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Bonne Année

David M. Aldridge
dave@davidaldridge.com

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David M. Aldridge, MPP, 8 October 2018

After receiving an honorable discharge from the Army in November 1967, I finally got a job. Just before Thanksgiving, the owner, and then the manager, of the Gulf Station in Garden Grove, California decided to take a chance on me. They were both Veterans and knew how hard it was when you got out of the service. The owner said to call him Red. He was in his 50s and had fought in Europe. He showed me the ropes of how to manage the station. I soon found out he had a larcenous heart; his instructions were troublesome.

He told me, “Always check under the hood. Keep a sharp pen knife concealed in your hand so you can cut the fan belt or punch a hole in the radiator hose. Tell the customers they need immediate replacement and show them the evidence. That’s how we get most of our business, because I don’t make much on the gas.” I merely nodded. He then said, “When you check the oil don’t put the dip stick all the way back in. Show the customer that they’re running short on oil. When you put oil in the car use the oil from our 55-gallon drum. I get it wholesale and we can make a hell of a profit that way.”

“Yes, sir, the cheap oil.”

“Always try to sell an additive, like STP or Bardahl. We have a special deal with the sales guys for those companies.”

I simply nodded and tried to look interested in how to bamboozle our customers.

Red showed me how to use the cash register and how to close up at night after I put all the money in a hidden floor safe. I had to write on a clipboard the meter readings from every gas

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pump and count all the cans of oil, additives, etc. The job was seven-days-a-week; on weekends, I was offered double shifts so that the regular manager George could have time off.

Over the course of the next 6 weeks I got proficient at all the paperwork. Everyone seemed pleased with me. George was a Japanese guy who'd fought in Europe, too. George was nice enough so I told him straight up on my first day, "George, I cannot fuck up someone's hoses or cheat them. I don't want that kind of shit on my conscience."

He looked at me like he was disappointed. Finally, he said, "That's OK. Just do the best you can to sell as much oil and the other stuff." I agreed I would do my best.

It just wasn't in me to deceive the trusting customers who chose to come to us for their gas and oil needs. I never saw the owner again. George opened the station every morning at 6 a.m. and ran the show until I showed up at 3 p.m. I closed every night at midnight. George was one hell of a mechanic. He used to repair all the weapons and vehicles in his unit during the war. When George left for the day I took over. On busy nights, time flew and I could keep the images of Viet Nam out of my head. Slow nights were hell. It was during those times that all of my tour would come back and assault me. I couldn't wait to get off so I could go get something to drink.

One thing that bothered me was the never-ending feeling that without a weapon I was naked and vulnerable. I started carrying my Mother's .25 caliber automatic pistol. If I was caught it would mean 5 years in prison at a minimum because I didn't have a concealed weapon permit. I prayed I wouldn't have to use it on someone, but I felt better with it in my fatigue jacket pocket. I kept three full extra magazines with me also. I knew it wouldn't kill someone outright like a .45 pistol but it could sure fuck up someone's day.

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I have always been a voracious reader. I could read the entire newspaper in 15 minutes. My mother joked that I would read the cereal boxes when I was a kid. I could never get enough. None of my four brothers read anything but the comics or the sports pages. To me, knowledge was power. So I read everything. My family subscribed to the *L.A. Times* and the *Orange County Register*. If I could have I would have subscribed to the *New York Times*, too.

As Christmas 1967 grew near, I began to read about a gang of five thugs robbing gas stations all over Orange County. That got my attention. They'd beat one station attendant half to death and left him in a coma. The only description was that there were five of them, probably ex-cons looking for an easy buck by striking late at night when no witnesses were around. Every day I read of the further misadventures of these thugs. I hoped the police would stake out some place and catch them in the act. That would make all of southern California safer.

New Year's Eve arrived. I was eager to get it over and done with. New Years Day was the big game on TV, with USC and Indiana playing at the Rose Bowl, and I wanted to watch. My brother Rik played for USC; I was excited to see how he would do. New Years' night, getting ready for work, I fixed a couple of sandwiches and debated whether to take my Mother's pistol.

My Inner Voice said, "Take it. You're going to need it." In Vietnam, I first heard that voice and learned to trust it. With no further thought I stuffed the pistol in my jacket pocket. I made sure I pocketed the extra magazines, as well. I cranked my motorcycle to life; in ten minutes was at work and got the keys from George. He told me to be careful because there had been more gas station robberies the last few nights. I wished him Happy New Year and he took off.

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Nothing exceptional happened that night. I sold a bunch of oil, STP and Bardahl, bound to make George and Red happy; other than that, business was slow. People were out partying already. Fireworks exploded all over Orange County. The sudden reports of sky rockets exploding kept me vigilant. I fixed my eyes on the side of the station where it would be easy to park a car out of sight. Approaching midnight, I grabbed the clipboard to record the gas pump readouts. I inventoried all the oil and additives along with the Anti-freeze containers. I locked all the pumps and went back to the office. I made sure to lock the door, then counted out the money from the register and put it in the floor safe.

I had just finished locking the safe when a vehicle drove up next to the building. My Inner Voice said, very clearly, “Get ready. This is it.” Five swarthy-looking men in dark clothes ambled towards the office door. They exuded an evil presence in the way they looked at me through the locked door. I wasn’t afraid, but slowly took a deep breath and reached into my pocket for the pistol. Locking eyes with the leader, I pulled out the gun and jacked a round into the chamber. The leader put his hand on the front door and pushed. I had double-locked it, and it held firm.

I laid the pistol on the desk in front of me. I waited, never taking my eyes off the gang leader. With my left hand I drew one of the magazines out of my other pocket and held it ready. The leader and I stared at each other for a full minute. I would make sure to shoot him in the face first before going for the others. Head shots or shots to the throat were my best bet. The leader turned to speak with the other four. Unhurriedly they turned, returned to their car, and drove away. I checked my watch. Midnight.

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A year ago, in Saigon, the Vietnamese and the Chinese down in Cholon wished each other Happy New Year in French, “Bonne Année!” they yelled to each other and to the Americans. The warm, lush smells of Saigon’s streets came rushing back to me. I locked up and drove to Daisy Mae’s bar on Beach Blvd. Beer rarely tasted so good. It looked like 1968 was going to be a great year. USC won the Rose Bowl.

I read in the late edition to the *Orange County Register* the next day that the gang had killed an attendant at a 24-hour gas station up in Santa Ana. They beat him to death and got away with \$50.00 cash and cigarettes.