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**THREE**

**“Greetings”**

Fairfield, Connecticut  
October, 1967

“I’m home!”, I called out as I came through the front door of my family’s home on Rhode Island Avenue.

“Hi, Bob! Supper’s almost ready.”, my mother answered from the kitchen. “We’ll eat as soon as your father gets in.”

I plopped down into an old easy chair in the living room where the TV was turned on. My mother never missed an episode of the daily soaps, which she referred to as “her stories”. I was beat from a full day’s work and the soaps held no particular fascination for me, so I rested my head back against the chair and closed my eyes. It wasn’t more than a few minutes when I opened them again and looked up to see her standing beside me. It seemed somewhat odd the way she was just standing there, staring down at me.

“Anything the matter, Mom?”

Her expression told me that something wasn’t what it should be. After a long, obvious hesitation she held out a white business envelope.

“This came for you in the mail today.”

Before I even looked I knew, whatever it was, it couldn’t be good. Not if it was affecting her this way. A quick glance proved me right. The letter had my name on it and the return address, in the upper left-hand corner, read: Selective Service Board

I'd registered with the selective service when I turned eighteen, just as the law required, but had heard little from them since. That was clearly the reason why my mother suspected the worst.

I tore the end off the envelope and removed the single sheet of type-written paper. The letter began with the one unmistakable sentence that no non-college, working kid from the neighborhood wanted to read.

“Greetings from the President of the United States.”

But, it sounded so official. And we were still so naive.

It went on to say that I must report to the induction center in New Haven, Connecticut where I would undergo an examination to determine whether or not I was eligible for the draft. The appointment date was only about two weeks away.

Numbed, I stared over the top of the page as the realization sank in. I'd never really given much thought to being called by the draft. Probably because I didn't want to. It had just seemed like a distant, hazy specter doggedly hanging around on the outer fringes of my world. And now, here it was jumping dead in my face!

I'd been out of school for just about a year and was working as an apprentice in a small display company that built and maintained exhibit booths for corporate conventions. These booths were often as long as forty or fifty feet. We'd get them into shape and then ship them out to the various industrial shows that took place around the country throughout the year. The pay wasn't fantastic, but I was learning everything from carpentry to silk screening. Being out of school and working, however, had put me into the prime category for draft selection.

The two weeks prior to my appointment passed quickly and I reported to the railroad station in Bridgeport, as the instructions had indicated. From there the train ride to New Haven was only a matter of thirty minutes.

During the time since the letter had arrived, I'd had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. On the one hand, I suddenly did a lot of thinking about all the things I'd ever seen or heard concerning military life. In fact, my boss at the exhibit company had been a cook in the Army during the quiet period between the Korean and Vietnam wars. Even with all the experiences he was able to relate, and his sympathetic attempts to ease my mind by continually telling me, "The Army's not so bad. When you get used to it, it's just like any other job.", I couldn't shake the anxiety.

I figured there was always the chance, though a mighty slim one, I had to admit, that I might somehow be rejected. That false sense of security managed to take a slight edge off my apprehension.

Going through the physical was exactly as I expected it would be. The procedure hadn't changed much since World War II. On the floor was a yellow line that we potential inductees followed from one room to another in our undershorts. As we went, a battery of doctors checked everything from the tops of our heads to the bottoms of our feet, leaving absolutely nothing in question.

Actually, this part of the day had been relatively boring. It was after the physical and written test that the situation changed dramatically.

When the group of us coming in from the train first arrived at the induction center, a young, black Army corporal had seated us in what looked like a typical school classroom with a large desk at the front. From that desk he'd explained what was expected of us as we went through the tests.

Now that the tests were over, we were reseated in that same room and I watched as the procedure became painfully clear.

After a short period, during which the corporal informed us that he was waiting for our completed files, a stack of manila folders was brought out and placed on the desk. He took the first one from the top of the pile, looked it over with a dispassionate expression, and called out the name of the man to whom it belonged. The rest of us watched with riveted fascination as that man went up to stand in front of the

desk with his back to us. After an obvious pause for the dramatic, the corporal looked up and smiled at him.

“Congratulations. You have been found eligible for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States.”

Suddenly, you could have heard a pin drop in that room! We all realized just how much the next few minutes could drastically change our lives.

I felt the tension, in the pit of my stomach, turn into a tight knot as each man’s name was called and he went up to that desk. A few, *a very few*, were told that they’d been found ineligible, but the great majority weren’t so lucky. Then it came.

“Hutton, Robert A.”

That walk, from my seat near the back of the room, to the front of that desk, felt like the longest one I’d ever taken. While I was standing there with the corporal scanning my file, the thought went through my mind that there was still the remote possibility I’d somehow failed the physical or written test. But the knot in my stomach said otherwise. Finally, he looked up at me.

“Congratulations. You have been found eligible....”

I never really heard the end of that sentence. I didn’t have to. With the word “eligible” it was all too clear that the next two years of my life were certainly going to be different from anything I might have imagined.

Two weeks after the physical another letter came in the mail instructing me to report to the induction center on November 15. From there I would be transported to Fort Dix in New Jersey to begin Basic Training.

I couldn’t believe how much everything had changed with this new turn of events. I was suddenly seeing the world through someone else’s eyes,...someone I didn’t know.

The most difficult part of it was the helplessness of having absolutely no say in the matter. An unseen entity, namely the Department of Defense, had suddenly loomed up from the outer edges of my world, where I'd fooled myself into believing it would stay, and taken complete control of my life. I figured most draftees probably felt the same way, but it didn't help to ease the turmoil that was eating me up.

Other considerations played heavily on me too during that period. I realized I wouldn't be seeing my family or friends for a good long time. I'd never been really far away from home and my family was close, which made the prospect all the more difficult.

And then, of course,...there was Vietnam.

Though it still seemed far away in both time and distance, it became a distinct possibility. Like most people, I'd seen reports of the war, including the daily casualty figures, just about every evening on the six o'clock news. Now, however, it struck painfully home just how little I actually knew about it.

On the morning of the fifteenth I was up before the sun even cast a glow on the eastern horizon. Not surprisingly, I'd slept little that night. My parents, younger brother, and sister all went down to the station to see me off, and, as the train pulled out, and they fell away in the distance, I felt a loneliness like nothing I'd ever experienced before,...and that was going to take some getting used to.