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## The Salute

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I'm just outside Petersburg, rolling out on Route 36. "Fort Lee, next right." I pull up to the MP Station. "Reporting for a new assignment."

The MP responds, "The AIT Brigade headquarters is straight ahead, left on B Avenue." I show him my orders and am politely redirected to Mifflin Hall, the post headquarters. Not sure why I'm here. A redleg with the fighting quartermaster corps? I guess it's a place to stick too many lieutenants promoted up. Fine. After a year in the jungle, put me behind a desk.

I get my wish. I'm assigned to the quartermaster brigade S3 shop: our section in charge of post-training operations. Broken in with the major's briefing on his self-importance. I'm grateful for the encouragement. Hope I can measure up to his world of experience. Glance at my new teammates: two smirking captains. "Major Hornblower" can bluster all he wants. Forget him. I'll follow the lead of these seasoned 'Nam vets. Under their mentorship I settle into the Fort Lee way. Get the daily details out, inspect the training sites, then beat the early rush to the O Club. Return in time to send out the next day's detail requirements. Then beat the early rush to the O Club again.

It's all fine at first, but not as expected. Hard getting used to the certainty that tomorrows will all be the same. As much as I hate it, my thoughts lead me back to Charley Battery. Hours in the O Club with war stories over bourbon provides no relief. Stateside duty, just not as advertised.

But one army universal truth remains. There always will be "other duties as assigned." It doesn't take long for my name to pop up on the post-duty rosters. Some are routine such as languishing overnight in Post HQ as OD. Others are a little more detailed. But I'm not given my first choice: Class VI inventory officer. Why not? I can tell the difference between bourbon and vodka. Others are a mixed bag of "don't volunteer for," such as summary court martial officer:

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judge, jury, and hangman. So hard to have a soldier before you for the crime of not adjusting to coming home from 'Nam. But casualty assistance officer? Never heard of it. Maybe a carryback to WWII days: delivering the feared telegram to the parents. "CAO" in today's army lingo, assigned to assist the primary next of kin. Can't be more open-ended. No idea where this would lead me. I sign up.

I'm assigned to a family who lost their nineteen-year-old son. He died after only two months in country as a rifleman. It's my first time accompanying the remains of a service member. The casket will arrive in Roanoke, the nearest airport, then be transported to the family near Grundy.

With the flight scheduling from Vietnam, I have a couple of days in Roanoke to hit the VA and social security offices. The young man's draft and death notices have probably been the family's only contact with the military. I need to make it as smooth as possible, not burden them with, "I'll be back in a couple of days with more government paperwork."

The plane arrives. A hushed crowd gathers. The honor guard from the local First Battalion, 116th Infantry, transfers the flag-draped casket to the waiting hearse. The soldiers come to attention; the detail NCO renders honors. Now the last leg of this soldier's return begins. Out of Roanoke on I-581 to I-81, I follow the hearse. The flag drapes the casket ahead. It just doesn't seem right. He shouldn't be coming home like this, stuck in traffic. Quickly we leave the melee of cars and trucks, headed south as those lush blue mountains begin to rise.

On the other side of Blacksburg, US460 turns into a tortuous mountain road through the heart of Appalachia: Bluefield, Tazewell, Richlands. The rugged mountains loom larger, the curves sharpen. Roads have been destroyed by overweight coal trucks. We roll past worn-out homes. Who lives here? To those in the "flat lands," these folks must be nobodies, just folks

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sitting on the porch by a sleeping dawg. Picking at a banjo. Passing around a jug. It doesn't matter if that's accurate or not, because I'm following the casket of a soldier from these parts.

Our little convoy attracts onlookers as we pull into an Esso station in Grundy. Folks are not accustomed to seeing a hearse trailed by a black sedan with government tags. My greens stick out among the men in miner's overalls.

“Where you heading?”

“Bringing one of our boys home?”

After a brief exchange, I inquire, “I'm looking for the Greater Grace Freewill Baptist Church on Hoot Owl Gap Road.” Appreciative of the respect shown by everyone, we head into the heart of Buchanan County, over what some might call roads. It's easier to find potholes than patches of asphalt. No straight stretches here, only run-down homes with rusted cars in the yard. Just how do these folks make it day to day?

Up ahead stands the church. Like so many found all over rural Virginia, it's a plain white wooden chapel with a steep roof and the ever-present cross. There to greet us is Preacher Johnson and a few men in those same overalls. After some getting-to-know-you pleasantries, they help bear the casket into the church.

As everyone starts to depart, I ask, “Is there a motel nearby?” I could hit myself. How dumb is that? There's nothing nearby this place!

Preacher Johnson replies, “You're staying with us. Don't argue. It's getting dark and you'll never find your way out of here.”

I follow Preacher Johnson down the mountain to his home. Not sure what to expect. It doesn't take long. He has two kids running around wanting to play army with my hat. “It's OK, they can't hurt it.”

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A stranger is a celebrity. “Tell us all about Richmond!” The preacher’s wife pulls out all the stops for the meal, blessed eloquently by Preacher Johnson. Dinner and conversation are enjoyed by all, except for the rhubarb pudding. She apologizes for its shortcomings. All that changes after I mention my dad’s rhubarb patch behind our garage.

Later, sitting by the TV, there’s a knock at the door. Preacher Johnson greets the visitor. “Bobby, we were expecting you. The man who brought home your son is here.”

Bobby Anderson, in overalls, has come by to go over my pile of papers. Both of us wade through the stack. “Please sign and date here. Now another signature here.” What am I doing, selling a piece of land? Buying his car? I can barely imagine how this father felt. Near the bottom of the heap came the application for a veteran’s headstone.

Bobby Anderson picks up the form. “What does this here mean?”

“Your son is entitled to a grave marker if you want one.”

Wheezing and coughing, he says, “You mean like one of them they got at Arlington? Much appreciated if you can. Know it would do wonders for his mother. Folks need to remember my Bobby, Jr.”

“Yes sir, be honored to do that.”

Bobby Anderson departs. I retrieve my hat once the kids are asleep.

The preacher’s wife brings out the lemonade. “Glad you got to see Bobby. They’re a real fine family. Hate seeing all this sorrow.”

Preacher Johnson joins in. “Yes, my daddy baptized Bobby, Jr. along with his three sisters. Eleanor, their mom, grew up here. Buried her dad. The coal dust did him in. Looks like it will do the same to Bobby, too. With all this heartache, Jesus will have a special place for both of them.”

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With curiosity, I ask, “Guess everyone grows up to be a miner?”

On went Preacher Johnson: “Not Bobby. He’s from down in Bristol. Showed up after the war trying to find work. Hear tell he soldiered in the army like you. Some say France. Who knows? Can’t get a word out of him. The one truth that can be said is he met the love of his life, Eleanor. Bobby’s a hardworking man. Would do anything for her and the young’uns.”

Preacher Johnson’s wife remarks, “Only makes your coming even harder. Bobby, Jr. was his pride and joy. If not fishing, they were hunting. Had to. The only food on the table when the mine shuts down. What will they do now?”

“A good life is hard to come by around these parts. That’s true enough. But didn’t Bobby sign Bobby, Jr.’s army papers? What was he thinking? He would be alive now.”

I comment, “So sad. If only it could have turned out differently.”

Agreeing, Preacher Johnson adds, “Can’t judge Bobby too harshly, though. Guess he wanted more for Bobby, Jr. than he had. I can’t help thinking that Bobby knew this day would come. The good Lord has plans for us even if we don’t know what they are.”

The next morning Preacher Johnson and I meet the honor detail from the Abington Reserve Center at the church. Along with Bobby Anderson, the funeral arrangements are formalized. Preacher Johnson laughs at my question. “Yes, son, a Catholic is welcome. Jesus loves us all.”

Folks in their best file into the church to the song “An Unclouded Day Where No Storm Clouds Rise.”

Preacher Johnson begins in earnest: “Sunset is coming but the sunrise we’ll see.” A chorus resounds, of knowing amens. Testimonies are made to Bobby Anderson, Jr.’s life. Some are so sad, some full of joy. All are accompanied by more amens. The piano strikes up “The

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Glad Reunion Day” only to be drowned out by the churchgoers. Then silence, complete. Only the sounds of the detail sergeant’s muted commands. The honor guard moves forward in perfect concert. They carry the casket to the gravesite beside the church. A soldier’s final rest.

Preacher Johnson delivers the blessing: “I Will Meet You in the Morning.” On command, three volleys are fired. Bobby Anderson flinches on each discharge. The coronet’s *Taps* brings tears to Eleanor Anderson.

The detail removes the flag before lowering the casket. They fold it and give it to the honor guard sergeant. Then to me. Receiving the flag, I present it to Eleanor Anderson. She cries uncontrollably.

I start, “On behalf of ...”

She shouts, “Y’all killed my boy!” Shrieking, she throws the flag to the ground. “Y’all took my Bobby from me!”

I bend to pick up the flag. I tuck in the end and wipe away the dirt. I catch Bobby Anderson’s gaze. He’s standing by himself. I’m not sure what to expect. Will he also empty his wrath on me?

Bobby Anderson steps up, so close I hear him breathing, see his tears. He reaches to the flag in my hands. His fingers touch it. Then he takes the flag. He pulls it close to his chest, staring at it. He raises his eyes to mine and nods. I step back. I render and hold my salute.

One soldier to another. We understand.