

## ON THE DOLE

1969—the year I came back from war, the government sent me monthly disability checks. Found money, a token for fools who had volunteered for hazardous duty. My wounds didn't put people off or make them nervous, the scars hidden under my clothing. The VA shrink said I qualified for vocational rehabilitation; they sent me to college to get an MBA. I could walk and talk and push a pencil. My resume said *decorated US Army Special Forces Medic* under prior work experience.

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

1973-1977	Citibank
1977-1979	Chase Manhattan
1979-1981	Bankers Trust
1983-1991	United Financial
1994-1997	Anderson Company, CPA's

1997—the year I got fired from my last job and the year I declared bankruptcy. The checks that year were \$399. Employers and I had differences of opinion; couldn't find a career worth giving up my humanity. In between jobs, I was a consultant, what you call yourself when you're out of work, free of the empty suits, that is, until I could no longer afford the freedom. The VA shrink thought I had set the bar too high. "So what if you can't trust them." I told him it was their problem, not mine. I'd have traded that government check for a living wage.

1998—the year my wife walked out. The checks were \$404. Told her I would never go back to a corporate job. She'd had enough of the financial roller coaster. I'd have traded that check to get my family back.

2001—the year diabetes caught up with me—Agent Orange. The checks were \$625. The VA gave me pills but the diabetes didn't go away; I just lost weight. In 2003, they put me on insulin. The weight came back, but I still had diabetes, and two sons with learning disabilities. I'd have traded that check for my sons' health.

2005—the year I had a nervous breakdown after an army reunion. The checks were \$873. The stories about my brothers made me cry: suicides and drug abuse and broken lives. Memories of war consumed me. The VA shrink said I could have a life worth living. He gave me pills, but the memories didn't stop. I couldn't work. Thank God my mother left me money when she died.

2007—two years of wrangling with the bureaucrats to convince the government that war had rendered me unemployable; so much for vocational rehabilitation. The checks that year were \$2,610, equivalent to \$15 an hour for a 40 hour work week; so much for an education.

I'd have traded that check for self-respect.