

AL

“Al wants to be a Marine. Ian and I are sick about it.”

It was June, 2008, and my sister Sarah had called hoping that I might have some words of wisdom for them. My nephew had just graduated from Norwich Military College in Vermont with a BS in Civil Engineering. He was enrolled in Army ROTC through his sophomore year, but began to waffle when cadre intimated that Second Lieutenants were expendable on the battlefield. During his junior and senior years, he continued in ROTC but remained uncommitted, toying with the idea of going in the Navy. In his senior year, he was offered a civilian job with the Army. Now, it was the Marines.

“Sarah, would you like me to speak with him?”

"Please. Ian and I would be grateful."

“You know how I feel about war. Maybe I can talk some sense into him. Now that he’s home from school, I’ll invite him out to dinner.”

I remember what a pain in the ass Al was as a kid. The youngest of four children, he was interested in the military ever since he was old enough to walk and talk. As a toddler, he played with toy soldiers, and terrorized his two older sisters. He would lie in wait in the bushes in front of their house, hoping to scare the shit out of one or both of them. When he was old enough to read, it was books about the military: uniforms, weapons and vehicles. At seven, I gave him my Green Beret. He strutted around the house dressed as a soldier, wearing little boy fatigues, a toy M16, and my Green Beret, so large it sat on either ear. I thought it was a hoot. From that point on, I was his hero. As a pre-teen, he was an active participant in Civil War reenactments, having been drafted as a drummer boy. During high school, he expressed a desire to go to West Point,

but ultimately enrolled at Norwich. It was fitting that I would be the one to try and dissuade him from going into the service.

“Al, its Uncle Pete.”

“Hi. How are you?”

“I’m good. When did you get back from school?”

“Last weekend. I’m just settling in and thinking about a summer job. I need to make some money to support my habits.” We laughed.

After some idle chitchat, we agreed to meet at Pablo Gallo’s, the Mexican restaurant in the village. Sarah told me Al had the summer to think about his options. The next Marine Corps OCS class wouldn’t start until October. A couple of hours before we were to meet at the restaurant, I prayed for guidance. I didn’t know how much Al knew about my situation, but I was prepared to lay it all on the table in hopes of convincing him to take a civilian job, any civilian job.

The restaurant was crowded. It was July third, the evening before the long holiday weekend, probably a poor choice for a quiet talk. We were seated at a table in the bar, busy with people waiting to be seated in the restaurant. Even though Al wasn’t my son, I felt a special bond with him, and I hurt inside at the thought that this young man could wind up being another tool of the government and political leaders who had no personal concept of what it was like to go to war.

“It must feel good to be finished with school.”

“Yeah. It feels great.”

The waiter came over and put menus down, and asked if we cared for a drink.

“I’ll have a Dos Equi. Al, what do you want?”

"I'm going to stick with water."

I was surprised that he didn't order a beer. I thought that maybe his parents had told him not to drink, or maybe he anticipated the depth of our conversation and wanted to be completely sober when sparring with me. I took a long drag on the bottle and felt the beer bite my throat, and followed with two more. I was tense, unsure of myself and where our conversation might take us.

"So what's your plan this summer?"

"Get a job, make some money and figure out what I want to do."

"Thinking about the future is a good idea, Al."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking. My Mom and Dad have tried to help me sort the options. I want to have a family, have a good job, have a boat and a nice car like you and my mom and dad." He took a sip of water. "At the end of my sophomore year, I decided against going into the Army. All I heard was how Second Lieutenants were cannon fodder. It scared me."

His comment surprised but encouraged me. I thought that perhaps my job of convincing him might have gotten easier.

"Al, you were raised in a home not unlike the one in which your Mother and I were raised. We're sensitive, emotional people, not prone to violence. The service is licensed violence. Young officers are vulnerable in times of war. I could tell you some stories."

Al nodded his head.

The waitress came over and asked if we were ready to order. We hadn't opened the menus.

"Give us a minute," I said.

There was a lull in our conversation. Al looked almost relieved. He took a couple more sips of his water and shifted in his seat. I waived for the waitress and she took our order. “I decided not to seek a commission in the Army, but instead consider other branches of the service. Along the way, the Army offered me a job as a civilian engineer at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey. It was a research position, and I want a job as a process engineer, like in a plant.”

So why are you even considering the Marines? I thought. I could feel the tension built in my gut.

“What happened with the Navy?”

“The program included extensive training in nuclear engineering, essentially a graduate engineering degree, paid for by the Navy. Unfortunately, my grades were a problem, and they turned me down.”

He gestured with his hands, palms up, while his facial expression read disappointment. I took another tug on my beer, steeling myself for what was to come.

“I had heard that you were considering Marine Aviation.”

“Yeah, I did. Some of the guys at school have already signed up for the program. They’ve been walking around campus with flight jackets and sunglasses. I’ve been talking with a Marine recruiter about OCS. The officer training program is three segments, each three months long. Boot Camp is the first; the second involves rotating through all five of the command branches to see which we like the best. You spend three weeks in each area, such as infantry, artillery, logistics and so forth; the last segment is specific training in your chosen field. The recruiter said that we get a couple of command choices, and they do their best to give us what we want.”

Here we go; the propaganda machine, I thought.

“Al, don’t believe everything you hear. You know, of course, that in a time of war, when troop strength is low, the Marines are going to select infantry for you; you won’t have a choice.”

He took another sip of his water, and glanced around the bar. The crowd was a distraction, as people jockeyed to order drinks while they waited for tables.

“I know, Uncle Pete. In fact, I want the infantry.”

I was in the middle of a drag on my Dos Equi, and choked on it.

“You want to go into the infantry?”

“Yeah.”

I struggled to remain composed.

“How does the infantry fit into your long range plan?”

“I know, it sounds crazy. I’ve been thinking about this for months. I’ve read a bunch of leadership books and I want to test my mettle; I want to see if I have what it takes. You did it, Uncle Pete.”

Fuck. Now what? I've got to let him have it.

“You’re right, Al. I did it. But I’m here to tell you that I made a mistake, a huge mistake.”

Al became animated, his torso and arms driving a sales pitch that he had practiced, no doubt on his parents and other disbelievers.

“I’ve even read memoirs written by veterans who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. I just finished a book written by a former Marine Captain, a Company Commander. He was frank about the risks, and how difficult it is to re-acclimate to civilian life. In fact, he almost didn’t get into grad school because the admissions committee didn’t think that experience as a soldier was a good enough reason to admit him.”

He was trying to paint a balanced picture, that being a soldier has its ups and downs, just like any other profession.

“Al, did any of this guy’s soldiers get wounded or killed?”

“Yes.”

“What was his comment on this; what did he have to say?”

”That he would have to live with the painful memories for the rest of his life.”

“And even after reading all that, you still want to go in?”

“Yes.”

I wanted to reach across the table and throttle him. Thankfully, the waitress brought our meal. Al looked almost relieved. I was vibrating with anger. We started to eat, but neither one of us dug in. I picked at the food while I tried to figure out how to respond. I knew I couldn't go off on him. I'd surely lose the argument.

“None of us go to war thinking about the downside. Somehow, those thoughts never come up because the testosterone floods our brains and distorts reality. You ought to ask your recruiter how difficult it is to make a life for yourself with legs or arms missing. There is no glory in war, only pain and suffering.” I paused for a few seconds. “You knew that I was wounded, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, after the bullet missed my heart by a few millimeters, I thought I was invincible. I strutted around like I was a fucking hero. I used that wound as a badge of courage and hid behind the Green Beret for years because I really didn’t know who I was. Three years ago, I went to a reunion of guys from my SF Medics class. Out of a class of 56, there were 18 of us there. Some of us were killed in Nam, others committed suicide after; but most of us are fucked up. Al, there

I was in a room full of broken men, crying over what we had done to other human beings in the war. Do you know that I have PTSD?”

“Yes.”

“I am a hundred percent disabled. I can’t work anymore. I see a team of shrinks and psychologists every month. I’m in group sessions every week with other Vietnam vets whose lives have been destroyed. I know that you think my life has been good, with the summer homes and the fast cars and boats. But the truth is that I have been running from my wartime experiences since I got out in 1969. I had no career, I have no security, no savings, my marriage blew up, and I’ve been bankrupt. I’m on a VA pension now and if it wasn’t for that, I’d be living in a fucking cardboard box. Life isn’t necessarily as simple as it appears on the surface.”

Al had leaned back in his chair during my fusillade. He looked like he had taken a direct hit. He was speechless. I was spent. We picked at our food for another ten minutes without saying a word. The cacophony of voices in the bar swallowed us in idle chatter. I’m glad we were out there, rather than sitting at a quiet corner booth. The silence would have been deafening. There was nothing more to say.

The waitress came to clear our table and I paid her. Al and I walked out to the parking lot.

“Uncle Pete, I appreciate that you thought enough of me to have this talk.” He extended his hand, and I took it.

“Al, a friend of mine, my therapist at the VA, reminded me of two characters in classic literature. There are two kinds of people in this world: Knights and Merlins. It’s taken me years to understand that I’ve been hiding under my Green Beret because I’m no Knight, never was. I’m a Merlin, an empathetic, emotional, sensitive human being. I’m not a killer. Be true to yourself.”

Al shipped out in October. I felt like I had failed him. Then I thought how my parents must have felt when I enlisted in the Army. I know they weren't happy with me, but there was nothing they could have done to change my mind. It had been time for my journey, and now it was time for Al's.

Two months after Al had shipped out to Quantico for OCS, I went to the grocery store one evening and as I parked my car, I saw Al walking toward his car across the aisle from me. I jumped out and yelled his name. I couldn't believe my eyes; Al in the flesh. We shook hands and I hugged him. He was smiling, but looked like he didn't want to see me.

"What are you doing here, Al?"

He looked down at the pavement for a minute.

"I resigned my commission."

The words hit me in the solar plexus like I had been drop kicked. It was the last thing I expected to hear. I thought maybe he was home for a few days on leave.

"What happened?"

His demeanor subdued, he looked embarrassed.

"I loved the Corps and everything it stood for, but when I realized that the lives of 18 and 19 year old kids would be in my hands, I knew I wasn't ready to lead them. I may never be ready to lead them. I told my commander and he suggested I sleep on it a few days. Those few days only solidified my feelings."

Al's lips were pursed and his eyes glistened. I was shocked. For a few seconds, I didn't know what to say.

" You made the right decision. It took a hell of a lot more courage to do what you did than to stay against your better judgment. I am proud of you," and I hugged him.

"I don't know. I think about my buddies who are serving in the Middle East, and I feel guilty."

"Hey, you don't owe them anything, except maybe the truth. Don't let the Catholic guilt thing work on your head. Do you think they've been honest with themselves? How many of them would have had the guts to do what you did? You saved those kids' lives, and maybe your own life by listening to your conscience and making a difficult decision. I admire you, Al."

As he drove away, I thought about all the questions I had had while lying in the hospital bed at Camp Zama, before opting to go home. Why did I turn my back on my teammates, my brothers? Was I a coward for choosing life and the relative safety of a stateside assignment? What did my teammates think of me?

I had mixed emotions that evening in the parking lot as Al drove off, because I knew his decision would haunt him every day for the rest of his life.

