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The Ugly Young Americans

- An Apology

by Frank Corradino

As I come to realize that I have without a doubt already lived more than half of my life, I become more and more aware that the time to repair all the wrongs I ever did is growing shorter. What I want more than anything else out of this time I have on earth is to have made a positive difference while I was here. Thus, I have imposed something akin to a twelve-step program upon myself, not because I have to recover from an addiction or dependency, but rather to establish a code of behavior that will minimize the chances of creating negativity through my actions. An important element commonly used in recovery programs is making amends for the mistakes that we make.

This essay, then, is my way of making amends for a very negative aspect of my character when I was a young man. It is an apology for my behavior.

In the autumn of 1971, I was a 22-year old soldier in the United States Army, stationed in Schwabach, a small town in Bavaria, Germany. In almost a year of serving there, I had developed a close friendship with Nick Donnelly (not his real name but I haven't located him yet to get permission to use his past in my apology). Most of the guys in our unit called him Big-D because the name fit him so well. He was a ruddy robust specimen of a young man with a kind heart and a wicked temper. He was full-blooded Irish and proud of it.

Nick and I became close friends probably because we shared so many things in common. We were both survivors of a year in Vietnam; he was with the 1st Infantry Division, I was with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade. Ever since World War II, 1st Infantry had been known as the Big Red One while the members of the 199th, a creation of the Vietnam War, were nicknamed Redcatchers. I took more than one solid punch to the body for accusing him of being in the Big Red Run while I was busy "catching reds" (communists, for those of you born subsequent to that era). I mention that to show we shared an appreciation for very physical expression. We both wore several rows of ribbons, including Purple Hearts above the breast pockets of our Class A uniforms. But his awards included a Silver Star. Most recipients of that award for valor also had Purple Hearts; many received them posthumously. Nick never talked about his Silver Star. I never asked him about it.

We had both initially been drafted but had each enlisted for three-year tours in misguided, unsuccessful attempts to avoid combat in Vietnam. We both were assigned to serve in Germany at the conclusion of our tours in Vietnam with more than eighteen months remaining in our enlistments.

Nick and I were assigned to 2/4 Cavalry, a unit of the 4th Armored Division. The Division's mission was to defend the Fulda Gap near the border with East Germany. Because of the geography of central Europe, the Fulda Gap was one of the only routes that Soviet tanks could utilize to invade Western Europe. I am often reminded of it when I travel the NY Thruway near Amsterdam. It is a narrow pass through a mountain range that presents a significant barrier to heavy tanks. In addition to the historical reconnaissance role of cavalry in the Army, armored cavalry at the time also provided a screening force to delay the enemy as main battle tanks withdraw in the face of superior numbers. That was the precise situation we faced in the NATO versus Warsaw Pact game in which we found ourselves. We trained and practiced on the very ground that the Soviets would need to secure.

The armored vehicles our unit used were light-skinned anti-tank weapons that relied on speed and surprise and could never stand toe-to-toe against main battle tanks. The usual outcomes of our training exercises would be the complete elimination of our cavalry troops. Nick and I agreed that our unit would suffer heavy casualties if a real shooting war were to erupt. Evidently, our assessment was accurate because today's cavalry units are equipped with M-1 main battle tanks, the same as heavy armor units.

Thus, Nick and I also shared a poor outlook on life in general and a bad attitude about the Army in particular. Those feelings were manifested in a deep distrust in the ability of any of our young officers to lead us into battle, and a strong desire for our tours to end and to become civilians again. We took great enjoyment out of disrespecting young officers; enough to make them uncomfortable but not enough to be brought up for court martial. More than once, hapless lieutenants were asked "What are you going to do? Send me to Vietnam? You already did that once." We shared many laughs over the antics one or the other of us had pulled off, a skill in which Nick far exceeded me.

Occasionally, our dangerous but exciting game we played wasn't restricted to junior officers. One day we were standing in formation while a visiting brigadier general reviewed the troops. The general paused for a few moments in front of Nick. I was standing in the rank behind Nick's and I watched the general's eyes as they passed over the Silver Star ribbon and infantry badge on Nick's chest, then to the sleeve of his somewhat faded uniform. The sleeve revealed an area of darker shade that had formerly been covered by three sergeant's stripes but was now occupied by the solitary stripe of a private. After a few seconds, the general asked "What happened to your stripes, trooper?" Nick shrugged his shoulders and responded "I don't know, sir. I'm just a fucking grunt." Grunt was considered a derogatory term when used to identify an infantryman unless used by another. It was the N-word of the Army at that time. The general, an armor officer, fixed his eyes on Nick's for a moment, recognized that Nick had spoken the absolute truth. He turned and continued moving down the ranks.

Somehow our commanding officer avoided fainting and followed the general. I was certain I had just witnessed a miracle and my esteem for Nick was greatly increased.

Nick and I shared three final characteristics: a passion for rock and roll, a never-ending desire to be close to women and a love of German beer. We indulged in all three at every opportunity. Whenever we had a weekend off, early Saturday afternoon, we would leave our base, a former SS casern in Hitler's army, walk through Schwabach to the station at the opposite end of town, and board the train to Nuremburg. We enjoyed the 30-minute ride to the big city where we knew we could simultaneously quench all three of the common thirsts we shared. Nuremburg was home to several large night clubs where we could find German beer and plenty of frauleins willing to dance the night away with randy, rude American GIs with U.S. dollars in their pockets, much to the disdain of their parents, I am sure. I know now we were desperately seeking stimulation to counter a pain we both held inside.

The following morning would find us dragging ourselves back onto the train headed south, hoping that one of us could stay awake or at least wake up in time for us to disembark when the train stopped in Schwabach.

It was on one of these weekend junkets that the inevitable happened: we passed out on the train and did not regain consciousness until we were well past the station at Schwabach. The next stop of any import was in Roth, a small city approximately 20-minutes south of our intended destination. We actually thought we were fortunate in the fact that we had stirred from our sleep before reaching Munich because we probably did not have enough

money to pay for the ride and were not in any shape to deal with an angry conductor. Although, given our attitudes at that time, we probably would have blamed the conductor for not waking us up at Schwabach. But at that point, we were not in the mood for a fight. That was to come later, actually, just a few minutes later.

When we got off the train in Roth, we learned it would be more than an hour before the next train heading north would arrive. Train stations in Germany are simple structures without many facilities. We left the station to look for a place to enjoy a beer in the hope of easing the throbbing in our heads. As we walked across the street, the first likely place we saw was a charming, quaint gasthaus. I think that means guest house in German but to us it meant beer joint. But affixed to the front door was a handwritten sign that read "NO GIs." We stopped in our tracks. We had never seen a display like that in either Schwabach or Nueremburg. We couldn't imagine anything so openly antagonistic to our young egos. As soon as I heard Big-D mutter "Bullshit" and reach for the door, I knew that any hope we had of passing ourselves off as Canadians was probably very remote.

As our eyes adjusted to the lower lighting levels within the gasthaus, we were greeted by the familiar sight of a small bar room with approximately a half-dozen tables. All the tables but one was occupied by groups of people enjoying a Sunday beer, wine or cola. We took seats at the only vacant table and within a few seconds, the barkeeper approached and said something in German. Nick held up two fingers and responded "Two be-ahs." This surprised me because Nick, being from Oakland California, had never

displayed even the slightest hint of a New York accent. But this was clearly the two-syllable pronunciation of “beer” heard only in Canarsie, or maybe Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

The room fell silent immediately. All eyes were turned to us. The barkeeper’s face appeared puzzled but I did not detect any animosity. Next, he asked “Wiederholung bitte?” My German was never very good but I guessed he had just asked: “Repeat please?” Sensing an opening, I said “Tucher Lichen” the name of a pilsner that Nick and I both enjoyed. The man turned, walked behind the bar and returned in a few moments with two of the bottles with which we were so familiar. We paid for the beer with Deutchmarks, change left over from the preceding evening. Meanwhile, the muted conversations at the other tables resumed where they had left off. At least I hoped so, though I knew they were probably talking about us. At that point, I watched the proprietor walk behind the bar, pass through a curtain and disappear from view.

Those who study brain development recognize that most adolescent brains, though fully formed, lack the neural pathway development required to permit the various parts of the brain to work efficiently in conjunction with one another. While some brains complete their development at an early age, many do not achieve completion until the individual reaches their early twenties.

It is clear to me now that both Nick and I, instead of using the large areas of our frontal lobes to reason and analyze, were still using our central cortexes or maybe our pituitary glands; regions that are just not up to the task. Nothing else could explain why we popped open the tops of our beers and agreed that we

should enjoy our drinks while we waited for the arrival of the polizei.

But enjoy our beer, we did. In about two swigs each. I actually began feeling a lot better. The pounding in my head had greatly lessened and I was getting the feeling back in my tongue. In a moment of jubilation, I slammed my bottle down on the table and yelled out “Bartender!”

At that point, the room was filled with the sounds of chairs scraping across the uneven wooden floor, carefully aged with generations of fine German beer spills. Suddenly, all of the other people in the room were standing. It was also at this moment, that I first realized that there were no women or children in the room. They were all men: large men. And somehow I could sense that they were not about to begin a tournament at the foosball table located in the center of the floor.

It is not necessary to describe a lot of detail about the fight that ensued. We actually did fairly well. We were, if you will, “agile, mobile and hostile,” a phrase commonly used to describe AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters in Vietnam. I will relate that by the time the polizei began streaming through the entrance of the gasthaus, Big-D was standing on the foosball table, swinging and kicking at the eight or ten men trying to pull him to the floor. I had chosen the largest of them and was clinging to his back with my arms around his neck. There were many hands pulling at my arms, legs and hair, but the harder they pulled, the more my arms choked my target. I was yelling “I got your back D!” Meanwhile, Big-D was shouting to his attackers “We never shoulda gave you back your country. We won it fair and square in a war!”

The polizei were actually quite nice to us. We were handcuffed and they walked us back across the street to the train station. When the train arrived, they escorted us aboard and handcuffed us to our seats. They didn't, however, treat the cuts or bruises on our faces and hands but we didn't mind. They handed the key to the conductor, bid us "Auf wiedersehen" and left us. When the train arrived at Schwabach, several of the local polizei lined the platform to greet us. They gave us a ride back to our base in their VW bus paddy wagon and handed us over to the duty officer who was not amused. Or maybe he just hid his amusement very well. Nick and I stood at attention and saluted the VW as defiantly as possible when it exited through the main gate.

Nick ended up on kitchen police (KP) duty for a week; pots and pans if I recall correctly. I was lucky and got to serve my penance outdoors. I painted every jeep and truck tire rim in the motor pool, removing each wheel from its vehicle, separating the rubber tire from the metal rim with a pick axe and replacing it when the paint was dry. But the motor pool sergeant was a decent guy and gave me new brushes every day.

More than 35 years have passed since this series of events transpired and it is long past the time for me to take responsibility for my actions and apologize for them. To the Germans in that bar room in Roth, I apologize for being such an ugly American. It was wrong of me to disregard your desire to enjoy the company of your friends in peace. I apologize for reinforcing your belief that young American servicemen are not to be trusted in polite company. I was wrong to put my hands on you. I apologize for any physical harm I may have caused you.

To the American people, I apologize to you for being an ugly American too. I apologize for representing you so poorly while serving in a host nation; one of our allies. I was wrong to throw away an opportunity to build greater understanding of America's capacity for good. I was very wrong to feel pride when I remembered this story for the first twenty or so years after it happened. I do feel shame for my actions now and I am truly sorry.

Finally, to Nick Donnelly, I hope you found peace as I have. I hope you were finally able to lose the anger. I am sorry I was incapable of helping you then. Welcome home, brother.

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