



A Narrow Escape

Looking back, I realize my life has been a series of narrow escapes. In my younger years, I stumbled through them like some hapless Buster Keaton character—ducking one danger only to have another sail by inches away. They say the Lord looks after drunks and idiots; I don't drink much, so that leaves me with only one category to explain my survival: I'm an idiot.

Two years before the accident that nearly ended it all, I had a brush with death brought on by my own sheer idiocy: I volunteered for a one-year tour in Vietnam—while serving in the Navy.

My wife was furious. "If you get killed, don't expect me to wait for you," she said. I remember thinking, "Wait for me? Where would I be going?"

I was stationed in Da Nang. Before we left that awful place, Da Nang was a crowded, humid coastal city dominated by war. American jets thundered from the sprawling air base; military trucks churned dust through streets

packed with bicycles, motor scooters, vendors, refugees, and uniformed servicemen.

I was one of those servicemen working in a Quonset hut office for the Naval Support Activity's Port Services. My boss was Boatswain's Mate First Class Bill Mitchell—"Bosun Bill" to anyone within earshot.

The Bosun had been in the Navy for 23 years, had no hope of ever making Chief, and bore the peculiar trademarks of too many liberty ports: a whiskey breath, a temper, and a grin that featured a missing front tooth courtesy of a bar fight in downtown Da Nang.

The Navy had issued Bill a .45 caliber pistol for mail runs to headquarters. Sometimes I wore it when he was too hung over to drive. On the day my luck almost ran out, Bill was in the hut, pistol in hand, making "ketchoo, ketchoo" noises as he pretended to gun down invisible Viet Cong. I flinched when he swept the muzzle across me.

"Whoa, Bosun Bill! You sure that thing's unloaded?"

"Hell, yeah, I'm sure! Watch," he said, flipping off the safety. He raised the pistol toward the ceiling and squeezed the trigger.

The blast in that small metal hut was deafening. My chair toppled backward as my startle reflex tipped me over, ears ringing. A jagged two-inch hole appeared above us, sunlight—and the startled face of a seagull—looking in. Bill had forgotten about the round already in the chamber.

The court-martial stripped him of a stripe for "conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline." I didn't feel bad about testifying; that hole could have been in my chest. But when I shook his hand before rotating home, his smile—minus that tooth—came with a flat, "I won't forget you."

Two years later, my Navy hitch completed, I was driving my eight-month-pregnant wife, our young son, and my in-laws home from Niagara Falls in a little Chevy Nova. Rain sheeted down the New York Thruway, the crosswind shoving us around like a paper boat. I kept it at 50, hugging the right lane.

A tractor-trailer blew past us doing at least 70. The gust from its wake spun us into the grassy median. The Nova bounced hard, tipping but settling

upright. Two tires blew, the trunk popped open, and our luggage scattered. Miraculously, no one was hurt.

As I gathered our wet clothing from the median, I remembered Bosun Bill and the hole he had blasted through the roof of our Quonset hut.

Two years earlier, I had survived a loaded pistol in the hands of a drunken boatswain. Now I had survived a tractor-trailer, a rainstorm, and a Chevy Nova with the aerodynamics of a shoebox.

They say the Lord looks after drunks and idiots. Bosun Bill had qualified on both counts. I was apparently still getting by with one.