**My life has been a wild ride, and I’m told I should write some of them down before I fade.**

There are points in my life that cleave it into vignettes of ‘Before and After’ stories. Some require surrounding memories to help ‘set the stage’. I apologize if I ramble on too much. It is such a mess of events that it’s not simple to determine, as Bob Seger said “What to leave in, what to leave out”, but the stories I have told entertained, and more were requested. This is in answer to that request.

I was listless as a kid, growing up in a Navy family that moved every one point five or two years, and only slowly realized that setting down roots, gaining friendships and joining groups of friends was maddeningly frustrating, and not really worth the time and effort. I became a very solitary person, who found my best friend in the book I was currently reading. This escape was not without issues, as other humans did not approve of me retreating into some different landscape any minute I found available, scrabbling to avoid the incomprehension and pain other humans created within me each time I tried to interact.

So, my fear of the tumultuous, raging, cruel, frustrating reality was causing that reality to rear its ugly head higher and higher to get my attention, slowly turning me into an expert on what to expect from bullies, instructors, authority and assorted rabble. Reading was my escape and my ‘kick me’ magnet. But I read about amazing people, amazing adventures and outrageous ideas. I was a science fiction addict by the 4th grade. There are lots of wild tales in SF. My life was certainly pale and dull by comparison.

Eventually testosterone and frustration pried me from a victim position (I simply reached a point where I decided I’d rather die than submit to idiots, a perspective that may not have ever left) as high school loomed, and shortly after graduating I floundered with no idea what I wanted to ‘become’ (many were frustrated by my answer ‘I don’t know what I want to be’) and bounced around from job to job until my bristling against authority and reality almost ran into a large oak tree at high speeds. Then I tangled with the law. It was recommended that I find a career, perhaps in the military.

I looked back and realized I was being an idiot, squandering precious moments while I tried to figure out what I wanted to do. And in my inattentiveness, my cavalier attitude towards life (and death?) I had nearly ended it before it began. I needed to pull myself up by my bootstraps and start Living. So I found a wife and joined the Navy.

This was a turn, and as I swiveled from rebel to conformist (uniformity is paramount in the military, individualism is crushed) I had to learn a whole new way of thinking and doing - study everything so you know where the edges and boundaries are located. I understood that the edges were where the most possibility existed. Granted, I was never really successful at Becoming a Conformist, but I did learn how conformists think, talk and do, and then just acted that way. Master Thespian!

The Ship

In my Navy Naivety I imagined I had found a way to avoid sea duty (as I was newly married and would rather not be gone from shore for months and months at a time) and was ready for Navy life on shore. At the end of bootcamp my orders were to join the crew on the newest nuclear aircraft carrier, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, CVN69 and prepare the ship for commissioning and sea trials. This was not what I had anticipated. “My recruiter lied to me” was our favorite rejoinder to new shipmates.

So, I became Real Navy. I was forged from some smart ass troublemaker into a cog in the war machine that was efficient at the things that must be done in order to kill people and break things most successfully. They drained out 80% of the joy in my life and filled it with rolling, flaming, sixty tons of terror slipping all over the flight deck, turning into roaring specks, and then angrily growling back aboard a short time later - slamming onto a rolling deck at full afterburners hoping the hook catches the wire. I confess that the flight deck terrified me (and many others). People were dying or being maimed up there far too regularly and I quickly asked for a transfer to V3 - hanger deck crew. Less deathy. But the sounds and sights of terror were still all around that floating airport - each plane that took off bounced us slightly, you could feel the lessening of weight as they were slung off on the catapults that screamed into the water-breaks; and the slam-deck as they landed with the successful wire snag sending the hydraulic engines below deck howling as they increased tension while the afterburners raged.

That place rarely slept, even if the people needed to. We worked twelve hour shifts, seven days a week until we hit a port. We had ‘General Quarters Drills’ several times a week that lasted hours (fine for day shift, hell on night shift usually because we prefer to sleep when we are not ‘working’), then the hanger deck crew had a 4 hour ‘conflagration watch’ - a small pill box hung at the top of each of three hanger bays with controls to shut the fire doors that separate the bays, activate any fire fighting controls and communicate the efforts to central control. Oh, and I was ‘Number One Nozzle man’ on the shipboard firefighting party - which meant that I was holding the nozzle that would keep the ship from dying in a fiery furnace, if I was lucky. I’m glad they trained the fear of fire out of us.

There were too many emergency calls on the 1MC squak box , day or night, we most dreaded hearing the words “Away the emergency medical team to the flight deck!”- a plane missing the centerline and slamming into our firetruck, shattering the wing tip and the cab of the truck (injuring my shipmates) as it wobbled off the landing strip, where the Admiral had decided the firetruck needed to be to ‘more rapidly react to emergencies’. A spun plane on an MB5 spotting dolly nearly cuts a shipmate’s leg off when the wingtip pins him against another fuselage. Helicopters failing to hover as they attempt to land, crashing into the deep blue and exploding into shrapnel. You get the picture. It was controlled demolitions, over and over until we stop fucking up. Then we do it more, only with less death.

Mind Wrenching

On the ship, when you are not working 12 hours plus various duties and watches, all there was left to do was think. There was no internet, no email, no cell phones, no VCR’s. There were books and other humans to discuss ideas with. So I read, thought and discussed. Soon there was a group of us willing to think about hard questions like ‘why are were here, and what is the point of it all?’ Eventually someone mentioned that I needed to see things from a different perspective. I was slowly convinced to try LSD. This too was a major turning point and I will only mention a few aspects -

**Prior to this I was unable to figure out what I was going to do with my life, how to order it, who I was at a bedrock level. One single twelve hour experience changed my perspective. It was like being unshackled - one day I am bound in chains and unable to determine my fate, the next day I feel like I can do what ever my heart directed my soul to accomplish, and I suddenly had thousands of ideas and the beginning of a plan - I wanted to cultivate ecstasy, to revel in life and the living of such sudden and tremendous joys. I felt that I had been handed the keys to wisdom itself, and only needed to flesh out the leaves that this great oak frame had suddenly revealed.**

**Wisdom’s Pains**

**So I went through this multistage crucible from smart ass to wisdom seeker in a few short years. I had been on the fence regarding bringing a child into this wretched world (I had yelled at my parents “I didn’t get to CHOOSE to be here, my very existence is YOUR FAULT!”) - mostly fearing that I would not be a good enough person to be able to become a great father. That feeling disappeared the day after I had the ‘veils pulled off my eyes’. I felt completely competent to do whatever I set my mind to - and I realized I was not thinking using what other people had told me I was or was not, I had somehow dug down and plunged my fingers into the rawness of ME and in that measuring, realized I had astonishing capacity I had not begun to tap. So we chose to become a family.**

**Ship Life**

Once I got over the horror of actually being on the ship (a few months) I started plotting ways to get off. I went to a councilor who showed me what I had to do to request a technical school. I became studious, spending much time testing out of courses that were dotted lines to the path I had to take to get off this death machine. Within 6 months of my intent, I was raised from an Enlisted-2 to E3, this made me eligible to request my ‘A’ school. I got my class and then, just before my last deployment, drove my 7 month pregnant wife from Norfolk, VA to Memphis/Millington TN, got us a trailer in the dead of winter, and then took a bus back to Norfolk to do my last deployment (I missed ships movement due to a delay in the bus).

There was lots of drama on the ship - looking back, I’m sure some of it was due to it being only 2 years after they cancelled the Draft, and getting honest, clean, decent, law abiding citizens to join the military after Vietnam became so tricky that they basically had to lower the sluice gate until they had enough warm bodies to fill desperate vacancies. There were bunkmates that I am pretty sure were potential felons and several that admitted awful things they had done in civilian life. There were ‘divisions’ in our ranks - our sleeping quarters (coop) was segregated (because we slowly populated the racks and friends bunked near friends) into three groups -

Lifers: who intended to do this for 20-40 years and thought all this death and destruction was great;

Stoners: who just wanted to do the 4 years and get out, who were all given the same speech when they came aboard by the chief “I know lots of you smoke the wacky tobaky, just don’t do it on my ship.’ ;

and The Ebony: of our 80 man crew, probably 30 were African Americans, and all of them were scared and enraged, so they hung together, fully expecting bad things to happen. I had only been around one or two individuals of other races, but we were taught to be polite. Politeness was not well received in that environment; there was much tension, several fights, one or two folks must have fallen over the side over night, because they were gone the next day. It was a tense place to sleep. I was pulled out of my rack one night and three of them attempted to whip my ass, but my bunkmates made short order of their efforts.

Advance Schools (Electronics and Computers)

Eventually I was able to leave the ship and fly back to Millington TN a few weeks before my son was born. Then I went to my technical schools - Basic Electricity and Electronics, servos, systems and computers. Then my specialty school “TD” - Tradevman (we fixed and managed all TRAining DEVices - that tended to be ON SHORE ONLY - perfect). Six months of training and I was offered a position to flesh out my new training at a radar bombing range in Ocala Florida (my home state!). I jumped at the chance.

PEWR

The Radar/Bombing Range. That was the strangest place I have ever witnessed, isolated from all other military in the middle of a National Forest far from all prying eyes. A tiny place with about 150 personnel to run the bombing range for Top Gun pilots. People have a difficult time believing the antics that I witnessed, are incredulous that I describe it honestly as a cross between “Michael’s Navy” and “MASH” as far as how insane it was to work there. Turns out it was also a ‘dumping ground’ for various folks in the Navy that they wanted to ‘hide’ from most of the military. It wound up being where all of the women in the Navy that got ‘caught’ with another woman were ‘shipped off’ to this place: Pinecastle Electronic Warfare Range- lovingly referred to by those worked there as “PineHole”.

Now, all of this happened under President Carter, and no one seemed to care what the heck was going on with military personnel and how they behaved, what we consumed and in depth discussions regarding how to squeeze past ‘consensual reality’. We were nearly free agents, and Owned that Jacksonville Detatchment [JAXDET] responsible for training the best pilots in the world. They pilots hated us, and loved us and we loved electronically shooting them down before they could drop their bombs (they still did blow up tires ringing sand in our valley, but we got the six-pack credit back at the main base). It was a conglomeration of non-sea-going sailors blowing off as much steam as they could manage each day. There were marajuana plants growing just outside of several barracks windows. I came into this arena rather cocky, and in short order was enmeshed with all the odd characters in this dance of futility on steroids.

As I trained, operated, managed and repaired all manner of radars, scopes, assorted electronic equipment, and very primitive computers I was being absorbed by all those around me, or was it the other way around?

Gonzo Naval Career

When I showed up at this remote base, it was as a ‘geographical bachelor’ because there was no military housing within an hour of my base. This meant that any time I needed (like when we hadn’t found a place to live when we first arrived) I was able to stay on the base in the barracks. So the first few months on base I only went home on the weekends, over 2 hours away.

My entrepreneurial time aboard the ship and the lax attitude regarding recreational diversions may have led me to an overconfident perspective. I had just finished reading fear and loathing in Las Vegas and felt an odd, visceral, almost hysterical connection to the gonzo mindset invoked. I walked into the room I was to share with a fellow sailor and shook his hand as I said “Hi. I’m fresh off the ship, I have a quarter pound of weed available should anyone want some…”. He declined. Several others did not.

I gravitated towards others who also were seeking a deeper connection to reality, or conversely working on ways to disconnect more completely from reality (in order to peer into the mystery of life within - that was our justification). We all needed mind expansion or suppression fuel & hustled among the bustle to keep all of our virtual parts well lubricated and flowing (albeit erratically at times), and so a network evolved to allow furtherance of our explorations.

Soon there was an increase of various pleasures available. Not just pot, but acid, cocaine, and other more esoteric distractions started showing up all around that little base. Folks were leaving the barracks and getting mobile trailers in the middle of the woods so they could be ‘freer’ to explore their rising potentials. We became a family of experimenters, sharing notes, dosages and tricks to enhance or avoid detection.

Accountability Police

About this time, Reagan replaced Carter. Shortly after that there was a dramatic shift in ‘our acceptable behavior’ - First they sent out a census, anonymously asking lots of questions about drug use. Far too many of us were honest. Then came ‘Operation Goldenflow’ - ‘Random Testing’ of Naval personnel - it was ‘fair’ because they picked a single digit out of a hat each week, and if your SSN/MILID last digit matched it, you got your urine tested that week.

10 weeks later, they had a map of who was doing which drugs. Then came the hammer.

Zero tolerance for any non-sanctioned chemical they found by combing through our urine regularly. Line up, about once every 4-6 weeks (more if ‘caught’ already) and provide proof that you did not enjoy yourself any more than the government allowed. Loss of Top Secret Clearance with first offense, drummed out of the military with Other Than Honorable on repeated behaviors. We lost about 1/10 of our quality workforce due to this shift.

This new government was going to make it difficult to have any fun at all. So it became a battle between those who believed that what we did in our spare time was NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS, and the rest of the folks who didn’t seem to mind other folks sorting through their urine for tattle tale signs of nonconformance.