

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

And Other Loose Change...

Ron Breland



PublishAmerica
Baltimore

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First printing

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ISBN: 1-60474-154-6
PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP
www.publishamerica.com
Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

DEDICATION

The stories outlined in the following pages are a testament to God, my darling wife Helen, and those who have stood shoulder to shoulder with me over the years to ensure that our freedom remains. Freedom is certainly not free, and in these great adventures with all of you, I hope and pray that you all have the peace in my heart in knowing that we gave our best to the last.

*For
The Four Horsemen,
The Magnificent Seven,
the Steel Horse and her crew,
Darrin, Top (T-Rex), John,
and those who have borne the battle
shoulder to shoulder with me
on many fronts
so that our children and grand-children
may enjoy the sweet taste of freedom.
God Bless you all,
and thank you—
for I have walked with heroes.*

FOREWORD

When the time came to choose a title for this collection of stories, I recalled the same period of time when I was deciding on a title for my first book, *‘Castles In The Sand’*. If you ask anyone I know, they would most likely tell you that they’re never quite sure what will ever come out of my mouth, nor in the printed word. I don’t mind being unpredictable, however I can assure you that there is a reason or meaning behind everything that I do. I like to “think outside the box,” as it were.

So there I sat, searching for a title for this unusual group of short stories. Some were from my career in the Army while serving on many fronts. Yet others were from my younger years; my raising, or my ‘rearing’. In addition to my ‘coin collection’ of stories as it were, these seemed like other loose change that I might add. And so it began.

I originally got the idea for “*A Pocket Full of Memories (and other loose change)*” from my children. Just when you think that you’re older and mostly set in your ways, children will say or do something that allows you to peer into their little souls and grab a moment from their fountain of youth. I’ve come to see that it’s this little borrowed glimmer that transports us through time and enables us to go to a place that we’ve not been in quite a long time. It’s amazing what they enable you to remember.

In my den at home, I have a very nice wooden coin rack that holds my accumulation of Challenge and Recognition Coins from my years in uniform. Every now and then my daughter Abigail, who is now four years old, will ask me something to the effect of, “Daddy, that’s a pretty one...where’d you get it from?” My own love of the military and some of the best years of my life, combined with my

paternal obligation to share these times with my children will usually propel me into a series of stories regarding the different coins. My children's sincerity and innocence is priceless, and it is due to them that I decided to document these moments so that neither they nor I would ever forget.

Being a military man, I do not fit the unjustified stereotype of being one who likes to brag. However I don't ever mind sharing these stories with my children. I see the light in their eyes as I tell the stories, and I must confess that I do feel the pride as the somewhat surreal words come out of my mouth. The stories though...they do take me back.

Whether it's a four year hitch, or a career in the military; I don't think that there are many veterans that would argue that it's a wonderful experience overall. Every unit has their own unique traditions, missions, as well as their own special place in history. Most units have a unit coin, or trinket of some sort which serves as a small but meaningful and tangible effect of their fraternity. These are awarded to individuals as a token of brotherhood of sorts. Once receiving a unit coin, you've 'earned your stripes', per say, and are "one of the boys" now. These individuals have proven themselves through some display of professionalism, expertise, or excellence. Although traditions and idiosyncrasies vary from unit to unit, most fall under one of the many variations of "Challenge Coin Rules." There are many unofficial versions of these rules, but we'll get into that later.

I've always liked to write. After a few published poems and then eventually my first book; I looked to venture out into other venues. I've tried short stories, more poetry, and a few articles here and there. Anyone who truly knows me would tell you that I'm never short on something to write. The truth is that I have had many blessings in my life, and I honestly feel that it is vitally important; a calling if you will, to put these on paper. A wise poet once said that the spoken word is gone in an instant, but the written word lives on forever. When I am long gone from this world, let it not be said that I didn't do everything I could to pass a few lessons on to my children, grand-children, and great grand-children.

As a veteran of the military, I find myself fascinated by the stories recounted by others. Moments like those have enabled me to dig just a little deeper into myself and search for new ways to enable others, civilians and military alike to perhaps gain or enhance an appreciation for those in uniform. Although I'm not the type to stand up on a soap box, I usually don't pass up the opportunity to enlighten folks on not only the benefits of the military, but the deep appreciation that I still have to this day for all those who serve.

I am, of course biased in my writings and perspective of events past. However, even if you are not particularly a 'fan' of the military; then at the very least you can perhaps enjoy a funny story or two.

There are those moments in our lives that truly inspire us. Then again there are those which occur, and much to our dismay only resurface at the most inconvenient of times; such as family reunions or other gatherings. I've learned over the years that everyone has a past history, and most of us have skeletons in our closets to one degree or another. Depending on our age, background, geographical location and family history, our own levels of awe are defined by our own experiences. Some of us have entire cemeteries instead of a skeleton or two.

Our family was one of those weird ones where my two brothers and I had lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins. There's nothing particularly odd about this, really. But the fact remains that most of them were not related. Their existence could only be proven in our day to day lives and memories; not by a bloodline or a genealogy chart.

It's been said that our children will reap what we sew. They learn everything from their parents, including some things that I'm sure a lot of parents probably wish they wouldn't. They are sponges, and absorb everything they see, experience, and overhear. There have been many such occasions that my son, Kevin has overheard such things regarding transgressions from my own past. Helen and I are very honest with our children, and although I do not regret these moments I have lived long enough to repeatedly hear my son's laughter over the stories from my childhood and the consequences that followed.

I often hear him say something to the effect of “Dad, tell my friend about the time you shot your brother with an arrow!” There’s still a little part of me that cringes when he says that, however I fall right into it every time and for a moment, feel like a kid again. Although I certainly hope and pray that he doesn’t do some of the same things that I did (he’d better not!), it shows him that I’m not infallible as well. I’ve been fortunate that my son hasn’t tried half the dim-witted things that I have in my youth, however I’m also very pleased that he can look back and still learn the lessons of my mistakes.

Some of you who read this will laugh, and those of you who have been where I have been should be comforted by the fact that you’re not the only one to have worn these shoes. Some of you will receive an education of sorts from these stories. It is my sincere hope that you gain *something* out of these pages. And incidentally, if you have children and they haven’t experienced any of these things... consider yourself incredibly blessed.

CHALLENGE COIN HISTORY

Below is but one version of the origin of Challenge Coin History that is derived from true events that have been passed on from generation to generation. As you will soon see; in days of old a coin from your unit most certainly could have saved your life. In these modern times, the most dangerous thing that a coin will save you from is buying a round of drinks at the local pub. Nonetheless, if you are not familiar with this tradition I hope that you will gain a sense of appreciation for those who serve as well as a sense of understanding with regard to the pride and honor associated with this elite community.

During World War I, American volunteers from all parts of the country filled the newly formed flying squadrons. Some were wealthy scions attending colleges such as Yale and Harvard who quit in mid-term to join the war. In one squadron, a wealthy lieutenant ordered medallions struck in solid bronze and presented them to his unit. One young pilot placed the medallion in a small leather pouch that he wore about his neck.

Shortly after acquiring the medallions, the pilots' aircraft was severely damaged by ground fire. He was forced to land behind enemy lines and was immediately captured by a German patrol. In order to discourage his escape, the Germans took all of his personal identification except for the small leather pouch around his neck. In the meantime, he was taken to a small French town near the front. Taking advantage of a bombardment that night, he escaped. However, he was without personal identification.

He succeeded in avoiding German patrols by donning civilian attire and reached the front lines. With great difficulty, he crossed no-man's land. Eventually, he stumbled onto a French outpost.

Unfortunately, saboteurs had plagued the French in the sector. They sometimes masqueraded as civilians and wore civilian clothes. Not recognizing the young pilot's American accent, the French thought him to be a saboteur and made ready to execute him. He had no identification to prove his allegiance, but he did have his leather pouch containing the medallion. He showed the medallion to his would-be executioners and one of his French captors recognized the squadron insignia on the medallion. They delayed his execution long enough for him to confirm his identity. Instead of shooting him they gave him a bottle of wine.

Back at his squadron, it became tradition to ensure that all members carried their medallion or coin at all times. This was accomplished through challenge in the following manner—a challenger would ask to see the medallion. If the challenged could not produce a medallion, they were required to buy a drink of choice for the member who challenged them. If the challenged member produced a medallion, then the challenging member was required to pay for the drink. This tradition continued on throughout the war and for many years after the war while surviving members of the squadron were still alive.

MY TOP THREE



*From L-R, the 64th Civil Support Team (WMD)—‘Masters of Disasters’,
The 30th Engineer Battalion ‘
Desert Knights’—Fort Bragg, North Carolina,
Headquarters, US Army Garrison, Fort Wainwright, Alaska*

I chose to begin this unique set of stories off with a description of my top three coins. You might notice in the picture above that these three coins are displayed in such a way as to see the front and back of each coin. You might also determine from this that there are two of each, and you would be absolutely correct in this assumption. The reason for this is because both my wife and I each received these coins from various Command Staff throughout *our* career. I say *‘our’* career because as many people are blissfully unaware of; a military man’s career and its success is directly proportionate to the support on many levels from his wife.

This is by all means a very sacred covenant, above and beyond that of a ‘normal’ husband/wife relationship and should be respected in the highest regard.

THE SERGEANT MAJOR

As anyone who was witness to this event can attest, I was absolutely speechless the first time that I received a Challenge Coin for excellence and was ordered to give it to a civilian. This came as a great shock to me. When I found out who it actually was, I was in an even deeper level of shock. It's very common throughout the military for wives to be recognized, and unfortunately even more common for those same women to feel the strain of our positions and careers in many ways that parallel our own. So when a little recognition comes along, most Soldiers that I know don't waste any time in getting all dressed up and making the most out of it. In this instance, this was not necessarily the case. Allow me to take a step backwards on this one.

At the time this story occurred, Helen and I had been dating for quite some time. I had the meanest, most physically intimidating, and backwards redneck of a Command Sergeant Major that I had ever seen at the time. Most folks would consider this sentiment as somewhat disrespectful, if not outright insubordinate. Not me though. These are most assuredly compliments, as he was from the same Parish as I am in the great State of Louisiana and we knew how to talk to each other. He was an unorthodox leader, and had taken a liking to me for reasons unknown. We had several jumps together, and this guy was definitely certifiable. He was a wild man who always took care of us, and we loved him for it. He had been an outstanding superior as I went through my divorce a year earlier. And in true Paratrooper fashion, he worked me silly so that I wouldn't have time to cry over my MRE's. There was a method to his madness, and I wound up appreciating it more than I could say; albeit long after it actually happened.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

The day came that the Command Sergeant Major told me that he was retiring, and asked if I knew anyone back home who would hire a “crusty, old pain-in-the-ass Command Sergeant Major.” I had also come down on orders for Alaska at the time, and told him that Helen, whom I was only dating at the time, was going ahead of me to California to see her family before joining me up in the frozen North. He knew the disappointment of being away from Helen even if for a short while, although I never mentioned it. The Command Sergeant Major hastened to retrieve a Battalion Coin from his pocket; holding it up as if to point at me with it. His exact words were, “Breland, you give this to Helen. Any woman who can take dealing with your hard-headed, stubborn, Paratrooper ass deserves it.” He palmed the coin into my hand with a firm handshake and a smile as big as Dallas. His hands were huge, and I felt the camaraderie and sincerity in his hand. I had been blessed to serve with such a caring leader, and the fact that he cared when he didn’t have to about the woman who is now my wife speaks volumes for his heart. Airborne! Sergeant Major! I hope you’re enjoying your retirement.

MY DUTIFUL WIFE

Upon my arrival to Alaska in the summer of 2001, I arrived alone and Helen would soon travel up the Alaska-Canadian Highway to be with me. Before her arrival, I think everyone I knew or came into contact with was aware of who she was. I was apart from her for about a month by now, and I didn't like it at all. I knew she was the love of my life, and I longed to have her near me again.

When she did arrive, even after a life-threatening incident on the Alaska-Canadian Highway with our son Kevin, and our cat, it didn't take long for her to fit right in with my unit and my chain of command. Both my Company Commander and my First Sergeant recognized her as a valuable asset to the unit and the community, as her personality and loving nature touched everyone she met. She was active in our Family Support Group, and her efforts were truly appreciated. This is not as common in our elite community as you might think, however we had a truly good group of people in key positions around us that made all the difference in the world.

One such instance was 'Operation Bent Turbine'. This was an exercise developed for the entire installation to test our ability to survive under the harshest of arctic conditions. It was estimated that if the entire post lost heat and power for a 24-hour period during the worst part of the winter, then we would have to evacuate on a permanent basis. In principle it may sound simple enough, however from a logistical perspective it was truly a nightmare. We would have to evacuate all the Soldiers and their families, their pets, and all civilian personnel as well. This was no doubt a huge undertaking, as well as a very real possibility considering our environment.

The Command believed that after we notified every unit, Soldier, and family member of the details of the exercise that we would be

ready to handle any eventuality. Now, over the years I've heard a particular recurring sentiment from many military spouses; that being that just because their husband's are in uniform implies no consent whatsoever that they have to take orders as well. Even though this isn't necessarily true overall, the spouses stood their ground and proved that this was only too true in this case.

The standard procedure was for each Soldier to report to the post gymnasium with their wife, children, and pets. They would then be routed via buses to the nearest hotel off post and their accountability tracked from there. It seemed logical, and at the appropriate signal, the Soldiers would start arriving at the gym. I was a Platoon Sergeant at the time, and I had planned to run my portion of the exercise from a laptop and my Leader's Book out of a rucksack on my back. My unit was running the exercise, and I didn't want to see this exercise go anything less than spectacular.

By the end of the day, only three wives had shown up. Quite obviously the majority of the women on post ignored the exercise and missed a great opportunity to have their voices heard. It was unfortunate, but true. You may have guessed by now that there was one wife who didn't miss the opportunity. You guessed it; Helen showed up with bells on, and brought two of her girlfriends with her including their children and even a dog. She always has gone out of her way to make things work. Even though there was minimal involvement, the husbands of her girlfriend's were both in two separate units other than our own. Technically there was a bigger representation of the corps of wives than there would have been, but it surely wasn't by sheer numbers or their own doing.

After it was all over, we conducted the typical after action reviews, and mercilessly went over every detail of the exercise and beat ourselves up over the most miniscule infraction. In typical military fashion we reviewed all of those involved and my Commander notified us that he was recommending Helen for an award from the Post Commander. I was a little apprehensive, because our Post Commander had the personality of a rock. I didn't expect much, but in truth I reasoned that something was better than nothing, and Helen surely deserved it.

RON BRELAND

About two weeks later, I had forgotten about the whole thing and became resolved to the fact that nothing was going to happen. My Commander asked me to call Helen and have her meet us at the Post movie theater. It was there that she was called out in front of the Post Command Group, my Chain of Command, and others who were present to receive her Post Commander's Coin. I couldn't have been more proud of her. It's a small percentage of the time that an Army Wife gets recognized for anything, and this was certainly the exception.

I received my Post Commander's Coin later for running a Quick Reaction Force immediately after 9-11. In the end my wife got her coin first, and I'm okay with that. That day belonged to Helen, and she certainly earned it.

BEHIND THE EXERCISE

The 64th Civil Support Team (Weapons of Mass Destruction) is a facet of the New Mexico National Guard. These brave souls are experts in Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical warfare, and are an excellent State resource in the Global War on Terrorism as well as local and regional disasters as well.

As the interim Program Manager for the FEMA Urban Search & Rescue Program (New Mexico Task Force One), I contacted the Commander of this elite unit and requested that they assist me in planning my annual exercise. I was now a civilian (military retiree) and found myself never straying too far from the military community. Typically, we tend to stick with what we know. The Commander, Air Force Major Dan Jaramillo was only too happy to comply, and offered several resources and invaluable insight regarding the training. Also very typical of a leader's wife, my wife Helen donated quite a bit of time to this all-volunteer team. Helen went along with me and her own ideas and insight were appreciated by all in attendance.

By the end of the afternoon, we had a general idea of what we wanted to accomplish during this annual exercise, and everyone seemed to have a good feeling about what we were doing. My wife and I are equally dedicated to our community, our nation, and each other. Without her I simply wouldn't be complete. Our teamwork and assistance was unknowingly rewarded at the end of our day long session with a Commander's Coin from the 64th CST. On the drive home that afternoon we held hands, and were both openly excited about the fact that 'Team Breland' was still as functional outside the military as when we were on Active Duty.

RELIGION AND THE MILITARY



*St. Michael—Patron Saint of Paratroopers
U.S. Army Special Operations Command—Fort Bragg, North
Carolina, Special Operations Command—MacDill Air Force
Base, 172nd Airborne Infantry—Fort Richardson, Alaska, 82nd
Airborne Division—Fort Bragg, North Carolina*

Since the beginning of time, religion and the military have gone hand in hand in one form or another. The Crusades, Holy Jihad, and almost every conflict imaginable has involved religion (or had it dragged in...kicking and screaming) to some degree for thousands of years. Some, however, would argue that one has absolutely nothing to do with the other.

When it comes down to the common man, the Soldier on the ground; this all takes on a whole new meaning. For those believers who don the uniform this is a very personal relationship. I speak only from my own personal experiences and those who I have witnessed through our collective service together.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

As you may know, the Catholic religion has many Saints. Though the vast majority of the military is neither of the Catholic faith, nor of the Paratrooper community of the Armed Forces; the common thread of some sort of faith is an underlying and ever-present tone. It is often not spoken, but clearly understood by all in this elite community. From veteran Paratroopers to those getting their first jump or 'cherry blast' down at Fryar Drop Zone at Fort Benning, Georgia; I don't believe there's a jumper alive that doesn't know Saint Michael, the Patron Saint of Paratroopers.

Upon arrival at their first unit, many jumpers realize that their 'new life' is one that few will ever know. The inherent hazards are not just an occupational hazard but still risks worth taking. They will also most likely receive a visit from the unit Chaplain as part of their introduction into the Airborne Community. Regardless of their own faith, a Chaplain in an Airborne unit will most likely pass on a token of spirituality in the form of a St. Michael's pendant which is authorized to be worn around their neck with their identification tags. This is a symbol of not only their belief in their brethren Paratroopers, but in the true connection with God who allows us to safely and gently drift to the ground. You certainly don't have to be catholic to understand this.

I have been blessed in many ways to have served with the Airborne community. I spent most of my career in the XVIII Airborne Corps, and have received several St. Michael's medallions over the years. Despite this day and age of political correctness, side-stepping sensitive individuals and groups to avoid the ruffling of feathers, and becoming generally more spiritually introverted as a result of society; I can still recall the unspoken approval and camaraderie with the display of our St. Michael's medallions with our unit's symbol on the back side.

In a culture such as the Airborne community, where you put your life in the hands of your brothers every single day and not just during times of war; this display is not only very common but an open display of uncommon valor. It is accepted by all without question. It matters not the color of your skin, your social status, or by what name

RON BRELAND

you call your God. It simply just *is*. I've often pondered what societal relationships and international diplomacy would be accomplished under this same simple, silent, and unquestionable acceptance. God bless all of my brethren Paratroopers, now and always!

THE MOUNTAIN MAN



When I met the ‘Mountain Man’ as I’ve come to affectionately refer to him over the years, I was about as tired as I’d ever been, and quite honestly didn’t have the energy or the inclination to have even an abrupt conversation under the circumstances. It was the morning of October 4, 1993. To be more precise it was the ‘wee hours’ of October 4, 1993 and many of us were involved in an after action assessment of what had happened the night before.

The night of the massive firefight of ‘Blackhawk Down’ fame was a busy one for many of our nation’s military members as countless attacks were mounted throughout that night; anywhere that there was an American presence. Small pockets of insurgents took advantage of the catastrophic events of downtown Mogadishu as a diversion and an excuse to exact their own personal forms of vengeance. It was as if the blood was in the water and the sharks were looking for any excuse to attack. And our base camp was no different.

After almost three months of constant guard duty for our unit, the 2-22 Infantry out of Fort Drum, New York was brought in to perform these tasks. After the first Blackhawk had fallen on that ‘Black

Sunday of October 3, 1993, the entire country was on full alert. The Quick Reaction Force was activated, and meandered through the base camp in a slithery and unpredictable pattern so as to close any gap within any of our stationary guard forces. I had volunteered earlier that morning, and was placed on the QRF for the day. The QRF, which was comprised mainly of members of the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment out of Fort Benning, Georgia, was truly a sight to behold. These guys were the physical manifestation and embodiment of all things “HOOAH!”. They were rock solid professionals and they lived for the job.

During the night, four Somali ‘gunmen’, who were actually still in their teens or very early twenties climbed through the wire, slipped between the double stacked 20-foot shipping containers which made up our perimeter and started shooting. This was obviously a suicide mission; having chewed *khat* all afternoon had given them a false sense of bravado. As they encircled our base camp in pairs, the four Somali’s squeezed off rounds consistently, but not very tactically. Thankfully, they weren’t very accurate either.

I was paired with a Ranger and we were at the main gate of the camp. Two more young Somali’s had been captured already, and we were to keep them secured until the fight was over. When the shooting got louder, one of our detainees started to shout and give up our position. The young Ranger with me simply butt-stroked the Somali in the head with his rifle which immediately silenced our new friend. When the Somali in my charge started yelling as well, I shook my head in disappointment and followed suit. I’d never butt-stroked anyone up to that point with exception of a few old tires in a training environment. I have to admit that it’s a very effective technique.

The shooting was getting louder because apparently the two pairs of gunmen started at a certain point on the other side of the camp and ran around the perimeter in opposite directions. The front gate, which was our location at the time, was apparently where the four would meet again. At this geographical point was a corner to a building with a door which was the entrance to a barracks facility for the base camp Commander and his staff.

Right about this time, a young Lieutenant came walking out that door wearing his PT shorts and T-shirt, shower shoes, and a 9mm pistol in a shoulder holster. Very unaware of his surroundings, he finished yawning he yelled, “What the hell’s going on out here?” The four young Somali’s replied with a hail of AK-47 gunfire that should have dropped that Lieutenant like a limp piece of Swiss cheese. The hand of God himself must have been protecting that man, because not a single round struck his body. I simply couldn’t believe it.

When the young Ranger and I saw the Somali’s rounding the corner and heading straight for the Lieutenant and firing wildly in his direction; we posted up on a pile of bricks, each of us with a knee on the neck of our silenced detainees. “You go left, and I’ll go right!” he told me. I was amazed later on that night at how instinctive it is to put a man in your sights under the worst of conditions. I fired only two rounds at the two gunmen on my left. In what seemed to me to be a surreal and frozen moment in time, I observed as neither of the gunmen moved their legs. The gunfire stopped sharply; their bodies moving lifeless through the air for a millisecond, much like a cartoon. Within the shooting community this is called a “photo finish” and I’d now seen it first hand. I had placed two clean head shots, which killed the gunmen before their bodies hit the ground.

I wasn’t sure which shocked me more; the fact that I had just killed two men or that I had fired the two miracle shots of my life. I have always maintained that fear is a great motivator; and it certainly was that night for me. The young Ranger got off one clean head shot and the other was in the neck. That made me feel a little cocky for a split second, and then he spoke to me. As we looked over at the four dead Somali’s in front of the barracks building, he stood up and said, “Nice shooting.” Then he started laughing, and as I gazed over at his direction I saw that the young Lieutenant was still standing there, his PT shorts drenched in his own urine. He hadn’t been shot, but he surely felt the fear and his reaction was obvious.

After a short time we were assembled for our After Action Assessment, and that Lieutenant (now in clean clothes), presented me with a 10th Mountain Division coin without ever saying a single word. I

RON BRELAND

couldn't seem to decipher his expression as he stared blankly at the floor. On the way out of the briefing, he silently and quickly made his way over to me with a quiet handshake, and slipped the coin into my hand. I'm not sure whether or not his pride had been wounded, or if he was still in shock; deeply reflecting on the life that he still had to live.

THE 4TH HORSEMAN GETS HIS SHIELD



Our tour in the Horn of Africa lasted just over five months. It is truly amazing what a difference a day makes. It is also truly awe-inspiring that being somewhere halfway around the world on a particular day can place such a momentous impact on your life. It's so much more than an "*I was there when...*" mentality. Over the years, many of the memories seem to fade, but then again there are those days where the memory is sharp as a razor. My time in Somalia is a mixture of these times, and this tale is but one that truly stands out.

We deployed to Somalia in late summer of 1993. It was July, and just when I thought it couldn't get much hotter than the tarmac at Campbell Field at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; I found out very soon how wrong I could be. The mission was being run by the United Nations as an International peacekeeping coalition to feed the starving and free the oppressed. History may show what happened in the overall mission; however it will probably never make mention of The Four Horsemen.

When our unit left Fort Campbell, we were a small contingent of 68 volunteers from throughout the 101st Airborne Division. I don't believe that there were even ten people from the same unit. We came from all over Fort Campbell, and I guess you would have called us a 'mutt' unit. I met Rob, Harv, and Veno on the tarmac before we

boarded the plane, and that was all she wrote. We were all inseparable. Those three were truck drivers, and I was the only fireman in the bunch. Our First Sergeant figured us out pretty quickly, and like a good leader he utilized our individual and group talents to their fullest. Over the next five months, the four of us would pilfer, build, borrow, or acquire (steal is such an ugly word) whatever was necessary to get the job done. Damn we were good.

The Army, never being short on ceremony had a formation one afternoon to hand out the light blue U.N. berets and ball caps. The gold United Nations flash that normally accompanied the beret was short in supply; however it wasn't a problem for us. We vowed that before we got on the plane to go home, we would all four have one. Two of us, Will and Veno were issued theirs along with their berets. We got Harv's by trading a walkman radio with one operating ear phone to a Pakistani for his beret flash. That left only one. We had about three days left in Somalia, and I was still without one for my beret. The 4 Horsemen just weren't *'complete'*.

Our Company Commander was a 2nd Lieutenant, and most of the enlisted men didn't think much of him at first. After five months in the "Mog" with 2nd Lieutenant Bob Kessler, most of us realized that not only had he had his 'cherry' busted right along with ours, but also that he was the real deal. He was a good guy, and he was a young leader that got us through all the missions, the mortar attacks, the never-ending guard duty, and the idiosyncrasies of the Army itself.

Lieutenant Kessler calls me on the radio net one night, and orders me in a brash tone to the TOC. Being a young Specialist at the time I of course double-timed it to the TOC and as I come through the door flap of our GP Medium tent that doubled as our Command Center and quarters for our Commander and First Sergeant, I see Bob standing there smiling. I suddenly felt like I'd been had. To the contrary, Bob Kessler, the First Sergeant, and the other three Horsemen were standing there. He personally gave me my United Nations flash for my beret, and thanked me for a job well done over the course of the tour.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

The day we left SwordBase is one that I'll never forget. We apprehensively drove down 21 October Road towards the airfield with Godspeed on our heels and crashed on cots in the waiting area out of sheer exhaustion. That evening for supper we ate MRE's, wore our berets and stayed up most of the night laughing and recalling stories of our first combat tour together. I could not have served with a better bunch of guys. The day we stepped on that plane to come home, the Four Horsemen were complete.

WE'RE FINALLY GOING HOME



After our convoy to Mogadishu airport, we all spent a restless night turning Army cots into couches and watching AFN Television. Everything we owned in the whole world was hastily packed into a single duffle bag and rucksack and tossed into the back of our vehicles. Leaving the camp, much less Mogadishu airport was a risky proposition in and of itself.

I recall the early morning hours of the day we left as still being another surreal environment. The airfield crew was exceptional in their organizational skills, which left us free to relax until the moment we boarded the plane. I remember talking to Command Sergeant Major Cindy Pritchett some months before and volunteering for this mission. I was a young 'Joe' with very little experience, however Command Sergeant Major Pritchett accepted me raising my hand to volunteer, and allowed me to go.

A lot had happened over the last five months. During the plane ride over to Somalia, we had a pit-stop in Cairo, Egypt. We weren't allowed to de-board the plane due to threats of terrorism. However, I was still able to see the green lights of the Nile River at night and the outlines of the pyramids as we took off on our way to Djibouti.

Tourism is extremely overrated. There were mortars falling like raindrops for the first couple of months. I remember the bittersweet saturation of gunpowder in the air after the attacks. The aroma was a familiar old friend from hours and hours at the rifle range; except this time it was so thick that it burned our noses.

And then there was October 3, 1993; the “Battle of the Black Sea.” It would become eternally known as a ‘Day of Infamy’ in our Army history. After his Blackhawk was shot down, Mike Durant was released after eleven days of captivity. I remember a TIME Magazine floating around the hooch with Durant’s face on the cover, while he was still in captivity. That was yet another surreal moment for me. One of our comrades was in captivity in the same area of operations as we were, and his face was on the cover of a national magazine during his captivity. Although it’s still hard to wrap my mind around that one, I still have a copy of that issue in my footlocker at home. Shortly after the ‘Battle of Mogadishu’ my turn in the rotation came up for Rest & Recuperation (R&R) in Mombasa, Kenya. I certainly needed it as only a week before I had killed two men. This would become a nightmare for me that would not even begin to fade for years to come. After I was left at the airport, I had several hours to wait until our plane took off for Mombasa airport. As I sat there, I observed a busy airport which was trying desperately to find a *non-U.S.* Military aircraft in which to transport General Aideed to Kenya for negotiations and peace talks. Aideed had required this stipulation, and the U.S. Army wound up ‘dressing up’ an Army C-12 airplane for the mission. A C-12 is typically reserved for General Officers, however in this case they created the letters “U.N.” on the side of the aircraft with large strips of duct tape. I remember laughing at that, thinking that once again the resourcefulness of our military had prevailed. Whatever it takes, I suppose. As I stated before; a lot had happened over five months.

All of these thoughts streamed through my mind in what seemed like a split-second as we walked out onto the tarmac to board our plane home. Just prior to the portable stairwell which was docked next to our plane, Command Sergeant Major Pritchett made a point

to shake each Soldier's hand, and present a coin to each one of us. She was incredibly short next to my six foot four frame. As she palmed a coin in my hand, she quipped "Good job, fireman!"

The final adventure would come only half a day later as we landed in Gander, Newfoundland to re-supply the aircraft. We were caught in a huge snowstorm, and were stranded there for over 24 hours.

The people of Gander came out in droves to open up the local airport grill to make us hamburgers and other luxury dishes from the grill. My buddy Jim Vines, or 'Veno' as we called him, rewarded one of the locals with his coin for making him the first cheeseburger that he'd had in months. Rob Harvey ('Harv') also lit my pants on fire that night; but that's another story. I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly express my gratitude to Command Sergeant Major Cindy Pritchett for having a soft spot in her heart for firemen, and especially to the 4 Horsemen for saving my life, trusting me with theirs, and being such a huge part of it all.

‘DEATH WAITS IN THE DARK’, AND SOMETIMES IT HAS A KIND HEART



While in Somalia, the element known as Task Force Ranger utilized the many special talents of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) to insert and exfiltrate many operators during untold amounts of flight hours and missions of great importance. The reverence with which I describe this special group of individuals cannot truly do it justice. However, I will try.

During my first marriage, my in-laws at the time lived just off post in what was then a new community. After the birth of my oldest son, my family and I were hanging out there a lot at the behest of the grandparents, of course. It was shortly before all of this that I was attending barbecues, as well as other family events and I came to know the neighbors. The neighbor directly next door was a man by the name of Command Sergeant Major Bob Page. He was a Special Operations guy to the core of his being, and one of the gentlest people that you'd ever want to meet...at first glance.

RON BRELAND

When I volunteered for the mission in Somalia, I was a young Soldier who had no clue as to what I was getting myself into. I had spoken to CSM Page prior to going, but due to the nature of the mission that the 160th was to have over the skies over Mogadishu, he used due diligence in not divulging any pertinent information to the family. It gave me great comfort knowing that sometime during my tour that their infamous Little Birds would be hovering above to ensure the safety of all.

After returning from Somalia on Christmas morning of 1993, I had lost twenty pounds, had a one year old son who was bigger than I imagined, and a notch on my belt for surviving my first combat tour. It took a little bit of adjustment after I came home to consider my options. Some Soldiers I knew would hang up their boots, so to speak and leave the Army; never taking the chance that they would ever serve in a combat zone again. Not me.

In many discussions that would follow, the Command Sergeant Major and I would share a beer at a weekend gathering, and he would consistently try to convince me to join Special Forces. “They give you free uniforms, for crying out loud!” he would say. He was a great Soldier, and an even greater man.



The lithograph pictured above was given to me by former Night Stalker great and personal friend, Darrin Numbers.

During one of our many gatherings after my return home from Somalia, I'd noticed that he'd been gone a while and I suppose that I'd just figured that he'd been on leave like a lot of other Soldiers. Command Sergeant Major Page had been gone a while now. I later

learned that he had traveled around the country and personally attended every single funeral and memorial service that was caused by the battle of October 3, 1993. He had first hand knowledge of the casualties of the 160th and Task Force Ranger. He was now also very well aware of the peripheral effects that these casualties had from a family's perspective. Nonetheless, he still attended every single service until they were all completed; even at personal cost to himself. He was just that kind of guy, and I don't know a Soldier alive that doesn't respect this man.

Upon his return, I felt more in awe than ever of this man. During one event, our conversation turned to the Battle of Mogadishu once again, as it would many times from then as well. He gave me a 160th "Night Stalker" coin, and I could not have been more honored. I told him that I didn't think that I was deserving of something so highly coveted, and he reminded me that the men on the ground were as important as the one's in the air. He also mentioned that I should take the lessons that I learned and apply them throughout my career, and that the only difference between me and the 160th members that gave their all that day was that I was fortunate enough to still be alive. He quoted the NightStalker motto: "Night Stalkers Don't Quit!" I would never forget these words and never take a moment of my life for granted from that point forward.

Command Sergeant Major Page would go on to retire and become the President of the NightStalker Association. Even after his retirement, that Night Stalker Didn't Quit!

THE COMMANDER'S FLAT TIRE



Of the many years that Fort Bragg was my home, I've had many memorable moments with more great Soldiers than I can count. As the years go by, some of the names slip the mind, however the elation of many great moments does not.

One day, on the way in to morning PT I was distracted by an older gentleman; a fellow Soldier, who was obviously struggling with breaking down a flat tire on the shoulder of Highway 210 coming in from Harnett County. I was running a few minutes behind that morning, and I was keeping a sharp eye out for the County Sheriff as I leaned heavy on the gas heading towards Fort Bragg. I stopped anyway, and offered my assistance to this obviously frustrated older gentleman. There was no time to change the tire and make it to the morning formation on time.

Morning formation on Fort Bragg is a very important issue. Commanders at all levels report up their available manpower and readiness through the chain of command so that the Post Commander can gauge his overall strength for the day. Every Soldier on Fort Bragg has the inherent responsibility and duty to make it to this crucial first formation in order to make this happen. Things were not looking good for either of us making the first formation.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

The gentlemen asked me what unit I was in, and asked me for the reassurance that it was okay if I gave him a ride in. He would simply come back to fix the tire and retrieve his vehicle later on. I told him that this was okay, and to my surprise discovered that he was the Battalion Commander of the 2nd Squadron, 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment at Simmons Army Airfield. Simmons Field was about five miles away from where I needed to be; but he had scheduled a Regimental Run for physical training this morning. As the Commander, the cardinal sin of being late would not go over well at all. Not to mention that his second in command would have to fumble his way through the morning reporting procedures and formation with all kinds of questions on his mind.

On Fort Bragg, professional Soldiers do not walk around through the course of their day without a coin in their pocket if they have one. The coin pictured above was given to me by this man. This was his personal coin; the very one he'd received years before during his first tour with the unit. And now he was the commander! I could certainly see the depth of his current situation; however I knew that he was also now 'naked', so to speak, without his coin. As I sped around the perimeter of Simmons Field to ensure the Lieutenant Colonel's timely (nick of time is more like it) arrival, he assured me that a quick phone call to my Battalion Commander would resolve any issues about me being late as well.

True to his word, immediately after morning PT he phoned my Commander and explained the events that had occurred earlier. It was perhaps the only day that I ever felt okay about being late for work. I was never so proud to be a Noncommissioned Officer as I was that morning.

THE ‘OLD MAN’ AND THE FIRE TRUCK



As time passes in any unit, people come and go. At Fort Bragg, if you're a Paratrooper it is more than likely that if you ever leave for another assignment then you will eventually return to North Carolina to jump again. I've known men who returned to my beloved Fort Bragg as Command Sergeants Major even after they may have left years before as a young Sergeant. I've even had an Air Officer as a Major, who left for a year and came back as our Battalion Commander. "Bragg Babies" as we're affectionately known as, are a rare breed indeed. They typically get promoted faster, and are just generally better people.

Typically, as firefighters we were exempt from many of the mundane taskings of daily Army life. However, serving at Fort Bragg, which is the center of the known universe, was a different story. 'Legs', or non-Paratroopers found it very difficult in most cases being transferred to Bragg after a more relaxed and casual assignment. Let me be clear about this: besides Fort Bragg, *any* assignment is considered casual and more relaxed. The bottom line is simply this; either you're a Paratrooper or you're not.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

I was informed with plenty of notice that a Brigade level change of command was approaching, and the new Commander wanted my crew and me to launch an arc of water over the Command Group at the conclusion of the new Commander's acceptance speech. I had my guys out every evening, applying a new coat of wax, armor-all, and window cleaner to every visible surface of that engine for over a week. The Colonel's communications officer had given us a radio, and would notify us of the exact moment to start flowing our water stream.

And immediately after the ceremony, the incoming Commander made a straight path towards our engine. I had already released my men, and told them that I'd fill the truck back up with water and put the engine back in the barn. As I watched this incredibly short Colonel speeding his way towards me, I was almost happy that I'd sent the men home already. I could only imagine what he might want. Did I inadvertently hose down the Commanding General? Or perhaps I soaked his wife by mistake. I ran the entire event through my head in an instant. Apparently, everything worked just fine. The stream was perfect, and no one in the Command Group received as much as a light misting.

As it turned out, he wanted to thank me for our services. Moreover, this was Friday afternoon, and the Colonel asked me if I'd take him for a ride around post in my fire engine. Technically, it was *his* fire engine, but a good fireman never gives up ownership of his apparatus. About halfway through the ride, the Colonel barely spoke up in a very hushed tone. He asked me, "Sergeant, would it be alright if I tooted the horn?" I was amazed. I was staring at the little boy in all of us in the form of a Master Parachutist and Combat Commander with almost 25 years in the Army. I saw the look in his eye that I'd seen from my own son and a thousand other children that I'd given rides to over the years. I replied by flipping on every light on my truck and stepped hard on the siren. His face simply and uncontrollably lit up, and I said, "Have at it, Sir!" He leaned on that air horn like his life depended on it. It was truly a rewarding day for both of us.

RON BRELAND

As we returned to Brigade Headquarters, I don't think that anyone could have peeled that smile off of his face. I dismounted the vehicle, and walked around to open his door for him in accordance with Army protocols. When I did he jumped to the ground and sounded off with "Airborne!" He reached into his pocket and gave me a Brigade coin, the first of his Command. I saluted him in farewell, and climbed back into my engine. As he waved at my departure, I gave him a loud sounding of the air horn in return. Airborne, Sir!

A LATE NIGHT COOKIE RUN



I've been a night owl most of my life, and I've never really slept much. And somehow, I've also managed to always be an early riser. I suppose that this could be attributed to a dysfunctional childhood, or just coming from multiple generations in the fire service. Neither the military nor the fire service is conducive in providing an environment for a lot of sleep.

That being said, I also have to mention that I really don't believe in coincidence. I've witnessed too many miraculous things in my life to believe in something as elementary and crude as coincidence. As a matter of fact, when I hear my friends mention the topic as they feel it most recently applied in their lives; I often have to laugh...sometimes out loud.

I've mentioned previously that throughout the span of an Army career that sometimes events occur that you just wouldn't have seen coming. After I had served nine years already, I had been a seasoned Soldier, and was a veteran NCO as well. I considered myself to have had decent social, diplomatic, and awareness skills beyond most of my peers. Let me just say that you can never place enough emphasis on

situational awareness. But then again, we all have our off moments. And how a lack of my own situational awareness resulted in me receiving this coin; I'll never know.

When our small element of Soldiers from Fort Campbell, Kentucky had deployed to Somalia in August of 1993, the Commanding General of the 101st Airborne Division, (then) Major General John M. Keane was not going to allow any of his Soldiers to think that they weren't in someone's thoughts during the Thanksgiving holiday. In true Paratrooper fashion, he showed up unannounced to our area of operations, inspected the barracks, and shook hands with each of us. He then ate a not so traditional holiday meal with us. We all thought the world of General Keane, and how his intentional and purposeful leadership was one of his strongest qualities. He had evidently seen the fire helmet in my hooch that I'd found lying in the sand one day, and cornered it in his mind. When he was introduced to us, I was introduced as Specialist Breland, the guy with the helmet. He returned my salute with a handshake saying, 'So what brings you over here, fireman?' I was somewhat taken back, however it did let me know that he had crawled up to the second floor of our home made 'studio apartments' that we'd recently finished. I was impressed.

That was my first holiday in a combat zone, and I'll never forget it. But he was a General Officer, right? Of course I wouldn't forget that day. I was a young Specialist (E-4) at the time, and it obviously made an indelible impression on me regarding what the leadership cast is supposed to do. But I was just Specialist Breland, one of over 500,000 Soldiers in the Army at the time. I knew that I'd remember him, but I doubted that he'd remember me.

Again, I was wrong.

Our next meeting would be in the Balkan Region in the winter of 1999. By the time I was in Kosovo, John Keane had pinned on two more stars, and was now the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. Once again, I had no idea that we were about to bump into each other. Surely this couldn't possibly happen twice in the same career. Oh yes...indeed it could.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

I've mentioned before that I'm something of a night owl. These days were no different than my childhood, as a combat zone is a very dysfunctional place as well. Inconsistency is a constant, and after a while, you almost begin to act like a 'functional dysfunctional' person. It's difficult to explain, I know. Be that as it may, I found myself walking around the base camp one night. I missed my boys, and was almost fully accepting of the fact that I was single once again. The holidays were approaching fast, and I now knew the gloom of a single Soldier away for the holidays with nothing to really return home to. I had my men though, and I loved the team dearly. They are what would get me through this tour.

The camp was quiet that night, and no mortars fell during my lengthy walk over to the dining facility. Our chow hall was run by Americans; however the manual labor and cooking duties were tended to by local nationals. The food was not horrible, but it certainly wasn't home. The one thing that I particularly liked was the cookies that I always seemed to find after our main meal. I would often take these walks in the wee hours to contemplate a lot of things. This was our last mission, and if we were going to be deactivated upon our return to Fort Bragg, I definitely wanted leave a positive memory in everyone's mind of the 89th Engineer Detachment (Firefighters).

So far, we'd handled the fire protection for three base camps in two countries, forged mutual-aid agreements with both countries, responded to over fifty emergencies, and provided security and fire protection assets for Air Force One and Marine-One. My guys were absolutely loyal and hard working, and I couldn't have asked for better.

I even had one Soldier go home due to his wife having a miscarriage. After he begged to come back to be with us after only two weeks home, the first General Officer in the chain of command finally approved his repeated requests to come back into the fray with us. I'll never forget the day he arrived back at the 'House of Steel', our affectionate name for Camp Bondsteel. His name was Cox, and he swung open the door to the hooch yelling, 'Honey, I'm home!' Soldiers never cease to amaze me, and I felt truly blessed to have them in my charge.

All of these thoughts kept creeping through my mind as I walked through the rocky terrain and up the hill to the dining facility. Typically, whatever cookies weren't eaten after the supper meal were put out with an endless supply of coffee for those who worked a night shift or were out on missions at night 'outside the wire.' The fire department never truly shut down, and so, in turn I was never really off. I didn't mind though, as it helped me pass the time and keep my eyes open and focused on my mission.

For some reason on this particular night, I suppose that my situational awareness wasn't the first thing on my mind. Like a plant leaning into the sun, I found myself just outside the chow hall. All of a sudden, this subliminal thought came to me to go in and get some cookies and coffee. I was like a moth to a flame... a yuppie heading to Starbucks. As I entered the dining tent, I noticed an older gentleman out of the corner of my eye, his Army gray PT uniform fitting loosely over his large frame. I didn't pay much attention to him, as I was half delirious from sleep deprivation and focused on getting more caffeine into my veins. Subconsciously, I sat one table over from this elderly gentleman, and all of a sudden my ears heard what they never expected to hear this night. "So, are you a Fire Chief, yet, or what?" he asked. Stirring my coffee, and without blinking, I replied, "Yes, sir, I am the Task Force Fire Chief, what can I do for you this evening?" By the time I got the words out of my mouth, I'd turned around and all at once recognized who I was speaking to.

I simply couldn't believe it. This guy remembered me from a chance meeting in Somalia over six years before, and his mind was like a steel trap. As my eyes met his, I stood up and snapped to attention anyway, even though it was uncommon to do so in a dining facility. Either way, he and I were the only two people in the tent. He invited me to join him, and so we talked for a short while. We shared our common plight of insomnia, and more than one cup of coffee. It was a wonderful opportunity to see him as more of a human being, and he was obviously okay with that. We spoke of our meeting in Mogadishu and if I still had that old fire helmet that he'd seen in my hooch. I told him that against my better judgment that it was hanging on my wall at home. We laughed about the helmet, and I thought he liked those cookies as much as I did.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

I was desperately tired by now, and fought with everything inside me to stay awake and alert for this chance meeting. I did, and as we left for the evening I attempted to salute the man. He waved me off in mid-salute, and offered me his hand instead. I replied in kind, and when I did I felt the cold steel of his coin amidst our handshake. I would have never expected it, and it truly was the icing on the cake. I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and the coffee. It also taught me to keep my eyes open during my late night cookie runs.

A TRANSFER OF COMMAND: SAME MISSION



Being surrounded by the Engineer community within the Army's structure was second nature to me after the first couple of years. I had seen Combat Engineers, Topographic Engineers, Well-Drillers, and even met an Army Diver once. All of these groups of individuals bring great diversity to the Engineer Branch, and all have their own idiosyncrasies about them. However, I don't think that I ever met such a *'different'* group of Engineers as the civilian-based U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They are a truly amazing group of individuals. They are a mass of experts from throughout the Engineering specialties. Some are structural engineers, while others are aqueduct, planning, environmental, or construction experts. This unique part of the Army community under a deployment setting is quite possibly the center line of a successful base camp. They take on the same inherent risks that most Soldiers do in a combat zone, and they do so willingly and without the benefit of being able to carry more than a pocket knife.

As a part of the Engineer community, I had certainly heard of the Corps of Engineers, but never gave them that much thought. I certainly never thought I'd be working hand in hand with them. This, my second combat tour, would educate me in ways that I'd never

dreamed of. I would also come to appreciate their expertise and sense of duty; something which I'd seen in only a handful of civilians in the past.

The first time that I was asked to report to the Corps of Engineers, I really didn't know what to expect. There was a Lieutenant Colonel that I was to report to, and that alone gave me a little bit of hope. As the Task Force Fire Chief I would consult for and with this group over the course of our tour. We had strategically placed water blivots all over the base camp, planned for worst-case scenarios, and actually designed and emplaced the first fire hydrant on Camp Bondsteel. This alone was a minor miracle in seeing that the camp was at the top of a mountain with no water distribution system of any kind. It was a primitive beginning, but it worked.

When the initial list of major tasks was completed by the Baltimore Corps of Engineers, their replacements arrived. The New York Corps of Engineers was a group that definitely fit the stereotype. They were hard, aggressive, and obviously wanted to take on their fair share of the work. We continued working with them until our tour was over, and accomplished more than I ever dreamed. In the most primitive of conditions it's truly awesome how resourceful some people can become, even civilians.

I must admit that at first sight these civilians didn't appear to be much, but proved themselves more than competent and worthy of the task. If given the opportunity, I would work with them anytime.

MORE THAN ONCE “OUTSIDE THE WIRE” TOGETHER



There is a commonly used term used throughout the military community when forces are deployed called ‘outside the wire’. In the old days as I refer to them now, this term was mainly just that; a common term that most Soldiers used but few ever experienced. Now that the Global War on Terrorism has just about every Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve unit in the throes of war it is certainly more common than in the past.

I can tell you for free that I have spent more than my fair share of time outside the wire. It’s a common mentality to achieve when clearly; so much time is spent like this. There is a fine line between comfort and complacency, and it is a truly thin line to tread. Complacency was never the case; however I do believe that we looked at everything in our daily lives just a little different from most others.

As the Task Force Fire Chief, I took it upon myself to leave the camp more often than my men. After all, this was the first combat experience for most of them, and their skills were needed at the airfield and around the camp. It’s certainly not because I didn’t trust

them to go outside the wire, but moreover my own way of making sure that I didn't have to call anyone's mother or wife in the event something unconceivable happened. And so it went, day after day for months.

The Commander of our Quality of Life Assessment Team was a young Captain from Fort Bragg. As fellow Paratroopers, we fell right into the mission and leading a group of unarmed civilians around the countryside on dozens of missions while trying to keep the Commanding General's finger on the pulse of our region. I usually took the point position. This meant being in a vulnerable position... a lot.

One afternoon, while escorting a member of the Commanding General's Staff around from village to village, we chanced upon a tiny, and I do mean tiny, European looking car. I'd never seen such a thing, and it was disabled in the middle of the road. After taking several security precautions, we determined that this man was no threat, and that his car actually did break down. After about five minutes of trying to negotiate with him to help me push it out of the way with no apparent results; I started to become more frustrated as the language barrier seemed to get bigger.

We had to get back to Camp Bondsteel before the sun fell on the horizon, and it was starting to get really dark outside. I picked up the rear bumper, and to my surprise the entire car moved with it. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hundred pounds, and I simply dragged it out of our way one end at a time. I think that I was in as much shock as the General's Staff Officer and the rest of our posse. The poor Albanian guy who owned the car simply stood out of our way, while we drove on past him and drove out of sight.

On our way back, that Staff Officer never spoke a word, however he really didn't seem to have a problem staring at me either. I just cast my gaze out the window of my vehicle, and aimed my rifle outward. If the truth be told, I really was laughing on the inside.

At the end of our tour, that young Captain and I swapped coins and promised to sit down and have a beer on the 'other side' after our return.

THE BIGGEST BIRD IN THE BUNCH



During our first meeting at our newly built airfield, I was engaged in a briefing to the senior staff of the aviation unit regarding what my team’s capabilities could provide for them. The briefing went off without a hitch and I felt good about what we were there to do. The aviation unit, known as the “Fighting Eagles” was a proud bunch of hotshot pilots and exceptional crew chiefs who took great pride in having their aircraft in top shape.

Being an Army firefighter for so long, I’ve been exposed to the Army’s aviation community from around the world. I have to say that although aviators share a common love of their chosen profession, however I can’t say the same for some of their foreign counterparts. The United States has sold some of our ‘toys’ and equipment to our allies over the years. This is a common diplomatic practice; although the first time I saw this first-hand was right there on that airfield in Kosovo.

It wasn’t our first week in country that I witnessed what looked to be one of the most horrifying aviation disasters of my life, maybe even in history. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a coalition of Arab nations who provided a unique element within our allied

deployment community. The UAE had apparently purchased some U.S. military equipment, and had deployed with it. Among the laundry list of items included Apache helicopters and American U.S. Army battle dress uniforms, and M-16 rifles. At the very least, this was an odd sight.

At this point, I have to mention a little bit about firefighters and response time. The Army regulation that dictates such things states that an announced response, such as for a planned drill for example, calls for a response time of up to one minute. An unannounced response, (such as for a house fire, aircraft crash, or vehicle accident) calls for no more than three minutes. After the bell at the fire station goes off, firefighters gear up, start the fire engine, and eventually get on the road; a significant amount of this time is already counted in as lost. At this point we get there as fast as we can. Typically this is how it usually works.

In this case, however, we were on the far side of the camp and probably couldn't get through that Balkan mud in anything less than ten minutes. This was a challenge to say the very least. As we rounded the corner of a barracks complex and a muddy road, I watched as an Apache helicopter being piloted by one of the UAE officers swung sharply upwards and in a nearly vertical position. I am not a pilot, but working on airfields across the Army as long as I have, even I know when something looks dreadfully wrong. The pilot didn't have enough power to push the aircraft vertically, and he obviously didn't see the power lines or the aviation Headquarters building directly underneath him either.

My driver took off like a shot, spraying mud everywhere behind us. We were on site in about thirty seconds, and by some miracle didn't get killed in the process. Apparently, the American aviation crews on the ground and nearby were white as a ghost. I couldn't even begin to blame them. The UAE aircraft had somehow pulled it out, and barely missing landing into a building. It simply kept on flying as if nothing had happened.

With our red lights flashing, suddenly a couple of Soldiers showed up at our truck. The aviation group Command Sergeant

Major marched through the mud and right up to our truck. For a split second I actually thought he might be upset about our speeding over there and spraying mud everywhere. It didn't make sense with a life or death emergency at stake, but the Army doesn't always make sense. He climbed right up on the side step of our engine and shook our hands. Words could not accurately express the sincerity in that man's eyes.

About a week later, it was the aviation Regimental Commander's birthday. The Command Sergeant Major asked if my men and I would barge into the room during a flight briefing in full gear with a loaded hose to quench the fire from all the candles on his birthday cake. Command Sergeant Major or not, it was still a bit unnerving for me, even as a practical joke. The Commander took it well though, and we were slapped on the back and presented with coins after the party. It was a day to remember.

A CONVINCING DISCUSSION



When my six-man detachment of firefighters deployed to Kosovo in the late summer of 1999; we knew that we were facing the working end of Army-wide budget shrinkages and that this would probably be our last mission before we were deactivated as a team. We'd already received word that we would probably face the end of our detachment's history sometime during the following year. For my men and me, we really considered this mission a privilege. At that time, The Army had reduced its compliment of firefighters from seven teams down to four. I suppose that in the grand scheme of things that we were lucky to have made it down to the final cut. The team's only consisted of six men each, and in reality it was a pretty elite society. There were only about two hundred firefighters in the Army at the time, and that included the Active forces, National Guard, and Reserves.

Firefighters belonged to the Engineer Branch of the Army. That being said, I don't think that there was a single full bird Colonel throughout the Engineer community that hadn't heard of us. Only a handful of these men would have a fire detachment under their command during their careers. And those that did never treated us

like a ‘novelty’ as some might think. They actually considered it an honor. And as long as our fire engine was as shiny as our polished boots, they usually went out of their way to treat us right.

Operation Joint Guardian was going well in the Balkan region of Macedonia. In a period of six months or so, Skopje airport had become the busiest airport in the world. Most of it was military traffic, but nonetheless the constant flow of troops and equipment kept moving. As a team specializing in Crash and Rescue, we posted near the airport on most days. Camp Able Sentry was our home for the next six months and we began to set up shop. After about five weeks or so, we had every building and tent inspected and placed on our maps, saved the camp from a major brush fire, and forged a mutual-aid agreement with our host, and allied nation of Macedonia. We were smoking hot and our chain of command knew it.

In all honesty, Camp Able Sentry was a very small camp, and we had done just about everything that we could do there. My buddy from the team at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri was up north at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo. They swung through the Balkans like a rogue unit on a whirlwind tour that landed them up north just prior to their rotation home. There were no replacements on the horizon, and we were the only firemen in country. The solution was obvious, but we would have to get our Brigade Commander to buy off on it. I was a young Sergeant, and my idea of fun was not delivering a sales pitch to a full bird Colonel.

I hitched a ride on a Blackhawk up north to talk to my buddy, Mike. I wanted to get a feel for the Command, get a tour of Camp Bondsteel, and try and get a grip on what I was getting my team into. Camp Bondsteel was a rough, mowed down wheat field that was full of mud. I loved it. Essentially, the Army had the construction Engineers cut off the top of a mountain and build a base camp on it. It was truly an engineering feat of momentous proportion. If nothing else, you had to appreciate the enormity of the vision, as well as the effort that it took to make it happen. It was truly an incredible thing.

I arrived at Brigade Headquarters about 1900 hrs. and nervously opened the door. This facility was actually a hardened expando-van.

Most would view it as a giant RV, with the sides that flare outward to create an expanded space. As I entered the room, the white lights instantly changed to a soft red glow while the door was open, and resumed to full iridescent light upon closing the door. It took my eyes just a second to adjust, but the Colonel sat there unflinching in his chair with a cup of steaming hot coffee in front of him.

He offered me a seat, and I proceeded to offer my logical solution to the manpower issues that we were facing. The Army, in its infinite wisdom decided to send my detachment home as well, leaving all three base camps without any fire protection. On Camp Bondsteel alone there were almost five dozen allied and Army aircraft with more weapons, ammunition and fuel than could be imagined. It just didn't make sense to me. We could go home early, and be safe and sound with all the comforts of home, but my men and I didn't want to end our detachment's history like that. This meeting with the Colonel was a resounding success, and even though I was awestruck by the meeting—I was pretty sure that I had his full support. Besides, we were from Fort Bragg, and Paratroopers never run and never hide. It is simply not in our nature.

At the end of briefing each slide, the Colonel would reply with not much more than "Mmm Hmmm." I wasn't sure, but I didn't take this as a good sign. At the end of the presentation he thanked me for a well-presented discussion item, and agreed that we should not only move up to Camp Bondsteel, but that we should stay for the entire tour and I would then take the position of Task Force Falcon Fire Chief. My disbelief was immeasurable.

And so goes the story of my first major one-on-one briefing. He laid down his coffee cup on the table, and slid a coin across the table. "Congratulations, Sergeant." were his last words of the evening. I silently accepted his gratuity and took his compliment to mean that he knew that this was a personal accomplishment for me. As I walked back to the Blackhawk to return to Camp Able Sentry that evening, I was ecstatic. I took the twenty minute flight back to Macedonia to attempt to untie the knots in my stomach that had wrenched themselves into double knots during the long, slow minutes of my briefing.

When I stepped of the Blackhawk at the airfield, Specialist Jerry Mulcahey was waiting for me. I observed the glow of a long slow drag off of a cigarette at the edge of the tarmac, and I knew it was him. ‘Mick’, as we called him, was my right hand man and was one of the best fire apparatus driver’s that I’d ever seen. When we got back to the hooch, the news by the men was well received, and they also took it as a victory. We would stay and fulfill our mission.

A FOND FAREWELL



At the conclusion of our tour in the Balkans, the unit that we were attached to had planned a small get together for “The Magnificent Seven,” the nickname for our team that General Sanchez had dubbed upon us. There was a group of about thirty or so attendees, complete with a huge sheet cake which was decorated with our unit patches in brightly colored icing. It was a wonderful evening, and a nice farewell as our final mission came to an end. Someone had blown up a picture of the seven of us as a group to a life sized image and attached it to the wall. In most circles, firefighters are generally liked and this was certainly no different.

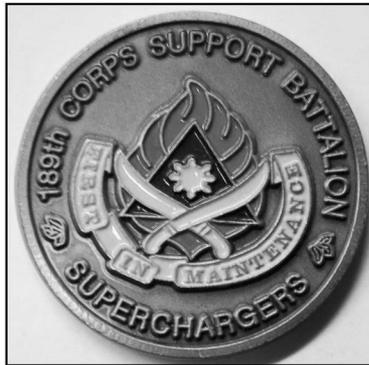
The next morning, we would board a military bus destined for Camp Able Sentry in Skopje, Macedonia to begin our redeployment. As we waited for our bus to arrive, a messenger showed up and hastily rushed us to the General’s briefing room. Even I had no idea what was happening, and I have to say that I was just a little concerned.

The Task Force Command Sergeant Major entered the room, and called the room to attention. The current Brigade Commander appeared shortly thereafter, and smiled as he walked down the line

and shook each of our hands and presented us with the “Iron Brigade” coin. I was actually relieved that this was just a follow up from the farewell gathering the night prior. Following the Brigade Commander was General Carlos Sanchez himself. Although he was my boss for the previous six months, we really didn’t have much contact, other than the morning briefings and an occasional incident of significance. He shook our hands as well, and thanked us for keeping the Task Force of three camps and over twelve thousand Soldiers safe during our watch. As a former Airborne Commander from Fort Bragg, he offered us a hearty “Airborne!” and was gone. In mere minutes, we were on our way back to Macedonia to begin the long flight home.

I was a little sad that the tour had come to an end, but inevitably that time would come. We had already persuaded the Command to let us stay the full tour, as well as move up from the rear echelon area in Macedonia up north to Kosovo. I had supposed that it was now really over; and admittedly a small part of me was relieved.

HANDING OVER THE REIGNS



In the past, I have described the elite nature of Army Firefighters, as well as their unique types and small numbers throughout the world. It is an unparalleled community of those who are willing to give, serve, and then give some more. When I'd heard that the budget for the Army firefighting teams was being handed over to the Engineer Branch, I was a bit skeptical; however being at Fort Bragg gave me a sense of security. The order was already on the table to cut three of the remaining seven teams Army wide. I wasn't the least bit concerned, as our team had deployed regularly through the years and performed without flaw.

About a month or so before we redeployed back to Fort Bragg from Kosovo, we'd received the final word that out of the final four teams, we too were being deactivated. Deactivated; it's such a cold word. Regardless, I received it about as cold as it seemed. It was almost personal. My men and I were of the same opinion, only because we loved the team and the work so much.

Upon returning home to Bragg, we immediately took thirty days of leave, and came back to a somewhat unfamiliar set of circumstances. Our detachment was down to three men, and we

would soon begin an inventory of our equipment to turn over to another unit. God only knows what they would use the truck for, so I devised a scheme to hang on to my engine for one more week. Engine 89 was my baby and I was very much attached to her. It was a long shot, but it worked and gave me a little bit of piece of mind at the same time.

We were to turn our entire compliment of equipment and our fire engine over to another unit who had three firefighters assigned to it. These firefighters fell under a very unfortunate series of circumstances in that the unit didn't allow them to work at the fire station. The unit they belonged to handled ammunition, and therefore they were used to perform endless hours of guard duty at ammunition storage facilities.

This never made sense to me either, but a few phone calls to some key personnel that I was acquainted with proved a valuable move for them. Before we knew it, a General Officer from Post Headquarters called their Company Commander and *ensured* that the three of them would receive the required training and be moved to the fire station within the next 24 hours. I do love it when good things happen to good people.

I showed up at their unit on a Monday morning, and told them to hop on the truck. I had pre-staged a bunch of equipment at a concrete pad just a few hundred yards away, and drove them straight up to it. They were more than a little surprised to see bunker gear all lined up in a row as they dismounted the fire engine. I gave them a crash course over the next three or four days to get them licensed on the vehicle, and turn over the equipment. We held a miniature and very impromptu graduation ceremony on that same concrete pad.

I waited until those young guys drove off in their not-so-new, new shiny fire engine before I felt a tear roll down my cheek. I'd been to hell and back with 89, and I would miss her dearly. I still do.

HURRICANE FRANCIS



In 1997, the coast and inland areas of North Carolina would come to receive one of the worst hurricanes in the area's history. I was a young Sergeant and assigned to the Fort Bragg Fire Department at the time. And, as luck would have it, Murphy's Law was in full effect as I was on duty the day that Hurricane Francis struck the Fort Bragg and Fayetteville areas.

In growing up around the fire service, I learned long ago that this vocation was so much more than rescuing kittens out of trees and just putting fires out. By this time I had lived it for quite some time and had realized that on any given day we could respond to an automobile accident, a house fire, a plane crash, or have a pedestrian walk through the fire station doors with profuse bleeding. At a young age I learned to look forward to the quiet days.

The day that Francis struck Fort Bragg was not one of those days.

During the early hours of my shift, we were briefed on the impending storm, and prepared to brace the fire station itself for the inevitable. Every potted plant and piece of excess hose from the grounds was brought indoors, and our vehicles were all fueled up with extra fuel cans on hand as well. The morning hours proved to be

more of a preparation session than anything, but provided little time to rest. At the 24-hour mark of our shift, we would feel the full brunt of true exhaustion. But I digress.

By the time our lunch hour rolled around, we still hadn't had so much as a single call, and actually were afforded the opportunity to have a nice lunch together. After lunch, however, the winds picked up considerably, and before you could blink we were in the midst of a full blown hurricane. We actually were prepared for it all, as we stared out the windows in front of the fire station. In anticipation of the first of many calls that shift, our Station Captain recommended that we 'suit up' while it was calm. This was at approximately 1 p.m., and just after lunch. I would not take off my bunker gear until seven o'clock the next morning.

As the night wore on, we responded to call after call. The storm had done quite a bit of damage during the hours of darkness, and the full measure of its power would not be felt until the next morning at daylight. I received a radio message sometime late in the evening that my wife had called, and that the power in our neighborhood was out as well. Unfortunately, there was nothing that I could do. I was twenty miles away, and we were already answering dozens of calls from truly desperate people.

The entire four man crew of our truck took turns driving throughout the night, giving the others an opportunity to catch a few minutes of well needed and well deserved sleep. It wasn't the best sleep that I'd ever had, but I savored every minute of unconsciousness on that noisy fire truck.

By the time the sun came up, we had answered over one hundred calls. One family had a tree in their living room. Unfortunately, they all gathered in that room to have a slumber party because their children were scared. Their injuries were minor and treatable. Another gentleman had been driving home after work and the hurricane force winds downed tree which landed on top of his car. When our crew turned him over to an ambulance to take him to the hospital; the ambulance too was struck with yet another falling tree. North Carolina has thousands of beautiful pine trees within its scenery; however they're not so beautiful when they're falling down like matchsticks during a hurricane.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

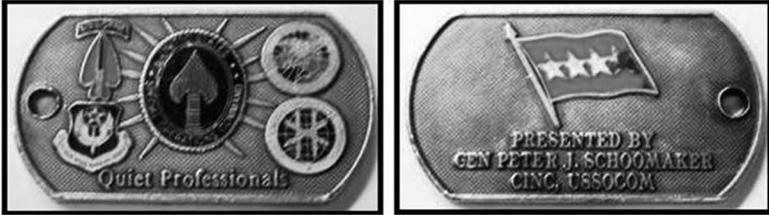
When we responded to the ambulance carrying our former patient, he simply couldn't believe that it happened again, much less that the same crew of firefighters was getting him out of yet another accident. Another ambulance responded and transported the gentleman and one member of the first ambulance crew to the hospital. Fortunately, the second ambulance reached the hospital unscathed.

There came a time, somewhere in the wee hours of the morning that we actually didn't have an active response, and so instead of parking our truck in the open bay at the fire house as was custom, our driver merely pulled into the parking lot. We were all asleep, and he was vigilant to monitor the radio while we all slept for a glorious fifteen whole minutes! It was beautiful.

We met back at the fire station at shift change to relieve our crew, and to get ready to go home. At roll call, we finally took off our gear and longed for a hot shower. The briefing was short that morning, however we had a visitor. The gentleman who had been struck by not one, but two trees was a Lieutenant Colonel from the Department of Public Works, which was our senior organization. As the Colonel stood there at our shift's roll call, he passed each of our crew a coin. He also shook each of our hands with his left hand, as his right arm was in a cast; a result of his multiple vehicle accidents the night before.

I don't think there was a single time in my life up to that point where I'd been that tired. I also don't think that there's been a single day in my firefighting career where I'd been able to work with a crew to help so many people either.

THE CINC



One of the many benefits of being a Paratrooper at Fort Bragg is that the XVIIIth Airborne Corps affords the opportunity to have either a three-day or a four-day weekend at least once a month due to the incredible operational tempo and workload placed on its Soldiers. You may work really hard the majority of the time; however you can pretty much count on some quality down time on a fairly regular basis.

On one such weekend, I decided to drive down to see my brother who was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. He was assigned to the United States Special Operations Command there, and I truly couldn't have been more proud of him.

That Saturday morning, he and I drove onto MacDill, and approached his building which was USSOCOM Headquarters. It was an impressive building, complete with civilian security guards with automatic weapons. This was no place to mess around. As we entered the building, we were swept by detection equipment and a host of other procedures.

After exiting the elevator on his floor, my brother and I walked down to his office where we heard some other people also hanging around on a Saturday. I suppose that I should have expected it; that this office would never be completely vacant. He showed me around a little, and suddenly a voice spoke up. "Is that you, Gary?" the man queried. I of course was not familiar with this voice; however my

brother sounded off with “Yes Sir!” I was of course Active Duty at the time, and being a Non Commissioned Officer realized that he was speaking with a commissioned officer; most likely with someone of considerable rank given the building that we were in.

An older gentleman appeared in the doorway wearing slacks and a dark polo shirt with the SOCOM logo on it. My brother stopped what he was doing and focused his attention completely on this man as I followed suit. He reached his hand out for a hand shake from Gary, and then I was introduced to him. He was General Peter Schoomaker, the Commander in Chief (CINC) of USSOCOM. I couldn’t believe it. This man was a legend; and suddenly there we were.

When serving in the military, some aspects of this path are no different from any other career. Co-workers share details of their lives as there is a certain social atmosphere in any workplace. My brother had apparently shared some of my career adventures with General Schoomaker in my dealings with Special Operations forces and Secret Service prior to then, and I was impressed that this man could, or would commit any of it to memory. That being said, it has been my experience that most senior officers, Generals in particular, have a very keen sense of detailed memory.

While he thanked me for supporting ‘*the boys*’, as he affectionately referred to the Special Operations community; he asked if I liked being a firefighter for the Army, and why I wasn’t down in Florida with my brother. It was a nice conversation, and I felt fortunate for having the chance to meet a legend of his magnitude. Before leaving the room, he presented me with the coin pictured above. I found myself in awe over the situation, and silently thanked my brother for speaking so highly of me.

THE FLOOD



As I've mentioned before, when working as a firefighter you really can't afford to take anything for granted. In Alaska during the winter months; this is especially true. The subzero temperatures have a negative effect on just about everything; everything except ice fishermen that is.

One of the great things that I have always loved about the military community is that during peace time and in a garrison environment; as a Soldier you can think outside the box, as it were. You may be rescuing someone from a multiple vehicle car accident in the morning, and be cooking a fine meal at lunch followed by a restless night of response after response. Something potentially exciting is always around the corner, and boredom is seldom an issue.

One evening we received a call that fire alarms were going off all over the post hospital. I've never taken a call for granted before, however it did seem unlikely that this would be true and we would be hearing about it all at the same time. When we arrived, we found that indeed the alarms were going off all over the building. There wasn't any smoke, or any flames. We figured it to be an electrical malfunction, and walked through the entire building. When we reached the fourth floor, I don't believe that even I was ready to find what we saw.

It was colder than minus thirty on this night, and the fierce arctic winds howled through the air and cut like a knife. As we exited the elevator on the fourth floor, we felt a cold snap and immediately became suspicious. After going through an administrative area away from the patient treatment rooms, we found water pouring through the ceiling in one of the offices. The occupant had cracked their window during the day, and forgotten to close it before leaving. The cold Alaskan air had frozen the pipes in the ceiling and caused them to burst. Up to that point in my life, I'd never seen so much water flowing freely *inside* a building.

I was carrying a high-rise pack which consisted of a hose pack, nozzle, and wrenches to hook up to the house line. My partner and I detached one of the hoses and, standing knee deep in water, slipped the hose coupling over the busted section of pipe and redirected the water through the window and outside of the office. With water everywhere and the frosty air flowing freely through the cracked window we found ourselves bordering hypothermia. We were soaked. This immediately created an icy waterfall directly below the window on the ground. The crews from the other engines told of how beautiful it looked cascading out the window and then freezing in mid-air.

At the time, the pretty, frozen waterfall was the last thing on my mind. With the hose outside the window, and soaked to the bone in a room filled with water we tried desperately to find a shutoff point. I recall seeing one of those multi-plug power strips with the little orange light glowing about four feet under water next to my boot. This couldn't be good.

By all tallies, we'd actually saved more damage from being done than was caused by the initial flooding. That was hard to believe as we held that hose to siphon off the water over our heads in subzero temperatures.

When we arrived back at the fire station, we turned the oven on and opened the door to wiggle our fingers in front of the heat until we regained circulation and feeling again. It was quite a night. We must have looked like a couple of idiots shivering in front of a warm stove.

RON BRELAND

After all was said and done, we had a few laughs about it and told each other that we'd draw straws the next time something like this happened.

A few shifts later, the Commander of the hospital showed up unannounced at our fire house and presented all the firefighters with his coin as a sign of appreciation for our efforts. It was certainly nice to be appreciated, however I would have much rather never felt that cold.

I now live in New Mexico.

BEYOND THE STANDARD



Just before I was promoted and became a Platoon Sergeant in 2002, I was assigned as the Reenlistment NCO for a near Battalion-sized company on Fort Wainwright, Alaska. This duty station actually facilitated my job with the scenic beauty and host of outdoor activities available. The area around Fairbanks was family friendly, and there was never a time where there wasn't something to do.

This time frame was of course after the events of 9-11-01, and I thought I would have several challenges in completing my mission. Actually, after the post security and procedures for almost everything tightened up after September 11th, I was sure that more Soldiers would be leaving the Army than reenlisting. I couldn't have been more wrong.

As a Reenlistment NCO, I would contact the Soldiers about a year out from their time to leave the Army, and then again periodically up to the 90-day mark. The closer we got to the three month mark, the

more nervous the Command would get. As a part of the Command Staff, of course we didn't want to lose *anyone*; however there are percentages set as goals that are based on those who are eligible to reenlist. Being in such a large unit, the list was always long, but geography was always an issue as well. This headquarters element was sprawled out over a 150 mile radius of Fort Wainwright, and reaching these folks in person often presented its own challenges, especially in the winter months.

Our Commander and his staff, including myself, were close to achieving our required percentage of eligible reenlisting Soldiers for that particular quarter. We weren't quite there yet, but we came up with a plan. There were two Soldiers stationed at an outpost about 150 miles away from Fairbanks. It was in the dead of winter, and a site visit was unlikely, however not impossible. My Commander and I decided to take a four-wheel drive vehicle, invite our wives, and make a day of it. If every day in the Army were like this, I'd never have a single complaint. It was a rough deal, but someone had to do it. So off we drove for a place called Black Rapids. Along the way, we stopped to take a few pictures of the Alaskan Range Mountains and have a Buffalo Burger at what was then Delta Junction's only restaurant, the 'Black Raven'. The view was breathtaking, and I think Helen would have called it one of her better days up north; at least while being pregnant during an Alaskan winter.

Upon our arrival, the dirt roads off of the Richardson Highway were passable, but not very comfortable. My wife Helen was pregnant, and not enjoying the off-road experience. The Commander and I situated our wives inside a guest area of the main building, and then hopped on snowmobiles with the site staff to talk with our two prospective reenlistees. This had probably been the most desolate posting that I'd ever seen, but these two guys loved it. They worked a regular schedule, and had all the time in the world to take classes, go fishing, hiking, and any other activity that they could think of. Neither one required even the slightest bit of motivation to re-up for another term. I would have reenlisted as well.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

When the word got around through the main Post Command that the Headquarters Company Commander and his Reenlistment NCO had gone to such lengths to secure the reenlistment of two individual Soldiers, the phone started ringing. Little did they know that the day was more than enjoyable; so much so that it hardly seemed like work. After we achieved over one hundred percent of our assignment for the quarter, the Commander was presented with a plaque, and I with a coin from the Deputy Commander of U.S. Army Alaska (USARAK). There are many types of days that you can have in the Army, and this was certainly one of the better ones.

I'd like to thank U.S. Army Captain Paul Tappen and his wife Shelley for being a part of one of my best days in the Army. Neither Helen nor I will ever forget.

A CHANCE RUN IN WITH THE ‘SMAJ’



In late April of 2002, I found myself getting ready to leave Alaska for the warmth of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Helen and I were looking forward to the trip, however the spring in Alaska is perhaps the nicest season that we'd found there. The fishing was incredible, and the outdoor opportunities were endless. But alas, we were changing our career path, and it was time to go.

I distinctly remember one particular day, as I was receiving my final stamp of approval to leave the Alaskan Command, when a short, stout, and very fast walking gentlemen accosted me in the parking lot. As he approached, I realized that he was the U.S. Army Alaska (USARAK) Command Sergeant Major, and I quickly began checking my uniform for deficiencies. There weren't any as far as I could see, and so I locked up and addressed him to break the ice.

He told me to relax, and offered a handshake. He asked me when I was leaving, and that he'd been looking for me that day. I was surprised to hear this from a man of his position, and queried as to why. He told me that he just wanted to thank me and my wife for our contributions to the Command over the past couple of years, and wished us luck. The coin pictured above was what followed.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

At the time, USARAK had a motto, which was ‘*Soldiering is an Affair of the Heart*’. He truly loved his men, and in the transition after 9-11-01, he saw his force of over 12,000 Soldiers go from a non-deployable force to one that was used to fill Army-wide gaps in units from across the globe. He had been a combat veteran and apparently felt the sting of losing a Soldier in battle before. Perhaps prior to September 11, 2001 this assignment was safe from consequences such as that. This was certainly not the case anymore.

He was a true professional that always had the Soldier’s best interests at heart. I’m told that after his third and last assignment in Alaska that he retired there. There’s no doubt in my mind that he wanted to continue to be around Soldiers. Good luck Sergeant Major.

THE ONE-HANDED PUSHUP...” JUST ONE”...



When serving with the Army in Alaska, about the most exciting thing that happens is a monthly visit from the Commanding General. And as exciting as that may be, it is only for some. The Command element is usually only interested in a few different things, the least of all visiting troops at the grass roots level. During my second tour to Alaska, this would certainly change.

As a Platoon Sergeant, I was often kept in the loop on things such as visits from VIP's, and other such miscellaneous events. And usually I had enough notice to adequately prepare for whatever the event might be. If a distinguished visitor was coming our way, then I'd inspect the Platoon myself and knock them especially hard if they didn't meet the standard. I was always very proud of my appearance, and had a standing offer with each Squad or Platoon that I ever led. If the entire element had a more pressed uniform than mine, and shinier boots than mine; then I would work a day in their place as a reward for working as a team. I never once had to pay up, but came close a couple of times. It proved to be a good motivator.

My First Sergeant pulled all of the key leadership into his office, which at this point was standing room only. The Post Command Sergeant Major was in there, and by the eye contact darting back and forth across the room we presumed that this wasn't going to be good. As it turned out, the Sergeant Major of the Army himself was coming up to Alaska for a visit, and did we ever get the motivational speech of a lifetime. When the Post Command Sergeant Major was done, the First Sergeant added his two cents, and I didn't foresee the need to relay any further pressure on the Non-Commissioned Officers of my Platoon. I simply told them, "Same deal as usual."

I really came close that day to having to work a lot of overtime for free, however it didn't pan out for them that time either. We all gathered at the post gym, and the bleachers were full of Corporals, Sergeants, Master Sergeants and First Sergeants. The Post Command Sergeant Major posted himself by the door, and I soon found out why.

After his grand entrance which included his entourage, the Sergeant Major of the Army stood in the middle of that gym floor and asked if we had any questions of him. You could have heard a pin drop. I feel sure to this day that the gym was as quiet at that moment as it normally was at three o'clock in the morning.

In the military, there is a fine line between "Hooah!" and stupid. You may well have guessed it by now that at that moment I didn't see the blur in this line; and you'd be right. Suddenly, I raised my hand, and I felt the blood drain down my appendage and into my body. My hand was the only one in the air at that moment, and everyone knew it. Everyone in that room who knew me knew it, and was probably rolling their eyes or shaking their head. I couldn't even remember my name all of a sudden, and I felt cold.

The Sergeant Major of the Army pointed at me, and motioned for me to climb down the bleachers and step in front of a microphone. I hadn't even seen that microphone when I walked in. What was I thinking? It was a bullet out of a gun at this point, and there seemed to be nowhere to go but up from here. He went on speaking for a couple of minutes while I stood there, locked up so tight at the

position of parade rest that I thought I'd pass out from locking my knees. All of a sudden, he spoke. "Yes Sergeant Breland, what's your question?" For the life of me I couldn't even remember what I'd thought of, and all of a sudden it came to me. I tried to think of something that would benefit everyone in the room, regarding my question. It had to be something that my fellow Non-Commissioned Officers would be able to take with them when they left that room. I asked my question, which shall not be mentioned here and now, and stood there.

Relief swept over me, yet at the same time I was prisoner to his silence. He turned around and addressed his answer to the entire crowd. I think he may have forgotten that I was still standing there, because when his body came full circle he jolted slightly when his eyes met mine. He told me to relax and please step out to the center of the gym floor. I looked over at the Post Command Sergeant Major who was shaking his head by now and mouthing something that I couldn't understand. Again, it couldn't have been good.

After I broke the ice, about six or seven more questions were asked, and I took comfort in not being the only one. One by one, they too were asked to join me in a line in the middle of that gym floor. I never did mind being center stage before that day. After a good long speech to the entire leadership community, he turned to me and asked if I could do at least one, one-handed push up. I must have frozen like a deer in the headlights. Knowing all too well that it was probably not likely, I sounded off with "HOOAH Sergeant Major!" He folded his arms and watched as I obviously struggled pumping out even a single one-handed push up. The only one I ever did was fueled by fear, motivation, and God only knows what else. Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley then got down and pumped out no fewer than twenty one-handed push ups himself. I was in total shock. He was an old man, and damn was he in good shape! He popped back up on his feet and gave me one of his coins. I was still in shock. And so he went down the line until the last guy to ask him a question gave him at least one, as he fired back with twenty.

I have never seen anything like it, and I probably never will.

THE OLD MAN AND HIS NERVES



Upon arriving at Fort Riley, Kansas, I was immediately assigned to the 'Devil Brigade' of the 1st Infantry Division or 'Big Red One'. Once again, I found myself in a Division assignment, and had a pretty good idea that we'd be at the 'tip of the spear' somehow.

The majority of the Brigade had left only days before I arrived at Fort Riley. The rear detachment only consisted of a couple of dozen Soldiers, and my fellow NCO's and I stepped right up to take the lead. We lead the physical training, the rifle ranges, the marching, and the barracks inspections. The rear detachment First Sergeant was about to retire, thus he was not going to Iraq. He wasn't really old, maybe his mid-forties; but he was surely ready to retire.

One day we showed up to the morning formation and he asked me to see him after our morning run. I complied, and he then informed me that he wanted some help with a Family Support Group Meeting that was to occur that evening. I must admit, he did look a little worried. An entire Battalion of Soldiers' wives and kids were going to cram into the Battalion classroom and were looking for answers regarding their spouses, and the unit's status. By then the unit was still in Kuwait and awaiting the order to move up north into Iraq. There

weren't many answers and even less accurate information, but he told me that he was counting on my diplomacy skills to keep the peace. Trust me; there is nothing on this earth as bad as an uninformed, angry, or completely stressed Army wife.

The meeting went relatively well, and based on my previous two combat tours I was able to speculate somewhat on the process that would move the unit from Kuwait to Iraq, and keep the nervousness down to a minimum. By the time everyone left, the First Sergeant and I were both still smiling at the success of averting a potential crisis. His gratitude was obvious.

The following morning before our morning exercise session, he asked me where I was from. I told him that I hailed from Louisiana, and we made small talk about the good food, fishing, and Mardi Gras. As we saluted the flag at Reveille, he turned to face the unit and put us at ease. He then began a short but funny speech about how I was going to be the Governor of Louisiana one day due to my ability to keep the peace in what he called a potentially explosive situation.

He called me up in front of the formation of about forty Soldiers and presented me with the 1st Engineer Battalion coin. Honestly, I felt as though this was probably among the lesser of my career highlights, but it showed me how much this simple act meant to him. He stuck around until just after our return in September of 2004, and then retired. At least he could retire with a few less gray hairs. (As a matter of fact, he didn't have any hair at all.)

FROM ONE FIREMAN TO ANOTHER



At the end of our portion of Operation Iraqi Freedom we found ourselves at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. This camp is a great facility where we washed vehicles, turned in our weapons, and generally relaxed until there were enough aircraft to bring our Brigade home. In our case, this was about three weeks.

Our tour was finally over, and we relished in the multiple opportunities to rest, eat a great meal at one of the best government contracted dining facilities that I've ever witnessed, and even partake in some ice cream at the camp's very own Baskin Robbins. We were in heaven, but after a week of relaxation and watching movies we were ready to get home. After all, we'd been gone for a year by now. It was a very long year.

That last three weeks may have been the final stretch in a much friendlier environment, but it was perhaps the longest three weeks of my life as well. This is a lot of time to ponder the issues of your life. It's also a lot of time to be incredibly bored. I probably ate more ice cream than I should have during that time; however I also did my fair share of walking the camp out of absolute boredom as well.

By this time, I hadn't actually worked a shift at a fire station in over a year and a half. The fire service was not only the family business, but still had a huge place in my heart. I found my way to the local firehouse and had lunch with the guys and played some cards. When the Chief walked in, I was introduced to him and we talked for a while. I told him about the crude firefighting operation that my men and I conducted with primitive 65 GPM pumps and 5-gallon buckets of pink hand soap after an IED attack, and we both laughed out loud over this highly unconventional technique.

He mentioned to me that he knew a lot of military firefighters that had traveled up north to Iraq, but none that had spent so much time on the road, much less any that had lived to tell about it. He smiled as he tossed me a Camp Arifjan Fire Department coin, and I felt privileged. I got the feeling that had he been younger that he might have liked to have the opportunity to go up north as well. Sitting in that leather chair in a nice air conditioned office I felt sure, however that this was where he needed to be. By now, I was glad that I was there too.

THE FIRST OF THE TOUR... NO BIG DEAL



During my tour in Iraq from September 2003 through September of 2004; there were many memorable moments that have seared themselves into my memory forever. The coin pictured above may be seen as an achievement; however it has a very indelible memory attached to it for me. It was a day that is impossible to forget.

We had been pulling our fair share of guard duty at the main gate of our camp for a few weeks. Our Brigade had already had approximately fifteen casualties during our tour, and every one of us was at a perpetually never-ending heightened state of alertness. It was more like walking on egg shells, but at least no one had their guard down. From our perspective at the gate, we could see the wall of the adjacent camp just across the Euphrates River, and over the course of time had visited that same camp many times.

Each camp had a guard force, as well as 'escorts'. Escorts were armed Soldiers sent along with any inbound vehicles to ensure that their business on the camp was quick and took a direct path both on the camp, and leaving it as well. The escorts were typically safer than

the guards, due to the guards having to search vehicles and assume the greater risk. At our neighboring camp, called Champion Main, was the Headquarters for the 82nd Airborne Division. I was relieved somewhat that the All American Division was our senior organization, as I'd served over five years at Fort Bragg prior to this assignment. I know their capabilities, and I also knew that the 'HOOAH-meter' was always maxed out. As we were pretty knowledgeable of both camps and the area in between, we were comforted, but not complacent of our familiarity of the area. After all, this was our home for a year.

On one particular day, we were busy searching the day laborers and vehicle traffic that was now routine for the most part on a daily basis. All at once, the entire world stopped. A huge explosion rocked Champion Main; so loud and thunderous that it made my legs shake nearly half a mile away. As I peered over towards Champion to see where the plume of smoke was coming from, my Soldiers and I immediately realized that the explosion had taken place *on* the camp. We immediately checked the radio to see if the Explosive Ordinance Disposal unit was scheduled to blow up any captured munitions. Even so, I doubted it as we usually escorted them to the middle of the desert for such tasks.

As the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of the gate at the time, I had to make a quick decision. I decided to call all of the escorts who were with local nationals (Iraqis) on the camp, and clear the entire camp of non-essential personnel. In short, if they were not an American, then they had to leave. I have to hand it to my Soldiers and their dedication. We cleared over four hundred Iraqis off of our camp in less than five minutes.

All of a sudden, a column of tactical vehicles rushed the gate trying to get off the camp and out to Highway 10, one of the most infamous roads in the Al Anbar province which included our town of Ar Ramadi as well as the city of Fallujah. Our Brigade Commander and Command Sergeant Major had their own Personal Security Detachment and were heading out for a better view. They wound up posting their position at the intersection to the camp's main entry

road about one half mile to our North. Anything past our position was definitely ‘outside the wire’ and not safe by any means. We could still see them, but responding to them in the event of an attack was unlikely to be successful, especially on foot.

When I finally got the word that the camp had been cleared, and that all gates were shut down to any and all incoming local nationals, I attempted to reach the Brigade Command Staff on the radio. The radio net was bustling with traffic and there would be no way to reach them for at least an hour. Still, we had to notify him that the camp was locked down and cleared of non-essential personnel. So I began to run. I told all of our men at the gate to select a point about two hundred meters around me in a circular pattern, and to cover me while I ran out to the Command Group to deliver the message.

As I approached the Command Group, my running foot steps must have startled one of the gunners, as he rotated his heavy machine gun around on me. Of course I immediately stopped. The Colonel and Command Sergeant Major knew that I was the NCOIC on the gate and asked me what was wrong. I replied that our team on the gate had cleared the camp of all non-essential personnel in the past five minutes or so. “Good job, Sergeant!” replied the Colonel. I turned around and immediately ran back to the gate to report back to my men. I was sweating profusely in the desert heat after running nearly a mile with sixty or so pounds of gear on me. Damn it was hot.

I realized that at the point I started running back that I had about a dozen rifles and two heavy machine guns ready to scan and kill anything that might shoot at me, but just the same the message *had* to be delivered. I thanked my Soldiers for covering me so well, as they assured me of my safety. They told me that if anyone so much as threw a rock in my direction then they’d meet a worse fate than mine. I believed them.

That night, after we were relieved for the night, I was summoned to the Battalion Headquarters where I was told to walk with the Battalion Command Sergeant Major and my First Sergeant over to the Brigade Headquarters to see the Colonel. I relived the events of the afternoon over and over in my mind. I did feel somewhat foolish

in that I risked my life by going outside the camp's perimeter to deliver a message instead of waiting. Surely I was going to receive the reprimand of my life.

The Colonel and Command Sergeant Major met us at the door, and I was patted on the back as well as received the first 'Devil Brigade' coin of the tour. I was somewhat honored, but still in a state of dismay as I thought about that young Soldier whose name came up on the Escort duty roster that morning over at Champion Main. That poor young Soldier simply did his job and was ready to be an armed escort to keep others safe. What neither he, nor any of us knew at the time was that the inner panels of the vehicle's door were packed with explosives. Once the Division Headquarters came into sight, the Iraqi driving the car detonated his car bomb, killing them both instantly.

When the Brigade Commander asked me what I thought about receiving the first coin in the Brigade, I replied "I apologize, Sir; the only thing that happened today that matters is that a Soldier died." The Command Sergeant Major placed his hand on my shoulder and quietly told me that I could go. This was fortunate for me as the tears were starting to well up in my eyes. That coin still reminds me of that day.

THIS BUD'S FOR YOU



In the Iraqi Theater of Operation, there is one major set of rules to abide by. It's simply named 'General Order #1'. This order is a document that outlines the dos and don'ts that may or may not be permitted while deployed. Among the highlights for example are the fact that a Soldier may not consume alcohol, have sex, or engage in any behavior which might affect the good order and discipline of the unit. It's common sense really. Anything that might hinder the ability of anyone to complete their mission is not allowed under this General Order.

Fortunately for all of us, we were all entirely too busy to partake in any of these activities even if they were available to us. Although we had many long, hot, and exhausting days the thought of missing a beer at the end of the day never really crossed my mind. We wanted to relax, but at the same time didn't feel the need to stop riding the razor's edge. Our survival depended on it.

One evening, after a particularly hot and arduous day, we returned to our hooch to see a big smile on our Platoon Sergeant's face. He told us to relax, and that he had a surprise for us. He had a box sitting on his cot, and then notified us that he had a Budweiser for each and every one

of us. Some of the men mustn't have been thinking straight, as their eyes lit up immediately. As NCO's, we were naturally suspicious, and patiently waited for the punch line to this seemingly cruel joke.

Our Platoon Sergeant was a very quiet guy most of the time, and was known to be a very passionate Christian who didn't partake in alcohol...ever. The word 'Budweiser' rolling off of someone's tongue while surrounded by desert in heat that peaks at over 130 degrees creates a very vivid picture in your mind. My fellow Squad Leader and I had been around quite some time by now, and I simply knew better.

Out of the box on his cot, he retrieved a smaller box containing a coin for each Soldier in the Platoon. The Anheuser-Busch Company had coins minted and individually numbered for every single Soldier, Sailor, Airman, and Marine that was in Iraq. It wasn't the icy cold longneck bottle that some of the guys were hoping for, but I was intrigued and amazed at the gesture. It truly was the thought that counted. It was a tangible sign of support from home on a somewhat national scale.

I remember thinking to myself, "This Bud's for you!"

NO FURTHER NEED



By the time that the ‘Devil Brigade’, the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division had arrived to serve our tour in Iraq for our portion of Operation Iraqi Freedom there was no real threat from Iraqi Paratroopers, Republican Guard, or any semblance of an organized Navy whatsoever. The enemy as it were was not an outspoken force, but a hidden insurgency that we would become all too familiar with.

Our arrival in Ar Ramadi was by no means a welcome one; however we never forgot the unfortunate reality that a human life can be erased in an instant. Every second of our lives from that moment forward was a cherished moment not to be taken for granted. Our surroundings were something to be considered as well. Our camp was an old Republican Guard camp which housed two entire Brigades of these elite fighters. When our arrival became imminent, the entire population of this camp dissolved into the local communities of Ramadi and Fallujah. We would set up shop in their barracks, and find them a formidable enemy in their own backyard. I could only wonder what conversations and plans had transpired between those very same walls regarding Iraqi soldiers and their plans for us only weeks before. They were familiar with every back

alley in the Al Anbar Province, and over the coming year we would see full measure of their home court advantage. Our only allies were those who bore the same patch; the “Big Red One,” or the ‘blood patch’ as the insurgency came to call it over the course of our tour. Our Brigade was aggressive, well trained, and ready to do what we had to in order to get home in the end.

Allow me to tell you about a gentleman that I met one day after we were engaged in combat operations for some time. His name was Sam. Sam was an average looking fellow who was a very self conscious dresser by Iraqi standards. He wore a sports coat and pressed shirt every day. He also smoked like a chimney. The Iraqi people are social smokers, and are ever—willing to offer up a smoke just to engage in conversation.

After three combat tours of facing Muslim fundamentalists, I had come to be very skeptical of even the most subtle social kindness. Even at the risk of insulting anyone, I would never accept even the smallest offering. After all, I had my convictions and I had learned a lesson or two along the way which had kept me alive for this long.

Sam had been “checked out” as it were by the Intelligence community, and was hired as a Category I Interpreter. This meant that Sam was allowed to work with the gate guard force as an interpreter for twelve hours a day, six days a week and for a mere \$60 a month. This may sound rough, but to an out of work Iraqi, the prospect of sixty American dollars a month looked pretty good.

As time passed, we all learned of Sam’s family. He had a wife and five children whom he loved very much. Sam used to be a school teacher while Saddam was in power, but after the invasion there was a short time when civilized functions such as public schooling were shut down until things were more stable. He spoke English very well, and to hear him speak of the past was almost heart wrenching. As a Soldier, and a leader, I stood firm and tried not to feel at all. After all, at least he was able to see his family every night even though hitchhiking from Baghdad to Ramadi every day was a potentially life-threatening event. Still, as I could not see my family at all I felt nothing for his plight. It was all perspective, you see.

One afternoon while working at the gate, I reached for my wallet to buy some trinket from a local kid. This was common as they'd sell anything that they could. I had dropped my wallet, and a photo of my daughter fell onto the ground. Before I could do anything, Sam reached down and retrieved my daughter's photo.

In a somewhat surreal moment, I watched this simple act of kindness and I was intrigued. "You will have much trouble" Sam said. When I inquired as to why, he told me that because my daughter was so beautiful that I would have a lot of trouble in her later years, primarily with boys. He handed the photo back to me, and reached for his wallet. Like me, Sam had five children as well including a young daughter.

Over the months, I had come to grips with the fact that I had shut down my own abilities to feel much of anything. Sam and I continued to share photos throughout our tour, and I found an inherent value in social smoking with my new Iraqi acquaintance. I had told Helen of my conversations with Sam, and not long after that she and my daughter, Abby sent a small bracelet that they had made out of beads together. It was an interesting trinket, and I knew immediately where it should go.

On our last day of duty at the camp's main gate, I took Sam aside for a few moments. We exchanged the typical Iraqi 'double hug' that is the standard greeting. And of course we smoked. I retrieved the small multi-colored bracelet from my pocket and placed it in his hand. "This is from my daughter to yours" I told him. He told me that it was the will of Allah that we should cross each others paths during this time, and that he too had something for me.

As a U.S. Paratrooper, I of course have developed and still maintain a huge respect for the Airborne community. This, you may already know. However, what I didn't know at the time is that Sam recognized me as a fellow Paratrooper without ever having let me know that he was ever aware of that fact. Before becoming a school teacher, Sam was a Paratrooper in the Iraqi Army. This again was a huge risk. Things like safety and knowledge of tactics, conventional or otherwise were completely unbeknownst to him. He handed me

RON BRELAND

his Iraqi Paratrooper wings and asked me to remember him as a father and a fellow Paratrooper when I left his country. I still do to this day.

I don't recall what happened to Sam in the latter days of our tour, but I do keep him and his family in my thoughts and prayers. He was a good *man*; not just a good *Iraqi* in my eyes. He was a good father, and I can't seem to imagine him to have been anything less one hell of a Paratrooper.

CHALLENGE COIN RULES

RULES:

- A.** The challenge is initiated by drawing your coin, holding it in the air by whatever means possible and state, scream, shout or otherwise verbally acknowledge that you are initiating a coin check. Another, but less vocal method is to firmly place it on the bar, table, or floor (this should produce an audible noise which can be easily heard by those being challenged, but try not to leave a permanent imprint). If you accidentally drop your coin and it makes an audible sound upon impact, then you have just “accidentally” initiated a coin check. (This is called paying the price for improper care of your coin.)
- B.** The response consists of all those persons being challenged drawing their coin in a like manner.
- C.** If you are challenged and are unable to properly respond, you must buy a round of drinks for the challenger and the group being challenged.
- D.** If everyone being challenged responds in the correct manner, the challenger must buy a round of drinks for all those people they challenged.
- E.** Failure to buy a round is a despicable crime and will require that you turn-in your Coin to the issuing agency.

2. WHEN—WHERE:

- A.** Coin checks are permitted, ANY TIME, ANY PLACE.

3. EXCEPTIONS:

- A.** There are no exceptions to the rules. They apply to those clothed or unclothed. At the time of the challenge you are permitted one step and at arms reach to locate your coin. If you still cannot reach it—THERE WILL BE NO WHINING!

4. A COIN IS A COIN!

THE YELLOW CORVETTE— BOTH INSIDE AND OUT



When I was very young, I can recall many things about my home. To this day I can tell you how many steps were on our stairwell, the exact color of my Norwegian Elkhound's eyes, and how I felt the moment my mother's brother, my Uncle Steve, pulled up in front of our house in the brightest yellow corvette I'd ever seen. The year was 1973, and although I didn't understand it, I was possibly in love for the very first time. However, as a three year-old with the attention span of a puppy, this soon faded. You'll soon see why.

My uncle was single, and even though he visited our home quite frequently from across town I never really grasped the concept of being single. My grandmother lived with us and I suppose that I still thought that he should live at home with his mommy as I did.

As it turned out, he was stopping by to give my mother a break and take me out to lunch at a local establishment renowned for its hot dogs. After all, how hard can it be to impress a three year-old little boy? I don't have very many memories of this type of thing happening, but I believe that I'll remember this particular one until the day that I die.

My uncle had let me climb inside his new 'Vette', and I remember being asked at least twice in the first thirty seconds to get my shoes off of his brand new leather seats. I also recall the smell of warm leather as it sat there in the afternoon sun. With an instrument panel that resembled that of a fighter jet I remember being utterly impressed. At three years old, I was excited just to be sitting in the car, let alone to be actually going somewhere in it.

All of a sudden, my uncle had to go back in the house for some reason or another. He told me to sit there and not to touch anything until he returned. It seems that the second he shut his door, I felt the urge to go to the bathroom. Maybe it was the warm leather, or the thought of slurping down a cold drink with my lunch that I was anticipating. Either way, it didn't seem to matter because for whatever reason I had to go...and right now!

I suppose that I was in the middle of a stereotypical three year-old nightmare scenario with crossing my legs and the whole bit, but I do distinctly recall being upset with him for taking so long. Children are inherently selfish, and apparently I was no different.

I stood up on the seat, spread my legs out so I wouldn't urinate on myself, and just let it go. At this point I have to mention that when urine hits a hot leather seat which has been sitting in the sun for a while, that "showroom scent of leather" is instantly gone. It is also replaced by another scent; one that is much less desirable than the original.

Upon his return, I watched his eyes as he looked through the window and saw the puddle in my seat. Words cannot describe the crazed look on his face, nor the seemingly violent tone or words coming out of his mouth. As he reached for the handle of the driver's side door, I was reaching for the handle on my door. Both were for

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

completely different reasons, and I'm sure that we both felt equally adamant about getting our doors open. I ran for the house, and I was off like a shot. Incidentally, I never rode in that Corvette and we never did make it to lunch that day.

GETTIN CAUGHT WITH YOUR HAND IN THE COOKIE JAR CAN LAND YOU INTHE HOSPITAL

It's been said that getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar is no fun at all. Well, compared to the following story from my childhood, nothing could be further from the truth. Getting caught would have been great if that were the end of it, or if that were the only consequence. For some reason, when I was growing up I always had to take things to the next level. It's funny to look back now of course, but at the time I was always wondering how I was going to get out of the trouble that I'd somehow always managed to get myself into. Here goes.

My Grandmother worked at a department store, and every Friday afternoon she'd cash her check at work and buy a small toy for both my brother and I before returning home. Friday was usually an exciting day for the two of us. My brother was five years younger than I, and sometimes he'd forget about the excitement and promise of Friday evenings. This may have been so, but I never did. Friday night was full of wonder, and a million guesses about which little trinket she'd bring home for us. God bless her soul; she never forgot either. As we grew slightly older, these little toys held lesser and lesser value simply due to our age. Usually they were small packages that you'd find on the shelf at a dollar store, made in the orient and sold by the millions. My grandmother was simply trying to spoil her grandchildren. We grew up pretty poor, but this small weekly gesture made us feel like kings.

I remember vividly the night she came home with no toys for us. I thought that perhaps my selfishness had gone a step too far, and I was getting taught a lesson. Not so. She took us out to the store the following morning to pick out a package of cookies; one for each of us. Now this was something I could sink my teeth into...literally.

I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked right down that aisle and grabbed a package of Nutter Butter peanut butter cookies. I knew exactly what I would choose, and once we got the green light from grandma, I shot straight as an arrow towards my new prize. On the other hand, my little brother was less knowledgeable in the arena of baked goods than I, and the cookie aisle at the store offered a host of choices in all different sizes, shapes, and colors.

Patience was never my strong suit, as I held my newfound prize as if my life depended on it. My little brother took his sweet time walking up and down the aisle as if he had all the time in the world. I wasn't happy with this at all. My Grandma, with the patience of a saint, held his little hand and walked him up and down the shelves about a hundred times or so until he found something that suited him.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally made his choice. I couldn't believe his ignorance. Being five years younger than I, he was lesser experienced in such choices. Although my patience was growing thin in the grocery store, I was actually willing to take a few extra minutes to mentor him for his ill-fated choice. For some God-forsaken reason, he had chosen Fig Newtons. I just couldn't believe how blissful he appeared in his own ignorance, and although I tried to sway him into sensibility, he would not be persuaded otherwise.

As a big brother, sometimes you just have to let them fall on their face and make a few mistakes. It's inevitable.

By the time Saturday night rolled around, our cookies were only about four hours old or so. It had already been explained to us that these would have to last us the week, and we shouldn't eat them all too soon. Being the oldest, I took this information with a grain of salt and rolled the dice anyway.

It was bedtime, and as I lied there in my bed I had the warm and very full sensation of an entire package of cookies in my belly. Yes, it's true; I had eaten them all. I was impressed with the fact that I had even remembered to throw the empty packaging in the trash. At my age, this was surely worth mentioning. My cookies were in fact nothing more than a memory, and although I wasn't too terribly concerned about setting a good example for my little brother I was warned about getting sick and it being entirely my fault. I actually felt fine, and wasn't worried about it that much.

Now, in every childhood story there comes a point when there is a choice to be made. This would usually be where the moral of the story comes in. You guessed it; I didn't see it coming back then.

Note: I have five children now, and due to my own childhood catastrophes I can see the writing on the wall like a glowing neon sign.

For some strange reason, I woke up in the middle of the night that night, and I was *hungry*. Still to this day I cannot surmise how this was physically possible, but a young man's appetite is nothing to be toyed with. So I got up and headed downstairs. This would be the beginning of a monumental series of mistakes over the course of the weekend for me.

Tactically this was not a smart move. It was not very practical or smart by any stretch, but that's neither here nor there. As my bedroom was separated from my parents' room by a narrow hallway with a squeaky wood planked floor, I was careful to avoid the known hot spots.

There were twelve steps from top to bottom, and number six was a booby-trap waiting to happen. It was louder than the floorboards upstairs; and many attempts at sitting on the stairwell to watch television after bedtime had taught me what to avoid. There was just something entrancing about facing the danger and doing something taboo.

I had made it downstairs finally, and the next big hurdle was grandma's room. She wasn't a light sleeper, but she always had her bedroom door cracked a few inches. Not as challenging as the stairwell, I traversed the living room and made it into the kitchen with the ease of a covert operative.

Searching for a midnight snack, I happened across my brothers' package of Fig Newtons. At first, the thought to sample them hadn't crossed my mind. However, after a fruitless search of nothing but foods that were healthy for me, I decided that since there were no witnesses, I'd give my brothers' cookies a shot. In the wee hours of darkness, no one would witness my cookie thievery, and if I only took a few then surely no one would notice.

As so many children are capable of, I became lost in the silent darkness as these cookies found their way to my mouth one by one until all of them were gone. It was a mindless activity, and although it wasn't my intent to eat them all it was certainly too late to cover it up now.

The rumble in my stomach was getting louder and I was beginning to realize first hand what true nausea was all about. Before I knew it I was in a dead sprint to the bathroom. Any sense of tactical or subtle movement was a foregone thought. As I got to the downstairs bathroom and pushed my way through the semi-closed door, I felt a wave of cookie vomit begin to cross the threshold of my lips which came up somewhat short of the toilet bowl. The cat was definitely out of the bag.

My grandmother quietly opened her door, and the light from her bedroom illuminated everything that I was trying to hide. I heard her instantly call for my mother. By the squeak on the sixth step, I knew my mother's location, but that gave me no comfort as I felt that the impending punishment was unavoidable.

As my mother turned the bathroom light on, the look that I envisioned on her face was of course much worse. As a parent myself, I of course now know how to decipher the contents of vomit by looking for distinct colors and textures among others. My mother was exceptionally gifted in this arena, and with a look that could raise the dead she both opened and closed the conversation with a single word... "Bed!"

Besides being the reason that my father invented 'Road Rage', I have to take at least partial responsibility for the late popularity of the show 'Fear Factor'. Someone finally captured and employed on television what my mother made me feel that night. It's a little known fact, but I do take credit for these two modern media phenomena; at least in part. Through the years, I've spoken with many of my parental peers and have since realized that my part in all of this was not only a small one, but one of many.

For the most part, I was an early riser as a kid. I was never up later than 6:30 a.m., but as you can imagine, this day was a little different. I actually *was* up, but I didn't dare leave my room. The climate was

uncertain, and of course I feared the worst. Nary was a word said, until my mother cracked my door and told me to get ready to go.

There was another debate between my brother and I that had gone on for some time whereby we both wanted a cap gun, the same one. The old style strip caps were out and the new plastic, louder type were in. But because we were poor, it was nothing more than a pipedream.

Because nothing was said about the night prior; when we pulled up in front of the toy store, a local five and dime; my excitement was hard to contain. Happy as a lark in my own ignorance, I naturally *assumed* that because both packages of cookies were gone (because of me) my mother felt bad and was taking us to the toy store to pacify her poor deprived children. I could not have been more wrong.

Looking back on that day, I actually still feel a little bad. We barely had money for food, much less any luxury items. I actually had the guts to say, "So what are we getting?" My mother replied that 'we' aren't getting anything, but my brother would be receiving a shiny new cap gun. Her style of subtle 'shock and awe' was a powerful undercurrent and a credit to her in not raising us to be too dysfunctional. Well, maybe not.

When we arrived home, the neighborhood looked pretty normal for a Saturday. There were a few kids playing outside, so my faux pas from the night before wasn't really in danger of being found out. As you probably know, kids *can be* very cruel, and will exploit anything if they can.

My mother's silence told me everything that I needed to know. I wasn't restricted to inside the house, nor was a spanking or any other form of tangible punishment in order. Her wisdom was incredible. Unfortunately, mine wasn't, and I wasn't willing to let this go quite yet. In hindsight I of course should have, but then that would have been the end of the story.

In no time at all I found my brother outside cracking off caps out of his new cap gun, and this of course served as an 'all call' for every kid in the neighborhood. Our front yard was suddenly 'Mecca' and my brother was Mohammed.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

Allow me to digress here for a moment. I know I can't be the only one to remember the glory days of yesteryear when you could actually trust the local mailman or other public servant not to molest your kids. Well, Henry was our local mailman, and he was a 'good ol' boy' from the deep south. He had a seemingly endless supply of huge rubber bands and candies which he handed out freely to all the kids. I dare say he was more popular than the ice cream man. Don't gasp, because I know that such a risky statement is pretty bold, but in this case was very true. No other daily deliverer of goods even held a candle to Henry.

Being slightly older than my friends, I had already accumulated a large collection of rubber bands from Henry, and I wasn't afraid to throw it in any one's face that I *owned* them. In our neighborhood, this was the childhood equivalent of a collection of Faberge eggs.

I had made a bow with a uniquely shaped tree branch and one of my largest rubber bands. I even left the loose ends dangling from the knots to look more authentic. It was really cool.

After about an hour of my brother popping caps and I twanging my rubber band bow in the never-ending game of 'Cowboys and Indians', I was getting pretty tired of the notoriety of the cap gun, so I decided to use a little ingenuity. Without the advisement of any consenting adult in the area, I secured my father's Swiss Army Knife and a tomato stake from my mother's garden. Lacking any common sense whatsoever, I entered the front yard with my newly fashioned arrow docked into the rubber band. The knife had enabled me to sharpen the end of the arrow beyond comprehension...another smart move.

By now, my brother was really enjoying all the attention and he turned the tide towards me. He aimed his pistol at me and knocked off a few caps, as did the others. I played along, and fell to my knees as if I were dying. I played into it for a reason though. As I hit the ground I drew back on the rubber band as far back as I could. By the time my brother noticed the real arrow everything had turned into slow motion surrealism. I saw his eyes light up and his body turned almost instantaneously. His legs hadn't quite caught up yet, and as I recall, I aimed low (thank God!). As I saw him turn and run, I released my

arrow and watched the largest amount of blood I'd seen up to that point come out of a human being. The arrow went through his jeans and lodged squarely into the flesh directly behind his knee. I felt an instant sense of justice, retribution, and guilt-induced heart palpitations. My mother, who gave me life, was now going to take it as well.

The next thirty minutes were a blur of sorts. Somewhere between hearing the piercing screams and loading my brother into my grandmother's car; I realized that my young life could soon be over. His little body was stretched out along the entire backseat of her '73 Chevy Impala; my arrow protruding from his leg like an antenna sticking straight up. It was an awful sight.

Upon our arrival, the scene was a disaster. My brother had actually calmed down a lot on the ride there, but at the first sight of a comforting nurse he began the wailing again. Of course my mother was called at work, which she couldn't really afford to miss, and I suddenly realized that all of her suppressed issues from my bad decisions during the previous day or so were surfacing rapidly.

It was an ominous moment when she walked into the emergency room. It was something like Darth Vader arriving at the Death Star for the final inspection. In a single motion, she fluidly lowered her purse off of her shoulder and continued the upward motion to raise her hand clean over her head. What goes up must come down. And down it came. I've been in fights, served in the Army for fifteen years, and survived raising five children. I tell you this because I don't believe that I've ever been smacked that hard in my life.

And so, the moral of the story is this: 'Even if you don't literally get caught with your hand in the cookie jar; you might wish that you're the one who needs to be in the hospital instead of the one who put him there.

LESSONS LEARNED
I'LL NEVER TOUCH A GUN AGAIN...
WELL, MAYBE IN A FEW YEARS

As a kid growing up in the mid 1970's, you just didn't hear many of the same things that you do today. In fact, as a father raising children in a new millennium I can certainly tell you that some of the things my parents did to me growing up would be considered illegal today. What were once common practice forms of discipline in the home now have children of the Y2K generation speed-dialing the authorities on their expensive cell phones.

But I digress to my sixth year.

Disciplining children has never been an easy task. My father and I experienced the same dichotomy of a relationship that I suspect most fathers and sons do still today. Allow me to go back a few years.

My grandfather was the Fire Chief in our home town. Now, having a father who holds such a prestigious position can give the impression that you have big shoes to fill (or boots in this case). We all know that many little boys want to grow up and do what their fathers do as well. This couldn't be a more true statement in the case of my father and his Dad. As a rookie fireman my father took his licks just as any other new guy.

After a while, however, I suppose the pressure of living up to the 'old man' became too unbearable and he did the only thing to rebel that he thought he could do. (Having spent my career as a fireman myself, I can verify this statement.) If you ask the son of any fireman what he wants to be when he grown up, the answer nine times out of ten is obvious. The thing that a fireman never wants to hear is that his son wants to be is a policeman. So that's exactly what my father did. And although I was his son, and being a cop was kind of cool; I still wanted to be a fireman.

My father worked a graveyard shift when I was a young boy, and I loved to be up in the mornings when he got home. When his tall frame came through the door, wearing his badge and gun, I couldn't help but to watch him in awe. He was, and still is, my hero.

One such morning, I was pilfering through my bedroom closet, which was much too tall for me to reach. Curiosity got the better of me, and I found a chair to use to get to the top. There were boxes, and paperwork and things of that nature. And then I found it.

In a small box at the very top of the closet was a nickel-plated .38 pistol. It was fascinating. It was beautiful. I held it in my hand, and without regard for it possibly being loaded, I slowly squeezed the trigger. Thinking back, that moment was frozen in time. But at the time my curiosity was overwhelming and the danger wasn't even a thought. For the next hour or so I ran around the house shooting imaginary bad guys and pretending I was Starsky and Hutch. Of course it was unloaded, and apparently my ingenuity was seriously underestimated. Either way, the safety laws of today weren't even a consideration, and I'm just thankful today that it wasn't loaded.

When my father walked through the door that morning, it was a different homecoming than I was used to. As I recall, I was sitting on the couch watching cartoons like any other day. As a father of five myself, I can only imagine his delight in seeing me anxiously awaiting his arrival each morning. But that day was certainly different. That day I was taught one of the most valuable lessons of my young life.

When my father came into the house, I thought I would impress him with my new found knowledge of weaponry, and gave the pistol a spin like a six-shooter from the past. I then proceeded to squeeze the trigger a few times to show off a little. If I had any hopes of impressing my Dad, they were soon faded as the gun was snatched from my hand, and I was dragged into the family room. I not only received the mother of all lectures, but my father took my hand ever so gently, and held it up. He cocked the hammer back on the empty pistol, and placed the skin between my thumb and forefinger in the space between the hammer and the space where the bullet would be.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

Click.'

Up to that point in my life, I don't think I ever felt so much pain. When the hammer fell, it did not break the skin, as one would suspect. Instead, it left something of a 'permanent dent' in the flesh where it struck.

Albeit a little unorthodox, it was indeed a lesson well-learned. I don't even think that I would imagine such a punishment for my children. And as illegal as it may be today and somewhat dysfunctional as it is looking back now; I can still appreciate the point.

Incidentally, I never touched a gun again until I was sixteen. It was on a hunting trip with my Dad.

THE ICE CREAM MACHINE— HOW FLIRTING GOT ME IN THE HOSPITAL...AGAIN.

When I was a little boy, about five or six, I had a huge imagination. Most folks who didn't sleep through the '70's remember that amazing three wheeled contraption called a 'Big Wheels'. They are the classic, miniature three—wheeler ATV's of yesteryear.

Growing up as poor as we did, my three-wheeled plastic steed wasn't the top of the line brand, but it certainly got me around. As I recall, the front tire always made for a bumpy ride as I'd lock it up; doing side-slide stops so much that it started to wear out and become flat in one area. I didn't mind, however, because in my circle of youth we all saw it as a sign of being cool.

The 'Big Wheels' had multiple purposes. It was not only a method of transportation; but if you had a really vivid imagination and flipped it upside down you could manually spin the pedals and presto...you had your own ice cream machine. It was one of those things that made us believe that we were pure genius. Growing up under less than humble circumstances makes you believe later on in life in the phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention'. Dang we were cool.

One summer day, the neighborhood kids and I were outside making imaginary ice cream cones with my Big Wheels. There was a girl who lived around the block that occasionally came around to play with us. She was about four years older than we were, and looking back, she probably only came around when she had nothing better to do. Her name was Natalie. And did I mention that through my seven year old eyes Natalie was a cutie. I believe that I must have heard more than one seventies era ballad go through my head when I saw her walking down our sidewalk (in slow motion, of course).

Natalie knew about the ‘ice cream machine’, and asked for one. We had a theory about making ice cream with our machines. The faster you spun the wheel by cranking the pedal with your hand, the better the ice cream would be. It made sense to us. I spun that wheel at top speed. My determination to make Natalie the best imaginary ice cream cone possible was totally focused. While I was continuously spinning the wheel, my confidence was in overdrive and I took her act of kindness as something more than that.

I cannot recall her exact words, but it was something that made me realize with perfect clarity that she was only hanging out with us as a courtesy. I was young, and very foolish. As the words came out of her mouth, my embarrassment and prideful anger started to swell in me. My heart was broken, and unconsciously I think that I started to spin that wheel at an alarming rate.

Natalie asked for her cone, as my words would not come. I nodded, and as she reached towards the wheel for her imaginary treat I pushed her hand into the furiously spinning wheel. Her hand turned instantly red as the rough plastic wheel ground into her hand and gave her an abrasion. This was not a smart move at all.

Natalie was now ready to show me the angry side of her personality. She pushed the Big Wheels over like King Kong pushing a small house out of the way. Her eyes widened, and her furious expression told me that I was in real trouble. The fear receptors in my brain told me to run. And run I did.

She chased me completely around my house. I was pretty fast as a kid, but she was much faster. I was on my own home turf, which gave me a slight advantage, but not for long. When I got around the other side of the house to my mother’s garden, I was cornered. She stayed on my heels the entire time; all hope dissipating fast with her seemingly thunderous footsteps keeping up with mine.

In the garden, she walked up to me. I was frozen, like a child ready to receive a scornful tone as I knew I would. She walked up to me as close as she could, and simply pushed me. My knees were locked out of fear, so I fell backwards. I had no choice. My eyes stayed connected with hers until I felt the sharp pain in my left butt cheek.

I broke eye contact with Natalie, and felt those embarrassing tears start to stream down my face. She scolded me further for crying over being pushed down. What she didn't know was that my butt cheek landed on a board with a sixteen penny rusty nail sticking straight up. If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have had any at all.

I immediately rolled over and attempted to stand up with this board impaled to my ass. I pulled it straight out, and felt every rough and rusty edge. When it was out, the pain was not gone. The only thing that was gone at this point was my pride; there was clearly none left. And then the blood started to flow. When Natalie was what had happened, she got my mother, and told her every heart-wrenching detail. As I recall, there was some whispering involved between the two of them. Natalie walked away, and any thoughts I had about being sweet or nice to her had faded quickly and forever.

My mother took care of my injury as only a mother could. While she poured iodine and rubbing alcohol over my backside, she informed me that I had really earned this one.

There was also another lesson to be learned from all of this; messing with girls can be a pain in the butt!

SKATEBOARDS AND BLUEFISH— A BOY’S DREAM TO PROVIDE FOR THE FAMILY

The recollections that I have from my childhood are few and far between. We came up pretty hard, and although the struggles were constant, I do actually have a few fond memories. Unfortunately, a lot of the not-so-fond memories that I have were self-inflicted and nevertheless became lessons learned. As in the earlier case with my brother and the arrow, these lessons only prove valuable if they don’t actually kill you (or someone else).

Now, you may be asking yourself by this point; “What is the correlation between skateboards and bluefish.” It’s a good question to ask. Go ahead and ask yourself again if you like. It still probably won’t make any sense. As an adult, I would most likely think the same things you are right now. However, I will now share with you what I know, and you’ll never look at a skateboard or a whole fish at the market the same way again.

We were poor. I mean really poor. After my parent’s split up, things got even harder as they inevitably do in those situations. I was old enough to realize that things were tough, but I was still shielded by my mother and grandmother quite a bit in every way that they could.

In southern New Jersey, in a town called Margate, a wonderful event occurs every year. The bluefish run up the coast from Florida to Maine during their annual migration. By the time they reach the New Jersey coast, the one’s that have survived this incredible journey are quite sizable and very tasty.

During this migration, the City of Margate holds their annual Bluefish Tournament. Everyone and their brother know about it, and you can see every type of vessel including kayaks take off at the starting line on opening day. As far as fishing goes, it’s the closest thing to ‘fishing in a bucket’.

Being a pretty poor kid during those days, my summers were generally boring and I spent just about every waking minute with my best friend in the world, Joey Varani.

Being inseparable, it was a common sight to see us together doing all sorts of things. It was also a very common sight to see each other's belongings at each others homes. One day, we had taken our skateboards down to Joey's house for the day. His father had then driven us back to my house later on that day, and being absent-minded kids, we left our skateboards at Joey's house. This was not a big deal, and would later prove to be a practical solution to one of the many situations that we often got ourselves in.

The next morning was opening day of the annual bluefish tournament. Joey and I were fishermen at heart, and never missed an opportunity to get a line wet. Being that it was opening day, Joey and I would be up earlier than usual and heading down to the docks to see the hundreds of boats take off towards the horizon. It was quite a sight to see. If you were a kid, then this was a free-for-all of sorts. Some of the larger boats which were owned by very well-to-do folks carried a lot of intoxicated fishermen, and were always willing to toss us a soda or some bait of our own. We would usually be there every day of the tournament to try and pilfer whatever we could off the boat crews.

About seven o'clock in the morning, Joey and I raced down to the docks. Most of the boats were already lined up, and the area was bustling with activity. Crewmen were cutting up bait, sharpening hooks, placing new monofilament line on their huge sea reels, and loading up their coolers full of beer and soda. Vendors of every kind were there early as well, and attempting to ply their wares. There was plenty of pilfering to do for a couple of poor kids.

We used to hang around the docks and talk to the local elders who seemingly had nothing to do all day but sit on the edge of the docks and drink beer. It was Saturday after all, and no one really cared that we were hanging around most of the day. Some of the smaller boats would come back earlier than the larger ones for fuel or to simply weigh their catch of the day. I've always thought throughout my life

what it would be like to be at that weigh-in and at least place for a trophy. My father actually took ninth place one year, and I think I would have been just as excited as if he'd been the tournament champion.

The tournament kickoff was about three blocks from Joey's house, just past the midway point between our homes. We were both very poor growing up, and in a moment of infinite wisdom we thought if we could acquire some fish then we could score some big points with our families. God only knows we'd given them enough gray hair with the stunts we'd pulled already. We had already ridden our bikes down to the docks, and since our skateboards were at Joey's house we could just ride our bikes back with a skateboard on our legs. Our skateboards had something relatively new on them. They were covered with this tape that allowed your feet to not slide around on the board. It was very coarse, and we were sure that we could lay a bluefish or two on it without it slipping off. We were pure genius, or so we thought.

When all the boats had returned for the day, around five o'clock in the afternoon, we didn't have to look far to find those fish we were looking for. The catch was a good one by all accounts, and a couple of begging kids could have scored more than a bluefish or two if we'd really wanted to. However, one of the boats had a particularly good catch that day, and was very obliging to give us each one.

Joey and I split up at that point, and off we went. We were both were riding our bikes, along with a skateboard on our lap with a bluefish riding shotgun. We were so proud that we'd been able to secure at least one meal for our families, and as I pedaled my way home that day I couldn't be any prouder.

I once heard that 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. Unfortunately for me, I heard this little pearl of wisdom much later in life; as it would have come in pretty handy that day.

After reaching my house, I pedaled around to the side yard fence so as to be undetected. The door on our back porch went straight into the kitchen. I pulled up to the porch and stopped so I could lay the bluefish-topped skateboard on it and roll it towards the door while I

put my bike up. This should have been suspect anyway, as I always rode up to the front of the house and dumped my bike in the front yard all the time.

As stealthy as I thought I was being at the time, I of course wasn't. I grabbed this huge bluefish under the gills, and proceeded into the kitchen. I hadn't thought of my dilemma up to this point, but I now had to figure out where to stash this fish until I was ready to surprise the family. There was no plate or bowl big enough to put the fish in, so I decided to put it on the bottom rack of the refrigerator where I assumed it would lie undetected until the big moment.

Now, as a kid there are just some things that just don't seem disgusting to you; one of these being a large smelly fish in the bottom of your refrigerator. This was nothing but good intention, but of course by now you realize where this was leading.

I realize now that I didn't have a really detailed plan, and I didn't know exactly how to spring the surprise, so I simply waited. And then I waited some more. For some reason, no one went into the kitchen for the longest time. Being as young as I was, I wasn't much on patience anyhow, and when mine ran out I was almost saved temporarily...almost.

I was about to walk out the front door, when I heard this horrendous scream coming from the kitchen. I recognized the scream coming from my grandmother as the footsteps got louder and louder towards me in the living room. By now, my parents and my aunt and uncle had all converged in the living room where I sat. I remember thinking that yelling "Surprise!" suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea.

When questioned as to if I knew where the mysterious fish came from, I had no choice but to confess. I revealed my plan for a surprise supper for the family. Although my mother thought it was a sweet but misplaced idea, my grandmother didn't exactly see it that way. You see, in our home, grandma was in charge of the kitchen. This was the first house on the block; the same one that my grandfather had built. It was the house that my mother grew up in, and the one that I permanently scarred with the not-so-sweet aroma of fresh fish.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

The sweetness in my mother's voice, however, didn't save me from having to scrub the refrigerator within an inch of its life. Looking back, maybe an open box of baking soda would have prolonged the surprise a little; but as I mentioned before, we were poor and our budget didn't lend itself to such luxuries as baking soda.

That pretty much ended my days as 'the great provider', and although we all still get a chuckle out of that story today, I still cringe at the sight of a whole fish lying on ice at the supermarket.

SURFBOARD FISHING

One of my favorite 'relatives' growing up was my cousin Jeff. 'Jeffy' as I called him was slightly older than I, and in the years before I met my best friend, Joey Varani, Jeffy and I became very close and were of course inseparable. Jeffy was as poor as I was, and his father was a 'hippy-protestor' as the label then went, and my father was a Vietnam veteran. In the mid to late 1970's you probably wouldn't think that that mixture would have worked out but somehow it did. I recall Jeffy's father and mine being 'beer buddies', and that went a long way back then. On occasion one of our fathers would call the corner liquor store and warn them that we were coming down to pick up a case of pony cans of Budweiser. Now that I've effectively dated myself I'll move on to the rest of the story.

Jeffy and I loved to go fishing. I have my whole life, and though I rarely got the chance I jumped all over it when the opportunity presented itself. To give you an idea of what a fishing nut a poor kid can be, I'll tell you that we only occasionally used fishing rods. And this was one of those days.

My cousin and I came up with an extremely bright idea. Since we had no rods available, but did have the fishing line, hooks, and weights; a fishing venture was not only possible but completely within reason. So we headed for the water.

Being poor, just about everything we had was generic in nature. Before the days of O'Neill and Ocean Pacific, there were even generic surfboards. They ran about a dollar each at the five and dime, and were pure Styrofoam. And armed with our high speed Styrofoam flotation devices, we raced for waters not-so-unknown and without the consent of our parents.

It was a brilliant plan.

Jeffy was a little older than I, and although we differed in age we still talked things over as peers. We decided that since we felt comfortable as the surfing experts that we were, what we would do is coil our fishing lines around our hands, holding the hooks between our thumb and forefinger, slide into the water on our Styrofoam boards, and paddle out into the lagoon. This was salt water, and in truth, we had no clue how bad things could get and how quickly they could get that way.

As a young boy, the excitement in me was raging, and the thought of paddling out into the open sea (actually, it was a small lagoon) was a great adventure. Neither one of us had any fear, and we paddled out strong and true. I felt like Evil Knievel coasting over the water on that flimsy board. My heart was pounding, and we hadn't even started fishing yet.

Up to now this may sound like a couple of innocent kids out having a little fun, but I can tell you that in looking back; this was easily among the top three of the absolute dumbest things that I've ever done in my life. You'll soon see why.

After paddling out to an unknown depth, we were apparently satisfied in knowing that we were no longer in the 'shallow end of the pool'. I seem to recall the look on my cousin's face. It was as though we were quietly satisfied at what we'd done thus far. Again, we hadn't even started fishing yet.

"Let's do it!" he said.

We immediately began unraveling our nylon fishing line which was still wrapped around our four fingers on one hand and secured with our fists. Our hooks were pre-baited, which was another logistical item that we hadn't thought of. On the off chance that a fish was dumber than we were and decided to take the bait, we could only do it once. There's a lot to be said for planning and thinking ahead. These days, I have four sons; two of which are teenagers. I still shake my head when I think about it.

I watched as my baited hook sank slowly into the ocean, and felt content in knowing that even though we were poor that I could still go fishing. I felt the line go taught when it was completely let out.

Then I waited. I was hugging that Styrofoam board for dear life, and patiently waited for something; anything to bite.

I felt what I thought was a bite. Looking back now I suppose that I should have hoped for a small fish instead of a larger one due to the fact that the nylon line was tied directly to my hand. I began to pull it in as best I could by twirling the line around and around my one hand while I held onto the board with the other. The drag of the water pulling over the bait *felt* like a fish on the line. For some reason, I felt that I should set the hook in the fish's mouth really good, as I'd forgotten to do a minute before. I yanked hard on the line to set the hook deep. The hook did set deep; deeply into my knee. I couldn't believe that I was floating in the middle of the ocean, hugging a piece of Styrofoam, and now had a hook buried in my knee. All of a sudden I was deeply concerned with the possibility of attracting a shark or two as I was bleeding profusely in a large body of salt water. Our day went from being a lot of fun to a seriously bad idea.

The hard part was not swimming back to the dock. I was really motivated for that, and the pain didn't even matter. The salt water flowing freely in my open wound was not as painful as the potential of hundreds of teeth from a shark sinking through any other part of me. I could live with the sting.

The hardest part for me was watching my mother walk into the emergency room yet again over one of my half-witted stunts. As the doctor numbed my knee, he pushed the hook completely through the other side of my knee, cut off the barb, and gave me my eleven stitches.

Not only did I never set foot on a surfboard again, but now I do all of my fishing from a boat or a dock.

“CHAMPION OF PINBALL”

As a kid who grew up pretty poor, I suppose I never really expected much growing up. We always made our own fun, and had vivid imaginations. And the stereotypical expectations from any child during the Christmas season aren't diminished by social status. Even as a poor kid, we suspected we'd get something and were always grateful for anything at all.

As I recall, it was Christmas morning of 1978 when I awoke rather early and rushed downstairs. I was right when I said that the spirit of a child's anticipation could not be diminished. What I found when I got downstairs was a shock that I recall with great delight, even to this day. It was a pinball machine. I couldn't believe it. Over time I would notice that little things like the light bulbs that were out, the duct tape around one of the legs, and the button for the right bumper that was stuck. But this morning, the awe that I felt was overpowering and I fell to my knees. My parents really hit a home run. It was perfect, and the theme was 'Archie and the Gang'. I suppose that I'm aging myself by mentioning this, but then again I still remember that pinball machine from 29 years ago.

After plugging it in and the bells and whistles started making an awful racket, the cat was out of the bag. Everyone knew that I was up and running. As hyper as I was at that age, I can only imagine my parents cringing as they came down the stairs. And as dysfunctional a childhood as I had, I don't think I can recall ever seeing my father so happy as when he rounded the corner of our living room to see me standing on a chair playing pinball.

We now had a dilemma. The pinball machine had to be moved upstairs to my bedroom which posed many problems. Getting that behemoth of a machine up our narrow stairwell was not only a feat of

modern engineering at the time, but took at least three people to carry. My dad finally got it upstairs, bolted the legs back on, and plugged it in.

My first phone call was to my best friend, Joey Varani. Joey couldn't come over until the day after Christmas, as his family was Catholic and very devout. The next morning, however, he was over bright and early. His disbelief in my good fortune was as deep and penetrating as mine. I don't think I ever saw someone's jaw drop to the floor as fast as his that morning.

After about four hours or so of endless racket and an incessant pinball tournament which drove my mother crazy, we stopped for a little while. This is when the true competition started between us.

For weeks on end, we would play pinball every day, and every single day Joey would beat my score. It didn't matter how much I practiced. You would think that with my own machine in my room that I would be an expert. Not so. I never could seem to manage a higher score than him. After every contest, Joey would raise his hands up over his head and yell, "Champion of pinball!" I was not happy with this, and in my ignorant youth I grew jealous over his excessive skill over me in my own domain.

Some people say that size matters, and in our case it certainly did. Joey was privy to the fact that his taunting bothered me, yet did it anyway. Kids will be kids, I suppose.

After weeks of this taunting, I started wrestling with him one day and threw him on the ground. I jumped up in the air, and landed with both of my knees squarely in his chest. It didn't knock the wind out of him, but only motivated him to yell, "Champion of pinball!" over and over. I jumped on him over and over again, only to hear that broken record of a best friend repeat his taunting words.

After a while, we both calmed down, and although I can't recall to this day what ever happened to that pinball machine, I still talk to Joey. And whenever I take my kids to the mall or to an arcade and I hear that unmistakable sound of the bumper bells on a pinball machine, I still think of those days with Joey, my best friend and the true "Champion of pinball"!

BASEBALL WITH DAD, AND YET ANOTHER TRIP TO THE HOSPITAL

I suppose that I couldn't have been older than about eight years old when a truly life-changing event crossed my path. My parents were separated and very close to finalizing their divorce. As you might imagine, tensions were a little high and as a young boy I was a bit shaken up by the whole thing. I recall thinking that they may be getting a divorce, but I would just stay out of the way and try to get my feet on the ground once again. And then again, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

When my parents split up, my father moved into a few different apartments. The one that I liked the best was the closest one to our house and easily within a fifteen minute walk from home. On the weekends that he was to have visitation, I often walked over to his place after school on a Friday afternoon.

Technically, due to the visitation agreement between my parents my father was allowed to have me over on the weekends. In my young mind I saw things a little different because of the convenience of him living so close. One day, I learned that convenience is not always a good thing.

Both before and after my parents split up, my father was my baseball coach. I was really young, but I played Little League for a few years and whether he lived under the same roof with us or not; I knew that baseball was the one thing that I could count on having in common with him no matter what. Well, I learned since then that too much of anything is certainly not good. As a matter of fact that day may have very well been the start of that lesson.

I stopped by my dad's apartment and asked if we could play some ball. He kindly obliged me, and somewhere during the course of that

afternoon he decided that he was going to teach me how to be a pitcher. All through my young baseball career, I was an outfielder by trade. I even liked to play catcher on occasion, but a pitcher I was certainly not.

My dad told me to crouch down and catch for him as he went through the motions of showing me exactly how to be a world class pitcher. What I didn't realize at the time was that my dad had been drinking most of the afternoon and what I was witnessing was not, in fact, the proper technique. With each pitch, the ball rocketed through the air at me faster and faster, harder and harder. The palm of my hand, even with a baseball glove was throbbing by now and I didn't think that I could take much more.

In combat, it's been said that you can always hear the bullet that's going to get you. I'm not sure if this day was a premonition of days to come, but I certainly did hear that one last pitch...the one that sent me to the hospital.

As I crouched there and braced my hand for the impact of yet another lightning fast pitch from my dad, I was focused on the ball. Something about the rapidity of the swirling laces on the ball itself entranced me, and I was hypnotized by it. I couldn't move.

I don't actually recall the impact itself, but I did seem to remember the ball bouncing off of my face and dropping in front of me at my feet. I distinctly remember picking up the ball; white knuckled, and saying, "Hey dad, there's blood on the b..." before falling over unconscious. The next face I remember seeing was that of my mother. I was knocked out for a while I suppose. I don't remember my dad scooping me up to take me to the hospital, my mother being called, or being brought in to the hospital itself.

The laces of the baseball, the object of my hypnosis are what had actually done the damage. The laces were spinning so fast that they cut my head open just above my eye on the bone. At this point I could feel the pain, and I was not happy. Neither was my mother who tenderly sat alongside me as I was treated; only occasionally glaring angrily at my dad who was not supposed to have me over that day. My dad was speechless as he stood there upset that he'd not only hurt his own child but angered his ex-wife, all at the same time.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

And did I mention that I wasn't so fortunate as to have a pretty young nurse taking care of me. No, there was no happy ending for me with this story. The largest, oldest, widest gargantuan of a woman was my nurse. She didn't have much bedside manor as I recall, nor a tender bone in her body.

There is one upside to this whole ordeal. As I was leaving the hospital with my mother, my dad slipped me a ten dollar bill to buy some ice cream on the way home. I was happy, and with no hard feelings for my dad. I can't promise that of my mom though.

PLAYBOY'S IN THE ATTIC

After my parents were divorced, my father moved into an apartment near the beach and had an upstairs studio loft apartment as well which had a really cute waitress as its tenant. Things were starting to look up. I wasn't one of those kids who tried to milk their parents from both sides of the divorce table. I was just able to recognize an advantage; in this case, a really nice view when I saw it.

My dad's apartment was a house owned by two brothers. These guys were both bachelors who absolutely loved their lifestyle. Looking back, I suppose that the writing was on the wall about Joey Varani and me loving the single life as well, but we were too young to recognize it at the time. Time would certainly tell, and in short time as well.

My dad had secured a small house in town, which was a little bit further away from our house than the one he had when he split my head open with a baseball. It was a very clean, wide open space, and he seemed to like it a lot better than the last one. I did too, as it gave me a lot more space to roam around. The weekend that he decided to move in was a visitation weekend for my brother and me. My brother decided not to come over until the majority of the moving was done, and Joey Varani and I decided to go exploring.

What we hadn't realized at the time was that the owners of this very small house had stored the remainder of their belongings in the attic space which ran from one end of the house to the other. As we wandered through the house, we spied a short rope hanging from the ceiling which was attached to what looked like a small trap door. We looked at each other, and in silent agreement agreed to pull on it. The small ceiling door swung down, revealing a very small ladder. This was our chance to peer into the unknown and was very exciting for the both of us.

We had both promised my dad that we would stay out of the way, and let him get his moving done without incident from us. Very soon, this would not be a problem for us at all. My dad didn't have very much, other than a few pieces of furniture and all of his police gear. The move itself wasn't very time consuming, but he finished the day with a beer run and a trip to the local hardware store for a new door lock.

My dad didn't have enough belongings to store anything up in the attic, so he told Joey and me to have fun, and to be careful to not get hurt. As he left to run his errands, Joey and I took off like a shot up that ladder into what I refer to later on as a 'pre-pubescent paradise'. When we reached the top of that ladder and stepped off onto the plywood flooring, I was surprised to see how clean the attic was. There were mountains upon mountains of books and personal items from the owners neatly organized in small aisles throughout the entire attic space. We found some small furniture and made somewhat of a clubhouse.

And then we realized our good fortune.

The mountains of books were not books at all, but literally thousands upon thousands of Playboy magazines. We were in paradise, to be sure. Not only did we have a really cool clubhouse with furniture, a small window, a light, and an open space; but we had one of the most widely distributed forms of entertainment in all of America. We had found the treasure on the map without even looking very hard.

We spent hours and hours in that attic discovering the secrets of life and finding out what we *really* had to look forward to in the years to come. No, we weren't reading the articles either. This went on for weeks and weeks until one fine Saturday afternoon my dad decided to come up for a visit. I suppose that in knowing exactly what we had to look forward to with each visit to the attic, we failed to have any sort of plan such as pulling up the ladder and securing our secret stash.

When I saw my father coming up the ladder, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. The jig was up, and we both knew it. That

afternoon, we were both told to climb down the ladder and not go up in the attic ever again. As we both stood there and watched my dad fold that ladder up for the last time and cut the rope to the attic space I remember feeling sad, but not too sad.

I knew now that when I got older and the time was right, I would have more than just a few pictures and the promise of a 'well-developed' future.

BUSSEY LAKE AND HOW IT ALMOST KILLED US

At the place of my birth, within the great State of Louisiana there lies a man-made lake called Bussey Lake; “Bussey” to the locals. It’s just down the road from my home town of Monroe, somewhere around thirty or so miles away near the town of Bastrop. Bussey is a 2,200 acre man-made recreation area. Under normal circumstances, a good day on Bussey would be gauged by the size of your stringer dangling off of the edge of the boat. Not this day.

You may have noticed through these stories that on more than one occasion a seemingly innocent event, trip, or intention can go south very quickly. That day out on Bussey Lake with my grandfather was such a day.

There was a point from my youth to that day on Bussey that I hadn’t seen my grandfather for over ten years. Our visit to the lake that day was a transitional part of our relationship as we hadn’t done anything similar in over a decade. As a matter of fact, I had only been reunited with my father and grandfather no longer than a couple of weeks by this time.

The night before, I prepared my fishing reel with new monofilament line, checked and re-checked my gear, and got dressed before I went to sleep. To say the least I was excited. My grandfather was showing up sometime around 4 a.m., and I wanted to be ready. My camouflage pants and t-shirt didn’t make for great sleepwear, however by the time he showed up I’d be ready.

He had a huge pickup truck, and with his boat and trailer in tow we headed out before the sun came up. We stopped for coffee, and by his silence I could tell that he was focused on the day. He always

took his fishing very seriously, and he intimately knew every body of water in the surrounding parishes of Louisiana like the back of his hand. When we arrived at Bussey, we put the boat in the water while it was still dark. Looking back, I can still see him in his camouflage jumpsuit looking like a character straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. It was an awesome day. It was our last fishing trip together before he died, and I wouldn't have changed a single thing.

As we hit the water, we idled slowly away from the boat dock and off to some secret destination that only he knew. I was a pretty adept fisherman at this point but today was somehow different. I was with the master. He had fished the rivers and lakes of our home state for over sixty years. I never second guessed his navigation as I knew somehow that it was full of promise. Truthfully I didn't care if I caught a single fish that day as long as we were together.

We were out on the lake for almost three hours, and it still wasn't even mid-morning. The sun wasn't very high, but I started feeling warm for some reason. My stomach was churning and in retrospect I can see that it was probably the excitement of being out there with him. About an hour after I first started to feel sick, I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to go to the bathroom like never before and we were at least an hour from the boat launch. I didn't have any options, and I wanted so desperately to keep the day going well.

I had no recourse but to tell my grandfather how I felt. I thought for sure that this would ruin our fishing trip, but in my youth I misjudged not only his reaction but his wisdom under a crisis. Going back to the dock was not a possibility; certainly not in time to make it to a bathroom. In a moment of patriarchal wisdom his words rang true as he lifted his coffee cup, never moved, and offered the most simple of solutions. "Sling your butt over the edge of the boat and let it go!" he said.

As I soon found out, the edge of an aluminum bass boat is hardly as comforting as a warm, padded toilet seat. It worked, and as I sat there thinking of my dilemma of not having any toilet paper I glanced at my grandfather with a look of desperation which was rewarded by him passing me his handkerchief. "It's okay, I don't need that back" he snickered.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

As if this was a memorable enough event during our fishing trip, the adventure was far from over. Now that I felt better, we moved across the lake to a couple of other spots. We caught a few small ones, but nothing worth keeping. The memory of the day was already ingrained in my mind, but the day would prove to be even more memorable; so much so that the events of the morning would pale by comparison.

We were both relieved by now, in one form or fashion that the morning was over. I was feeling better by now, and as we moved to another spot on the lake I felt the temperature drop slightly. I also noticed that the sky was looking a little overcast. As the boat stopped, we pulled into this little cove alongside a ranch property. The bank was rocky, but had a steep drop-off which offered an opportunity for some big fish. As I recall, I cast my lure out in an incredibly long cast. Just then I looked over my shoulder; just in time to see the tornado forming on the opposite side of the lake. I didn't hear my lure hit the water, but just pointed in the general direction of our impending doom.

I watched as my grandfather hastily reeled his line in and I subconsciously did the same. As he cranked the motor and got the boat up and running, I didn't think at the time that my seating was so unstable in the boat. No, I didn't fall out of the boat, but almost did. We raced up the shoreline for a minute or so, when he killed the engine and yelled for me to get out. I jumped off the bow of the boat and onto the shoreline, simultaneously reaching for an anchor line that he was tossing me. I secured the line, and as he exited the boat, took the line from me and tied it off to a fence post that enclosed a cow pasture.

I didn't know much about cows at the time, much less a herd of Jersey cows that were extremely nervous about the tornado that was almost on top of us by now. The wind was howling, and I couldn't hear much of anything besides the wind. The water was choppy, and I didn't think the tornado would spare it.

My grandfather and I hurdled the pasture fence line and raced towards what seemed like an old abandoned house. The house was the center of a visual that you might liken to an older black and white

picture of Americana, or even something out of a John Cougar Mellencamp video. It was rustic and looked like it barely stood, but right then it looked a lot more comforting than the lake. And did I mention that Jersey cows can be very aggressive, especially when driven into a panic by monsoon-like conditions caused by a developing tornado that was closing in on all of us. The cows were running behind us, which motivated us to run even faster. I honestly don't recall ever seeing my grandfather move that quickly. As I learned later in life during my military career; fear is a good motivator.

Thankfully, the door to this old house did not face the lake, and we ran around the other side to gain what little shelter we could. Only seconds after knocking on the door a frail old black woman opened the door, motioning us quickly to enter her home. Her husband, equally old and frail himself, slowly got out of bed and stepped into his slippers to come greet us. This had to be the sweetest old couple that I'd ever seen. They invited us in, greeted us openly, and put on a pot of hot water to make us coffee. I don't know what we would have done if they weren't there for us.

After the tornado passed, we finished our coffee and talked about heading back to the boat. As we stood up at their kitchen table, my grandfather displayed his appreciation in silence as he laid a fifty dollar bill on the table. The old woman tried to argue about leaving money for hospitality, but B.R. Breland wouldn't hear of it. He thanked them both and with a warm hug from the old woman and a stern handshake from the old man we were on our way.

In our haste to get to the house during the onset of the tornado, we hadn't seen the path around the pasture to reach the shoreline. We walked cautiously through the debris and fallen trees to the lake's edge where we found his boat completely swamped. Our cooler, thermos, tackle boxes, and seat cushions were all missing. I remember thinking that they might be in a neighboring parish by now.

A POCKET FULL OF MEMORIES

Somehow, my grandfather got the sump pump running, and we gently pulled the boat by the anchor line along the shore until we got to the boat ramp. With ease his huge truck pulled the boat onto the trailer and we simply pulled the drain plug to allow the water to escape. As we climbed back into the truck, we pulled out and headed home. Before I nodded off to sleep, he looked over at me without a single word and smiled.

I believe the same thoughts now as I did back then. Damn that was fun!

A VALENTINE'S DAY GIFT

Within the title of this book *A Pocket Full of Memories* (and other loose change), the portion entitled (and other loose change) refers to my rearing, or raising. However, it easily could have come from this story as well.

This last tale is not one from my childhood, but from just a few years ago. My daughter of eight months was the center of our lives, and we made a big deal as most parents do about every “first” in her life. She was the best of the both of us, and like her every other “first,” Valentine’s Day was no different.

As I suspect most parents would react under similar circumstances, I believe that I was totally ecstatic when my daughter Abigail was born. After my wife Helen and I met, we collectively came to the marriage table with four boys already. Talk about a “ready made” family. Gary is my oldest, followed by Kevin who is only seven months younger than him. And then there’s Austin and Bailey, the twins. At the time she was in her late twenties and me in my early thirties. After four boys, neither one of us thought that there was much left to learn about children. We’d collectively had our four boys and had experienced the whole gamut of child raising experiences. I admit that I was myself, particularly of this mentality. I felt like ‘Super Dad’, and I exuded a high level of parenting confidence.

There was only one thing missing, and in the wee hours of the morning, Helen asked me ever so quietly to come to the bathroom. That which was missing would soon be here; if by my meaning of soon you take that to mean nine months from then. As I entered our tiny upstairs bathroom in our very small apartment I observed Helen sitting on the edge of the tub, her eyes darting back and forth between

me and the sink. Perched on the sink was a home pregnancy test. The results were more than obvious, and I think her eyes must have followed mine as I eventually found the unmistakable pink plus sign in the miniature window. We were having a baby, and in my heart I just knew that this child would be the best of us.

What I was completely unprepared for was the prospect of having a baby girl. After all, on my side of the family we hadn't had a girl in fifty-two years. We had boys. We all had boys. Having girls was just simply something that we didn't do. I was so wrong.

As we got closer to our due date, we had names picked out, and I was confident that the baby was a girl. I was so confident that I didn't give the possibility of another boy a second thought. I picked out a girl's name and Helen picked a boy's name. Abigail Anne was my choice. I dreamed of having a baby girl, and on June 23, 2002 Abigail Anne made a grand entrance.

The decade-old tradition of hand-me-downs with fire trucks and baseball jerseys was now over. It was the end of an era, and the beginning of another. Although I tried to buy her an outfit with a fire truck on it, Helen quickly steered me down the right path. Pink was now the theme of our home. Everything was pink. It's funny how pink grows on you when it covers a sweet little bundle of joy.

Okay, so perhaps I had a few small tidbits to learn about children by way of our baby girl. The lesson that I'm about to reveal came to me only eight months later on Valentine's Day. It actually could have come from any of our kids, but it came straight from Abigail...literally.

Helen and I had decided to exchange small Valentine gifts. Money was short, and although the gifts were small they were very meaningful. I am a very simple person to please. I have no lofty expectations regarding birthdays or any other occasion for that matter. I usually prefer to throw the party for someone else. However, Helen got me a small treasure that she knew that I would love. She gave me a giant chocolate covered peanut butter cup from a local chocolate shop. It was about the size of my fist, and I was truly impressed.

Abby was almost eight months old at the time, and as I relished the first bite of my monstrous peanut butter cup her eyes lit up. As babies go, they usually want to put everything in their mouth. I was more than willing for Abby to share my treat with me, as I'd become accustomed to her drooling everywhere and trying to chew everything in sight with her gums. Apparently she liked the chocolate, but it did leave a bit of a mess on the both of us.

We'd decided to run into town on some errands and started to pack up. With a newborn there's always a lot of extra gear to take on the road for even a small excursion. We changed the baby, packed up our vehicle, and headed out. As we drove off post and out into Fairbanks we felt happy about spending the day together.

As I sat at a red light, I noticed something on the back of my hand. I recall laughing to myself over allowing Abby to drool chocolate on me. I looked around inside our car for a napkin, but none were to be found. I suppose I didn't think too much of it, and simply licked it off.

This, I'm sure would have been a forgotten moment had it not been for the fact that what I licked off of the back of my hand was not in fact chocolate. The sensation that overcame me at that moment cannot accurately be described with mere words. Instantly I went over what had happened in the last thirty minutes or so, and what this taste could possibly be. It wasn't the small bit of chocolate melting on my tongue as I had suspected without hesitation. And then it came to me.

In my haste to leave the house and get the baby ready, I suppose that her wriggling little form must have captured my attention long enough to deposit some of the contents of her diaper on my hand without me noticing. The feeling in my stomach was not a good one, and suddenly I felt ill. The traffic light had turned green by now, and I felt that my face was the same shade as the traffic light. I was now moving, and I dared not swallow. I rolled down the window as fast as possible and in a frantic panic began to spit profusely. Fairbanks in February is typically very cold, and this day was no different. I just didn't care. Helen was laughing hysterically by now, and even though for a split second I knew I would laugh about it later; the remnants of Abby's last diaper change still didn't taste very good.

A LITTLE BIT OF WISDOM

I hope that now you have enjoyed this collection of stories as much as I have had recounting them. As you have seen by now, the *A Pocket Full of Memories*; although enlightening and sometimes comical have shown me much less pain and humility than those from the *Other Loose Change*. Much like most people, I suspect that I look upon my formative years with much more adoration and humor now than I did back then.

My sincere hope is that through sharing these treasured moments with you from the different phases and times of my life that you may see the many blessings (some in disguise) that I've experienced.

And for those of you who were included in these stories, and in my life; may God bless all of you for being a part of what has been and is still a wonderful life.