matt endures a partnerless 200-mile bike ride this weekend, I'll do my best to crank out enough distance to feel his pain in kilometers, so that our triathlon in MD goes smoothly and quickly (the

day after I return). Good times. Pray for my wife, who is single-handedly 'manning the line' with our troop. Viva her sanity!

SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2009

## Apes on a Plane, Flying Babies, and Infertility

I hate puddle jumpers. These days, they're cleverly disguised as "connection" flights. In other words, Joe's Aircraft Transport is contracted by a major airline, then Joe's magically does business as the "Delta Connection," or Continental Connections, or whatever. Once again, a sugar coated turd to make it easier for the general public to swallow. To me, the flights still taste like crap.

I cut my teeth on the C-130 Hercules. Although it's a literal flying pig, you can lose one of its four engines and still feel perfectly safe. As a crewman, I could set up a hammock on a long flight, or lay down on the ramp to cool down. I could do a full exercise routine in the cargo compartment... dips, squat-thrusts, pull-ups... now I'm lucky to do 'toe-ups' inside my boots. I can feel the heartbeat of the lady seated in front of me and the hot breath of the guy behind me. My ears are still ringing with the sounds of screaming baby who was seated across from me.

So I'm back to France today, currently awaiting air out of Newark. The crew looks a lot more experienced this time, with about ten fresh faces over the age of 40 and fewer pubescents than last time. Of course, they're all bigger built, so my complaints about puddle-jumping must be multiplied on their tongues.

Back to the screaming baby. She was maybe 6 months old, and unlike those air travelers that have not experienced la dolce vita of small-child parenthood, I'm very tolerant--of the baby, that is. Call it a pet peeve, but I often get annoyed at the parents of flying tots. Babies cannot valsalva (or 'clear' their sinuses) on command. During a rapid ascent or descent, adults can maneuver their inner ears, at least through swallowing, yawning, or holding their nose and blowing, to compensate for the physiological affects of altitude (increase in altitude = decrease in atmospheric pressure). Babies scream not only because

of the unfamiliar environment, but because they cannot properly relieve the buildup of pressure in sinusal air pockets in their head. Ever flown with a head cold? Scary. Solution? Have your babies, and kids for that matter, drink something during take-offs and landings. It may not always work, but most of the time, it will help equalize the pressure. Give your older kids a big wad of bubble gum to chew, which also works. For all we know these days, physical damage incurred during early (developmental) childhood flying may be a predecessor of ear, nose, and throat issues later in life.

As a closing note on the subject, larger planes and slower ascents / descents allow for better self-compensation of the sinuses, as the plane's pressurization system can more adequately equalize pressure in a timely fashion. Many of you knew this, and now more of you do.

And now, on a totally unrelated subject, another piece of medical knowledge. I just learned that infertility in women officially begins after a one-year lapse in period cycle. This period in a woman's life has no direct bearing on when menopause occurs. For post-menopausal women, any bleeding that occurs should incur a timely doctor's visit, as it may be indicative of cancer.

I sure hope we get a big, fat plane with comfortable seats...MJ out!

SUNDAY, MAY 31, 2009

## **The Flight.**

The second flight was much better. I was hoping for a big fat jumbo jet with comfortable seats and individual movie screens in the seats, and got it. Didn't turn on the screen once. Instead I was seated next to Ron Shively, the Editor-in-Chief of a travel magazine called 'Recommend' ().

As much reservation as it took to keep from talking his ear off, we talked the whole flight. We talked each other's ears off. Ron is a former Marine. We shared stories about the Corps, favorite spots around the world, and writing.

The hours that passed after landing were uneventful. I bought the wrong print-off minutes for my French cell phone, to the tune of \$40 that was non-refundable and useless to me. I swallowed a box of Good & Plenty's. Nodded off once or twice during the two-hour drive. Weather was gorgeous. Arrived back at le Relais des Sapins in sleepy St. Laurent. Embraced Christian, the hotel manager, as a long-lost friend. Checked into a front-facing room with a balcony and a 1950's black-and-white TV. Good picture, though. One wall outlet in the room--already used by the TV and the mini-fridge. Internet signal at the hotel is still weak and intermittent. Same roommate, Doug. We're both glad. Two coffee pots-a-blazin.'

Christian helped me assemble my bike and let me keep it in the wine cave. Had an evening meal of Ramen noodles, Ritz crackers, and a beer. Finished off the night with a game of Spades. Partner was straight Cherry...3 sets and we lost. I'm faithful to my partners...he'll be the smokin'gun of Spades slingers before we leave this place. Not to brag, but me & my partner held the Spades title against 49 other teams in the brig for 5 straight months... and another month separately. Okay, I know, it's bragging. But it's true. The fun part about this game was that we were playing with a French deck. The Jack was a "V," the Queen was a "D," presumably for la Dame, the King was some other letter, and the Ace was a 1. Anyway, got another game to attend to tonight... in just about an hour. Better go stretch.

MONDAY, JUNE 1, 2009

## La Loire a Velo



June 1st. This morning, I slept in. Left the balcony door (next to my bed) open all night. Felt great. Weather was perfect when I woke up. Sunny and 65 degrees all day. Beautiful night. Sun finally dropped around 11 PM.

At 11 AM-ish, I checked the air in my tires, filled my water bottle, strapped my camera to my bike, and headed out with the wind at my back and the Loire river to my right. No destination in mind. Within 20 minutes of fast riding on the Trek road bike, I had passed my furthest on-foot boundary from my last trip. Bringing the bike was an excellent decision.

From St. Laurent des Eaux, I passed through St. Laurent-Nouan and Nouan-sur-Loire. Muides-sur-Loire was a new town to me. Stopped to snap a few shots.





Lost my shirt at St. Dye-sur-Loire. One thing about this area, it's extremely bike-friendly. Between towns, there are paved bike routes that go for miles and miles along the river. Trees and flowers and plush green fields abound. I love riding through flanking tall cypresses, with rolling fields in the background and wisps of white seedheads floating everywhere through the air as if approaching General Maximus' Spanish home in the movie Gladiator. Families are out on strolls and bike rides. It's great to see, but hard on the emotions.



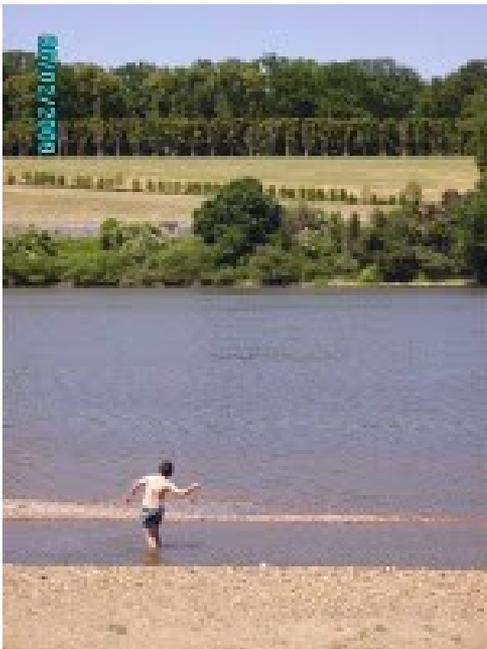
Huh, the Loire's really foamy. Wait a minute, that's not foam. White flowers! White flowers growing on reeds all over the river. Never seen anything like it! Do some push-ups. Drink water. Ride. I'm seeing kayackers, islands, and boats on one of the islands. Huh, a beach! On the island. Picked up the bike, waded across, set it down and went for a swim. Roughly 15 minutes against the current. Then sat on the shore to dry and soaked in the scenery across the water. A cathedral, a huge mansion farther down the bank, a boy skipping rocks against a backdrop of tall Pollard Willows on the far hill. About 30 miles into the ride, I hit a gravel trail. Picked up the bike and ran with it, about a mile and a half. Paved bike trail again. Camping area between the trail and the river.





LET ME PREFACE this next paragraph by saying that it is imperative that I get back into swimming shape. Matt and I are running a triathlon the day after I return. This information is paramount to justifying the following actions.

A small building on the right reads “la Piscene.” I



stop in, parking my bike alongside the others.

“Pardon, Madmoiselle--la piscine est public ou privat?” If you’re camping, the pool’s free. If not, pay a whopping \$2.50 Euros. Great! I follow her in line and lay down a 10. The guy behind the counter points to a sign. No shorts allowed. *Wait a minute.*

*I’m wearing silkies. I’d be stoned to death in the States for wearing these short shorts to a public pool.* His expression was blunt. *Who cares? No dice.*

The sign indicates Speedos. I peek around the corner at the pool, loaded with people. The pool is on the high banks of the Loire. Beautiful location.

And the guys are all in Speedos. Well, “When in

France...” *Ou cherche?* “You can’t buy them anywhere today,” he replies in French. “National holiday, nothing’s open.” He offers a pair of Speedos... they look new. I swam just over a kilometer in the 25m pool, then laid out and bronzed my buns. No, of course I didn’t. I swam my laps and hauled tail as inconspicuously as possible.



Back on the bike, I ride past a beautifully-constructed stone bridge that was extremely long. The over-water portion looks to be long removed, but the colossal supports remain upright in the water. I rode as far as Blois, then turned around and rode back against the

wind. Hadn't eaten a thing all day. I started bottoming out about five miles from the hotel. Rolled in, pounded water, ate two packs of Ramen noodles and more Ritz, then downed a big plate of Spaghetti Bolognese and a beer. Almost crashed out on the bed.

Talked to Petra on the phone twice, first for a half hour and later for an hour. She's miserable. I don't blame her. Life isn't fair to the stay-home mom, but it's a sacrifice that she believes in. I'm proud of her, she's a phenomenal mother and an even better wife. And now I'm typing this as a Word document, waiting for an internet connection tomorrow, the next day, or next week, so I can cut and paste this on my blog. Verizon wireless access does nothing for me here. Simultaneously, I'm watching the movie Ray-- my roommate watches movies to help him fall asleep. Ate a box of Whoppers and another roll of Ritz.

Tomorrow we're getting badges issued at the plant, then I'm heading to the store to pick up a phone card (can only receive calls right now) and my ration of food for the week. Might start work tomorrow afternoon, otherwise it will be the following afternoon. I work nights and have Fridays off this time. If no work tomorrow, I'm going for a run. On Friday, I ride again!



MONDAY, JUNE 1, 2009

## The Lonely Bridge to Nowhere





On my bike ride to Blois today, I was intrigued about a particular stone bridge. It had 26 arches over a field, then disappeared over the Loire. I estimate the distance of the intact portion of bridge to be 974 feet long, and the missing portion to have been roughly 800 feet. I climbed the short portion near the main highway, and the top is completely grown over with weeds. Internet and map searches have produced no pertinent results. It's impressive. I'll start bugging the locals for a history lesson.

FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 2009

## St Laurent 2: The Week in Review



It took four days before I could find a suitable Spades partner. This week's losses are devastating. We're ahead of the power curve at work though, and have begun removing the 72,000 tubes from two condensers alongside our counterparts with Endel-Suez. I like this crew a lot better than the last crew. The overall experience and maturity levels are higher amongst the men.

So far I've played a lot of cards, rode a lot of bike, pounded some dirt under my running shoes and pounded a few beers in the evening. I made a shopping trip on Tuesday to load up on cheap wine, cheese, knockwursts (snap-wursts that you generally eat raw), Belgian endive, salad dressing ingredients, oranges, UHT milk (the European standard if it's not fresh from the cow), sardines, corn flakes, banana nectar, French bread, salsifi, and butter. Bought a big glass bowl for cereal or salad.

Today was my day off. After little sleep last night, I jumped on my bike and took a right, following the Loire upstream, in the opposite direction of my previous bike adventure. Watched the sun come up around five. Saw the vendors setting up for the Friday marketplace in St. Laurent des Eaux. Passed some amazing fields of wildflowers, wheat, and barley. Rode into Beaugency, the nearest 'big' town, classified as such because it has a McDonald's. To enter the town, I crossed the landmark bridge that the local's call Devil's Bridge or Black Cat Bridge. During its construction, some unexplainable events kept occurring that slowed progress. When the bridge was finally opened for traffic, it was fabled that whoever first crossed the bridge would be cursed by the devil. A black cat was supposedly the first to cross. *Le Chat Noir*, a pub within the city, alludes to this story.

I rode to the next town enroute to Orleans / Paris, and almost got ran over by a mini electric car that apparently didn't see me and brushed me while passing (meepmeep!). The wind was kickin. I turned around in that (yawn) tumbleweed town and rode back to the hotel, stopping at the now-fully-aroused marketplace. Bought the last three avocados, two huge tomatoes, and some apricots. Rode back, crashed in bed for a few hours, woke up and heard that there was an American country band, currently touring across Europe, playing in someone's barn nearby. I jumped back on the bike and followed the rough directions, finding nothing. Another long bike ride ended on the bank of the Loire at

Muides, where a large park was filled with kids and seniors and soccer players and loverpeople.

Rode back to the hotel around 11PM, as the last streak of a bright pink sky faded with the sunset. Played spades, talked to Petra until the phone died (someone's borrowing my charger), and uploaded the photos I took today. Submitted for your pleasure.









06/06/2009



06/06/2009



MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2009

## Intermittent Internet--More Stories and Photos Soon



doesn't require Speedos. I'm done working by 10:30 PM and it's still light outside. I've inked a couple drawings for the guys... the usual... tattoos, wives, girlfriends, kids. One guy asked for a local landscape / cityscape combo. Until that request, I had underestimated his class. I finished up the Wine Cave picture and gave it to the hotel people--I'm their "favorite local artist." Working on others between bike rides and work. Internet works when it wants to. Only 4 days in the last 15 so far, and only briefly. With that, I will post this before I lose my window.

It's 4AM. I've been here 2 weeks and haven't established a normal sleep pattern. I'm homesick--I want to sleep beside my wife and roll around with my kids. I eat a lot of garlic yet still can't seem to get the taste of flashlight out of my mouth. Work is dirty and hard but requires little thinking. I watched one guy get his skull cracked and my old jokes get me nowhere these days. I jump on the bike to explore new towns at least every other day before work at 2PM. There's not a local pool that





MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2009

## Hard Work --The Great Equalizer-- Still Its Own Reward

Thursday, 18 June 2009

On this job in France, we are given a six-week window in which to finish our work. Every day, we briefly evaluate our required tasks, then attack. As a result, the job will be finished in four weeks, notwithstanding some





unexpected catastrophe. Our reward? Receive pay for the additional weeks for which we were contracted, and go home early--just in time for Independence Day.

Each project here was similar. Both times, we arrived in St. Laurent, received our badges within a few days, then got right

to work. The appropriate cooling tower (the big smokestack-looking thing) was shut down and the condenser housings were removed. These condensers have 36,000 tubes inside of them, each 70' long. We work on two condensers, or 72,000 tubes, per project.

First we'd pull plugs out of tubes that have received quick fixes over the years. We cut each tube with a penetrating cutter gun in the back water box. Then we pull the tube stubs out of the 3" thick brass sheet that holds the tubes in place. On the front side of the unit, we extract and flatten the tubes, then chop them into pieces, using a series of machines. Many stubborn tubes are simply air-hammered out from inside the unit. Then, we de-burr, clean, and serrate all of the holes. We insert shiny new tubes. We roll them until they tighten against the serrations. We flare them. We clean up. We're done.

Well, right now we're 'pushing tubes.' We're  $\frac{3}{4}$  finished, and it's the time when camaraderie is built between the companies involved in this project. Four lines of men, five men per line, moving as fast as possible without compromising the structural integrity of the tubes. Occasionally we stop and go inside the unit to stake the tubes.

I can't wait to get home, and with hard-working men to my flanks, I know that it will happen soon.

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2009

## The Ride to Blois II



About two weeks ago, I jumped on the bike and rode to Blois again. Since then I've either rode the bike or ran to nearby towns nearly every day. I waded to the same island where the boy was skipping rocks a few posts ago. I stumbled on a naked old man sunbathing

face-up. Wish I could get that picture out of my head. Rode to South Blois. The Gendarmerie (sp?) / city cops stopped me and made me put my shirt on.

I took some pictures, ate some chow that I packed, and rode back. I sketched one of the pictures back at the hotel and then passed out from fatigue.







THURSDAY, June 18, 2009

## Molasses the Hedgehog

Every evening, as my (evening) shift is leaving the plant, we see a hedgehog. He lives in a solitary, low-lying bush on a small strip of grass inside the plant. He is entrapped on one side by the perimeter fence, on another side by one of our access gates, and on two sides by a high curb from which he would fall.

I used to catch hedgehogs when I was a kid growing up in Germany. Unlike porcupines, they have no control over the release of their quills. As you approach a hedgehog, it will ball up like a roly-poly (pillbug)--size is somewhere between a grapefruit and a bowling ball. If you ever see one, you or your kids can pick them up without fear of being impaled or bitten, just keep in mind that some of them have fleas.

The plant hedgehog does not have fleas. He usually hangs out by the curb, then runs as fast as his little feet will carry him once he spies the greasy horde (us) coming toward the access gate on our way back to the hotel. He's not Sonic; he rarely makes it to his shrub before the guys are over there messing with him. No one's tried to hurt him.

Unfortunately, there is no photo to accompany this post, as cameras aren't allowed in the plant. I sneaked a camera into the plant, but was very discreet about the location and brevity of my snapshots.

FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

## My Little Lily

Lily turned two today. She is getting so big. Already potty-trained, talking well, helping her mama with baby Ayla, and wrestling with the boys as if she were their age. She breastfeeds her baby dolls. I got to talk to her today, and she kept wishing me a happy birthday. She is so cute. For me, it's hardest to be away from her, since she's at the age where she doesn't understand why I have to be away. Her tone of voice is mournful when she talks to me. I can't wait to get home and play with her! Soon.



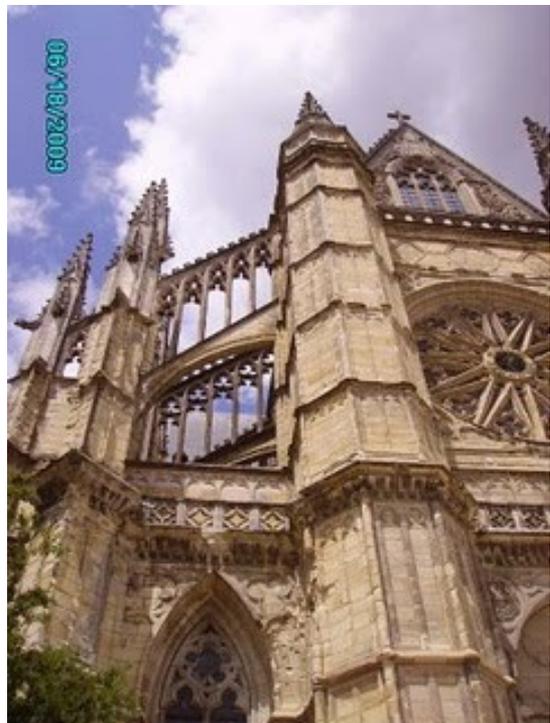
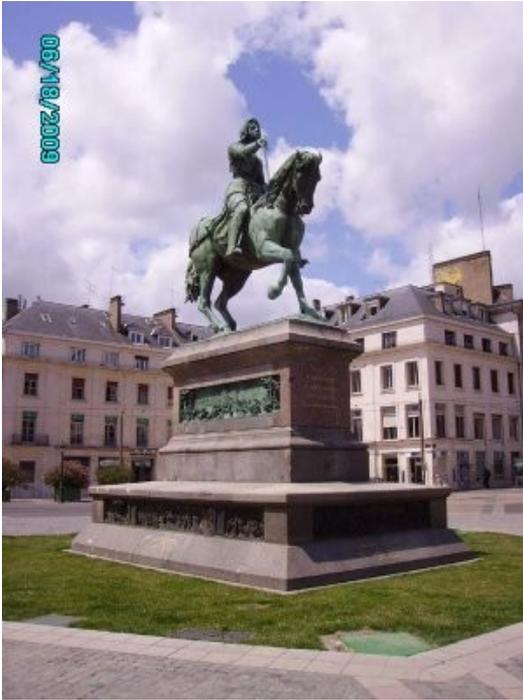
FRIDAY, 19 JUIN, 2009

## The Long Bike Ride to Orleans



I waited until about 10 AM. Some of the guys were headed to Beaugency. I hitchhiked with my bike to E. Leclerc, which is a small version of Super Wal-Mart with relatively short hours. I bought a bike lock and some--um, NOT Speedos. No, seriously--I found a municipal pool that lets guys wear spandex shorts (unlike most of the public pools around here, which require Speedos). The spandex look like tight boxer briefs. Anyway, enough visual. I rode from Beaugency through several towns and cities just to get to Orleans, which is Jean d'Arc central. Anyway, here are some pictures.









FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

## A Unique Embrace

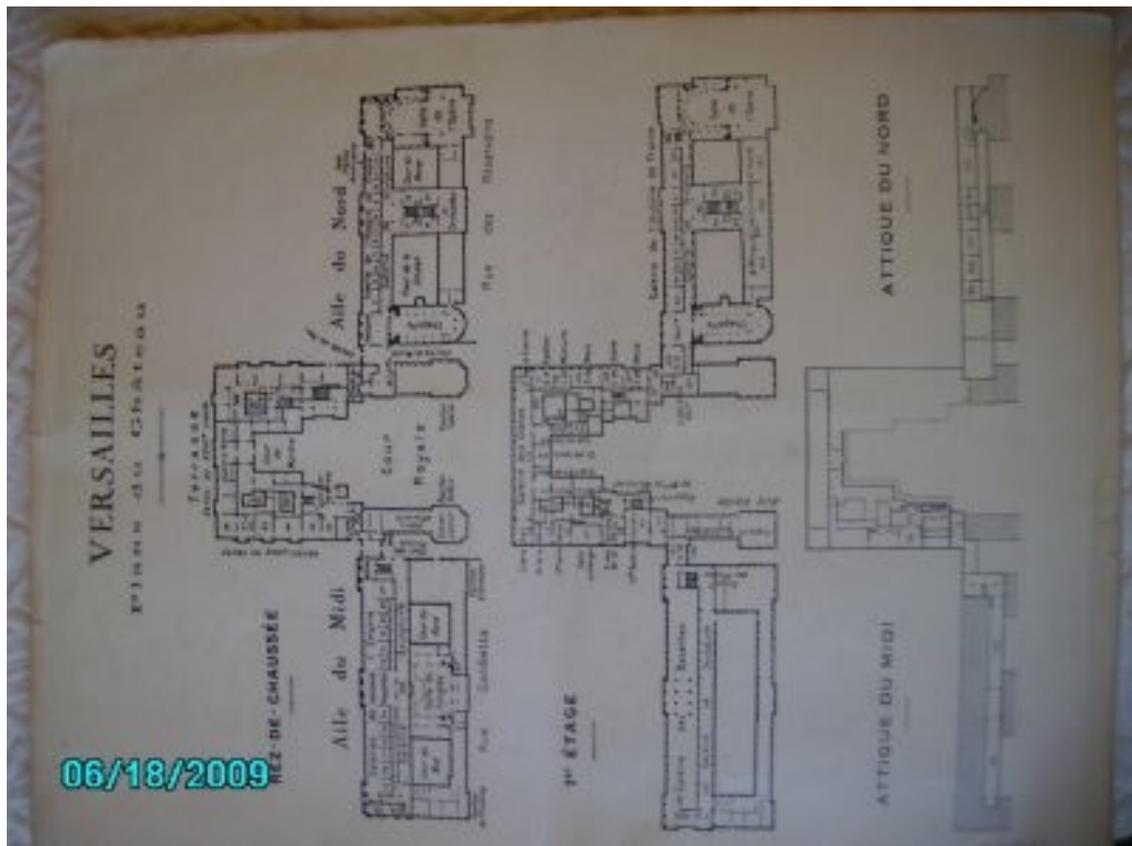
I stumbled upon these two locked in an embrace, tucked inside the front right corner of the cathedral at Orleans. The cathedral, by the way, is comparable to Notre Dame. Anyway, I'm a sucker for a passionate picture--leave it to the French (inventors of the negligee and the French kiss)... I call it 'the French hug:'



FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

## A Treasure Trove at the Friday Market

I arrived in the the center of Orleans at roughly 1 PM, parked my bike at a convenient little bike parking area, then walked the city carrying my man purse (a Marine Corps tan ammo/possibles pouch that I use as a shaving kit...these days it is strapped to the handlebars of my bike). I hit a large rotunda with a mounted Jean of Arc statue in the center. They had a Friday Market going on, with vendors set up all over. I purchased a vintage tourist booklet of Versailles Palace, which I have visited a few times in my life; I also bought a stack of European paper money ranging from WWI to WWII (war bills, including some Allied Italian Currency that is printed in the form of U.S. Dollars), a few military pins and metal trinkets, some expired business license certificates from Orleans (a cafe, a mining corporation, a tobacco shop) and this: a small, leather-bound Rosary devotional, printed in 1837 in Paris. Needless to say, some great finds.



06/18/2009



06/18/2009



FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

## Pistol Guy

Last night, I took a quiz on Facebook to see which plastic Army man I was. I was a bit upset that my answers didn't qualify me as the coveted 'Bazooka Man,' and that I was instead found best qualified to be 'Pistol Guy.' Nonetheless, I took the new title to heart, and in passing by a bric 'n' brac antique store in Orleans, I couldn't help but notice some lead soldiers in the window. I stopped in and laid down a 5 Euro bill for Pistol Guy. If that's who I'm to be, at least I won't be plastic, dang it.



TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2009

## Whiskey Nights



I get really sick of hanging out in the hotel every night. Not for any particular reason... mainly because I feel trapped here. So for several nights over the last week, I've been staying over at the rental home of some of the Endel-Suez guys, about 20 minutes from here. Patrick is my main buddy--he lives in the North of France with his wife Sylvie and his two teenage daughters. Patrick is the 47-year-old version of Ivan Drago, the Russian boxer from *Rocky IV* ("If he dies, he dies"). Patrick is actually a 25-year competitive boxing trainer at a club near his hometown.



Raphael is Italian. We talk about Eastern/Adriatic Italy a lot, probably because his whole family lives there

(near Brindisi) and I love the place to death. I get to practice my Italian with him. Then there's a Spanish guy whose name slips my mind right now, and two Arabicas--one from Morocco and one from Algeria (two other countries I've visited in the past.) One of the Arab guys is a buddy named Ben Unis. When we first had a difficult time communicating in French, I asked if he spoke any English or German. He said, "No, do you speak Arabic?" Then I said (using aggressive gun-in-hand gestures), "Sure. GET OUT OF THE CAR!!! GET ON THE GROUND!!! ARMS OUT, PALMS UP!!!" ...as best as I could remember in Arabic. The Arab workers laughed. Me and Benny hit it off.

Patrick is a whiskey monster. Jim, Jack, bourbon, scotch, and all variations in between.



He drinks bottles like I drink cups of coffee, and expects me to hang. I explain simply that I am a little girl when it comes to whiskey. Nevertheless, the whiskey flows, in the custom of manly men *tout la monde* (around the world). With his three-fingered, scarred & tattooed right hand, Patrick hands me a tall glass of what could easily be mistaken for iced tea. "*Chin chin!*" is what the toast sounds like. "*A la chien!*" is the reply. Somewhere an "*A te sante*" is spouted off.

Before you know it, we all speak the same language with no problems. We talk about wives, kids, travel, work, friendship, hardship, and life in general. I crash out at

their place. Then it's coffee and whiskey and eggs, and we're off to work. *Chin chin!*

TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2009

## The Hunting Festival at Chambord



If you scroll back through my blog a couple months, you'll find some pictures of Chambord castle. It's beautiful, it's huge, and it happens to be only 10 minutes away. Well, for the last two weeks, Chambord has hosted its annual "Fete de Chasse," or Hunting Fest. Hunters of all types assemble and hunt here for these weeks--horse-mounted, dog hunters, bow, sling, bola, spear, black powder, rifle, shotgun, pistol, and the most amazing hunter I've met yet...the guy with the golden eagle. The golden eagle guy had some photos posted outside his booth. It was dark, so my pictures weren't turning out (I've got a cheap camera with me)...but you get the idea. His eagle was attacking a fox in the picture below. Patrick and I made it to the fest on closing night... just in time to catch the fireworks at the castle, take a short video and get swarmed by what seemed like millions and millions of people for the hours that ensued. We tore into some wild boar sandwiches (fruits of the hunt) and some cold beers, sang festive songs with that same mass of people, and I even shot a video of guys playing some circular hunting trumpets. It was really cool. On the way back to their place, we stopped at their tiny town square (3AM-ish) to check out a local band playing classic American rock. Families were out there on the large dance platform, dancing with their kids and friends and other





family members. It was like a community fest at 3AM. The band played a final encore song like 20 times. Suckers. We had a blast.



TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2009

## France-Wide Music Fest



*[Excerpt from Journal--I didn't have the luxury of consistent internet connectivity in France, so I'm dumping some notes from my journal that roughly cover the events of the last week]*

France-Wide National Music Fest / Sunday, 21 June

Today began with a long bike ride and a run. I'm riding my bike and see this lady dragging a loaded trash can down an incredibly long gravel driveway (like a quarter mile). I stopped the bike and ran to help her. 70 year-old lady. Shocked her socks off. She was very appreciative. I don't know how often she has to handle that task, but it was difficult even for me. She's one tough old French lady.

I was tempted to dip into the Loire again, but Patrick told me about the river's problem with large shifting suck-holes leading to underground channels beneath the river... blamed for the deaths and disappearances of other swimmers on the Loire. Having swam some areas that I'm certain are good, I'm not particularly worried about swimming the

same areas again--but Patrick's revelation deterred me from swimming in the unfamiliar area where I was today.

The whole crew had today off, because we're waiting on the Germans to finish their Eddy-Current Test. Afterwards, we all headed to Le Colvert Bar & Tabac in the town of Ligny le Ribault. After shooting some pool and listening to Kenny Chesney, we headed back to the hotel...

Then every swinging one of us split our separate directions to check out the

region's different music festivals. Amber, the company French translator and my



occasional running partner over here, swung by to pick up myself and rastaman Chris Jones (aka Catfish). We headed to the town of Mer, to pick up Amber's friend Thomas. We all drove another 15-20 minutes to Blois. There were probably 20 different types of bands playing inside the city--jazz, rock, Spanish, you name it. Local

individuals playing guitar. Violin. Pan flute. There was a lot of singing and dancing and fighting. We ducked into a Japanese place for soup & sushi. We lost Catfish at every

reggae spot. My camera sucks in low-light conditions, so I borrowed Amber's. Got a few good pics, but most were still blurry. Should've brought a small tripod. Had a fantastic time!









## Being a Friend

Sunday, 22 June

After having lost Catfish in Blois (he warned us that it might happen) and having dropped Thomas back off in Mer, Amber confided in me on a relationship issue. We stopped and talked for a long time... I always try to find the solution but in this case, I think she just needed to be heard. I did too much talking, and feel that I failed horribly in being the friend she needed at that moment. Hindsight's 20/20. Hope it all works out the way she wants it to.

## My Little Big Men

Sunday, 22 June

After Amber dropped me back at my hotel, Petra called to have me talk with the boys. Josh, our oldest, was crying. It was atypical for him. It turns out that he was overwhelmed by the stress of being the 'big man' in my absence. I was instantly humbled, proud, and sorry. Country music has a song for that. It's called "Man of the House," and is relatively new. I felt this big. ". " I assured him that it's okay to cry, and not to worry about anything--I'd be home soon. I'm the man of the house, and I appreciate him helping Mama with his sisters and brother, but stress is not a burden that he should ever have to bear. Then I talked to Caleb, who was also crying. He was crying because he saw his brother crying, and also because no one has given him the opportunity to earn three more dollars so he could buy a Transformer toy that he's had his eye on. He felt neglected. Overlooked. I calmed him and talked to Mama afterwards. I'm so proud of those boys. Time for me to get on home.

## Misc, Gnats, Home, Decisions, Liquid Diet

Misc. / Monday, 22 June 2009

Run-swim-run today. I now know of two local pools that do not solely require Speedos for male patrons--they give you the option of less-intrusive spandex swim trunks that look like boxer-briefs. I bought a pair of those last week. Work was worky. Patrick's buddy Laurent drove down today from Patrick's home town in the North of France. They stopped by after Patrick and I got off of work (11PM), and we smoked cigars and popped the corks on two decent bottles of red. I've been buying really cheap local wines (between \$2 and \$5 USD), and haven't had a bad one yet!

A Plague of Gnats / Tuesday, 23 June

The weather here has been perfect this whole trip. The gnats think so too, and they swarm in flocks and herds, having huge gnat parties around every streetlight, shadow, bush, object, and all along my bike routes. High gnat intake is the reason for my lack of appetite at the end of a ride. They don't bite, they don't attack--they just swarm. When you drive down the street some nights, you'd swear it was snowing.

Going Home Soon / Tuesday, 23 June

Turns out we'll be heading out some time in the next week and a half... well ahead of schedule. We're all leaving at different times and on different flights. I'm falling into a PT routine finally. I take a long bike ride every morning, followed by a 12:00 swim for either 1 kilometer or 1 mile, followed by a short ride. How typical that I'd finally get into a routine right before I leave. I'm making the acquaintance of recognizable faces and my conversational French is slowly but surely improving.

A Great Decision / Wednesday, 24 June

I woke up this morning and rode W/SW to Muides, then crossed the river and headed town-by-town back into Beaugency, had an early lunch, made it back to St. Laurent's pool by 11:30, laid out in the sun, swam, and rode back to the hotel to get ready for work. How odd that my American counterparts, by-and-large, will leave this country having

never once visited the small-town dives and historical landmarks all within a few miles of their seldom-traveled 'long way' to McDonald's. I am glad I brought the bike. It's a decision I'm glad I made. There is so much to see here that is too small to be viewed from a moving vehicle, and too far of a distance to walk. The bike afforded me a unique pair of legs for this trip.

Liquid Diet / Wednesday, 24 June

I have not made it to the store in 3 days. It interferes with my PT schedule, and I know that I'm leaving soon anyway--I'll be giving my garlic cloves and onions and spices, sugar, flour, salt, and other mostly-full or unopened condiments to Manuella, the mama-in-charge at the hotel. For breakfast the last 4 days, I swallow a multivitamin with a cup of coffee and a pint of milk. For lunch, I fill my Nalgene bottle with hot tap water, drop in a large Knorr brand chicken bullion, a similar vegetable bullion, some Texas Pete, a little Maggi liquid seasoning, about a cup of olive oil, some salt, pepper, oregano, basil, and sage. I chop and drop two garlic cloves, then put the lid on and shake the crap out of it. It's really good. I eat a big dinner at the hotel, followed by ice cream and coffee. Sugar intake has been almost nil, and I think I've dropped from 218 to almost 200 since I've been out here.

## Sanitary Toilets?

You know, enough's enough. I see some people go to ridiculous lengths to keep their butt cheeks from touching a public toilet seat. Sanitary paper seat covers, toilet paper lining, sanitizer spray... If you're a man, there are issues with sitting on a toilet that are far more grave. You sit down to unload your last dinner, and unless you just took a morning swim, you have to tuck your Willie to keep from making direct urethral contact with the porcelain that dozens of other guys have just swiped since the last toilet cleaning. Can someone please design a more elongated, teardrop-shaped sanitary toilet? In this day & age, you'd think they'd have already thought of that. Communicable sexual diseases, to the best knowledge of modern medical experts, are transmitted through moist membranous contact. Guys, next time you crap in a gas station restroom, skip the sanitary liner and wear a freakin' condom.

## Grocery Shopping in France

The single-most annoying thing in France is the rear wheels on their shopping carts. They are not locked in place; they pivot/spin just like the front wheels. It is a workout to get the shopping cart around a corner without hitting the groceries on the far side. You see people with full carts crabbing back and forth in sailboat fashion. It's hilarious. On the flipside, they have a great way of keeping their carts in the corrals and not littered all over the parking lot. You have to insert a Euro coin to unlock the cart from the corral, and you get your coin back when you lock the cart back into the corral. Come to think of it, Germany has done the same thing since I was a kid, and presumably half of Europe has as well. Here's something I noticed: You know how we have cheapo value brands for different foods at the store? Cheap cereal in a color-free box, so you're not paying for the added-on costs of color printing, e.g... Well, they took it to the next level. Several of their viscous liquid condiments and food items (ketchup, mayonnaise, honey) come in waterproof, plain-jane, rugged bags made of plastic or special paper, with nozzles attached. The statement is simple: you are not being charged for fancy-looking containers or packages. Here's something cool... personal scanners. When you walk into a big grocery store, you might find a wall covered with little cell phone-sized devices. They are personal price scanners / price-totaling calculators to use for your shopping convenience. How cool is that?

MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2009

## The Journey Home

Monday, 29 June



The last four days have been a blur. The guys are leaving the job intermittently, due to the availability of return tickets (we're finished way ahead of schedule). Wednesday night I learned that I was one of three guys leaving Friday. I woke up early Thursday and drove to E. Leclerc (Super Wal-Mart?) to buy some French snack goodies to take home. I got there at 7 AM and realized they don't open until 10. I drove to the town center and parked, trying to kill time before Leclerc opened.

Watched other stores opening. Guy setting up the sidewalk in front of his store with oblong baskets of fruit--oranges, kiwis, plums, apples, berries, cherries--each in their respective basket. Lookey there... a woman escaped from the loony ward. She was 80+, and I expected to see her buns showing through the hospital-esque garb she was wearing. A little boy opens the wooden shutters that covered his window, and pokes his head out to spy the downstairs fruit basket store guy in the adjacent building. Old man reads a paper on a bench next to an abstract sculpture (Jean d'Arc statue background), his cane beside him. Looks like his morning routine. I'm thinking, Wow, what a great picture. What a time to not have my camera. You know, if I tried to read that paper in an open town square, it would be blowing all over the place. No wind on this guy though. Just the long shadows cast by a bright morning sunshine and a promising day. The headline catches my eye.

Michael Jackson...Mort...? I'm staring now, closing the distance, squinting to make sure I'm reading it right. I look around for an open store--the reason I;m burning time here in the first place. Can't I buy coffee and a paper ANYWHERE?



Okay, finally, the first of several bakeries opens. People trail in and out of it like ants for their daily bread. I go in and treat myself to a ginormous chocolate marzipan pastry (hey, I've been a good boy). I think it was sold in slices, but I bought the whole thing. Mmmm. Best sex I've had in months. The proprietor pointed me in the direction of coffee... the Tabac shop. The same one, in fact, that we usually drive past on the main road--ride beside le Chat Noir piano bar. I walk in and there's not an open space at the bar. Old guys in business suits drinking coffee as part of a morning ritual. It's the first real sign of life in Beaugency this morning. I order a big coffee and suck it out of the small shot glass in an instant. I sip the second one and pay the man, thanking him. The radio verifies Michael Jackson's death repeatedly, though I can't quite catch how he died.

I head back to Leclerc and pull a shopping cart out of the corral. I get in the store and wait with 75 other people for the gate to lift... And they're off!!! The mad dash for beer and cigarettes begins. I buy some snacky stuff and a couple French-specific toys for the kids. A Madeline book for Lily. A bottle of Paddy's Irish whiskey (the real deal!) for Matt. I left the store. Drove back and handed off the keys to someone else.

Grabbed the bike off the balcony. Patrick called. He and Laurent are stopping by the hotel to say bye...Patrick's headed home to Sylvie and his girls as we speak. They stop by and



we finish my existing bottles of Clan Campells and Paddy's. Another French hotel guest takes our picture for me. Earlier in the project, Patrick and I had exchanged contact info and swapped knives. I'll get up with him soon after I get back to the States. They took off and I yelled after

them in the fashion of Mr. Miyagi. "Banzai, Danielson! Banzai!" Then I went for my bike ride, stopped in on the St. Laurent Pompier Station (Fire Department) for a couple pictures... they gave me some patches/insignia for m'boys, and we swapped addresses.



Went for my last swim. Rode back to the hotel.

Went to work. Got off early. One last ride to Beaugency. Hung out on the bridge, watched the setting sun. I'm amazed at the number of birds that inhabit the island close to the bridge. Enough seagulls,

pigeons, and waterfowl to choke Alfred Hitchcock, flying and swimming in every direction every day. I rode back. The stadium at St. Laurent was occupied by a thousand people, who stood under the big lights on the dirt that surrounds the field. There were 20 different bocce tournaments going on at once. It was cool. I reached the hotel, broke down the bike and stuffed it back into the long box I picked up from All About Bikes before I left the States, packed my suitcase, shook hands with my roommate Doug before he took an assisted drift into sleepyland, walked downstairs, set down my crap, sat on the couch, finished my last bottle of wine and waited for the 3AM shuttle to Paris, courtesy of Joe Rinaldi. I busted out my last drawing, the side view of the cathedral at Orleans, for Sean, per his request earlier in the week. I like giving artwork away. It makes it more intrinsically valuable, and it can't just be obtained by anybody that way.

3 AM. We drive to Paris. 5:15 we arrive in Paris. The airport is dead. Can't find the Continental check-in. Find the hidden bastard. Crash out there with my traveling buddy Dadrian Hall. A guy walks up and leaves his suitcase with us. He walks away for an hour. I was too lazy or apathetic to give it much thought. A nice-looking family with three small girls is traveling home to Bogota, Columbia. They wait with us. 7:30 AM, the rest of the airport springs to life. Our desk takes another hour. I pay \$50 (36 Euros) for my barely overweight bag, but I refuse to take anything out, including the legibly-stamped brick I grabbed from the fireplace in the rubble of a deteriorating 14th-century castle home.





I head to the gate. Buy Petra some Yves-St. Laurent Printemps (Spring) perfume from the duty-free store, the budgetary alternative to her usual handbag / jewelry / fashion accoutrement gifts. I'm embarrassingly perfume-savvy, and know what scent Petra would appreciate. I was specifically looking for something French (albeit internationally available), that was also popular in France, and that was not l'eau d'Issey (her normal scent--and consequently my favorite). I thought it was a nice twist that our town was also named St. Laurent.

The flight was good. Chatted it up with a real-deal Special Forces officer Vietnam veteran, who was an advisor to an ARVN Ranger battalion. By far, the single-most pleasurable Vietnam experience that has ever passed through these ears. I felt like I was there. Being a Green Beret, he had also attended Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA, for Vietnamese. He was chatting it up with our stewardess, a woman who also recognized me from my flight over to France in May. She is a bigger-built but not unattractive woman with high cheek bones and a New Yorker's accent, who looks like a cross between a Samoan and a Navaho. "Are you Hawaiian?" I asked during our first flight. "No," she said, "but if you can guess where I'm from, I'll buy your next drink." "You're Vietnamese. Make it a vodka. Olive if you've got it." "Wow, I'm impressed! Most people don't get that." "So, double or nothing if I guess your last name?" "Sure." *I've got a 50/50*

*chance*. “Nguyen?” “You are good. Double of vodka coming right up.” So me and Vietnam Jeffrey are chatting it up a month later. She recognizes me (“Hey, Dinky Dao! [sp?]) and asks if I’d like some wine. She gives me several small bottles. Jeffrey chats it up with her in her native tongue. He’s loaded down with wine too. I never did get her contact info. The guy to my left finally spoke up 6 hours into the flight. Told me we had some fascinating stories. He’s a war game developer. Tells the story of his dad in WWII in Italy. I was deeply moved by his demeanor and his sincerity. I dug up the 50 Lire Allied War Currency Note (printed similar to a dollar bill... cool looking) that I picked up in Orleans at the market. Gave it to him in return for an email detailing his father’s experiences. A bill like that was probably exchanged through his dad’s hands long ago.

Laid over in Joisey (Newark). Gate changed 5 times! My little French/Columbian family had some trooper girls. Talked to dad in French, explained that I also had small children at home, and I know that they’ve got a long way to go. Offered up a big sealed pack of kinderschokolade, which he gratefully accepted. His girls’ eyes lit up. Finally made it out of there. Talked to an F-18 driver hot off the Ike, getting ready to PCS with his family. We swapped KC-130 refueling stories and ground fire mission stories from both perspectives. Finally made it home Saturday night. Pet and the kids didn’t recognize me walking up to them; I was clean-shaven and had my hat on backwards. Went home and dished out goodies to everybody, in the grand tradition of traveling parents everywhere. Glad to be home. Feels like heaven.





SATURDAY, JULY 4, 2009

## Bowling, Beach, Busch Gardens: The Week in Review





Been back home one week now. By and large, I have isolated myself with my family, which in my opinion is absolutely necessary after a long trip. Saturday night was the much-anticipated gift giving, where daddy (c'est moi) drags out the process of cleaning up and drinking coffee before busting open a suitcase full of goodies. I can relate to the kids' excitement because my

dad always used to do the same thing when he'd travel for business.



Last Sunday, we visited Newport News City Center as a family, ate

at a Mexican restaurant there, and had coffee at a place called Aroma's. They had some live jazz entertainment that made the place feel really inviting.



Petra and I both loved their coffee--cappuccino for her, naked Columbian for me. Really good.

Monday morning, I tried





to take a bike ride to Chesapeake (we live in Suffolk now). Popped a tire on 58. Walked back some of the way. Petra picked me up. Dropped the bike off at Bike West for new tires, new tubes, cable tune-up and a handle re-wrap. Spent some time outside with the kids the rest of the day.

Tuesday through Thursday, I ran 4.5 miles each morning. Spent much of each day outside with the kids in a big inflatable pool. Our butts are all getting whiter, so the rest of our bodies must be getting some sun. The boys are so much fun. They're at a great age to do stuff with. Lily is also an absolute joy, and baby Ayla is just starting to pick up a personality. She's smiling and laughing!

Wednesday morning, we went to Busch Gardens. It seems to get more expensive and less appealing each time. Nonetheless, Petra got to go on her ride, the sheer-plunge roller coaster named "Griffon." She talked me into riding it when she was done. We ate at the German fest hall, very similar to a true Munchen festhalle during Oktoberfest. Lily walked around--not with a monstrous grape ape, but with a small plush banana consolation prize that clearly states *my dad can't throw rings on a bottle to save his life*. We watched fireworks from the parking lot.







Thursday was nephew Connor's sixth birthday. We all went bowling for three or four games. I bowled a 184! It was an unexpectedly cool feeling for such an uncool sport. Josh was bowling well enough to not even need the gutter-bumper guard-things, Caleb got two strikes in a row one game, and Petra--like me--kept getting robbed by 1 pin each time her ball hit the strike 'sweet spot.' Lily bowled about five times, then got moody and uninterested. She hung back and guarded the pizza, drinking a little of each person's Coke until we caught her.





Friday we were outside all day. At 3PM I went to the Autumn Care nursing home to help Aunt Norma ready her finished children's book for the publisher. I think she's got a really cute book in the making. I return on Tuesday or Wednesday with some sketches. While I was there, I met some very interesting ladies, whom I will write about in greater detail after this post.

On Friday night, Petra and I got into a fight. I left the house and went to a great BBQ joint, then went to play some pool at AJ Gator's. Petra and I were both being stubborn, and I wasn't giving in. I drove home at 3AM, jumped on my bike, rode to Wal Mart in Suffolk with no specific game plan, then rode to Virginia Beach to watch a 4th of July sunrise near 17th Street. I called Petra for an invite to share a beautiful sunrise and possibly breakfast. After a splash in and out of the temperate water, I crashed out at the beach. Petra picked me up. We made up. We skipped a sexy breakfast for McDonald's, so we could get home... if you know what I mean.

We watched fireworks in Suffolk at the Hilton Garden Inn. Live music, ice cream, and I let the boys ride in the back of the truck across town, to and from the Hilton. State law says 16 is the magic age. I believe that in a small town on the 4th of July, that law must be challenged. The cops directing traffic didn't seem to mind.

Yesterday (Sunday), we heard a great message at church on marriage. Afterwards, we went to Olive Garden, referred to in our family simply as O.G. Baby screamed (hey, it's cold in there). I took her outside. She calmed down. Back inside. Tried everything. Petra took her out to the car to nurse. The rest of us finished our salad and breadsticks, then took our meals to go (along with extra garlic, extra breadsticks, 'fredo sauce, and a bottle of house [Principato] red wine. Petra snacked on breadsticks on the way to Rita's. We all had different flavors. Then we went to the movies to see Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs.

We loved it. Drove to Wal-Mart. Went grocery shopping. Drove home and nuked our OG dinner. Baby screamed. Verdict? Ayla hates Olive Garden.



SATURDAY, JULY 4, 2009

## A Beautiful Girl

Sorry, just had to share these photos of Lily. They're gorgeous.







SUNDAY, JULY 5, 2009

## Fifty-Nine-and-a-Half Years

Do you know where the greatest potential can be found on this earth? In graveyards around the world. The graves contain more wasted potential in the stories and ideas and inventions and devices that were never recorded, materialized, or acted upon before death. This was the topic preached by an evangelist that fell once upon the ears of my new friend Mable. She passed it on to me.

At the Autumn Care assisted living facility in Suffolk, Virginia, there is an 88-year-old woman named Mable Arnold. She is a widowed mother of nine (surviving) children, and has been a resident of Autumn Care for five years. Mable still has her own teeth and her mind is sharp as a tack. She is an intriguing conversationalist with a great smile and a great attitude. On Friday evening, we shared stories and laughs and kept her roommate awake for a good while.

Mable was a source of inspiration for Aunt Norma's book. She herself is a published author, and was kind enough to give me a signed copy of her book, entitled *God Still Speaks*. The book is a collection of inspirational short stories from her life. Besides being a writer, she is an amazing artist. At the nursing home, she paints beautiful winter scenes inspired from memories of her home States of Michigan and Montana. She is also an avid photographer, and she showed me close-up photos of several ladies' feet. "The shoes," she said. "I'm making a game for the next Autumn Care party...match the shoes with their owner." She showed me some paintings that her son made as well: his trademark Praying Mantis teaching a bunch of other bugs to dance. Really good folk art--*tres symp*.

Mrs. Mable was born on an Indian reservation along with her sibling [brother?], and was later taken to an orphanage. It was there that she met Babe Ruth. He visited the orphanage and gave each child a bat, ball, glove, and a shiny new dime. He played ball with the boys and also with the girls. She was the sole recipient of the Babe's friendly touch before he left (he patted her on the head). She believes it was because she stood out with her white-blond hair.

The singlemost inspiring story that Mable shared with me was that of her marriage, shortly after we made acquaintance. She was married to a wonderful man--who always kept her smiling and laughing--for 59 and a half years. "Wow, fifty-nine years," I responded. "And a half," she corrected. As the stories flowed and introductions were made between her friends and myself, I was hung up on that "half."

From what little I know of women, I do know that certain instances in life are very special and important to them. More so, it seems, than to men. For instance, the time of physical changes that occur in a girl's transition to womanhood is revered as special. Fabulous weddings are pre-planned in great detail in the minds of adolescent girls. The wedding day is also a red-letter occasion in a woman's life.

I am not a woman, and I certainly can't say I can relate to her, but I know how badly Mable Arnold wanted that 60th wedding anniversary. She and her hubby almost made it before the Lord took him home. That was why the 'half' was so important. To be with someone for 60 years (59 1/2)... wow. WOW. Many are fortunate simply to live that long. She shared her love with him for a lifetime.

Later in the evening, I met Mrs. Arnold's best friend at Autumn Care, a Mrs. Carolyn Asimos. Carolyn, whose family name is of Greek origin, is a 94-year-old North Carolina girl who was the longtime co-proprietor (along with her husband) of the Ritz diner in downtown Suffolk. "It's located right off Godwin Blvd... Mills Godwin was the only governor in Virginia to be elected for two non-consecutive terms..." She also has her own (natural) teeth. The two became friends when Carolyn's grandson checked her in at their Autumn Care home two years ago. Her grandson ran into his lifelong best friend there, who happened to be visiting his own grandmother, Mable. The two became best friends just as their grandsons were best friends.

Carolyn has several claims to fame. She worked for years in a hosiery factory, and boasts having owned one of the first pair of nylons ever. "The needles they had on those looms, they were something else," she said in her deep Southern accent. She looked as if she was

going to continue, then closed her mouth with a half smile and a look of reminiscence that turned right to me. Her expression--not at all smug or unpleasant--revealed plainly that I could not possibly understand nor appreciate the quality and complexity of such fine precision instruments.

Carolyn talked about the amazing changes in generations that they have witnessed. She was three years old when the Great War ended in 1918. She remembers that every year, on November 11th, on the 11th hour (11 AM), our countrymen would blow whistles to celebrate the Armistice. Everybody would stop what they were doing and join in. The holiday, hailed as Remembrance Day in some other parts of the world, is what we know today as Veterans' Day, which is nowadays celebrated with mattress sales and end-of-summer keg parties.

There were changes in dance, from the Charleston of the 20's to the freestyle moves today that one may view on the *So You Think You Can Dance* TV show. She and Mable talked about the dramatic changes in Catholicism in the United States. For a long time, it was a faux pas for pregnant women to allow their bellies to show. The married women at the hosiery factory would simply start wearing an apron when they would each become pregnant. Then they would kind of disappear from work and from the public eye, only to reappear after their children were in toddler phase. "These days, they have baby showers and celebrations." It was not an accusation, simply an indifferent observation of changing times.

"This generation would walk over a penny," began Carolyn on her next topic. "It's not that people who pick up pennies are poor and need the money, but there's something special and respectful about it. Finding pennies is like magic; they're lucky. My great-granddaughter would take walks in the park with me. 'Grandma, find a penny!' she'd say. And somehow, I would! It was very much like magic, and I was always lucky. These days, people are too fast and busy to even pick up a penny that's right in front of them, let alone go try an' find one."

Mable interjected. She had run either a seamstress or embroidery operation with her

daughter back in the day. Back then, gentlemen always kept their change in their right-hand pockets. She and her daughter would always check the right side cushions of the seating furniture (couches, chairs, e.g.) for loose change... they saved their findings in a big jar and would empty it every month. It was their "going out" money.

Before I left, the ladies told me that some famous individuals walked the halls with them at this particular home. A sometimes character on *Our Gang / Little Rascals* had a room down the hall. "She was the portly one," recalled Carolyn. I caught tidbits of the details of this and other stories before promising to return on either Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon for part II. This time I'll come armed with a digital voice recorder. As I was leaving, I offhandedly mentioned aloud that I could hardly hear a thing they said because Mable's roommate was so loud. The roommate, another ninety-something who had pretended to be asleep during my visit, piped up for the first time. "I haven't said a word the whole night!" She said it with a chuckle, and we all laughed. She introduced herself as Elsie Wiltshire and bid me farewell along with Carolyn and Mable. I went home and read Mable's book cover to cover.

MONDAY, JULY 6, 2009

## A Few Good Songs

Hey all--

I've got a few songs to add to the wierd music meter. Two are in French (go figure), but they're good. Check the official videos on YouTube; get the MP3's from [legalsounds.com](http://legalsounds.com) (I don't think itunes has them). Later.

Song Title: By: Genre:

1. Meme pas Fatigue -- Magic System Running
2. Tous les Memes -- La Fouine Thinking
3. Let's Get Excited -- Alesha Dixon Spinning

TUESDAY, JULY 7, 2009

## Two Random Paintings



The above picture is a large acrylic that I painted early in the 90's.



I painted this one two years ago, after nearly destroying the 2" x 2" photo negative of the scene.

SUNDAY, JULY 12, 2009

## Nice Tri



On Friday morning, Matt & I headed up to Perryville, MD, for our first triathlon, "Diamond in the Rough." Along the way, we hammered out this weekend's USA Today crossword, all except for a three-letter word for "muffin holder." It was an ego crusher. We stopped in Newark, DE to check into our hotel, Embassy Suites. Drove to Hoolihan's or Hooligan's or Hannafin's or something like that for loaded potato skins and a beer or two. Went to Dick's sporting goods so I could get some goggles. Went to check out the



start location for the course--some State Park located behind the firehouse in Perryville. Linked up with Matt's old buddies, Carl & Jon, along with their families. Carl and John were also competing.

We went back to the hotel around 5:30 for Happy Hour--free drinks for 2 hours... an Embassy Suites perk--left to go find a movie theater. Found out there was no movie theater located in the region. Went to Home



Depot so I could buy parts for a more suitable Jerry rig system for keeping my bike seat up and in place (the bike frame cracked last week, right at the point where the frame accepts the bike seat shaft). Headed back to the hotel where Matt ordered TGIF chow (Friday's is attached to the hotel). We snacked and watched Fool's Gold on HBO. Went to bed early. Race starts next day (Sat 11 Jul) at 0800.

5:30 wake-up call. Coffee. Fruit. Bagels. Bathroom. Check-out at 6:10. Drive to the

park, 20 minutes. Pump tires, grab gear, stand in line for our packets, get body marked and banded, stage bikes. Mandatory safety brief. Bathroom. Don swim caps and goggles. Get in the water. Tread. Wait for the gun... "5 minutes," "1 minute," "5...4...3...2...1...Go!" Swam. Easy day. Got on the bike. Steep hill. Another steep hill. And another. What the?! Okay, pretty much nothing but hills. Unevenly proportioned bike course. Lots of hills at the beginning, flat for the second half, except for a steep grade mile-and-a-half climb ten miles from the finish.

Run was good. Got finished not long before Matt, and was able to take a water-bottle shower, discreetly strip, and get dressed in clean clothes. Took pictures of Matt coming through the finish line, and later Carl. Jon didn't make it past the swim; he got pummeled pretty badly by other swimmers.

All in all, good race. Nice shirt. Small medal. Great weather. Ride home? Good. 2nd crossword? Sucked. Burger King... didn't suck. We're planning out our forthcoming races... looks like Virginia Beach Sandman (sprint triathlon) is next.



## Allen Stone Braveheart Run-Swim-Run



**ALLEN  
STONE  
MEMORIAL**

**“BRAVE HEARTS”  
RUN-SWIM-RUN & 5K EVENT  
1 MILE KID’S RUN**  
July 18, 2009 at 7:30am  
Neptune’s Park-31st St at the Va Beach Hilton

 1999  
Allen Stone   
2000  
Shawn Mustard, Brad Tucker, Chad Burkhart,  
Michael Beardon, Terrell Walker, Brad O’Neil, Eric Hill  
2001  
Rock Blais, Scott Danielson, John Skope, Jerry Pope  
2002  
Neil Roberts, Matthew Bourgeois, Peter Oswald  
2003  
Thomas Retzer, David Trapper, Mario Maestas  
2004  
Brian Ouellette  
2005  
Matthew Axelson, Danny Dietz, Jacques Fontan, Daniel Healy,  
Erik Kristensen, Jeffery Lucas, Michael McGreevy, Michael Murphy,  
Shane Patton, James Suh, Jeffrey Taylor  
2006  
Marc Lee, Michael Monsoor  
2007  
Joseph Schwedler, Jason Lewis, Mark Carter,  
Robert McRill, Steven Daugherty  
2008  
Ghane Shapoor, Nathan Hardy, Michael Koch, Thomas Valentine,  
Lance Vaccaro, Luis Souffront, Joshua Harris,  
Jason Frewald, John Marcum  
2009  
John Kainer, Sean Flynn, Tyler Trahan, Eric Shellenberger

Last Saturday, July 18th, Matt & I ran the Allen Stone Braveheart Run-Swim-Run in Virginia Beach. Matt hooked up our VIP wheels on the Blackhawk bus, which parked directly on the Start/Finish line next to the King Neptune statue on the boardwalk. The bus was loaded with ice cold beer and had a clean toilet. The race is still in its infancy, but with 600 registrants this year (roughly twice the amount from last year), an all-star location, a great cause and a good vibe, it is sure to blow up. The swim was the butt-kicker in this race. Took forever just to swim a kilometer. There had to have been a cross current. Anyway, all in all, good race! Will definitely do again next year.



## Sunday on the Outer Banks







Sunday the 19th, after a good message at church on dealing with temptation, we headed off to the Outer Banks. It's odd that for the years we have lived here now, we've never

made the trip, even when we (at one point) lived a whopping 40 minutes away.

On the way down we stopped at Powell's Market, one of several large roadside purveyors of fresh produce and packaged local fare. We grabbed some bottles of pop and a bag of peaches.

Caleb saw the home of his favorite monster truck, Grave Digger, from a mile away. He's loved that truck since his first monster truck rally at the Hampton Coliseum when he was two. Of course we stopped and took lots of pictures.

We stopped at Kittyhawk for information. Saw the Wright Brothers memorial. Stopped for chow at Mulligan's. Drove through Nags Head, Rodanthe, Cape Hatteras National Seashore. I ate the Hatteras lighthouse. We drove back, spent some time walking the dunes and taking pics, enjoyed a sunset and drove back home. It was really nice.

## Moments in Rodanthe

It's really cool to visit any small town that has a small town claim to fame. Rodanthe is the title town in one of Nicholas Sparks' recent books-gone-movie, *Nights in Rodanthe*, with Richard Gere and Diane Lane. If you stop in at the town's lone gas station, you'll see a small shrine to the movie, including a pair of Rodanthe's movie theatre ticket stubs to its own movie. While you're there, pick up a souvenir map that pinpoints hundreds and hundreds of shipwreck locations along the Virginia / Carolina coast, or a \$40 fossil shark tooth as big as your outstretched hand. Surfers seem to gravitate here, as do fishermen to the big pier. There is a locally famous rescue station located here called "Chicamacomico." Otherwise, there is little else to do or see here, which makes for very pure experiences in surfing, fishing, and chillaxin on the beach.







SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2009

## DC Day Trip vs. Fishing at Home

Petra's folks are in town for the weekend, and we did an out & back DC trip on Friday. We actually drove up Thursday night, stayed at a hotel, and played around Friday. Picked up some great skewered edibles at Kabob Palace in Crystal City on Thursday night, and we made the usual stressful run around the mall all day Friday. Came back Friday night. Saturday I covered a French breakfast, a German lunch, and a recently-acquired Asian cucumber salad accoutrement to a classic American grill-out dinner.



Hung out in the neighbors' big pool, then drowned worms in the lake with my Papa-in-Law Istvan, aka "Apu." The photos will always be better in D.C. Chilling at home, though, will always be better than a trip to any city in my book.





## Mud Run



Matt & I finishing the mud run @ Little Creek this last weekend. More sand, more mud, warm ocean, cold beer, good race.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 13, 2009

## Yesterday at Work



All day yesterday, Larry & I sweated our butts off with our shirts off doing a remodel job. At 3:30 PM, rain came out of nowhere and dumped on the area (ruining our just-poured concrete slab porch). We waited out the storm for hours--the heavy rains got heavier. We packed up all our tools and dodged lightning bolts on our way out of the neighborhood.



Here are three pictures of the flooded streets on the way out. Had to swim under the guy's car to find a tow cable anchor point, later to find that the plastic car was floating on its inflated tires. I pulled it by hand and it floated through the water like a rowboat.



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2009

## Caught in the Stirrup

In a challenging attempt to get back in the saddle of writing, I find myself trailing a whirlwind of stories and tidbits that might've made excellent blog postings when they were fresh in my head. A victim of life--and a wonderful one [life] at that--I am required at times to buckle down and work for a living, as writing is a hobby for me and precious few hobbies pay the bills. Alas, I'm back, writing nothing of grave importance or interest to no one in particular, and it feels great. I'm dragging behind my thoroughbred with my foot caught in the stirrup, in the fashion of a classic Western film stunt man. So in short-burst opportune moments over the forthcoming weeks, I'll pull out my Pecos Bill and see if I can't lasso me a few of those stories before they're lost to the whispering wind, and I've got nothing left to talk about but the cactus quills on my hindparts.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

## Darth Vader's Mom

It's my trump card when playing with kids. You wanna play Barbie dolls? No problem. I'm Barbie's evil stepmother or her rabid pet llama. I'm Bubba Smurf. Or in the case of my own boys, depending on which tupperware bin full of overpriced, easily-broken toys we dump out onto the floor, I'm either the mother of uber-Transformer Optimus Prime, or of Darth Vader. At first, I was playfully admonished: "Darth Vader doesn't have a mom!" "Sure he does. Why else do you think he likes macaroni & cheese so much?" "How do you know he eats mac & cheese?" "His mom told me."

The boys get their laughs in when I start making the labored Darth Vader breathing sounds that gradually intensify whenever Darth takes out the trash or performs some difficult chore around his house. Darth's mother is Jewish, and has a voice akin to Fran Drescher. I re-enacted the "Darth... I'm your mother" scene to which Vader replies, NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! You're not my mother... That's impossible!" Then she cuts his arms off. My boys know that the reason Darth Vader wears a helmet is because it was the

only way his mom could get him to stop picking his nose.

Bottom line, ladies & gentlemen, is that when you're invited to make-believe with your kids, be the mom. You can't go wrong.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

## Growing Up Illegal

The following was initially drafted as an AP Press Release. I was kept from sending the story because "it lacked fizz." I thought it was a great ice breaker for a potentially huge story with national appeal.

Sven Kasaroczky is a seventeen-year-old high school senior in Dayton, Ohio. For many of us, that pivotal age was accompanied by a slew of 'firsts.' First job, first bank account, first car--possibly our first relationship... these were the glory days that Springsteen sang about. Sven, however, sings a different tune. Due to an INS error that occurred when he was only ten years old, Sven did not receive a green card when his parents did. Without a lawful immigrant status, one cannot obtain a Social Security Number--making it impossible to legally drive, work, or open a bank account in this country. Without a Social Security Number, Sven will not be allowed to graduate with his class, and he will ultimately be torn from his family and deported to a country he's never known.

Istvan and Maria Kasaroczky immigrated to the U.S. from Germany in 2002, along with their son, Sven. They left nothing behind except their oldest daughter, Timea. At that time, their younger daughter Petra was a naturalized citizen who had been living in the States for six years, married to a U.S. Marine. Petra was expecting a second son. "We moved so that we could be closer to our grandchildren," says Istvan.

The Kasaroczky's know hardship and pain. Under extreme duress, for the good of their daughters, Istvan and Maria sneaked out of their native country, Hungary, while it was

under communist rule in the 80's. They stayed briefly in Italy, then moved to the greener grasses of Germany for greater work opportunity. Istvan struggled as a typesetter for a printing press, and the family was forced to learn a new language and a new culture. Sven was born in Germany in 1992, but is a Citizen of Hungary--a country in which he has never lived. After sixteen years of economic hardship in Germany, Istvan and Maria packed all of their belongings, and moved to the United States.

Their first few years here were difficult. Maria recalls the countless times that she questioned their decision to leave Germany. Work was scarce in the printing and lithography field. Istvan was forced to take any type of work he could get. Meanwhile, the status of Sven's case with the INS was in limbo. The local elementary school system conditionally enrolled him. Before long, Sven was getting beat up on the school bus to the tune of "Go home, Nazi!"

In the classic American style of our off-the-boat ancestors, the family rebounded, flourished and staked a claim. Istvan, now 59, runs a finish carpentry business called Old World Handyman. They own a new 2-story home in a modern suburban Ohio neighborhood. They've got a big yard, a shed full of tools, and a full complement of diverse neighbors; the friendly, the reclusive, and the wierd. Maria, 57, drives her own car--an automatic at that--a luxury that she did not have in Europe, especially when weighing the economical availability of public transit against a \$2000 driver's license fee. They live in a small town with a big Wal-Mart. Life is good.

But alas, there's still the issue with Sven. After seven years' worth of sent letters, phone calls, physical appearances, church action, and even congressional interdiction, the INS has not issued one single notice of resolution. Most adults nearing retirement age would agree that raising a teenager these days is no easy task. Girl issues. Texting. MySpace. Now add to those stressors the worry of your son's imminent deportation. He is becoming a man, and is not able to do anything that a man needs to do as he enters the world of adulthood. What's worse, Sven has no familial support overseas.

Sven is an All-American Kid. He gained acceptance. Sleepovers. Drive-ins. Taco Bell. He played football in high school. He speaks English without an accent; in fact, it's the only language he knows at better than a ten-year-old level. He's a guitarist in a rock band. In school and in life, Sven goes by his middle name, David (Dave).

The problem began when a worker at the Indianapolis INS office made Sven's parents file his visa application separately, under "student" status. This was witnessed by several American members of the family. His application was declined because Sven did not meet the eligibility criteria of a "student" for immigration purposes. His parents were told that they were simply supposed to file him as their lawful dependent on their own original applications. The INS admits no fault, yet has failed to offer a solution or even a hint of assistance. The only common answer to his parents' questions is, "your son may be deported at any time."

The INS is riddled with problems that would make most DMV offices look like well-oiled machines. Shortly after 9/11, the INS was revamped and placed under the Department of Homeland Security as the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigrant Services (BCIS). Today, it is known simply as the USCIS. The USCIS has closed Sven's case. They have also failed to return his only birth certificate--submission of originals was an agency requirement seven years ago. Now the agency warns against the submission of original documents. His case documentation has shifted hands between the Texas, Nebraska, and California INS Service Centers. The Kasaroczky family has paid numerous filing fees.

Recently, Istvan received a response to a plea for help in his son's case. The letter informed him to contact the National Customer Service Center, and that cases would be handled in the order received. The official USCIS letter also contained an attachment... which was written by a Hatian immigrant who lives in Miami. The attachment includes sensitive information regarding the individual's case. This document, while confusing and altogether non-pertinent to Sven Kasaroczky, is one in a long line of errors from a seemingly apathetic government entity--an entity that holds the fate of a fragile family in its clutches.

The Kasaroczky family decided to bring Sven's case into public awareness, in a last-ditch effort to save him from deportation. Anyone interested in scheduling an interview for a follow-on story or further assistance may contact XXXXXXXXXXXX during Eastern Standard Time business hours.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2009

## BLT's for Breakfast

I made an amazing discovery this week. It turns out that Sonic Drive-In Restaurants, who already have me hooked on their fresh strawberry slushes, now offer the croisSONIC BLT... FOR BREAKFAST! Phenomenal. For a breakfast sandwich, it ranks #2 on my list, right behind WaWa's pepperoni provolone bagel.

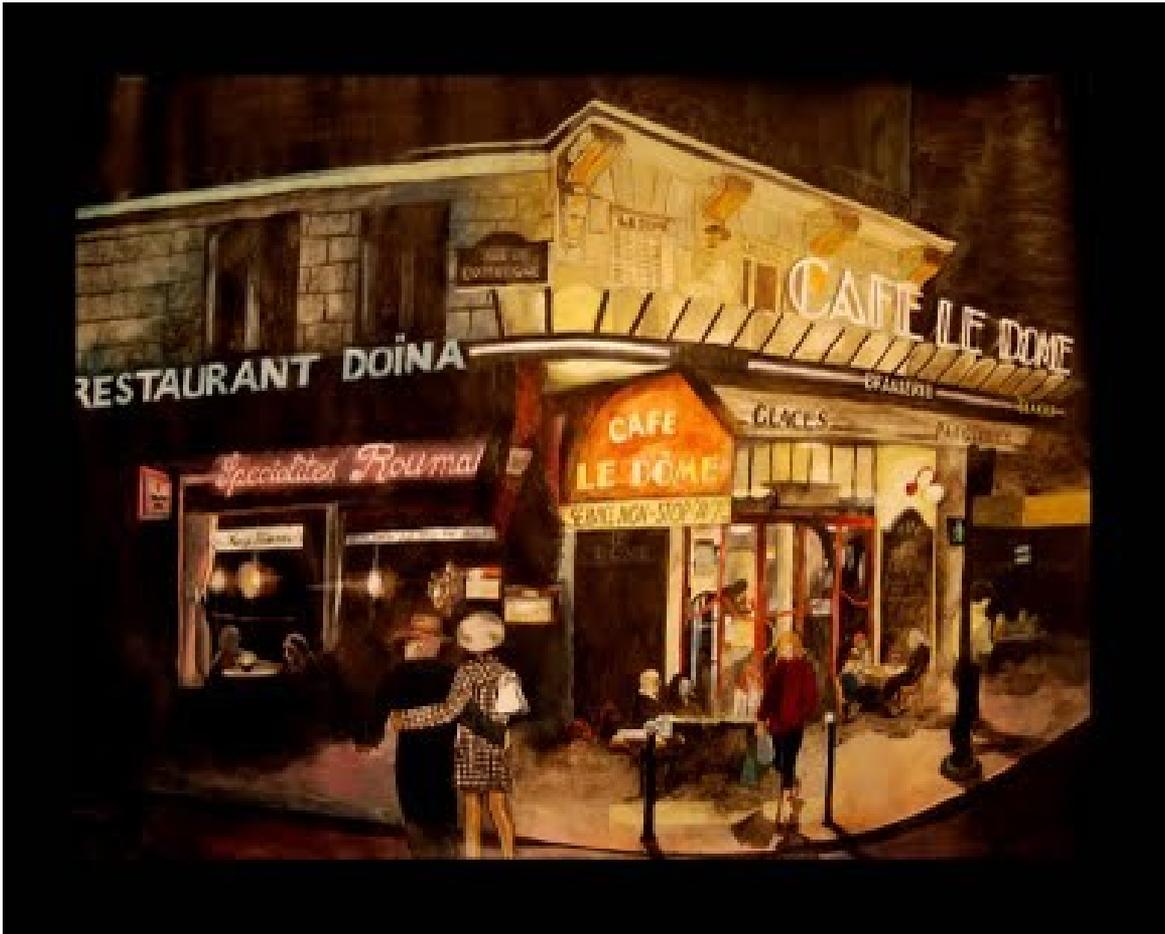
Typically, when I think of Sonic, I think of wasted potential. What was once the fastest-growing restaurant chain in the country has lowered their standards of delivery. Roller skates are rarely seen, 50's music is never played, and the cheery bubble-gum sock hop aura that accompanied my first Sonic experience is no more.

But then this happens. Just as McDonald's recently won me back with their Angus Mushroom & Swiss burger, Sonic has just reminded me that in my decision-making process (regarding where to eat breakfast) the 'fluff' shouldn't overcome the 'stuff.' Hopefully, this BLT creation will be the spearhead for a long line of re-thought breakfast foods, like liverwurst eclairs, the half-pound rawburger biscuit, the pork chop bagel, and the Reuben croissant.

God bless us, every one.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2009

## Cafe le Dome: My Latest Painting



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2009

## Old Stuff: An Interview with my Kids

It seems our human nature to reminisce about the past. Classic cartoons and movies. Where we were during certain events. How much stuff cost back then (gallon of gas, loaf of bread, postage stamp). How little the pay was and how hard the work was. You've heard variations of the classic 'lines.' Here's one: "Every day, we walked 5 miles to school in the snow with no shoes--uphill both ways--and we liked it!"

There was a lot of neat stuff in my past. I've done my part to put as many of these nostalgic items in front of my kids as possible. Here's what they had to say.

Slinkies are cool.

Yo-yo's are not.

Frisbees. "They're wierd. You just throw and catch them. They're cool for dogs I guess."

Marbles. "No. All they are are little shiny things you can see through," says Caleb.

Connect Four: "Not so much," says Josh. "It's wierd," says Caleb. "All you do is go 'bloom, bloom, aw man, you got me.'"

Transformers? C'mon dad, you already know [that they're cool].

Star Wars? They start naming the names of a million characters I've never heard of, from General Greivous' guards to names I can't pronounce. Hands down? They love Star Wars. "LucasFilms did a good job," says Caleb (6). "They made the old ones and the new ones just as cool as eachother. LucasArts did a good job with the video games too."

Blow pops vs. Tootsie Pops? Blow pops.

Tootsie rolls? Not really.

Jolly Ranchers? YES!!!

Cow Tales? No.

Sugar Daddies. Josh doesn't like them. Caleb hasn't had them.

Necco Wafers... No!

Nilla Wafers? Yes!

S'mores? "Oh yeah. I love smores." "Me too." "Me too," says Momma. "Never roasted," says Josh. "It makes them black and hot and crusty and I just give them to you. I like catching them on fire though, and blowing them out." "I like mine black and toasty, says Caleb. "Then they're nice and gooey inside."

Card houses? Bo-ring.

Dominoes (knocking them down). YES! Very cool.

Anything cool about VHS? "Not really. I like CD's and DVD's better," says Josh.

Ben Hur? "Never seen it," says Josh. "I saw half," says Caleb. "It was cool when he went to jail and escaped."

Looney Toons? "Too baby-ish," says Caleb. "I used-to kinda watch it," says Josh.

Pac-Man / Ms. Pac-Man? Love it! (Me too!)

Ovaltine? Yes!

Jacks? Not really (Josh). Yeah, I like Jacks (Caleb).

Root beer? I do! I like it! (Josh, throwing his hand up) "Hate it."--Caleb

Popeye? Cool. Mickey Mouse? Not. Tom & Jerry? Cool! Zorro. Seen it a hundred times. It's getting boring. Old Yeller? Not really. Pinnochio? Never seen it. What?!??? Says Momma. Okay. Superman or Spidey? Neither. Batman!

Comic books? Never seen one.

Baseball cards? They're cool.

Well, this concludes the first "Old Stuff" interview with my kids. I'll post another one in the near future.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2009

## The Cat Who Loved Water

I used to hate cats. Why? I dunno, why does anyone hate cats. The black ones are bad luck, they sleep on babies' faces and steal their breath, they scratch your couch to shreds... litter boxes... holier-than-thou attitudes... finnickier eating habits... wierd cat ladies (you know, your reclusive next door neighbor with 7 million cats living in her attic and crawlspace and Lord knows where else).

You know where cat hate *really* stems from? Your parents. Chances are, you're one of the 65+ million Americans with an inexplicable distaste of the creatures, even though you've never experienced any of the stuff in the first paragraph. Yes, I made that number up. You're missing the point. You probably hate cats because your dad hated cats, right? Well, *SOMEONE* in your family hated cats up the line. And you were brainwashed through some form of propaganda bleedover to hate cats. For that, in my country, we would call you a tool.

So back to me. I was a cat-hating tool. Then we visited Julie Amos' mom's house in Springfield, Ohio, before Julie married my brother John Martinez. Her neighbor (a psycho cat lady, I presume) had stray cats all around her house. One had a litter of kittens. Mama's real skittish (sp?). You'd approach mama cat, and she'd bolt, with kittens still latched on and all that. The kittens followed suit.

All except one.

He'd roll over, mew, and bat your hand a few times playfully. He seemed to be a little slow. I loved him instantly. We took him home to Carolina, named him Sylvester--not merely because he looked like Sylvester (Tweety rival), but because he was indeed slow... like Sly Stallone. How ya doin' doin.'

I'm a bath guy. Hot bath for soaking away grime or chills or muscle aches, icy cold bath to regulate body temp. Shower to wash & rinse. Well, Sly was a bath guy too. He'd hear the squeak of a bath faucet from a mile away, come running in, and jump in that bathtub. He loved it when you'd spray water at him. At night, he'd curl up in our drippy bathroom sink (hey, I was a Marine, not a plumber). In the morning, you could find him by following his wet pawprints across the hardwood floor.

This cat landed on his back regularly. Petra and I would be snuggled up on the couch, watching *A Walk in the Clouds* or some other gay movie, and Sylvester would be nodding off on the armrest. Next thing you know, we'd hear a thump, and Sly would be laying on his side, groaning. Then he'd re-mount the armrest. If you held him upside-down and threw him in the air a couple feet, you'd have to catch him, because he would make no attempt to right himself.

The cat would play with fire. Pet would light a candle. Sly would hop on the end table and bat at the flame until his hairs singed, then yelp, lick his paw, and do it again. He would do this until we'd put the candle out or move it somewhere else.

So Sly was my icebreaker. He was sent to live with my animal-hating mom-in-law in Ohio once when I was on deployment overseas. Petra was prego and was probably scared that the cat would sleep on the baby's face or something (hey, we were new parents--never too cautious). I received word from afar that my cat had been dumped in a field in Ohio somewhere. Never liked cats before him. Never liked people after him. Kidding about people. Since then, I've met a couple cats. None like Sly though.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2009

## The Peruvian Cross: My Last Reminder of Lima



On February 20th, 1998, a massive herd of Peruvians swarmed Centro Larcomar in Lima. It was the opening night of the new Hard Rock Cafe. An 'advance party' of sailors and Marines from an upcoming UNITAS deployment were in attendance. We were there too. The Hard Rock Cafe was walking distance from my crew's regular hotel, Del Pilar Miraflores. We were dancing on tables to some crankin' classic jams, and we shut the place down. I bore a striking resemblance to one of the 6 or 7 Americans who performed an onstage rendition of YMCA--how appropriate with a few of us in Sailor's attire.

Lima is a huge city. With few sections being the exception, it is very clean; reminiscent of a small Western European town. I don't recall ever having an opinion about the people (attitudes, aura)--suffice to say it's a comfortable atmosphere for visitors. Back in my flying days, our KC-130's would use Lima as a staging area when dropping off other Marines

in Iquitos, Peru, one of the DoD's jungle warfare training areas located in the heart of the Amazon.

Peru is famous for a few things that I can think of: The ruins of Machu Picchu (The Lost City of the Incas), one of the world's most beautiful mountain ranges (the Andes), the Lapis Lazuli stone used in some bawdy jewelry, good coffee, and alpaca fiber garments (an alpaca looks like the poodle of the llama family, and produces some ridiculously soft 'wool.')

I think my wife *might* still have an alpaca shaw packed up somewhere, but other than that, we have one remaining souvenir from Lima... a cross.

This terra cotta cross has been broken at least a dozen times. We glue it together and touch it up each time. At first it seemed really tacky, so we stopped displaying it and just packed it away. It would inevitably break again, and again, until we felt sorry for the poor inanimate object. Then, when I lost my Hard Rock Cafe beer glass, I realized that the cross was our last survivor from Peru. We now display it proudly, cracks and all.



## The Lost Treasure of Willie Wiggins

I've yet to meet a child or adult who, when opening a dusty suitcase or chest of drawers in their grandmother's attic, doesn't feel a tinge of excitement regarding the possible treasures inside. For many, the 'treasure' may be nothing more than a handful of nostalgic photos or dated letters postmarked with blast-from-the-past stamps and interesting points of origin. In a more lucrative instance, one may uncover newspaper-wrapped silver coins from a rusted coffee tin or old cigar box.

About a month ago, I was working with my partner-in-crime, Larry Hayes, when we made an

interesting discovery. We were contracted to remove and replace large portions of a house, including windows, roofing, siding, and drywall. We had decided to leave the original kitchen ceiling in place, since it appeared to be in good condition. As we demolished other walls in the house, the vibrations we created caused the kitchen ceiling to loosen and come crashing down. Our disappointment was quickly replaced by intrigue.

First, I found a photo. Then another. A few postcards. Some business cards. A \$2.00 credit coupon from Shneer's. A check stub. When we had finished collecting tidbits from the rubble, we took them outside and laid them out on the hood of the truck for inspection. The items collectively told a story: a story of one Willie Wiggins, who seems to have been a black Merchant Marine who served the Ex S.S. Delaware as a galleyman for the Texas Company (now Texaco) in the 1940's and 50's. He was well-traveled, and as Larry points out, it "looks like he worked long hours for a short paycheck back in those days."

It appears that Mr. Wiggins had met a woman named Elizabeth Wilson at a sailor's cafe called "Den Anker" in Antwerp, Belgium. Perhaps she was there with a few girlfriends, because he distinguished her as "the one with the long hair" next to a local Antwerp address he scribbled on the back of a café business card. A professionally-taken photograph shows regular German Bundeswehr soldiers at a bar in St. Pauli, Germany. There's a postcard from Paris. A name tag from a hotel in Bombay, India, that says "Wel Come." A postcard of "The Mighty Missouri," printed in her inaugural year of 1945 by the Liberty Picture Company (now Atlantic Fleet Sales, Norfolk, VA). One photo shows a handsome young [Mr. Wiggins?] on a ship in port at New York City harbor. In another photo, two uniformed African American sailors sit atop an old Jeep aboard their boat. It's difficult to tell whether Mr. Wiggins may be one of them.

While it is only stipulation that Mr. Willie Wiggins did, in fact, travel to all these places, the items at hand are still interesting and must be of value to the family of the items' original owner. We talked to some of the folks around here, and they say the old man (Mr. Wiggins) died a few years back. Whether or not this is true, we are trying to return these articles to whom they rightly belong. It would be cool to talk to some of his family members and fill in the blanks of his story, too. Keep yous posted.

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*St. Pauli bei Nacht  
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SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2009

## The Peanut Capital of the World?

If you Google "Peanut Capital of the World" today, you will find six U.S. cities that boast this title. Our current home town of Suffolk, Virginia is amongst them. Now, I am not arguing that our town is more deserving of the title. George Washington Carver never so much as took a crap here in passing, as far as I can tell from online research. There is another man, though, that thought this town was a peanut goldmine. You may have never heard of Amedeo Obici, but you've probably heard of the company he founded, *Planters*. The Planters factory headquarters, located here, works its evil on the little people of Suffolk daily, by pumping the local atmosphere with the smell of fresh roasted peanuts. Obici's house is here too, and there's recent news that it may be restored and turned into a fine dining restaurant. Of course there are other peanut factories in town, but none of them with such a cool, classic mascot as Mr. Peanut.





SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2009

## Josh, the Titans, and Sports in our Family



In 2007, I managed Joshua's T-ball team, the Deep Creek Reds. In 2008, I managed both Joshua's coach-pitch team and Caleb's T-ball team (each the Deep Creek White Sox), followed by the 7- and 8-year-old All Star team. Between bingo nights, fundraisers, and perpetual volunteer 'requirements,' Petra and I were tapped. It was a huge commitment just to see your kids quasi-interested in the American pastime, and each time, we looked forward to the end of the season.

This year, we took a break. The boys weren't super interested, and I was in France and couldn't help.

Then came football season. Josh wanted to play, Caleb didn't. So we signed Josh up with the Suffolk Titans. He was one of a handful of token white guys in the entire league. What a great opportunity! From a dad's point of view, I love that my boy is learning to play football in a black community. Leave the white and nerdy kids to tennis and golf.



I was a nerd when I was a kid. Collected butterflies. Played baseball one year when I was 9. Sucked all season, then hit a grand slam and was popular for five minutes. Played basketball in 7th and 8th grade. Sucked. Ran track in 9th grade. Fast mile (4:49), but compared to my fellow Ohio athletes, I might as well have sucked. Tried out for football my

Junior year of high school. Found my niche. I wasn't the best, but I made Varsity, and it followed me into my Senior year. Loved it. Got accepted to University of Central Florida, who at that time had a great walk-on football program. Met Petra. Tossed UCF and the football dreams with no regrets.

Now it's my kids' turn. Josh is not a nerd. In fact, he's an anomaly. Loves sports in a non-sport-loving family. And spent almost no time on the bench in his first year of tackle football. Turned out to not only be "good enough," but actually really good, to the point that one opposing team was triple-teaming Josh when he was playing defensive tackle, because he kept sacking the QB. The opposing coach was so



on

he



pissed at one point, he called a time-out and screamed, "Somebody stop number 88!" During practice, Josh was lifted up and shaken by Danny, the head of the Pop Warner league here. "That's how you do it, boy! That's how you tackle!!!" He's at the front of the pack when his team runs laps. Josh

eats, breathes, and sleeps football. He studies plays. He's eight years old.

Caleb is cool with taking some time off. He's thinking about soccer, or Karate, or both. Josh just finished out his football season and can't wait to go again. Even Petra and I can't wait. It was such an enjoyable venture for the whole family. Practice was like a tailgate hangout at Peanut Park, and we were some of the loudest screamers on the bleachers Saturdays. We're not sure about going back to baseball.





SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2009

## The Dynamite D/F of WWII, Part I: An Introduction

Digging Through Grandpa's Stuff...

Frank Norman Payton Speights was my grandpa. He died on March 16, 2006 at 81 years old. He was a fanatical collector of everything, and had huge collections of coins, precious stones and metals, original art, guns, knives, collectible

documents & photos, stamps, sports cards, books, you name it.

This weekend, my dad and I were going through some old photo albums, for use in a collaborative story about my grandmother's French-German family during WWII. This is one of the albums. It covers grandpa's second tour of duty in Germany, from 1946 to 1949.

"Dynamite D/F (Direction Finders):" The Round-the-Clock Aircraft Controllers of the 602nd Tactical Control Squadron, Dannenfels bei Kirchheimbolanden, Germany -- French Zone

Previous page photo: The Dynamite radio van in front of "the tower."



Above photo: Young Heinz the handyman; Emilie, cook and housekeeper; Walt, cook.



"Introducing 'Sunday,' the German Shepherd, to a fawn"



Where there are Americans, there will be swimming.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2009

## The Dynamite D/F of WWII, Part II: Meet Sgt. Bob Kresge

A picture is worth a thousand words... Grandpa didn't write much about the men he served with, but he took enough pictures for us to figure it out.

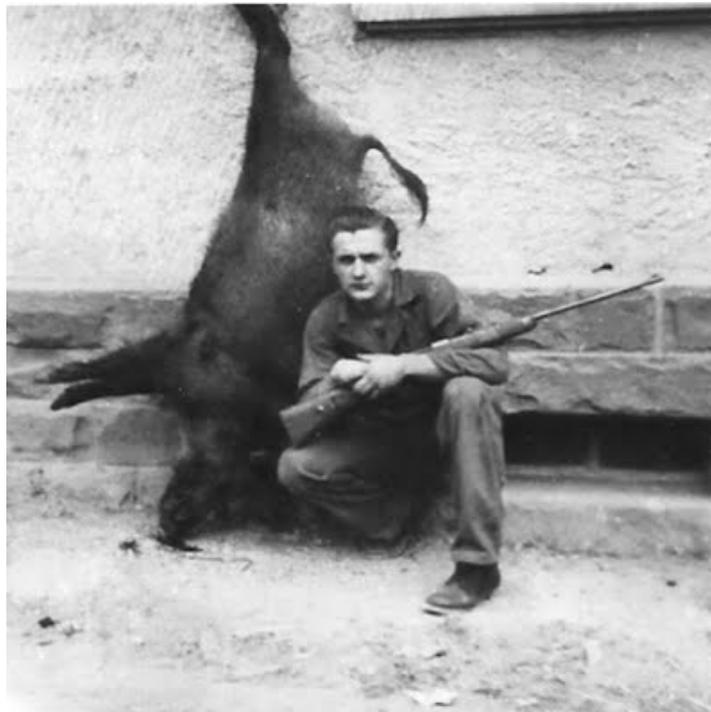
Sergeant Robert (Bob) Kresge was the second-ranking EM (enlisted man) in their detachment. My guess is, he was the epitome of a cock-n-swag American buck Sergeant. He was a true A-man, though, not requiring his men to call him Sergeant or even Sarge to boost his masculine ego. To the credit of, and in the fashion of, Bobs everywhere, he preferred to simply be called "Bob."



Bob, representing The Greatest Generation



Lookin' Sharp



Bob and his 'Wildswine'



Classic picture. Pointing a pistol as if to dissuade you from sharing his Coke (see crates at right)

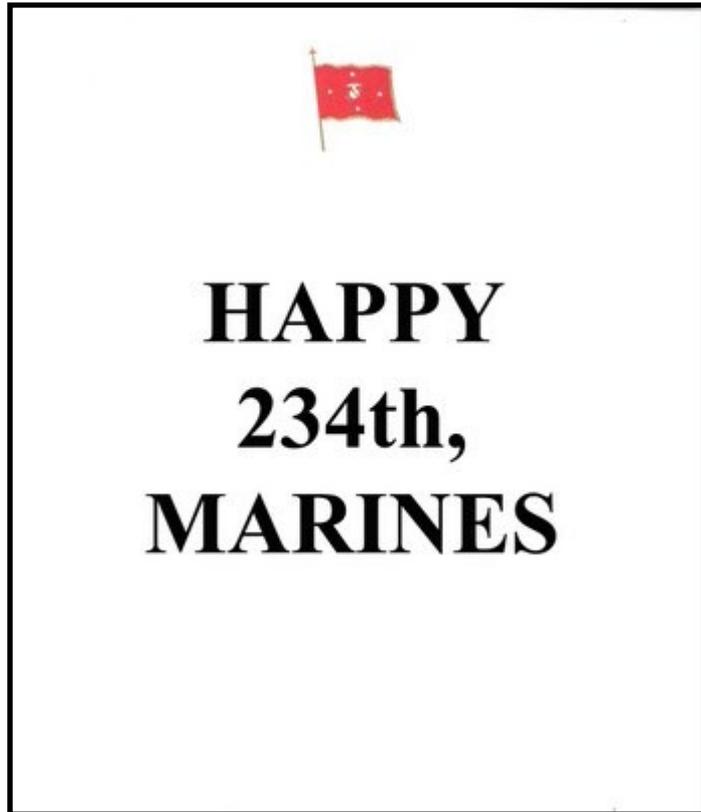


Carola (left) is Bob's girl. The other is Elfriede, or Frieda. She's T/Sgt Bill Stewart's girl.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2009

## Happy 234th Birthday, Marines!

Toasting you fine gents tonight at 9PM EST. Go in a good way, you filthy bastards! P.S. Easy on the cake, Jarew. On November 1st, 1921, John A. Lejeune, 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, directed that a reminder of the honorable service of the Corps be published by every command, to all Marines throughout the globe, on the birthday of the Corps. Since that day, Marines have continued to distinguish themselves on many battlefields and foreign shores, in war and peace. On this 234th birthday of the Corps,



therefore, in compliance with the will of the 13th Commandant, Article 38, United States Marine Corps Manual, Edition of 1921, is republished as follows:

“On November 10, 1775, a Corps of Marines was created by a resolution of the Continental Congress. Since that date, many thousand men have borne the name Marine. In memory of them, it is fitting that we who are Marines should commemorate the Birthday of our Corps by calling to mind the glories of its long and illustrious history. The record of our Corps is one which will bear comparison with that of the most famous military organizations in the world's history. During 90 of the 146 years of it's existence the Marine Corps has been in action against the nations foes. From the battle of Trenton to the Argonne. Marines have won foremost honors in war, and in the long eras of tranquility at home. Generation after generation of Marines have grown gray in war in both hemispheres and in every corner of

the seven seas that our country and its citizens might enjoy peace and security. In every battle and skirmish since the birth of our Corps Marines have acquitted themselves with the greatest distinction, winning new honors on each occasion until the term Marine has come to signify all that is highest in military efficiency and soldierly virtue. This high name of distinction and soldierly repute we who are Marines today have received from those who preceded us in the Corps. With it we also received from them the eternal spirit which has animated our Corps from generation to generation and has been the distinguishing mark of the Marines in every age. So long as that spirit continues to flourish Marines will be found equal to every emergency in the future as they have been in the past, and the men of our nation will regard us as worthy successors to the long line of illustrious men who have served as "Soldiers of the Sea" since the founding of the Corps."

(John. A. Lejeune)

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#### A MESSAGE FROM THE COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS

United States Marines represent the best young men and women our Nation has to offer. To be a Marine is to be a member of America's warrior class--to be one of the few who steps forward with the courage and conviction to face whatever dangers await. Our Nation expects her Marines to be ready when the Nation calls; to leave family and the comforts of home behind; to march into battle and thrive under austerity; and to come home under a victory pennant.

From Al Anbar in the west of Iraq, to Helmand Province in the south of Afghanistan, our Corps of Marines can always expect to be found where the fight is toughest. Such is our history. Today, as we write the final chapter on our victory in Iraq, we will increasingly take the fight to the enemy in Afghanistan and add new pages to our legacy in places called Delaram, Now Zad, and Garmsir. One day, we will return to our naval heritage and sail the high seas with our Navy brothers. Such is our future.

As we celebrate our Corps' 234th Birthday, we first pause to reflect and pay tribute to those Marines who have given the last full measure in defense of freedom. We extend our deepest gratitude to our Marine Corps families--the unsung heroes who endure hardship and sacrifice so that we are able to go forward and accomplish any mission. We extend our appreciation to our countrymen who have answered our every need. And we celebrate the magnificent men and women who willingly and selflessly continue to go into harm's way to protect this great Nation.

To all who have gone before, to those who wear the uniform today, and to the families that give us the strength to forge ahead--I wish you all a heartfelt Happy 234th Birthday!

Semper Fidelis,

(Signed James T. Conway,  
General, U.S. Marine Corps)

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2009

## **November 11th: More than a Mattress Sale**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The traditional Armistice Day celebration was a direct reenactment of the excitement shared by the American homefront when the Great War was formally ended on "the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month" in 1918. Towns and cities across the nation made noise. Bells, whistles, pots & pans, firecrackers and gunshots. For years thereafter, at 11 AM on November 11th, Americans would make noise with bells and whistles, in remembrance. Eventually, bells faded from the tradition. These days, there are plenty of Veterans Day BOGO shoe sales and folks looking for a free meal, and there are precious few whistleblowers. It's 10 AM. Ready your bells and whistles.

## Float Away, Fairy!

Lots of rain and wind coming in from that Nor'easter over here in coastal Virginia. Right now, there's a floating dock somewhere on Lake Meade... with a big fat tackle box and a few empties sitting on top of it. If you recover it before I do, let me know and I'll buy you a steak dinner. And maybe a root beer.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2009

## The Dynamite D/F of WWII, Part III: Meet Frenchy, Gizmo, McClancy, Wright, and Stewart

Continuing the story of grandpa and his Dynamite D/F controllers, I'd like to introduce you to the rest of the crew. This first guy is Frenchy.



Corporal Marcel "Frenchy" Wante was a keeper. He stayed in close contact with grandma and grandpa well into their senior years. Above, you can see him posing with a huge jackrabbit--that's the region grandma grew up in, and the same place I grew up for 5 of my 9 years in Germany. I used to chase those same rabbits (hares) around.

The next guy must have been really tight with grandpa during the war years. Corporal John J. McClancy takes up a quarter of this photo album. He and grandpa used to take off

together to climb on top of tall German war monuments, or go swing off trees into a nearby lake. McClancy hailed from Maspeth, Long Island. You'll see more of him later.



McClancy



Here's Corporal Richard Wright and his girlfriend, Marie. He strikes me as either a recluse, or twitterpated; in the photos of all the guys, he's usually missing.



I picture John "Gizmo" Talboom (left), true to his nickname, to be tinkering on electronic equipment all the time. Nearly all of grandpa's pictures of him take place around the Dynamite van (their mobile comm site). Here's Gizmo (below):



Here's the ranking guy. I'm pretty sure he was a pig of a guy. Almost every picture in the album that has a female in it, also has Tech Sergeant Bill Stewart pressed up against her, with a smug look. Not much different than most guys I know, I guess.



As for me, I still like Bob. He reminds me of 90% of the Marine Sergeants I ever came across. Full of piss & wind. And an effective hunter, it would seem.



FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2009

## **The Final Chapter of the Dynamite D/F: Fighting the Nazis and Tuberculosis**

We all know what the Allied Forces were doing in Europe during WWII. Here's some humanitarian work they did that you probably didn't know about. The town that the Dynamite D/F stayed in was home to a famous childrens' hospital. Grandpa's guys had the rewarding mission of keeping the hospital supplied with fresh water every week. While altogether intrinsically rewarding, it also earned them a few squares of fame in the Stars & Stripes and in their local military newspaper, the Gateway.

Here's a great photo of grandpa helping a little girl:



Here are the guys hauling a 'water buffalo' up the mountain (at least, that's what we called them in the Marines):



Three Air Force soldiers from the seven-man military community stationed at the isolated and lonely direction finding station code-named "Dynamite," 2,224 feet above sea level in the French Occupation Zone, make one of their regular water runs up the four mile wooded slopes of the Rheingfalt mountains to deliver the precious 250-gallon supply of water. The regular trips which the USAF GIs have been making voluntarily for the past three and a half months are credited with helping to ward off disease in the Donnerberg Tubercular Home during this summer's critical water situation.

Here are some more, including the Gateway writeup:

# The Gateway

U. S. Air Forces in Europe

WIESBADEN, GERMANY

Wednesday, September 24, 1942

## TC Squadron Helps Natives

**WIESBADEN** — Corps GIs, Engineers' water boys, had nothing on arrival in U. S. Air Force soldiers of the United Technical Squadron of EAFS in this peaceful and beautiful Rhineland village who operate a radio-controlled direction finding station which provides navigational radio aid to guide U. S. Air Force planes flying over the area.

When darkness came tonight it was more than the moonlight which shone upon the station which was lit by the searchlight beams from the United States Air Force base here. The station was lit by the searchlight beams from the United States Air Force base here. The station was lit by the searchlight beams from the United States Air Force base here.

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UPPER RIGHT —  
FRANK, SILVER &  
FRENCH  
LOWER RIGHT —  
DICK & STEWART WITH  
TUB.





With that, I'll end this chapter of my family history. I realize I didn't have many photos of grandpa, but that's because he was taking most of the pictures. I'm glad he did.



Here's the last one. Bill Stewart, grandma (Babette 'Betty' Hoffmann, at the time) and grandpa (Frank N. Speights). I have pictures of me somewhere that look just like him.



## Aftermath of a Nameless Storm

A week has passed since the big Nor'Easter began dumping wind and rage on the East Coast. Here are a few photos I took in Virginia Beach last weekend:





## Fresh Hot Lobstas Guy!!!



So I found a truck selling fresh Maine lobsters in Va Beach on the side of the road. Sign said "\$6 a pound. I said, "Whaaaaaaat?" Brakes said "skreeeeet." Bought 11 of them for like \$90. Dropped 3 off for Matt, who was in the process of drying out his basement after Hurricane 'Nameless' dumped on the area. Took the rest of them home for chow. It took Lily all the way until the last one was about to be cooked, before she befriended him. She named him "Larry." Mommy picked up Larry the Lobsster and voiced, "Please don't eat me!" Lily said, no, we'll eat you cause you're yummy! And then he was dead. They were delicious.

P.S. If we had a saltwater fish tank, we would have kept Larry.

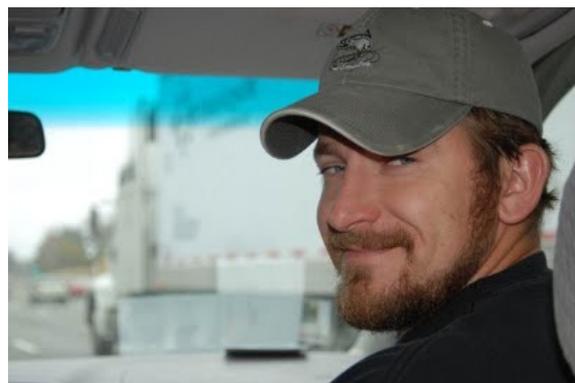


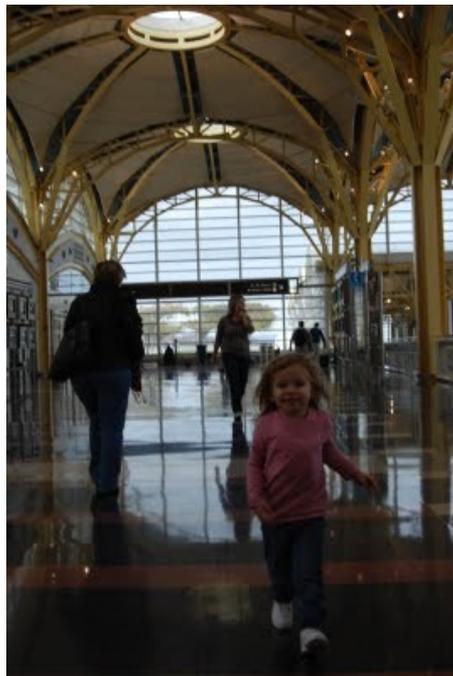
## My Kids' First Time on a Plane

I'm almost ashamed to say that. Josh is eight friggin' years old, and he's never been on a plane. At his age, I had filled every page of my first passport. Well, this trip was made in classic nostalgic family style. As a 4- or 5-year old kid, I remember taking long trips with my folks, my kid sis, my aunts and cousins, and grandma and grandpa, in the motor home across the country and Canada.



They were big NCHA buffs (National Camping and Hiking Association), and went to every pow-wow possible. Dad and grandpa would always sit in the front together and joke around and drink coffee. Well, yesterday I took my place on the right with dad at the helm. We're on a family Thanksgiving trip to see my sister, bro-in-law, niece and nephew in Alaska, and we're flying out of D.C.





Above: Lily at Reagan National Airport (mama background)





Mom's reading Sarah Palin's new book: "Oh my gosh, their family is so much like ours!"  
That's all she's been saying.



And we finally get on the plane.



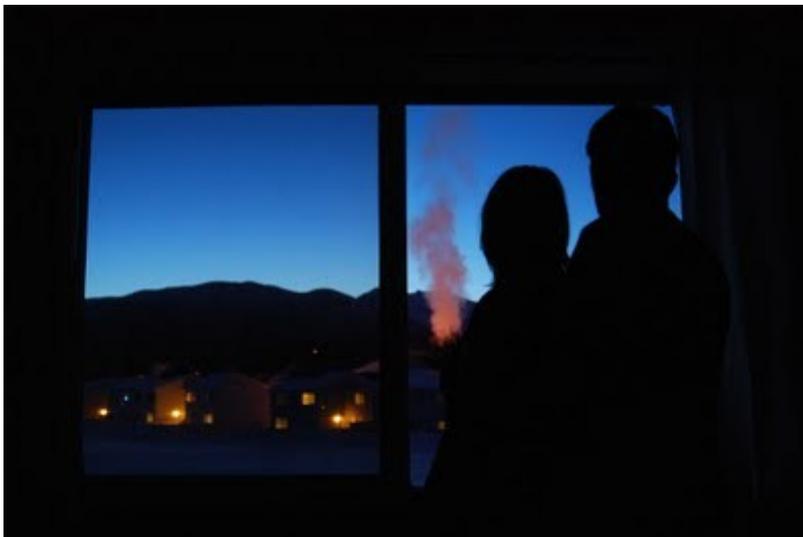
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2009

## Day One In Alaska: Subway \$6 Footlongs, Moose-stalking, & "What, No Yeungling?"



That's right, my brew of choice doesn't make it up this far--but you'll fare well enough here with Sam Adams Black Lager.

Woke up this morning after three hours' rest to a beee-youtiful sunrise, sub-zero temps and a very, very refreshing change of

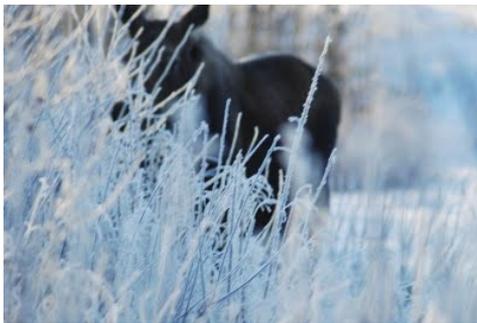


scenery. Mountains, crisp air, and much snow. My sister Renee had bought some cold weather gear for us as she came across various sales. We hit a few stores this morning to finish off the clothes shopping. The kids were in the snow instantly, and I along with them. Outside temp hit 5

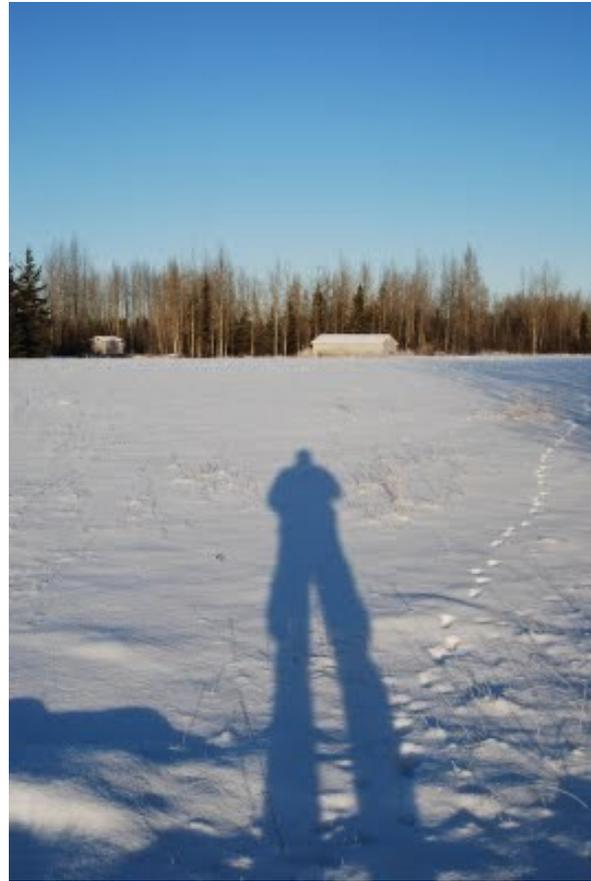


degrees Fahrenheit at peak today. We saw the old downtown Port of Anchorage, with all its furriers and ivory dealers and such, took some great pictures of the town from the cliffs across the bay (the bay was slow moving with massive chunks of ice), dad took me to a few spots reminiscent of his parents' photos (dad was born here in Anchorage), we bought

a pair of new pipes / some screens and good tobacco, checked out a great salmon fishing spot (now iced over and out-of-season), and the motherlode... I stalked a moose. She was in a patch of woods across the street from my sister's place on Elmendorf Air Force Base. Got a few good photos and readied myself for being rushed. Then I called Petra's phone, to have her come out to the woods and check out the moose (from a distance). Later, I found out that the Marines of Delta Company, 4th Anti-Terrorism Detachment (Reserves, formerly Echo Company, 4th Force Recon) will be having their drill weekend--and birthday ball--on the base this weekend. I just happen to have a few Recon Handbooks, and the need for a good 'cold weather operations' data dump for the revision of my book next Spring. I came back and the kids were worn out from all the outside play. Petra bought me a sixer while she was out shopping at Nordstrom. All in all, a very good day. Here are my photos today, from sunrise to sunset.









SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2009

## Mr. Chuck Heath, Denali National Park, Mt. McKinley



Well, we had an eventful Friday! We slept in, had a big breakfast, then headed over to Sarah Palin's parents' house for coffee. Sarah is on a nationwide *Going Rogue* book-signing tour right now, accompanied by her mom, Sally. So Mr. Heath is holding down the fort. And WHAT a fort! Inside this house, every boyish fantasy of tracking and trapping and fighting a killer bear with your bare hands... comes to life. This man has more fur pelts,

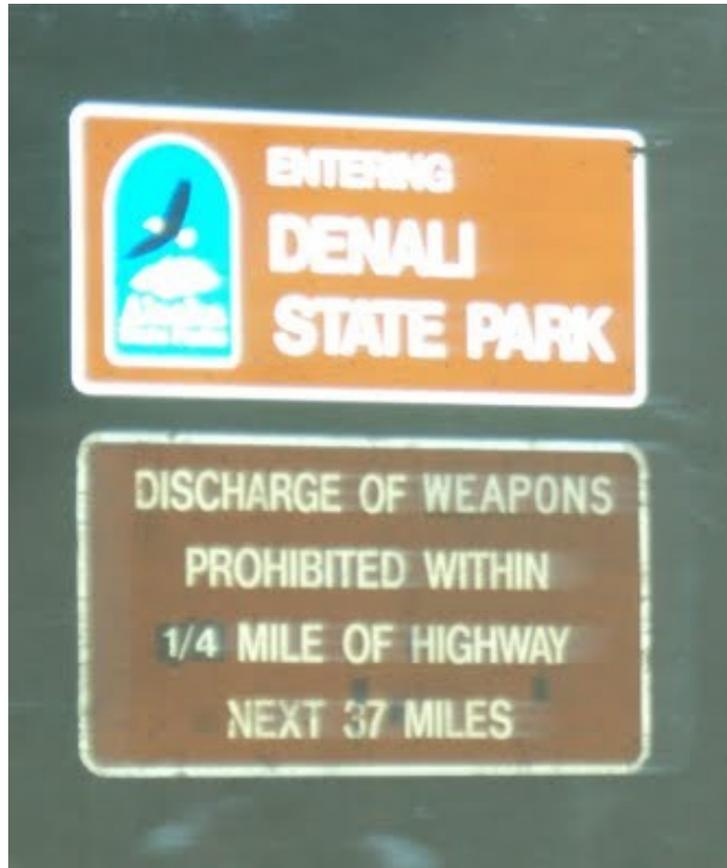
and hides, and claws, and skulls, and teeth, and bones, and antlers, and horns than anyone I've ever met! Fossils and artifacts and gold mining finds... I got to meet his gallavantin' buddy, Adrian. Between the two of them, they had some stories. Found out that Chuck is a fellow marathoner as well--only better--he ran Boston in '82.

We came bearing gifts from Planter's peanut town, and I gave him a copy of my handbook. He sent the kids home with Snowshoe Hare feet. "Lucky" feet, I told the kids. He corrected: "They're only lucky if they were shot at Midnight under a full moon by a crosseyed man!" We cut our visit short, because over the course of a few phone conversations, Sarah had convinced her dad to fly out and join them on the book-signing trail (that very day) in New York. We had a great time, and it was a pleasure to meet him.



From his place, we decided to head North for the day, so we drove a couple hours North to Denali National Park, just to see Mt. McKinley from the Southern viewing point. I won't romanticize it... it was a hectic--albeit beautiful--drive with two vehicles, six adults and six kids. "The guy at the tradin' post said it's another 45 minutes up Parks Highway!" "Yeah, that's what the last guy said, over an hour ago!"

We argued back and forth between the two cars, and almost turned around three different times. In the end, we got some good pictures out of it.







## Recon Santa Claus & Fun in the Snow



On Saturday, Petra and I toured the facility that houses the Marines of what used to be Echo Company, 4th Force Recon. The unit has been redesignated "Delta Company, 4th Antiterrorism Battalion." Besides herding moose, the reservists assigned to this unit have a very interesting--and uniquely special--assignment. Every year, they collect new toys in a huge warehouse... and for Christmas, they insert snowmobile teams via land, sea and air (C-130 cargo aircraft) into remote parts of Alaska's islands, interior, and extreme North, to drop toys off for children in need. Wow, what a cool job! The unit's Operations Chief was showing me some drop locations on a huge map of the State.

After chatting it up and politely declining an invite to the belated birthday ball later that evening--delayed because this was the month's drill weekend for the reservists (we've got nothing shnazzy to wear), we headed to Starbucks on Ft. Richardson and grabbed some less-than-desirable coffee. It was snowing outside though, and the coffee was hot, so it made for a cozy date. That is until half of the Army decided to busily mobilize for a

training mission--right inside the joint.



We scooted out and took a walk down some trail with a small bridge over a frozen stream. Then we headed home for some real coffee. We all played Guitar Hero for a bit, then got bundled up and headed for the hills. The sleddin' hills across the street, that is. Everybody went sledding! My mom, dad, sister Renee, bro-in-law Jared, Petra and me--and of course, all the kids. We walked back home after several hours and watched movies the rest of the night.





## Making a Pipe



Once upon a time, there was an antique cabinet from the 1800's, made from walnut. It stood on four legs, each around 9 inches long. This cabinet was recently modified because it was leaning badly (the legs were removed). I brought one of the cabinet legs with me from Virginia, to whittle into a pipe. Took about 8 hours and was accomplished using a Leatherman multi-tool pocketknife (and a drill for the long hole). Here she goes (see photos)... smokes like a beaut!





## Dances with Mountain Goats



So yesterday (Sunday) we decide to drive to the Kenai Fjords, straight down the Seward Highway to, well, Seward. The lady at the



gas station near Alyeska gave me a free thermos refill on my coffee, which was more than enough for me to write about. I was in a great mood the rest of the day!

We stopped at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, which is basically your local petting zoo in a big Alaska wrapper... they rehabilitate sick and injured wild animals there.

Midway to Seward, at a steep and windy place called Moose Pass, we were confronted with some nasty blustery weather, and feared we would not be able to get back to Anchorage that night if we didn't turn around (and bro-in-law Jared had to work the

following morning). We made it as far as my much-anticipated Bertha Creek, which is a prominent gold panning site on the peninsula. The creek was frozen and sitting under at least a foot of snow, but I still had to go explore it. Also explored a cool old train and an old home that presumably fell victim to the big 1964 earthquake, dropping into the frozen



marsh. There's a locked metal foot locker, frozen upside-down in the marsh in the adjacent demolished house. When we head back to Seward, I'm bringing an axe.

We headed back toward Anchorage, racing the huge top layer of ice on the northern Cook Inlet as it headed out with the tide. Got some great pictures along the way

back. Then the jackpot: near Beluga Point, a small herd of mountain goats was dispersed on the cliff-side of the road. We pulled over and jumped out of the vehicle at the next



pull-off. My sister ran with me as I fumbled with the camera. We hugged the cliffs so as not to be detected. Then we popped around the corner for some close-up pictures, catching a mama and baby unaware. For an instant as I continued my fast approach, I wasn't sure if mama would run or charge me. Fortunately they ran up the cliffs. I tossed the camera to my sis and

started after them... not because I thought I'd catch them, but because I wanted to be in the picture to prove how close we actually were. Then I slid down and re-acquired the camera, to chase after some different goats on the low cliffs. Had a blast! Unfortunately, Petra was feeding the baby in the back of the car, so she couldn't join us right away. She made up for it later in the wee hours, when she and I took a 4-hour midnight drive and she took a KILLER ghost train picture.

Monday, November 23, 2009

## "Ghost Train"

Petra and I took a four-hour drive in search of Alaskan wild things last night/this morning. We narrowly ducked some base cops who were chasing us through a restricted training area, we had Irish coffee out in town at the Pioneer



Bar on 4th Ave, and we stumbled upon this: a magnificent photo opportunity in the middle of nowhere. Petra captured it beautifully--I only wish we had a tripod with us for clarity of her shot. That photo will be blown up, framed, and hung in my den someday.

## The Great Alaskan Urbanized Bull Moose, in Photos



As it turns out, there's a reason that sand and dirt are the road traction spreadables of choice around here.



Salt pellets attract moose. So do pumpkins, consequently. Here's what we saw out the window yesterday.



## Downtown Anchorage: Revisiting 4th Avenue

If you have ever looked at my artwork, you'll recognize a very simple, almost drab, painting of downtown Anchorage in 1951. The reason I painted it was this: I was helping to move grandma's boxes from storage at dad's place to her new house shortly after grandpa died, when I discovered a small photo negative on the ground. It had been repeatedly stepped on, torn in half, and the photo was nearly indistinguishable. I didn't know the location of the photo, but I made it my goal to recapture the image on canvas, so that that specific place and point in time would not be lost forever. I realized later that it came from the same batch of negatives that showed baby pictures of my dad, of totem poles, and of parka-dressed people walking in snow. Since dad was born in Anchorage, and grandma and grandpa were stationed here for some time, I assumed it was Alaska. Grandma confirmed that it was downtown Anchorage.

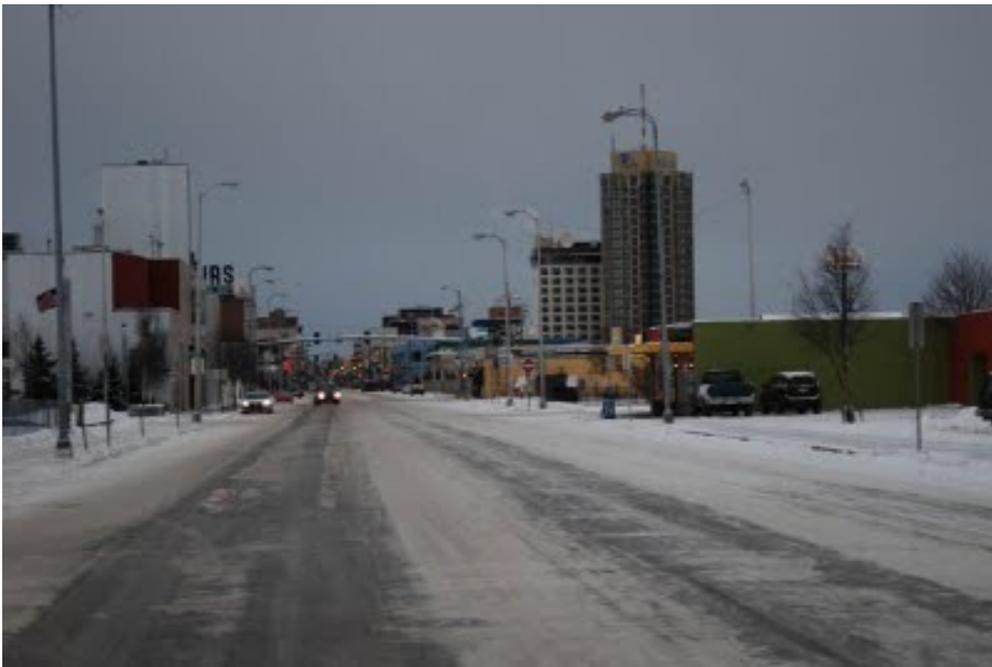
When we arrived here, I had one specific goal in mind: to take a 'today' photo of the same location. I searched for "Romick's Anchorage" online. Nothing. Then I tried "D&D Bar and Cafe." Bingo. I found some archived photos and an address. 307 4th Avenue. I drove over and took a million photos, not recognizing anything. When I got home, I finally found a landmark to link the photos together, between my 1951 painting and a 1964 [earthquake] museum photo, and the modern day 4th Ave. There is one building... the tallest building in the earthquake photo... it is the second tallest building on the right side of the street in the 2009 photo. Check it out:





Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

1964



2009

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2009

## To Seward and Back--Quickly!

It's not the optimal way of visiting any town. Most of the snow and ice had melted off of the streets, so we headed down to Seward for the second time this week. It's a 2.5 hour drive, half of which is through Moose Pass, a beautiful winding road through the mountains with a historically unpredictable weather system. It started snowing as we headed out of the pass, 10 miles from Seward.

Kenai Fjords National Park was closed. That was a bummer. We drove through Seward in what was rapidly becoming a small blizzard. Amazing town. It is one of the two major seaports on the Cook Inlet peninsula, which juts into the Gulf of Alaska (other is Homer, AK, of Greatest Catch fame). Famous for orca (killer whale) and beluga whale sightings. Josh and I saw a seal jumping in the harbor! We took the

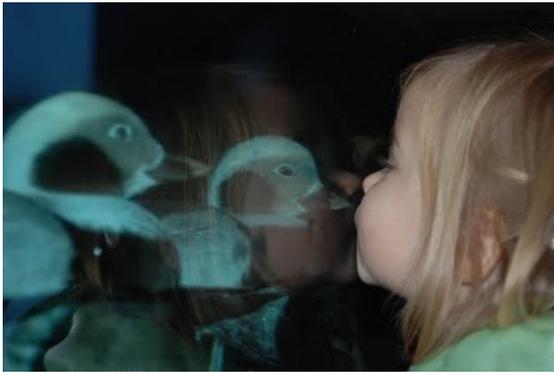
kids to the Alaska Sealife Center, a surprisingly large and very cool interactive museum with tons of straight-from-the-bay sealife and hands-on opportunities for the kids. I did a little beachcombing before all that, while the rest of the family was driving around.





We spent a whopping two hours in Seward. When we walked out of the museum, there was at least an inch of snow where there was none before, and we were in a blizzard. We jumped in the vehicles and hauled tail through Moose Pass. Talk about 'fun.' Passed lots of broken down cars (mountain rescue trucks were active). We all made it home last night in one piece.





## The Holiday Family Jerk

You've met him before. He's rude, he's mean, in a word--"Jerk." In two words? Bah-Humbug! Well, this Thanksgiving, he was me.

Holiday family jerks are typically the product of three sequential actions or events, quite similar to an engine's combustion cycle. There's the 'squeeze,' where air is compressed and pre-heated. This is also where fuel is introduced. Then there's the 'bang.' Some sort of trigger will cause a spark or fuse to ignite. The third part is 'blow.' The exhaust created by ignition needs to be vented overboard.

I don't know what I did to cause it, but somewhere around Noon, just as the guests were arriving at the front door, I blew up with the family and took off into the beautiful snowy wonderland that was in the second of three-days' snowy replenishment. I tracked animals in the woods and took scenic pictures in the evening and at night.

The traditional Thanksgiving meal is my favorite food, but somehow it doesn't taste so good without someone to share it with. Hopefully my spat won't land me a spot on the naughty list for Christmas.



**PHOTO ABOVE: SOUTHBOUND TRACKS OF  
A MALE GREAT AMERICAN DOUCHEBAG**

## Lily's First Apple Pie



So Thanksgiving morning, the whole family was up and at 'em around 6:30 AM. Time is a bit confusing, here, since it's pretty dark outside until about 9-9:30 (then it starts getting dark again around 3:30 PM). The girls (mom, sis, Petra) got to work on cooking, and Lily jumped right in with grandma, making her first apple pie. She learned to add fresh lemon to keep the apples from browning, she learned how to peel and mix and stir, and then she learned the most important lesson about baking an apple pie: no avocados!

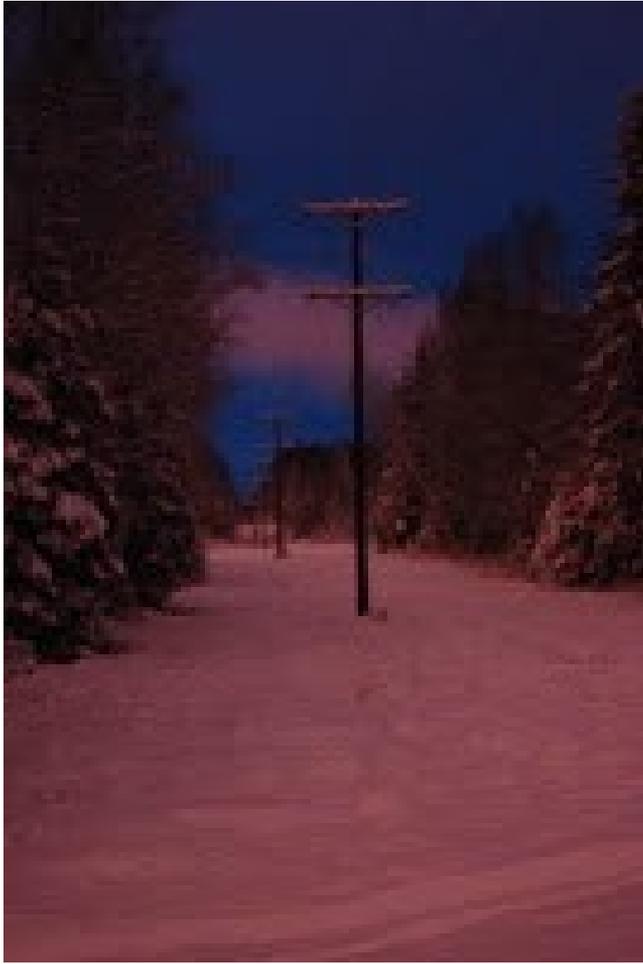




## Blurry, Beautiful Elmendorf Evening

Enjoyed a great sunset on Thanksgiving, but the camera didn't do it justice. Okay, okay, the photographer didn't do it justice. Should've brought a tripod. I'm posting them anyway, because I love the colors. Here's Elmendorf AFB by night.







Eventually, it got too dark to take pictures... I liked this one, though.



## Perpetuating Passe



It is a sickeningly old tradition of modern humankind, to take pictures of different animal crossing signs as if they were gags. Armadillos, bears, gators, bison, turtles... well, I'm doing it again. Pbththththth!

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2009

## Foul-Weather Friends

Ahhh, finally, some good packing snow. That means igloos, snowball fights and... that's right, snowmen. Or snow people, for you politically correct fags. I'm kidding, people. Irony. Irony! Anyway, here are my favorite seasonal neighbors in my sister's neighborhood (where we're staying for an extended Thanksgiving holiday).

Here's "Old Fathead:"



And Fros-T Chillin with the ice cube grill:



The Four Snowmen of the Apocalypse:



Snuffles:



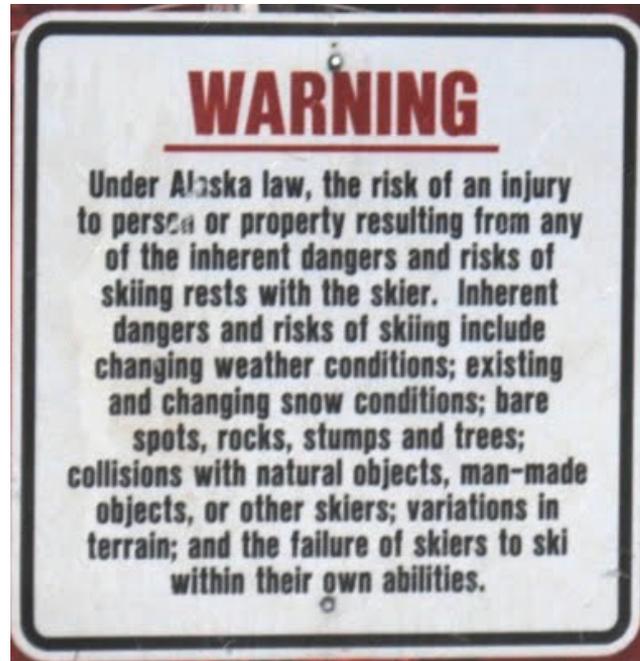
And finally, Ned Flanders' snowman:



## Lily Hits the Slopes with Mama

On Friday, we headed out to Hillberg Ski Area with the kids to go tubing. Talk about a blast! We stayed until evening, and by that time, the slopes had pretty much iced over and we were rocketing down at ridiculous speeds. The boys naturally had a blast. What's cool is that Lily had a blast too! I don't think the boys would have enjoyed doing something like this at age two. Lily went repeatedly, and didn't even whine with fear or anticipation on the first run! Anyway, took a boatload of pictures.











## Star the Reindeer

Yesterday I was driving through Anchorage, when I happened upon an odd sight for a back-Easter like myself. Some guy was walking his pet on a leash through the downtown area. His pet reindeer, that is. The man's name is Albert Whitehead, and his friend is named Star. She is the sixth in a longstanding constellation of Stars [a couple of which were turned to sausage for different reasons]. Albert and I exchanged stories and phone numbers, and left on mutually good smiles and a handshake. I looked up Star on Google when I got home, and found an article that gives the brief history of Star through the generations, and her impact and role as Anchorage's oldest and most celebrated mascot. Check out the link (attached).





SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2009

## 'Twas the Night Before Christmas: Dramatization of a True Event

This is a fictional story based upon the true events that take place each year in Alaska's interior and remote rural areas, thanks to the active and reserve Marines of Delta Company, 4th Antiterrorism Battalion (formerly Echo Company, 4th Force Recon) stationed in Anchorage.

'Twas the night before Christmas, and through the small house  
Were the smells of fresh salmon, and pies, and smoked grouse;  
Beside the stacked kindling the split logs were ready  
To fight back the cold with a flame that was steady;  
The kids were in bed, but to ease mama's cares,  
Dad was guarding their feast from the wolves and the bears;  
He pulled from his pipe, and he rocked with his gun,  
And he sighed as he counted the presents... not one.  
Then out in the woods there arose a loud humming,  
And dad sprung to the door to see who was coming;  
"Whoever it is, it's not trouble, I hope,"  
Then he chambered a round, and he looked through his scope;  
At first he saw lights, then his eyes caught the glare  
Of a symbol of old on a flag in the air;  
His jaw dropped at once when the snowmobiles stopped  
And off the machines, eight young Marines hopped;  
He miscounted, of course, because there was another--  
A man whom he knew long ago, he called 'brother,'  
With a dip in his lip, and a name that was funny,  
Dad smiled as he thought, "Ha! Slazinski made Gunny."  
"To what do I owe this occasion?" he asked,  
As he put on the coffee, and offered a flask;  
"It's Christmas!" Said Ski, "And you and your wife  
Live hundreds of miles from civilized life!

We're making our rounds as we do every year,  
With gifts for the young 'uns, and for you my friend, BEER!"  
Then dad and his brothers shared stories and lies  
And they laughed 'til it proved that the old man still cries;  
When no one was looking, a Corporal Joe Skagg  
Slipped out, and back in, with a Toys-for-Tots bag.  
He stacked the gifts neatly up under the tree,  
And he set down the Yeunglings, and dad said, "For me?"  
With a smile and a wink, and with handshakes and hugs,  
They said their farewells and they emptied their mugs.  
"Big Petey, Skagg, Smith, and Sergeant McFarlane,  
and Gaskill, and Mongo, Rodriguez and Carlin,  
Mount Up! We'll meet with the others up river--  
Stow bags and check gas, we've got toys to deliver!"  
In a flash they were gone, and the kids then did wake  
To a bushel of presents, and trimmings, and cake!  
Mama was speechless, and papa was proud  
But just then he gasped, and he shouted out loud  
For a black and white photo on the mantle we'd see  
Of PFC Papa!... and Lance Corporal Ski.  
He ran to the door, and he bellowed like thunder,  
"Semper Fi, Marines! And thanks for the plunder!"  
To this day, if you read this, you'd think it a lie,  
But a short moment later, he received a fly-by  
From a KC-130, with markings he knew  
From the days when he swam, and he fought, and he flew.  
The rest of the day, the family had fun,  
And dad smiled with his Yeungling, his pipe, and his gun.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2009

## No Prohibition in Sight

Alaska has a drinking problem. Their ABC/Class C stores are massive and many. I thought I'd seen everything until I saw this: a Sam's Club Liquor outlet!



## Ole Jack, Fur Proprioter



These days, Alaska has--with few exceptions--all of the modern amenities of the lower 48. In Anchorage, you can find Starbucks, Applebee's, Taco Bell, Wal-Mart and Barnes & Noble Bookstore (Borders), all centrally located. Even the recently-emerged mobile IT provider, the Geek Squad, is seen driving the streets (funny though, unlike their southern counterparts who typically drive eco-friendly Beetles and nerd-mobiles, these guys drive Turbo-Diesel F250s with studded snow tires).

What sets this State apart in the 2009 retail world is a surprisingly high number of fur, ivory, and animal product suppliers. The woodsmen of Alaska consume an entirely different brand of granola than the citizens of, say, Berkley, if you know what I mean. There's a reason there are no PETA signs displayed here; they've all been shot down.

Of the 30 or so furriers that call Anchorage their home, I was particularly attracted to one,



a man known simply as "Ole Jack." Now, Jack is an interesting character. His store is called Fur Alaska, located at 329 W. 5th Avenue, directly across from JC Penney's at the mall downtown. The store originated and was opened at this location by his father Jacob in the fifties. It is filled with all sorts of furs, and carved antlers, and scrimshaw ivory and whale tooth and baleen and bone. The Northern rival of alpaca cloth, called qiviut,

is carried here. It is spun from the soft underbelly wool of musk oxen.

"Have a seat, young man," said Jack after our initial introduction. "I'll tell you a story." Ole Jack spoke briefly about the store's beginnings, the fur trade, and its rise and fall with the economy. Then he said, "You know that chair you're sitting in? It has been sat in by two

U.S. presidents!" "Ha!" I exclaimed, noting its craftsmanship. "You're kidding!" "Nope! President Ford bought a fur coat in here for himself, and he sat in this chair while he waited. President Reagan was the other. Carter was in here but didn't sit; he simply leaned on the back of the chair. Clinton too--but he just stood." Ole Jack noted that for Carter, there was a ridiculous entourage of security personnel inside the store.

Jack then pulled down a framed photo to show me. He beamed with pride as he explained the photo. "That's President Ford's fur coat. The man on the right, that's [Leonid Brezhnev] the then-leader of the Soviet Union. At the moment this photo was taken, Mr. Brezhnev



turned and interrupted the U.S. Secretary of State... *'Please excuse me, Mr. Kissinger--I must try on the President's coat!'*

In the short time that followed, Ole Jack and I got to know each other better. He has traveled the world several times over, and has the knowledge and the multi-lingual abilities to prove it. He stressed the importance of traveling the world with one's children, at every expense. "If there

are roads, drive. Don't fly. If you can walk somewhere, walk. Engage with everyone! And above all, do not forget the most important word or phrase in any language: pourquoi. Warum. Par que. Nande. Why! It is how you will learn." He implored me to study the history of the Magyar people (my wife's Hungarian roots) and their ties to the Fins--and before that, their ties to the Monguls and the Huns. Finally, he told me to write about everything--all of my experiences--and to never stop writing. It was very encouraging. I found a friend in Ole Jack. Hope to see him again someday.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2009

## Sullivan's Steakhouse, Anchorage



On 320 W. 5th Avenue in Anchorage, there's a great dress-up spot to eat called Sullivan's. The restaurant, a classy Ruth's Chris type of steakhouse, is named for an Irish fighting champion--one of the last bare-knuckle boxers in organized fighting history. Its interior walls are adorned with framed photos of the legend, along with collectible items that presumably belonged to him (prize belts, clothing articles, etc.).

I dragged my very underdressed family to the seemingly low-key steakhouse to grab lunch. Our server was Charles Grittner, who did a fantastic job of catering to the kids without making us seem like a burden or embarrassment to the restaurant in the face of more informed patrons. I'm ashamed to think like that, but I can't stand taking my wife out on a spiffy date and then being seated next to the Brady Bunch. Good news is, our kids perform superbly at restaurants. The baby was even in a great mood, which was a huge score for the Speights family.

For starters, the Caesar salads were perfectly preportioned; not too small, not too large, not too much or little dressing (*too much* is a problem on most Caesar salads). The kids shared buttered French bread while Petra and I each had a bowl of lobster bisque. The bisque was perfect, and had surprisingly large pieces of lobster meat amply distributed throughout each bowl. For our lunch entrees, the boys and Petra each had a 'knife & fork burger:' The Classic, the Applewood Bacon BBQ, and the Gruyere & Sauteed Mushroom. As THE PAPA, I reserved the right to taste-test each burger. The Classic was too classic. Nothing special about it. The other two were equally good. Petra ordered skillet chips as

her side, which are dark potato chips fresh cut and fried in the kitchen. I had the 12 oz. NY strip with horseradish mashed potatoes. The extra garlic I asked for was not scooped from a jar, and comprised of roughly 6 large cloves finely chopped and delivered quickly. The temperature was as ordered, and the steak was very good. Two glasses of house red were not the best I've had, but complemented the meal nicely.

Ayla is six months old, but ate a little of everything I ate. Lily was particularly fond of the dessert that we all shared, a huge Blackbottom Pie (a lightly flavored, whipped peanut butter pie, with layered iced and whipped cream and a nut topping, all in an oreo pie shell... yeah, okay, we all loved it. Walked away from a \$120 lunch with a styro cup of black coffee, and across the street to Ole Jack's.



## Silent Night--Remembering Christmas Eve, 1914, Ypres, Belgium

I have been inspired, every Christmas since I was a boy, by two songs. This is a story about the first of those songs, or rather, a story about a story about the song.

I remember my grandpa retelling me a story that he'd heard when he was young, about how the song *Silent Night* caused a mutual British/German cease-fire in the trenches

during The Great War. The story passed through my ears, then through my aforementioned "fish story filter" on the way to my brain. The Fish for years I told the story in my own way, the troops being American Marines, the war being WWII. Over time, though I'm certain now that grandpa told it right the first time, I believed my own story.

I looked it up online. What a wonderful tool Google is. First, I'm ashamed to see that many vets have made that their own story, similar to the way that I did. The saying that "history repeats itself" seems a comical tag to apply to the instances wherein individuals retell stories to the point that they're horribly mangled and misconstrued. But it's true. Folks will continue to hack up plagiarized stories their own way, for glorification by the uneducated masses.

What I want right now, is for you to hear this beautiful story the right way. What I don't want to do is tell it myself. Please check out the link, by clicking on the title of this posting, to hear it told through the words of Victor M. Parachin. Enjoy.

## The Fish Story Filter

Being the son of my father, I have developed a sensitive and adaptive "fish story" filter somewhere between each of my ears and my brain. Unlike a bullcrap detector (which merely *detects*), this filter automatically extracts the lies and exaggerations out of any story, recalculates them, and re-inserts them in their proper sizes and proportions. Here is a sample story; it couldn't be one of dad's stories because he used to be a Harley-riding brawler, but you'll get the idea:

"I was driving to work in my Hummer when some big-rig trucker cut me off and made me swerve into the lead hog of the Hell's Angels. The bikers surrounded me and forced me to a stop. I prayed what I believed would be my last words, then noticed a donkey's jawbone on the ground. I picked it up and slayed all fifty of them. The only ones that gave me trouble were the seven foot ninja with the steel eye, and the pirate the bowie knife. He's the one that gave me a this nasty slice down my nose and lip."

The fish story filter recalculates the story as it enters my brain:

"I lost control of my golf cart on my way to tee off, and bumped into a Shriner that was parking his Road King. He held up some device near his chest and yelled at me through a hole in his throat. It scared me! I jerked the golf cart in reverse so hard that I fell out of the cart and onto the ground, hitting face-first on the tab from a can of Diet Coke. That's where I got this cut."

Believe it or not, we are not all created stupid. We all have these filters. Unfortunately, in some people, they have in-grown and have a reverse affect on storytelling. We call these people storytellers, or in English-speaking countries, LIARS. Such people are the ones who screw up a whisper line in Kindergarten. "PSSST! Jimmy loves Sally, pass it on!" "Jimmy loves Sally, pass it on." "Jimmy loves Sally, pass it on." "Sally's feet stink, pass it on..." If you're smiling as you read this, you've got an ingrown filter and you know it. Shame on you, tale-twister.

If your fish story filter is in proper working condition, the hard part is teaching yourself how to use it in various environments. Here's how you do it. Understand that 90% of people who are talking, have a motive for doing so (and don't forget, 70% of all statistics are made up). That means they're trying to make you believe what they're saying, or buy what they're selling if you will. Why? Because it behooves them in some way. They have a motive, and it is almost always personal gain. Recognize that propaganda has many shapes; determine the motive of someone who you are listening to (or reading), and you've just activated your filter. Congratulations.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2009

## Stille Nacht, 1914: Eine Frage für die Deutsche Leute

Hallo meine deutschen Leserinnen und Leser! Ich habe eine Frage. Es ist eine Geschichte über einen Waffenstillstand zwischen deutschen und britischen Kämpfer im Ersten Weltkrieg, es ist während der Weihnachtszeit erzählt in vielen amerikanischen

militärischen Einheiten. Ich frage mich, ob diese Geschichte auch in Deutschland erzählt wird, speziell bei der Bundeswehr und anderen Waffengattungen. Wenn jemand mir sagen könnte, wäre ich sehr dankbar. Ich möchte Ihre Antworten in englischer Sprache auf dieser Website transkribieren. Vielen Dank und schöne Feiertage.

## Relics of Infamy



At the extreme southwest corner of Hickam Air Force Base's runway on Pearl Harbor, there is a large tidal wading area that drops off rather sharply down a mollusk-encrusted shelf. When I was a boy, and we would visit our friends at Hickam, I'd ride my bike down to this area and inadvertently kick up historical artifacts as I'd search for pearls. Somewhere amongst my treasures today, there is a handful of large, spent brass casings with non-U.S.

markings, presumably from Japanese Zeros.

A lot has changed in the world since December 7th, 1941. Mitsubishi, one of the leading auto manufacturers in the United States (#1 in 2003), is also the company that manufactured the A6M "Zero" fighter plane, mentioned above. A 2009 Country song by Brad Paisley, *Welcome to the Future*, also compares the WWII-era Japanese-American vibe with the strong cross-cultural relations of today's generation.



The technological advances of recent decades put an eerie spin on historical research. Using Google Earth, you can zoom in on satellite imagery to view modern-day Pearl Harbor just as the Japanese fighters did that Sunday morning, complete with planes parked outside their hangars. In the middle of Hickam, there's a large, white-roofed building that is shaped like the middle of a waffle fry. This is the Pacific Air Forces Headquarters building, and the most prominent structure still in use that bears the pock-mark scars of bullet strafes from the attack.



Probably the most well-known monument that pays tribute to the lives lost at Pearl Harbor is the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial. It is built directly above the sunken ship. Every day, visitors from around the world flock to the structure, to pay respects to the sailors and Marines entombed below. You may be surprised to see oil bubble up from the ship--it has continued to do that since the ship was sunk. To get to the memorial from Honolulu / Waikiki Beach, take the Queen Lili'uokalani Fairway West to Kamehameha Highway, then North until you reach the Admiral Clarey Bridge to Ford Island. The bridge is another modern amenity to aid in observing and studying history. Before it was completed in 1998, the only way to visit Ford Island to see the Mighty Mo, or to see the Arizona, was to rent a sailboat and crab across the windy surface of one of the largest hammerhead breeding grounds in Hawai'i. I made that trip twice.

The most overlooked relics of the Day of Infamy, however, are all around us. Of the individuals who witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor, the living remnant grows smaller every day. If you peruse the human interest stories of your local and surrounding area newspapers today and tomorrow, you may be fortunate enough to read the first-hand accounts of these surviving gems.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2009

## The Moose's Tooth

Every city worth bragging about has a cooler-than-most hangout for the local yokels. In Anchorage, that place is [The Moose's Tooth](#). This spot's a pizzeria slash microbrewery that is cool for the whole family. We went last week. Now, I've got to be brutally honest--the pizzas are a bit too hippy for my taste. I had the **Backpacker** personal pizza, because it was recommended by our server as a hearty, gusto pie. It was disgusto. After I ate it all, I ate everyone else's leftovers. Hey, it's a beer and pizza joint, yo. The **roasted garlic pizza** was excellent, but only because tons of roasted garlic cloves taste good on anything. The **Pesto Supreme** tasted like toilet bowl cleaner--and I actually love all the individual ingredients (including feta cheese, artichoke, sun-dried tomatoes, Kalamata olives). The **spinach garlic chicken** pizza was not hateful... as for the **Pizza Margherita**, *the Tooth* would do well to take a few tips from [Cogan's Pizza](#), located in Norfolk and Suffolk, Virginia.

Now, you may assume that I'm just a Grinch among pizza critics, partial to my own neck of the woods. I assure you that is untrue. Moving on... The reason that my first pie went down so easily was because it was paired with an absolutely delicious tall cider ale. If you've ever had a Hornsby's hard cider, add a pinch of sweet and a whole lot of smooth. I knew two things at once: that I'd be having another, and that I'd return to *the Tooth* someday with witnesses. It got better.

My brother-in-law, who was sitting beside me, was kept company by two small tumblers full of beer, one dark and one lighter. "Hey, what's that?" I asked him. "You can sample all their brews here, for like a buck a piece." "Whaaaaaat? Dude!" Okay, so the Alpenglow Amber gets an 8. The Pipeline Stout, a 6. Klondike Golden, a 7; Midtown Brown, an 8. The Polar Pale Ale gets a 7, the Bear Tooth Ale takes the cake with a whopping 4--it has hints of molasses, urine, and Brussel sprouts. Good thing I drank it last. "Hey waiter, another Cider, please!"

The Moose's Tooth is certainly a cool place with a cool atmosphere and a worldwide cult-

like following (take note of the many wearers of the *MT famous* tie-die T-shirt posing across the globe, in photos that cover a wall). They hold monthly "First Tap" concerts, introducing a brand new band and a brand new brew. They also have an indie film venue, the *Bear Tooth Theatre Pub*.

In summary, the Tooth gets a "9" for unique beer selection, a "5" for pizzas, and a "16" for local support and worldwide fan base... this rounds out to an even "10" out of a possible 10 on the hip factor scale.

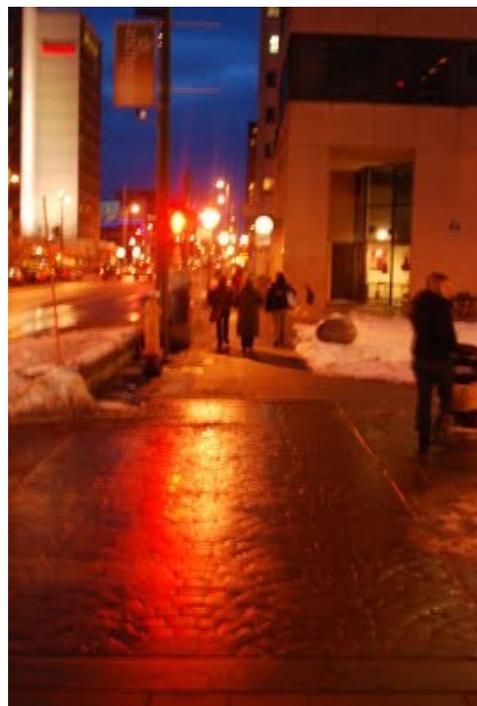
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2009

## Wrapping Up Alaska

We got back from Alaska last weekend. Feels like it took all week to adjust our sleep patterns. I'll be honest, I did not want to come back to Virginia. That feeling, I'm told, was shared by my wife and kids. We all had too much fun. From the day before Thanksgiving until we left, it snowed every day. Petra points out that every morning we woke up, she'd look out the window and the mountains always looked different.

In our final days in Anchorage, we all climbed Flat Top Mountain, we traced the Eagle River portion of the Old Iditarod Trail, we strolled the downtown area a couple more times, did a lot of sledding, bought some souvenirs... and I finally got a coffee from one of those cool little drive-up coffee shacks they had all over the place... they even put a little snowman on my lid.







**AVALANCHE HAZARD AREA**

You can die in an avalanche in these mountains, others have. While avalanches can occur at any time, the risk is greatest:

- During or after strong winds blowing snow or a storm (snow or rain)
- When clues of instability exist (e.g. recent avalanches, hollow sounds or whumping noises)
- On steep, smooth, leeward and snow loaded slopes

*You should be properly trained and equipped before traveling on these slopes. At a minimum, basic equipment should include a shovel, probe and avalanche beacon for each person. To learn more about safe travel in the mountains, call the Alaska Avalanche School at 345-3566.*

**Avalanche accidents are avoidable!**



MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2009

## A Strange Light Anomaly this Morning



It's 2:25 AM. Do you know where your kids are? Seriously, though... I wake my wife up at Midnight to check out the big meteor shower that we kept seeing advertised on Yahoo for the last three days. We bundled up and walked outside, and saw about 50 meteors in less than 15 minutes. We walked back inside to watch the spectacle from the big bay window. Right about that time, three big lingering flashes that resembled fueled explosions went off, illuminating a previously dark sky. Using the magic of *Google Earth* and the WKGM radio tower that is dead North of us for reference, I estimate the flashes to have originated in or just above downtown Smithfield, which is directly behind the tower from our Line of Sight and is almost exactly 15 miles from us as the crow flies.

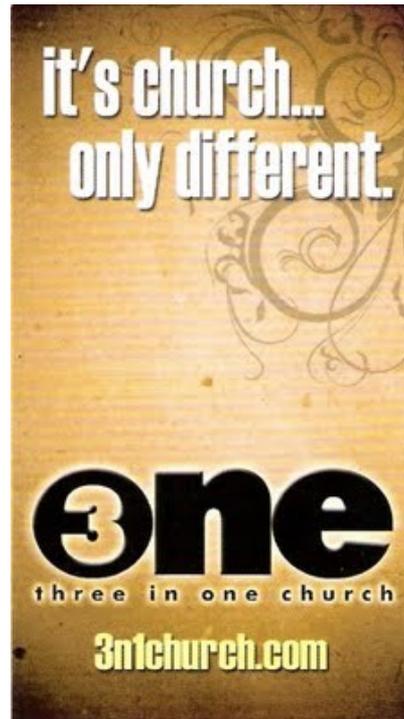
Then something wierd happened. The light rapidly shifted over to the left, probably a good 5 miles, and turned from Friday night white to sunset orange, quickly. It looked like a forest fire over Isle of Wight. Then clouds started rising and coming right at us, and we noticed that the field in front of us started to fog over--the fog coming directly at us so quickly that Stephen King couldn't have made it creepier. The light seemed to carry across the clouds, which quickly stretched out to my right at about a 90 degree angle (from my left lateral limit). That put the light somewhere over the Chesapeake Square area. My wife and I cannot be the only ones that saw this.

When the lights in the sky shifted from romantic to wierd, I ran upstairs to grab the camera. The first pictures I took were about 15 minutes into the show. The second set of pictures are a continuation of the first. The third set takes place about 30 minutes in; note how the color just disappeared and the light source jumped from the far left to its original position in line with the tower.

Mind you, this is not evening time. It's One O'Clock in the morning when I took these pictures! Sorry they're blurry. After about 40 minutes of intense light changes, the sky went back to pitch black. The cloud blanket was pulled back off of the sky, and the only lights outside now are coming from the stars.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2009

## 3n1 Church: New Growth from the Ashes, and a Dude of a Pastor.



It's no secret to those who know me, that I'm picky about what church we attend. You've heard the term "shooting the messenger," right? I have a tendency pay more attention to the delivery of a message than the message itself. Quirky, I know. Well, when it comes to church, I simply cannot subject myself (or my family) to a mamby-pamby preacher. Likewise important in a church, I'm not a big fan of old-fashioned, legalistic traditions (stiff-necked ties, no music except hymns, etc.).

We have been attending our new church, 3n1, since its inception a couple months ago. Ironically, it's the first church that we just kinda fell into. You see, the church that we deliberately chose when we moved to the Hampton Roads area of Virginia was called "Faith Alive." We fell in love with the leadership team and with the church's general aura. Apparently, we weren't the only ones. The church grew from an 11-person congregation a decade ago to a couple thousand people in 2009.

Pastor Bob was the Senior Pastor. He was an awesome spiritual leader and very cool guy

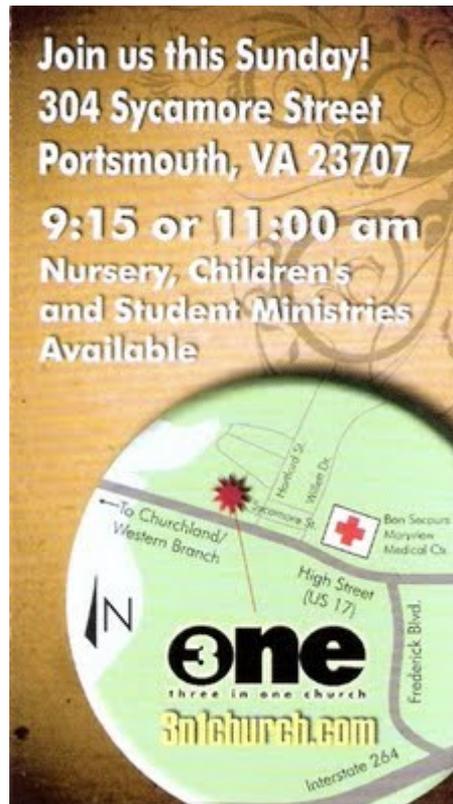
until he was caught doing someone he shouldn't have been doing. Inevitably, church attendance waned heavily in the months that ensued. It was a crushing blow for a church body that had just made the front page of the 7-Cities' paper, *The Virginian-Pilot*, in an article that showcased the church's huge new building, rapid growth, area popularity, and regional outreach impact. Even Alan Krasnoff, the Mayor of Chesapeake, called this church home. We were all very hurt.

The *Church of God*, who oversees the 'non-denominational' church from a distant location in Tennessee (and knows what's best for our community in Eastern Virginia) placed another guy in the hot seat: some new preacher with a nasty "old preacher" attitude. Then came the real slap in the face: most of the old associate pastors and staff were ousted without cause. The female offender in question, along with her husband, were apparently banned from the church by the new pastor. How very Christ-like. We ducked out after only one service with him, and just stopped going to church for a while. Be it known to all that we still love every single person that was involved in or affected by this.

Thankfully, God is bigger than the drama that plagues the American church. The fabled grapevine, doing what it does, spread word of some hip new church arising from the ashes, begun by the old associate pastor and his wife. Pastor Matt & Lori Stewart moved here with their kids from California in 2007 (or was it '08?). My first impression of Pastor Matt? He had frosted surfer hair and called everyone 'Dude.' Since Lori and the kids seemed perfectly normal, I thought his attitude might have been fake--the result of aging, mid-life, whatever--but nope, that's the real him. Our pastor dude.

They have been doing a tremendous job with the church, and have had quite a turnout since the beginning (not sure on the numbers... a couple few hundred-ish members). They're in a temporary location at the Portsmouth Women's Club on 304 Sycamore Street (Portsmouth). The best part about the church is this: it's REAL. It's pertinent to today, to life, to young and old. It is a very casual and comfortable environment. Great spread of snacks and coffee. Nice people who are not judgemental or gossipy. Least of all, encouraging nuggets from the Good Book to carry you through your week. Oh yeah... and my 5-Alarm hottie singing on the left side of the stage (AAOOOOOOOGA!).

If you get the chance, check out our church. It's different.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2009

## Wikipedia--The Official Reference of Virginia State Police, in Reference to Felony Convictions

So here's news to those who don't know me... I have a Bad Conduct Discharge from the Marines (and two Honorables, so I'm not a *complete* douchebag) for selling government gear on ebay a few years ago. Okay, so I'm a douchebag. It doesn't keep me from obtaining a concealed weapons permit, but it did keep me from buying a handgun. Hmm. Let's

investigate.

I contacted a big-shot Blue Law attorney in Virginia. "No, you don't have a felony," he assures me. "You don't have a misdemeanor, either. The *Uniformed Code of Military Justice* doesn't contain the words "felony" or "misdemeanor" anywhere. Typically, well, it's gray area. In Virginia, if you have a Dishonorable Discharge or served over a year in confinement, they'll treat it like a felony--but it's still not a felony."

Psheew, that's a relief. I didn't spend a year in confinement and I didn't get a Dishonorable Discharge, so what's the deal? Let me research it. Okay, I researched it. Pretty vague. Nobody's got a solid answer that ties to any official code anywhere. Something's fishy about all this... so today I call the State Police office that allows or disallows the purchase of handguns in Virginia. I talked to Tracy.

Tracy told me that the reason I couldn't buy a handgun, was because according to the paper in front of her, a General Court Martial conviction of any kind--though not officially a felony--was considered a felony in the State of Virginia. News to me. So anyway, I ask her where the source of this information comes from. "Department of Criminal Justice Services?" I asked. "Virginia Code?" She put me on hold.

When Tracy returned from speaking with her supervisor, her answer floored me. "We're not sure where this information comes from," she said. "There's a lady named Lori that we call for this kind of information, she's kind of a Marine Corps expert." She proceeded to give me Lori's number, then referred me to where they usually look up their information... Wikipedia!

For those of you who don't know, Wikipedia is a living online encyclopedia that is written by users--that means you, me, or any pschopath can write the information contained in Wikipedia. It is for this reason that Wikipedia is considered an inaccurate, unreliable reference by the majority of colleges and universities across the country, and its use as such is typically forbidden or discounted (as a student reference). But it's good enough for the Virginia State Police. Don't get me wrong, I use it all the time and it's a great resource

to start with--but make sure you back the information up elsewhere. Don't take it as 100% gospel.

So I'm stuck without an answer. Here's this--I've got \$500 for anybody that can correlate a military conviction directly to a misdemeanor or felony, in writing, in the State Code of Virginia (or the US Code). Wikipedia, by the way, says that it's considered a felony to have a Dishonorable Discharge (which I don't have).

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_discharge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_discharge) By the way, that particular Wikipedia article "needs citations for verification," if any of you feel like writing it to make it the Gospel According to You.

You see, the worst part of the whole ordeal was this: Tracy verbally confirmed that the rules are different for purchasing a handgun than for carrying a handgun. And she admitted that she didn't know why. Then she confirmed that there's not really a State Law to reference to tell me why I'm "delayed" from purchasing a handgun. Nothing against Tracy, I'm sure she performs her job expertly, and I'm thankful for the insight. But there are some serious kinks that need to be worked out of Virginia's (and many other States, I'm sure) legal system, regardless of whether the necessary changes fall in my favor.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2009

## **Melvin Basnight, Homeless American**

So last night my wife and I have a big blowout fight. I grabbed my truck keys and left without a plan, in the direction of Waffle House and fresh hot coffee. Well, apparently, someone tore the Waffle House down and forgot to tell me. So I'm back to having no plan. Wait a minute--we could kiss and make up! No, that would make too much sense. We don't do this often; I want to stay angry for a little while. New game plan: search the streets for a bum and treat him or her to dinner.

There were no bums to be found in Suffolk. I'll learn why later. I head to Norfolk. As I

drove down Granby Street, I see a bundle of shopping bags loaded onto a bicycle, vicinity of Club Fahrenheit. A thoroughly-bundled man was leaning against the pile, reading the paper. As if by fate, there was a single parking space available, right next to him. I passed him, whipped the truck around, and parked.

As I approached the man, he greeted me. I introduced myself informally and proceeded to explain to him everything that you read in the first paragraph of this story. Then I sized up the situation: there's nothing open at this point where we might chow down. So I transferred the money that was in my wallet into his hand so he could grab a bite at his convenience. Then we talked. We talked about everything. It was windy and cold. From the very start, I was freezing my kanuts off.

His name is Melvin Basnight, a 70-year-old black man who is fifty at best. He is "credentially disabled," meaning that he has no birth certificate, no Social Security Number, and no idea in which hospital or city he was born. For this, he has a vehement anger towards his father, who died a couple years ago. His mom died in 2005. He has one estranged son, but otherwise no family. Melvin is slightly heavy set, and his countenance is not unlike that of the actor Reginald VelJohnson, who we all know as the likeable character Carl Winslow from the old TV sitcom *Family Matters* (or the main cop from the original *Die Hard*). His hands are ashen white--chalky and cracked from the presumed effects of cold wind.

Without a Social Security Number, it is impossible to obtain legal employment or living assistance in this country. Melvin is stuck. By trade, he is an expert pianist. "You've heard of Liberace (lib-er-ah-chee)? 'Round here, they call me 'Niggerace,' he says proudly." He gave me the brief history of his musical gigs. "I can play classical, pop, rock, dance, funk, and gospel jazz. I don't play worldly jazz, though... there's no money in it. I can play Michael Jackson like a jukebox."

He explains to me how Norfolk is referred to as New York on the streets of Virginia. "New York, Virginia. We've got 5 landmarks: the World Trade Center, the Twin Towers, the lift-bridges, a section called Harlem, and a ball that drops every New Year, just like in Times

Square. Suffolk is known as San Francisco, VA. But you won't find too many homeless folks down in Suffolk these days. The city don't let you sleep anymore."

"As for me," Melvin continued, "I try to get my sleep during the day, on the city bus. Norfolk has the best deal. \$3.50 for an all-day pass. Keeps me warm and gives me a chance to sleep, and they even carry my bike around. But it's getting tougher to sleep-- they're crackin' down on everybody. These days, I'm not getting enough sleep and it's killing me. Back to the bus topic--I have to consolidate my bags. No more than two bags per passenger. So I keep this empty gym bag that a transit officer gave me, and when I get on the bus, I just strap this big sea bag on my back and put the small bags inside this here gym bag."

"How long you been homeless?" I asked him. "10 years, 11 months, 23 days... wait, what's today?-- yeah, 23 days." "Do the cops ever bother you?" "They used to. I used to hitchhike everywhere to stay cool during the summer and stay warm during the winter. Got so many tickets, it stopped bothering me. Sometimes they'd write me four or five tickets in one sitting, like they hated me for nothing. Then the judges and the cops alike kept seeing my face and got to know me. Nobody really messes with me anymore." Huh. *There's that 'freedom' mentioned in the song "Mr. Wendel," by Arrested Development.*

"The real danger is out here on the streets. The reason that I move around at night is because it's dangerous at the shelters." "Dangerous how?" I asked, "Like thieves who'll steal your stuff?" "No! Who cares about all this (motioning toward his pile of bags). They're supposed to separate the schizo's and the crackheads from the rest of the tenants, but they don't. As a result, your life is on the line every night." Then he laughed. "For women, it's a whole nother story. Lots of these women cry 'rape,' because they know it could be their lottery ticket from the State. Most of the women I see on the streets couldn't beg to be raped, they're so ugly! I mean REAL ugly!" Despite the gravity of the topic, I chuckled.

Then we had some excitement. Some guy walked out in front of the club, opened the water meter access, and started tooling around. I thought maybe he hid his pocketknife in there while he was clubbing or something. No, he took off the water meter. Then he

walked over in front of some restaurant, and proceeded to switch water meters. Besides being a wierd task at 2 AM, it's illegal! I had to cut Melvin's story short for a second--"HEY MAN, WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU DOING?" The guy gets super defensive, and is joined instantly by his drunk friend. The two are cussing and screaming and stomping towards me and--I can't help it, I'm doing it right back to them. Then a rolling cop hits his brakes. He jumps out and approaches. Then 7-car backup arrives, all at once and FAST! Never been on the receiving end of that before. They completely ignored me and Melvin. The drunk friend slipped away.

Melvin and I stayed right where we were and kept chatting it up while the other guy was getting written up. I grabbed my thermos from the truck, and offer Melvin the last splash of cold coffee, which I gulp down after he declines. I also hand him a banana that I brought from the house (fighting with my wife makes me hungry!) and a new HellStorm Tactical brand fleece cap, to replace the crappy cotton one he was wearing. Looked to me like he could use some kneepads, cause every half hour or so, he would kneel down, one knee at a time, 'to take the pressure off his back.' He was also self-admittedly in need of comfortable shoes that look nice. "What size?" "12." I offered my boots that I was wearing, but warned that they probably stink.

The night ended after many stories and hours had passed. A cabbie stopped by who was a friend of Melvin's, and offered to let him warm up in the cab for a while. With that I made my exit, making a note to return around Christmas with some decent chow, warm gloves, and a good warm pair of kickers.

Now, seeing as the sun came up hours ago, this may be my last post ever, because my wife may very well murder me when I return home.

## **A Soggy, Miserable, Wonderful Morning to Hunt**

This morning, I slipped out into the windy darkness and embraced the rain. My oldest boy by my side, I hoped that he might have a successful hunt. My youngest son excercised good judgement and slept in. Josh and I got to the tree where we would be shooting



liplock. Our toothbrushes have played the parts of Romeo and Juliette, Rappunzel, and a number of characters. They have played hide-and-go-seek and checkers. In a way, this simple role-play is one of the many ways my wife and I communicate with each other when words are not quite enough.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2009

## Ham On!

So, it's Christmas Eve and you're wondering how to do up tomorrow's ham--that is, if you eat ham on Christmas. John Natcher taught me this recipe long ago, and it's been a favorite in my family ever since. Without further adieu:

Buy a ham. Or, if you have a pig, cut its back leg off. Clean it up, keeping enough rind to flavor the meat, but trimming as much fat as possible. Now start hacking it up. No particular method... just make a lot of punctures and slices.

Okay, now the fixins. Cover the ham with equal parts of molasses and honey, roughly a cup and a half of each should do. Add a can of crushed pineapples. Now overpour a bottle of good, darker beer or amber ale--I use Yeungling. Cook in the oven for an hour and a half-ish @ 350, then remove and spoon the mix over the ham (or use a turkey baster to fill the crevices with the cooked juices). Now, dust the entire ham in ground or powdered ginger. Turn it over and dust the other side. Now slow cook the ham somewhere between 75 and 150 degrees, for at least two hours, checking it and overpouring juices a few times to keep it from drying out.

That's it. Go! Feast! Make stomachs happy!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2009

## **Satan's Cookies, the Healthcare Bill, and Luxembourg's American St. Nick**

I had three writing objectives today: one was a holiday ham recipe blog entry (done), another entry on the magic of Christmastime in Germany, and third, I'm sending out our end-of-year family letters.

As I sit here, computer on my lap, I'm enjoying one of the seasonal treats that pushes me over 230 lbs every year around the holidays. They are the absolute best sugar cookies you've ever tasted in your life. The recipe was passed down from my mom's mom's mom. When I eat one, I don't stop until the whole batch has been eaten. It's a holiday addiction, and I'm convinced that the devil has something to do with addictions. I call them's Satan's Cookies.

The health insurance reform bill passed in Senate today. I, um... don't know what that means. Republicans tell me to be angry and scared for my children's sake. Democrats tell me that Obama is the savior of our country. I think everybody's full of crap and I'm sick of it.

There was a very cool story on CNN, about a WWII Corporal who dressed up as Saint Nicholas and, along with his unit, visited the children of a Luxembourg town passing out candy. He just returned to the town to learn that he was a hero there. Very touching story... I suggest checking it out via Google or CNN.com.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2009

## **The Magic of Christmas Time in Germany, Part 1: Christkindlmarkt, Family Traditions, East Berlin**

Christmas time is highly anticipated at my house year-round. I fell in love with Christmas during the nine years that I lived in Germany. In my opinion, no other experience holds a

candle to a German Christmas.

The season begins in mid-November, when every town, village, and city in Germany sets up a *Christkindlmarkt*. What this translates to, literally, is "Christ Child Market," though *christkindl* has transformed into the name we know today as *Kris Kringle*, another name for Santa Claus. Sadly, some of the big cities have in recent years followed the U.S. example, succumbing to the antitheistic minority and eliminating Christ from a longstanding traditional title, and trading it for the less-intrusive "Weinachtsfest," or Christmas celebration. In either event, this market presents a cornucopia of artisans, street musicians, carolers, choirs, and vendors of holiday fare. And they're not out to milk your purses and wallets (more Christmas spirit, less commercialism).

Now, you have to understand that my father was raised in Germany for several years (his mother is German), and he made it a point to pass down the same traditions to my sister and I, through firsthand experience. The first thing we would do at Christkindlmarkt is make a dash for one of the many food booths, to snag some plates of *kartoffelkuchen* (German potato cake) and *gluwein* (a seasonal / holiday wine, served hot to all ages). We would toss a few Deutschmark into the hats of street performers, buy a few gifts, and join in with groups of singers when possible.

We would not leave to go home until mom bought her annual pyramid candle, which is a wooden, candle-powered windmill / mobile that she loved. Dad would also have to try his hand at the beer stein ping-pong toss, which offers a very cool prize variety for much less effort and fewer duckets than is required to win a cheap gimmick at an American theme park. My sister and I would each leave with an *adventskalender* (Advent Calendar), which contained 25 numbered doors that children open daily on the countdown to Christmas, each door revealing a new stamped chocolate treat!

Christkindlmarkt, like every weekend food market or seasonal fest held in Germany (and many other European countries), is usually held in the town square. The town square is almost always built around or in front of a huge Catholic church, complete with a bell tower. The ringing bells on the hours and halves add to the ambiance. The town square is

usually paved in cobblestone and designated as a *fussganger platz*, which is devoid of cars and open only to foot and pedal traffic. Most years in my experience, there was plenty of snow on the ground.

One of my favorite *Christkindlmarkt* visits was in East Berlin, back when the wall was still up. We would travel through *Checkpoint Charlie* after dad hit the currency exchange, and he'd hand me the equivalent of fifty U.S. bucks in East German Marks. With that, I could buy feather blankets for my grandmas, a fine porcelain china set for my mom, some toys for my sister, and even have enough left over for a huge set of lead soldiers, a switchblade, and enough candy to choke a Halloween bag. We went to East Berlin two Christmases in a row, then helped tear down the wall the third year (1989).

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2009

## **The Magic of Christmas Time in Germany, Part 2: St. Nicholas Day, Black Peter, and Midnight Mass**

German kids get to experience a very drawn-out Christmas. After the beginning of *Christkindlmarkt*, the next big event is on the eve of *Nikolaustag*, or Saint Nicholas Day. St. Nicholas Day is held nationwide in Germany on December 6th, and is celebrated by a daylong feast, and fellowship with friends and neighbors.

If you research online the Christmas traditions of various lands and cultures, you may be disappointed to know that through the carbon copies of plagiarized sites, much has been lost in translation. I try to back up my own stories through research, generally for dates and spelling, but could find no specific "in stone" traditions that mirrored those that I experienced in various German towns and villages. The truth is this: German Christmas celebration traditions are regionally different!

Americans military families who are stationed overseas in a permissive environment (as opposed to a semi-permissive [questionable] or non-permissive [dangerous] environment), have the option of living on the Economy, that is to say, off-base or off-post. We always

lived on the Economy, for my parents' reasoned importance of cultural immersion. For nine years in Germany, my childhood houses or apartments were located in Ramstein, Landstuhl, Kaiserslautern, Weselberg, Hauptstuhl, Stuttgart, and Vaihingen. The Homberg/Zweibrücken area was where my German family members lived (mostly second cousins, great aunts and uncles); hence, it was a perpetual second home to me.

On December 5th, the day before St. Nicholas Day, kids are encouraged to polish as many shoes as they could find, and place them outside the front door of their house before nightfall. Throw some carrots out there too. The reason? St. Nick will visit by night, along with Swartze Peter (Black Peter). Swartze Peter, if you ask some Germans, is Nikolaus' evil helper. Others say Swartze Peter works directly for the devil. Others still, say that Swartze Peter *is* the devil. So Black Peter and jolly Saint Nick come to your house with a big book of names. You guessed it--the good, the bad, and the ugly kids. Okay, not the ugly kids.

The gist is this: if you were good all year, you'll get your shoes filled with candy by St. Nikolaus. You may even get to meet him. If you were bad, you'll either get (A) empty shoes and a switch from Black Peter, (B) lumps of coal in your shoes, or (C) a visit from Black Peter and one gratis whoopin' on the butt. The options (A,B,C) depend on what part of Germany you live in, or maybe even what street you live on. You see, when I lived in Hauptstuhl, Herr Pfeffer (a neighbor) was--and has been for decades--the Nikolaus on our street. In Weselberg, Nikolaus was a group of volunteers from the village council. Nikolaus didn't make it around to the highrise apartments in Landstuhl, probably because it was mostly American kids--all of us brats and not even worthy of a few measly lumps of coal, I presume. Oh, by the way, the carrots are for Nikolaus' and Peter's Horses. The polished shoes? Oh, yes. If you were bad all year, but your shoes had a high parade-gloss spit-shine that a Marine would be proud of, your sins would be forgiven and you'd get candy in your shoes after all.

My grandma is here with us today (Christmas Eve, 2009). Her stories of Nikolaustag include an interesting intro for both Nikolaus and Swartze Peter. "Late at night, you would hear a racket outside the house. Usually, you would hear the sounds of nuts hitting the roof and

rolling off, or hitting the doors and windows. If the nuts were thrown softly, it indicated the coming of Nikolaus. If the nuts were pelted at the roof and doors with force, you'd better believe that Black Peter was coming." She went on to tell us that the kids were usually visited by both, and the roles were usually played by neighbors and townspeople.

I never met Swartze Peter. I probably would have crapped myself, especially after all the boot-shining I did to keep him at bay. I watched Nikolaus out the window one time, walking down the street with a big bag and stopping door-to-door. It was a cool sight, even for a super cool 9-year-old who was WAY past believing in Santa. Okay, so I was a 9-year-old nerd. I STILL didn't believe in Santa anymore.

Christmas was officially celebrated by all with a Midnight Mass ceremony at the town cathedral. Now here's where "fellowship" is defined. All the townspeople--the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, and every other German family--gathered at Midnight Mass, regardless of whether Protestant, Catholic, or unbeliever. Tradition and celebration was, and I believe *still is*, a very important part of German culture as it relates to Christmas time. Mit das, ich wunschen Euch ein Frohe Weinachten, meine Freunde! Merry Christmas, all!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2009

## Weeweechoo a Merry Christmas:

### The 2009 Speights Family Letter

Once Upon A Time, there was an amazing family that was so incredibly much cooler than you could ever hope to be. They still are just that cool. You know them as the Speights family.

Greetings, Humbugs!

A Merry Christmas to you all. Hope it was a good one. I'm writing you from the Armpit of the East--Suffolk, Virginia. Okay, okay, it's not that bad. But all the other cities in this State are covered in snow right now and it's not fair! With our proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, we simply get rain, no matter how much snow is predicted in the forecast.

Wow, what a year! Petra is homeschooling the kids again this year and singing in the choir at our new church (our old church fell apart after the pastor did bad stuff). She got to help coach her friend Courtney during her baby labor. Petra experienced the pain of kidney stones this year. Woo-Hoo! She took a killer photo of an old train that I think is museum-worthy. I started a blog, published a book, and worked at a nuke site in central France a couple times, totaling a few months. Ran a couple few races. Helped dad set up his company to bid on federal jobs. I also have been working with Aunt Norma, who's laid up with MS in a care facility, throughout the year to help her publish her children's books... one down, two to go.

Josh, our oldest, turns 9 in March. Football, football, football... for breakfast, lunch, dinner, & twice on Sunday. Loves to watch the games, loves to play the video games, and loves to play. This year, he was an awesome defensive contribution to the all-black local Pop-Warner tackle football league, the Suffolk Titans. Numerous sacks. He's got a lot of heart and drive, and we're the loudest parents on the sidelines. Turns out, mama's got a heck of a throwing arm as well! Josh and I just got back from hunting today. It was our first opportune hunting day of the year, and it was nasty outside! We'll try again next week.

Caleb turns 7 on January 1<sup>st</sup>. He is a creative opportunist, and a freakin' genius. He makes elaborate weapons and spaceships out of sticks and rocks and whatever he finds. He designed more than 50 of his own transformers, including one he named "Flamer." Messing with Caleb, I said, "Hey Caleb, you might wanna change this robot's name, cause 'flamer' is another way of saying he's gay." Josh defends his brother's creation, stating matter-of-factly, "Well then he's gay!" Caleb wants to take Karate classes, which we'll be looking into. Every other Friday night, his Blockbuster movie choice is one of the Star Wars episodes. We bought and wrapped up the DVD set for him months ago (for Christmas), but I still defend his Friday night right to choose whatever movie he wants (from the parentally allowable list) when it's his turn. Caleb caught two baby squirrels this summer, which we briefly kept in captivity until their mournful squeaks softened our hearts to let them go.

Lily -- Undeniably cute. Ridiculously sarcastic. Surprisingly quick for a two-year-old. She is the first Barney fanatic in the family. She is 100% potty trained, as of 2 weeks ago. Went through a horrible 'fear of mascots' phase. Amazing reasoning skills, sense of intuition, and big-word vocabulary (albeit lisped). My favorite words / phrases she uses are: (1) Comfy--"tunsee" (2) Oh my gosh--"Omidosh!" (3) Privacy--"pub-a-see" and (4) coffee cup--"tawshee tup."

Ayla is our youngest. She's 7 months old and smiley! She crawls, eats boobs and bananas (cheeseburgers, etc.), and poops. She loves Daddy's presence and mama's voice.

This October, we attended the LeBlanc's 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Pumpkin Carving Bash. It's a lot of fun watching kids and adults alike go nuts to making elaborate designs. Then we enjoyed a 20-day Alaska trip in November; we visited my sister, her hubby, and their kids. Saw some moose & some mountain goats up-close in the wild, and some black wolf-thing that didn't show its face. I did NOT come back

home with illegal ivory. This Christmas, we're chilling out in Suffolk, watching the kids open a ton of presents (the first time we could say that in years)!

Anyway, we had a great year, full of interesting stuff. Can't wait to rock out 2010.

Later, All! Have a great New Year, Be blessed, and do us a favor: DO NOT write us back. We will not read your letters. The only things we like to read around here are bills, overdraft bank statements, and hate mail.

Schlappy Oolidays,

The Coolest Family on the Planet. EVER.



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2009

## The Laconic Fortune Cookie

"You constantly struggle toward perfection." That was the wisdom offered by a cookie I recently ate. My son, Joshua, had one that read, "You do not have difficulty making friends." My son Caleb's fortune was "You will find great success in business." Wow, I'm digging the random accuracy of these stale cookies! For my daughter Lily, the following advice: "To be dealt with fairly, treat others better than you think they should be treated." Very *Golden Rule*-ish. My youngest daughter's, "You are always welcome in the company of others." We (myself and the kids) then implored Momma to bust open her MSG-laden shell to reveal the powerful and poetically insightful message within...

"It's a nice day."

100% true story. We're still laughing about it.

## An Uncommon Solution to the Common Problem of Weight Gain

From March through November, the scale in our bathroom typically reads 205 pounds whenever I stand on it, give or take 5 pounds. During the other months, it can creep dangerously close to 240 pounds. Today, I weigh 236.

I have always had a pretty high body fat content. That's because I love food, in every way, shape, and form. I have, however, also been able to gain and drop weight very easily. Every year around the holidays, I have a tendency to 'let myself go,' and engorge myself on buttery, starchy, and dense foods and confections. Then I get sick of having boobs under my boobs whenever I stand in front of the mirror and slouch, and I end up taking the following actions. This weight-loss method has been highly effective for me for many years:

1. Set a lofty physical goal. If you're like me, you know that you should eat healthier and exercise more, but you don't. You're comfortably lazy and your willpower to change is weak. What you need is a self-induced kick in the butt. As soon as your finances can handle it, set aside about \$100. Then start looking at races or competitions that require physical effort... running, walking, cycling, swimming, rowing, lifting, climbing, or any combination. The distance and time of occurrence is up to you; just remember to keep it "lofty," meaning at or slightly above the maximum threshold that think you can handle. And don't put it too far down the road. Keep it inside of 6 months. I also suggest looking for a race that you must travel to--so that it takes you completely outside of your comfort zone. Register for the race and pay your fee.

2. Print off your registration confirmation and hang it up for you and the world to see. Your workplace. Your home office. Your fridge. Doing this will ensure that you are being constantly reminded, and it will prompt your family, friends, and co-workers to hold you accountable. You have just built a support platform.

3. Train! You will want to anyway. You are striving for a goal now. Something to achieve. Something to live for. Something to break up the monotony of the duldrum existence that you have eased into. Here's how you train: mix it up. Constantly. Music is important for

me... outside of that, the sky's the limit. Move, and then keep moving. When you run or bike or swim consistently, every day (or every other day) for two weeks, something in your body changes. You feel comfortable doing something that didn't initially feel good. You'll find yourself turning down a lot of the trash that you've been eating. Then, just when you start feeling good with your routine, mix it up again. Trick yourself up. If you are running a 10K, take off for a week and just hit the bicycle. Don't limit yourself to stationary exercise machines--nothing beats training how you will race.

4. Finally, vanquish all fear. Don't worry about the guy beside you, the old woman in front of you, or the sea of eyeballs behind you, waiting for you to fall, fail, stumble, crumble, or crash. This advice is good not only for the race, but for the training regime that precedes it.

It's that simple. I'll say no more. For me, this year's lofty goal is the Big Sur International Marathon. I've talked about doing it since I was 14, and this is the year. On April 25, 2010, at 06:45 AM, you know where I'll be... and I'll be 30 pounds lighter.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2009

## Avatar: The Movie of our Generation?

I hadn't heard a thing about it. "*What's an Avatar?*" Then I was invited to see it with a friend tonight, in IMAX 3D.

Wow. WOW!!! I have always resented missing the original *Star Wars* on the big screen (the movie against which all other cinematic goundbreakers are measured). I was fortunate enough to catch some awe-inspiring "man" movies, like Tim Burton's *Batman*, the epic *Braveheart*, and the movies *300* and *Gladiator*. I saw both *Titanic* and *Passion of the Christ* both at theaters.

I have never, however, been able to catch a truly pivotal, era-definitive movie at the theater, let alone in IMAX 3D, until tonight.

Okay, to be fair, let me define pivotal, or rather give examples. Try to think back to these times... do you remember what **Pixar** did for animated movies? Or what *The Matrix* did for action and fighting sequences? Or what *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* did for martial arts flicks? Each of these mentioned had one thing in common: they pushed the envelope. They raised the bar. Their producers and directors stepped way out of the box to create new standards in their movies' respective genres.

In the same way that the *Wizard of Oz* broke the boundaries of color films forever, so *Avatar* does for graphically-enhanced, visually-stimulating movies to follow. The story was *Fern Gully* with a twist, but the delivery, fantasy, and effects were stunning. *Avatar* is an absolute must-see before it leaves the theaters.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2009

## Twelve Women and Two Guys

I have always loved to write. I owe that passion, specifically, to twelve women and two guys.

Right off the bat, **Mrs. Galbreath** was my Kindergarten teacher. She taught me my ABC's. Of course, she's also the one who wouldn't let me go to the bathroom during the Pledge of Allegiance... I still remember pissing in her classroom and blaming someone else for it.

**My mom** taught me the magic combination of a stamp, envelope, and 'to' and 'from' addresses. It changed my life.

The next handful were also teachers. **Mrs. Wampler**, my First Grade teacher, provided my introduction to grammar. **Mrs. Nora Moore**, my Second Grade teacher, really pushed me to write. I won her end-of-year, class-wide story writing contest; my subject was the Snowshoe Hare. **Cathy Condon**, my Third Grade teacher, was also especially supportive of my writing. **Karen Cantor**, my Fourth Grade teacher, made everybody spend 30 minutes

of journal time at the beginning of each day. She would give a subject to write about, and the class was expected to expound in their personal journals. At first, she was stern with me about my comic book doodlings (caught me red-handed several times--sneaky I was not). Then she shifted her position, and I was dubbed the only kid in the class with a separate mission from that day forward: I was the class' designated daily comic strip artist. A lesser teacher would not have recognized and fostered this child's need for creative outlet.

I moved around a lot as a kid, and it's tough to make friends when you don't speak the language of the neighbor kids... so my friends growing up were all pen pals from back in the States. The first two letters I ever wrote were to my **grandmas Speights and Buchholz**. They were both always faithful to write back, and they still do to this day. I remember how special it felt to get their letters in the mail.

I was six when we first moved overseas. We were in England for a few months and then on to Germany. I had two friends who wrote to me regularly: **Scott MacGrath** and **Andrea McGruder**. I loved going to the 09009 Post Office at Ramstein to check our box... the memory etched such a deep gouge in my soft mush, that to this day I can remember the smell of that place. Our box number was 321, and the rotary combination (which I could barely reach) was "C, A, I, J." On occasion, the small glass window would display a hint of yellow, which I would immediately recognize as a package slip. Those were really exciting. I'd wait in line at the window to my right and hope for something cool, like a cassette voice recording or a mixed bag of Stateside candy.

Scott eventually moved and we lost contact. Andrea was a good and faithful writer, and it forced me to become a better writer to keep up. Somehow, we lost contact after several years.

We moved to Ohio and bought a farm. It was cool. Dad thought he was retiring for good and we would be settling down. Ohio was "home" simply because that's where mom's from, and where most of her huge family resides. While we were there I began writing to **Lori Theesfield**, a girl I met in Papillion, Nebraska (just outside of Omaha). We wrote

each other every week like clockwork. Then as things go during the delicate pubescent age, I had a little girlfling in Ohio and Lori and I stopped writing to each other.

Ohio didn't last long. We moved to DC for a year while dad was at the Pentagon, and then back to Germany for my final high school years. During this time, I corresponded regularly with the most dedicated writer I had known. She was my very best friend and her name was **Julie Amos**. We shared every detail of our lives with each other through pen and ink (her boyfriends, my acceptance issues, our separate travels). Between regular letters to Julie, and the high school English essays required by my writing mentor and teacher (**Mr. John Pinschmidt**) I realized that writing had become not only something that I was naturally good at, but something that I loved to do.

I married **Petra Kasaroczky** just out of high school, and then enlisted in the Marines. Julie wrote me a few times at boot camp, then shifted her letters to my Best Man and brother, John Martinez. He and I joined the Corps under the "Buddy Program;" we had met in Stuttgart, Germany our Junior year of high school, and together we played football, wrestled (briefly), took Jeet-Kun-Do classes, boxed, lifted weights and ran track. Me, John, Pat Francescon, and Ed Vail. Okay, I know--you don't care. I'll share the details of each of them in stories to come. Julie disappeared from my life several years ago, on a rather sour note.

***Petra, my wife of nearly fourteen years, has pushed my writing over the edge. She and I communicated intimately for the accumulated time of nearly four solid years, via snail mail, while I was in the Marines. We did this EVERY DAY, and have two large tupperware bins full of twine-bound stacks of letters to prove it. Somewhere during that time, I realized that I really, really loved writing and would continue to for the rest of my life.***

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2009

## Around My World in 180 Posts

Well, I have to tell you... if someone would've approached me this time last year and told me I would be a "blogger," I would have called that person a fag and probably kicked them in the shin. On this, the Eve of 2010, I look back at a year where I unexpectedly fell in love with writing all over again. I would like to personally thank each of you who have regularly followed my posts; it means a lot to me. Thanks, Aunt Edie, for the inspiration to start this blog in the first place (and thanks for the goodies from your recent Ireland trip)!

Since February, I have been able to share some of my opinions, however bullheaded. You've met some of my family and friends, both the living and departed. You've found recipes for meals, and mischief, and disaster. I've shared with you my victories and defeats. You have followed stories of wars, and of laughter, and of random people. Of adventure races, and art, and music, and hobbies. Together we have re-lived experiences in South and Central America, in Europe, in Africa, and in the Middle East.

Many more stories such as these will surely follow in the bright New Year to come. Thank you for your support! I look forward to making new memories and swapping stories with each of you. Carpe Diem!