

"YOU ARE COMMANDED TO APPEAR"

By

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The 'Cold War' was about to heat up again, and everyone knew it. Americans had been on edge ever since the last year, when we had sweated through the 'Cuban Missile Crisis', the closest the United States and the Soviet Union had ever come to nuclear war. At the United Nations, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had angrily shook his fist and thundered at the Americans, "We will bury you!" Their military-oriented space program regularly launched huge manned spaceships and satellites far bigger and heavier than our U.S. rockets could lift, and the nightly TV newscasts told us of Communist-backed political and military unrest in faraway places with strange-sounding names such as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Against this backdrop, I entered Florence State College, in Florence, Alabama, in the fall of 1963. Aside from the learning and social opportunities, there was a huge additional benefit for a young man attending college in those days: a student draft deferment. In the 'sixties, The Selective Service System still had in place the same setup that had plucked millions of American boys from cities, towns, and farms ever since World War II and had deposited them into the awaiting clutches of the United States Armed Forces. But, for now, thanks to the deferment, I was immune to being drafted.

Not long after enrolling, the local Draft Board mailed to me the coveted "Selective Service 2-S" Student Deferment card. On it was a forcefully-stated order warning me to carry it at all times, as it put it, "under penalty of law." For over two years, during which time the Vietnam War erupted in Southeast Asia with ever-growing American involvement, I carried the card around in my wallet without much thought. I figured, along with millions of others around the country who had the "2-S" cards, that as long as I kept up my grades, I was home-free from the Draft Board. But as the war ground on, with upwards of a half-million Americans over there; with casualties by now numbering in the thousands---and mounting daily---rumblings from Washington hinted that the student deferments might be eliminated. .

Which is what happened. In the fall of 1966, The Selective Service System announced the cancellation of all student deferments and that college men would become "1-A," the classification for immediate induction. We were told that each male student would soon be called-up for a physical examination, followed by a re-classification into one of the priorities for the draft. Suddenly, our chances of being hauled out of the classroom and into a uniform were increased many-fold.

Trying to remain aloof from all this, I started another year at Florence State, with classes in the mornings, followed by my drive-time radio show on WVNA that rolled along smoothly in the afternoons. With evenings free, I decided to work with the Rehearsal Club, that put on the school's stage productions. For the fall semester, our production was Anton Chekhov's 'THE SEAGULL', a story with a Russian setting. My job was to help coordinate the play's musical score, partnering with an older lady who took who took the classes as a diversion, and who enjoyed working with us younger people at school. During this production, and over the next several semesters, she and I became good friends. Gladys Shepard, the director, attracted brilliant and congenial townspeople to assist in her productions. As this play had a number of hard-to-pronounce Russian names and words, Miss Shepard enlisted a dignified elderly Russian-Jewish woman, who had, years before, escaped

Hitler's Holocaust, to coach us in the proper pronunciation of the Russian words, and to fill us in on the cultural background of the story. (Gladys Shepard was very thorough about such things.) Over the weeks before showtime, as the cast and crew became fluent in the Russian words and phrases, we even started using some of them in our everyday conversations around campus, which intrigued (and doubtless amused) our other classmates.

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At the first cast and crew meeting, I had met Annette, a freshman from Birmingham, and we started going out together. Everywhere we went, people noticed the pretty young woman with the short, jet-black hair, fair skin and blue eyes. When we would walk into a crowded restaurant together, everyone in the place would admire Annette as we passed by on our way to a table. In those days, I was about the happiest guy in the world.

But a few days before the play was to open, there came the dreaded "Greetings" from the Draft Board. There was nothing subtle about it. At the top of the page was the heading:

***SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM
ORDER TO REPORT FOR
ARMED FORCES PHYSICAL EXAMINATION***

"You are hereby directed to present yourself for Armed Forces Physical Examination to the Local Board by reporting at Union Bus Station, 1116 Jackson Highway, Sheffield, Alabama, on November 15, 1966 at 10:15 a.m."

It was signed by a member of the local Draft Board.

The summons was essentially an order stated in unmistakable terms that had the potential to bring about one's untimely death. Several fellow students had received other versions that had put it somewhat differently, but with the same meaning. One friend told me his letter included the phrase, "You are commanded to appear----" that left no doubt as to the message's intent. An attached packet of instructions included a section headed:

***IMPORTANT NOTICE
(Read Each Paragraph Carefully)
TO ALL REGISTRANTS:***

"When you report pursuant to this order you will be forwarded to an Armed Forces Examining Station where it will be determined whether you are qualified for military service under current standards."

"TO CLASS 1-A AND 1-A-O REGISTRANTS:"

"If you fail to report for examination as directed, you may be declared delinquent and ordered to report for induction into the Armed Forces. You will also be subject to fine and imprisonment under the provisions of the Universal Military Training and Service Act, as amended."

The letter basically said, "Show up for the physical examination---or else."

There was more. An additional sheet, stapled to the Order, had a set of grim instructions that only added to the anxiety. One of the paragraphs was particularly telling, and included, among other things:

"INSTRUCTIONS FOR PRE-INDUCTION EXAMINATION"

"(Approved by State Director of Selective Service.) Gather the following information about your family so that you complete important records at the Examining Station.

- a. Names and ages of all members of your immediate family.*
- b. The cause of death, and age at time of death of any deceased member.*
- c. The name, address, and relationship of a person, and an alternate person, to be notified in an emergency."*

A colleague at the radio station, who had already had his Armed Forces physical, told us over Cokes in the Student Union Snack Bar that the Examining Station in Montgomery was the worst place to which he had ever been. Not encouraging. He advised us to eat lightly while we were there as the food was "strange" in his opinion, and tasted awful. The washrooms and restrooms were terrible, he said, and we should not expect to get any sleep. Finally, he advised us to always obey orders quickly and quietly, and to try to keep a low profile at all times. Not following his advice, he went on, could result in induction on the spot and a fast trip to Fort Benning for Basic Training. And after that---what?

Vietnam, most likely.

I thought about Annette, and the future of our relationship. She stared numbly at the Order, then looked up at me, her sad eyes revealing apprehension and despair. "What will happen to us?" Her eyes brimmed and a tear streaked down her face.

My head was spinning with many other questions: What about us, indeed? What about my other friends? Would I ever again see my parents and my sister and my other relatives? What about school? What would become of my radio career? What? What . . .?

It was a scene enacted countless times all across the United States in that autumn of 1966. And always lurking in the background was the war that television delivered into our living rooms each evening. New, horrid-sounding terms such as "firefight" and "body-count" had been added to the lexicon. For many, the summons was a call to death---whose' death, of course, we had no way of knowing in advance.

On the other hand, an ROTC physical a year earlier had brought to light my unstable ankle, the result of falling off a river-bluff when I was much younger. Because of some torn and loose ligaments, my right foot sometimes crunched around in a way that looked and sounded really awful. Most of the time the wobbly appendage was all right, but since I wasn't sure how it would affect my

chances of being drafted, I figured the Army doctors at the Examining Station could see it for themselves and decide what to do about it.

* * *

On the designated morning, my dad drove me down to the bus station. As per the information packet from the Draft Board, I had a small overnight bag. Our instructions had said that if we were drafted directly from the Examining Station, our civilian clothes would be mailed home. We had been advised to "settle your affairs," which had an ominous ring to it. The grim reality offered one the opportunity (requirement?) to serve his country, with the attendant possibility of being killed. We were supposed to inform our employers to hold our jobs open for the duration our military service, should we be inducted. (There were laws that required employers to do this, but it was up to us to make the arrangements.) The boss at the radio station predicted that I would soon be right back to work. I hoped he was right.

As the family car pulled up to the front of the station, we spotted a big Trailways bus marked, 'CHARTER', looming over a gathering of anxious-looking fellows about my age---a sure sign that several dozen others would also be making this particular trip to Montgomery. Presently a no-nonsense-looking woman in a business suit, who identified herself as the head of the local Draft Board, stepped up to the front door of the bus and, in a loud voice began to call the roll. One conscript failed to answer, whereupon she whipped out a pad and wrote his name on it with purposeful strokes. I had a feeling the individual in question would soon be in for a rough time from the authorities. She gave us a set of verbal instructions that generally coincided with what they had already sent us, then motioned for us to load onto the bus. The non-stop trip to Montgomery would take about five hours.

* * *

Many years later, I still have vivid recollections of that bus ride. Everyone was extremely nervous, as we were under no illusions as to the reason for the trip. For several in our group it would be the start of a military experience. Statistically, one or more of us would not return home alive. (I learned much later that at least one fellow passenger---perhaps two---on that bus were subsequently killed in Vietnam.) I sat next to a talkative, sandy-haired man in his late-'twenties who called himself "Billy," although I never learned his last name. At first, we all tried to put up a casual bravado, but after a while there came fretful periods when each rider brooded with concern about his possible fate when we reached our destination. The general conversation gradually took on an odd ebb and flow--false, nervous jocularity with periods of relative silence. Each, in his own private thoughts, pictured rice paddies, jungles, bloody firefights and body bags as being very real possibilities in his near future.

Someone pulled out a transistor radio. An anti-war protest song grated from the tiny speaker. The radio was quickly snapped off. Who wanted to be reminded of *that* right now? As we neared our destination, where the fate of our very lives would be in the balance, feckless attempts at humor became coarse with macabre overtones. One edgy fellow muttered he now understood how a condemned prisoner felt looking up at the gallows. As we rode along, the cold November day became overcast; the dreary leaden sky punctuated the somber mood. In silence we rode the last few miles toward our fateful rendezvous with the Examining Station. Thus, the sign that welcomed us to Montgomery, instead of its intended cheery message, instead, seemed to be a harbinger of doom. By

the time we arrived at the gates of Maxwell Air Force Base, each young man was weighed-down by the realization that the next few hours would set into motion events that could determine whether he would live a long life or die young. The stress level inside that Trailways bus was close to the breaking-point.

* * *

The roaring, lurching machine pulled up in front of a huge World War II-era brick and silver-metal hangar at the edge of the airfield that evidently served as the Examining Station. A serious-looking man in a blue Air Force uniform pointed toward a door at the side of the big building. "In there!" he bellowed.

Cold air struck me in the face as I joined the line of young men walking in a hurry toward the entrance. Inside, I blinked in the bright lights of an enormous room, while at the same time, a loud babble of hundreds of voices testified to the great amount of activity taking place in there. Another airman directed our group to an open space at the center of the building, where the varnished wooden floor bore painted marks that appeared to define an assembly area.

While everyone formed-up in lines, I looked around. The inside of the gigantic structure was painted pale green, with open, riveted steel beams supporting a tall, curved roof. Much of the original hangar floor was divided by partitions into corridors and rooms. As the only visible windows were skylights at the apex of the roof, I got the impression we would be completely cut-off from the outside world while we were here at the Examining Station. Every minute or so an announcement of some sort crackled out of funnel-shaped loudspeakers that were situated all around the place. There were lines of men going in every direction and I was startled to observe that many of the examinees were naked. Evidently, some of the physicals were conducted '*au naturel*', despite the fact that the frigid outside air was finding its way into the cavernous converted hangar. The prospect of not wearing any clothes for the tests was chilling, both literally and figuratively.

A trim, fit-looking Air Force sergeant strode up in front of where we were assembled. In his hands he held a sheaf of papers that he shuffled against his beribboned chest, and with a searching, skeptical face he surveyed our rather ragged ranks. "All right, listen-up for the roll-call!" He ran through the list, and as before, all in our group answered as present except for the hapless fellow who had missed the bus back in Sheffield, and who by now was probably somewhere in custody,.

Then, he called the names again, this time dividing us into smaller groups that he assigned to different areas of the building; I was directed to a squad of about a dozen nervous-looking young men.

Another sergeant marched us down a hallway. Our destination turned out to be the cafeteria, definitely a welcome sight as it had been early morning since any of us had eaten. Right away, I discovered that this cafeteria line was not like any other that I had ever seen. For one thing, there were no plates. The white-uniformed servers directed us to a stack of divided trays, which obviously functioned as such. As we moved down the serving line, everything they ladled onto our trays appeared thin and anemic-looking, as if reconstituted from various powders. There was a green, slippery, gelatin-like substance, certainly containing more water than anything else, that kept sliding around in its compartment on the tray. A stringy black object, that I never identified, looked like boiled automobile tire. Something else resembled a sponge. The only totally familiar item was the coffee. It was served black, in heavy, white, porcelain mugs that had no handles. Evidently, this style of coffee cup was a standard military feature. But to my surprise, the coffee was excellent, which I learned was characteristic of coffee in all branches of the Armed Forces. Judging from the amount of

coffee they offered us, and from observing the personnel at the Examining Station who gulped huge quantities of the stuff, one would have deduced that the U.S. military were wired on caffeine. In any case, we would probably need all the stimulants we could get as the upcoming day or so promised to be chock-full of mind-bending and physically-exhausting examinations and other activities.

As soon as we had finished the strange---although filling---military meal, and fortified with lots of hot, black coffee, we were marched in a hurry to a classroom for our first test. From the nature of the examination, I decided it was designed to tell the military for what specialty we were best suited. The quiz was loaded with logic-defying questions relating to spatial relationships---such as a series of boxes opened-up with distinctive markings on each side. The objective was to decide which box, when re-assembled, matched the answer box. However, the answer boxes were invariably upside down or sideways compared to the opened-up examples from which we had to select, which, of course, added greatly to the difficulty of the questions. After several hours of these tests, it was about ten o'clock.

Thankfully, the day was now finished at the Examining Station, as I was mentally and physically exhausted. The sergeant gathered the test papers and told us to bring our bags along with us (we had lugged them around ever since we had arrived), and we would go to our assigned sleeping quarters.

Once again, we lined up in formation, and prepared to march to our final destination of the day. As most of us in our section had previously had college ROTC, our marching, at least, was better than that of most other groups we saw shuffling around the hangar. With the sergeant leading the way, we quick-timed down several hallways; past the open assembly area where our indoctrination had started many hours before; skirted the cafeteria, now closed and dark.

Presently we found ourselves at the far end of the hangar, where the sleeping quarters were located. We were in a big open area, with row upon row of double-decked pipe bunks, where hundreds of young men prepared to settle down for the night. Our group was situated in a corner of the building near a television viewing area, but everyone was too tired to even consider watching TV. The matter resolved itself in any case when a disembodied metallic voice burst from a nearby loudspeaker. "Lights-Out" would be at "2230 hours", and everyone was expected to be in his bunk by then, according to the voice. I looked at my watch and tried to mentally convert the military time into something more familiar. "2230" translated into 10:30 P.M. With a start, I realized I had only a few minutes to get squared-away before the lights were doused. I found an unused bunk and tossed my gear onto the bottom mattress, then headed for the latrine (the rest room), which was located on the opposite side of the hangar from our quarters. After threading my way through a milling swarm of perplexed-looking fellows, I finally reached the facilities---whereupon I immediately discovered that my radio station colleague's grim description of it had been no exaggeration----"good housekeeping" was not practiced here.

After hurriedly taking care of business, I returned to the sleeping area to try to get situated. The bunk featured a shallow set of squeaky bedsprings, an emaciated pin-striped mattress and a sad-looking government-issue pillow. At the foot of the bedstead was a stack of folded bedclothes. Guessing it was my job to make the bed, I quickly put on the covers. At that moment, a sergeant appeared in the next aisle and berated a nearby inductee for making his bed incorrectly, although it looked all right to me. Something about the corners of the sheets. Thankfully, he moved on to another aisle further away where he continued haranguing someone else, his raised voice audible over the entire chamber. Remembering my radio colleague's admonition to keep a low profile, I sat on the bunk and, looking down, removed my shoes, pants, and shirt. Digging around in the overnight bag, I pulled out some shorts and a T-shirt, put them on, and crawled between the sheets.

All at once, there was an eardrum-piercing squeal from the nearby speaker and a rasping voice loudly informed us that "Lights-Out" would be in two minutes. As the others hastily completed their beds and scrambled into their bunks, I propped myself up and surveyed the scene. Hundreds of total strangers of every description were crammed into the barracks area, and from the obvious looks on the faces of the men, I wasn't the only one who felt nervous and apprehensive.

The lights blinked once, and went out. The only illumination thenceforth came from a dozen or so feeble night-lights near the roof that created a ghostly, irregular light pattern on the half-acre of iron-framed bunkbeds. I rolled onto my back and focused on the bottom of the threadbare mattress above me. I was glad there was no one in the top bunk, one of the few empty uppers in the whole place.

Right away there was a noticeable difference in how the individual men adjusted to the environment. A guy in the next bunk almost immediately began loudly snoring. Someone in a nearby bunk murmured prayers. Another conscript swore at the war that was going on in Vietnam, which was the reason we were here in the first place. From across the room came an indescribable variety of sounds emanating from the men: belches, stomach rumbles, groans, sighs, the cracking of nervous knuckles. After shifting positions several times and gradually beginning to relax, I felt myself drifting off to sleep . . .

'TTHHOORREEZZ! CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!'

A fiendish uproar erupted on the outside wall about twenty feet from me! A huge overhead hanging gas furnace fired up, its shrieking blower motor sweeping a searing blast of hot air right over us, at once raising the room temperature to sweltering levels! Sweat popped out on my forehead and I kicked down the blanket toward my feet. In a few minutes my ears stopped ringing and more or less adjusted to the racket.

Maybe I could get some sleep, after all . . .

'ZZHHRROOMM! SWISH---SWISH---SWISH!'

My eyes flew open as the furnace shut off with a vibrating rattle; its fan belt loudly scraping against something! Once more, the room resounded with the noises of hundreds of young men trying to sleep. With the heat shut down, the place quickly cooled. I reached down and pulled the blanket back up around my shoulders. After a while, the need for sleep got the best of me and my body again sagged wearily into the mattress. Everything tingled with fatigue and my eyes slowly closed . . .

'TTHHOORREEZZ! CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!'

The howling heater erupted again, jolting me fully awake; its roaring noise even louder than the first time. The heat wave renewed its maniacal assault on us prostrate examinees. By now, it was obvious that sleep would be well-nigh impossible as long as the diabolical furnace kept up its unrelenting on-and-off cycles---and it was plain that it intended to do just that. I ruefully recalled my back-home friend's earlier prediction that none of us would get any sleep while we were here---probably this was what he had had in mind.

The ceiling furnace's outlandish assault continued all night long. If anyone in the big room was able to sleep, he was the exception. As I lay there wide-awake for what seemed like ages, in a fit of nerves and temper, I may have drifted-off once or twice, but always the infernal yowling machine

with its alternating heat-and-cold cycles prevented any meaningful rest. After what seemed like hours of rolling about, tossing, turning, and tugging on the covers, I realized that scores of others at our end of the cavernous billeting room were in the same insomnia fix as I was. From time-to-time, someone would arise and go to the facilities.

As the long night wore on, conversations broke out among those of us who were unable to sleep. Introductions all around revealed the varied backgrounds of the conscripts and examinees among us. Several were unsophisticated boys who looked at the prospect of Army life as an opportunity to learn skills and see the world. The war, in which they were certain to become involved, held no trepidation for them. A few others had already joined-up voluntarily, and this visit to the Examining Station was part of their enlistment process. Some, such as myself, had been nabbed from college and were here to be tested and re-classified. Before long, a fair-sized gathering from all around the big room had eased into our section, where the subject became the war---the specter that overshadowed us all. Several expressed the concern that they would not survive should they be sent over there. In the dimly-lit corner, one of the men buried his face in his hands; his back heaved with sobs. I noticed a wedding ring on his finger. Another fellow patted the distraught inductee's shaking shoulders. Resignation soon permeated the whole group. And all the while, above us, the hateful heater continued its howling, unholy blasts.

Fatigue eventually overcame us and one-by-one, each man slowly drifted away, back down the shadowy rows to his bunk. Each, in his own way, would have to try to somehow come to terms with his individual situation.

I lay back down and again stared at the underside of the mattress that was just inches above my face. All around me men groaned and moaned in fitful slumber, but I was unable to sleep---the roaring furnace took care of that. At length, I reached into my bag next to the bunk and fished out my watch. It said, "4:30". With a sigh I slipped it back onto my wrist and folded my hands across my chest. Would this night ever end? What would the morrow bring? My mind was a turmoil of anxiety. For the hundredth time, I arranged the blanket around my shoulders and waited for the furnace to come back on and overheat the place again so I would have to kick it back off. I concluded that whoever had designed

the hangar's heater setup must have been a sadist. Lying here in this dark dormitory, surrounded by a horde of belching, snoring, tossing-and-turning strangers bordered on the surreal. And all this had come about because of what to many was an ill-defined war on the other side of the world. I thought about Annette's pretty face, her figure and her infectious laugh. How could there ever be a future with her like *this*? I craned my neck and looked over at the television viewing area. On the TV screen was a test-pattern; it looked as if some station was about to come on the air. I drew my wrist out from under the blanket and positioned my watch where I could read it. The hands said it was "5:50". In ten minutes the lights would come back on and the most pivotal day of my life would begin.

I slipped out from under the covers and put back on my clothes. Others were lying in their bunks staring at the ceiling or at the mattress above them. Had anyone gotten any real sleep?

Just as I had finished tying my shoelaces, a searing glare of light lit up the dormitory. Out of the speakers hissed a scratchy recording of the military "*Reveille*", followed by a voice. "Good morning, everyone, and welcome to another day at the Examining Station. Breakfast is now served in the cafeteria. Report to your muster stations at 'oh-eight-hundred'. That is all."

With that incongruously cheerful announcement, there was a chorus of yawns and groans all over the place as hundreds of conscripts fumbled for their clothes. Since I was already dressed, I picked up my bag and headed toward the television viewing area where I had previously noticed vending

machines arrayed against a wall. After last night's military meal, I had no desire for a breakfast of what would undoubtedly be "powdered-everything."

I figured there were enough varieties of food in the machines to constitute a reasonable breakfast---a few cookies and candy bars would likely go a long way this day, and I remembered my radio station friend's admonition: "Go easy on the food while you're there."

I settled into a chromed-tubular chair with my candy-bar-breakfast to watch a Birmingham TV station's early-morning news broadcast. I was somewhat surprised to see on the screen familiar newscasters I had viewed countless times back home at the other end of the state. Maybe this place wasn't so isolated from civilization, after all.

After downing the last candy bar, I paid a quick visit to the facilities that was surprisingly deserted except for a couple of others who evidently had the same idea as I had to get ahead of the post-breakfast crowd that would doubtless soon storm the place.

Then I made my way to the designated starting point for the physical examination. My early arrival meant that I would be near the front of the line. A few others milled around while the medical personnel arrayed their instruments. Presently, the same ramrod-stiff sergeant who had met us the day before came up and drew a couple of the medics aside for a hushed discussion. I watched as the doctors and the airman nodded in what appeared to be an agreement on something. While this was going on, the other members of our group began drifting up. From overhearing their conversations, I gathered that my hunch about the "powdered" breakfast had been correct--they unanimously longed for a decent meal.

"Listen up for the roll call!" Once again everyone answered except the absent man who had missed the bus. "We'll get him!" smirked the sergeant. "He's in the Army now, if he doesn't know it already!" My suspicions that he was in serious trouble were confirmed. "Follow me to the dressing station. There you'll take everything off except your shorts. Usually we do this in the buff," he snickered with a sardonic smirk, "but it's cold outside and the doctors don't want your mama's little babies to get sick!" The noncom pointed at a doorway. "In there!" I glanced at the fellow next to me who looked relieved that he would have at least something to wear. As for me, I hadn't relished the thought of us being in our birthday suits for an entire day, either, but I didn't see what real difference shorts would make. The big place was so drafty and chilly it was obvious we were in for a day of goose-bumps galore. In the dressing room ("undressing room" would have been more like it) everyone doffed his clothes and shoe-horned his belongings, including the overnight bag, into a too-small, numbered metal basket. A corporal came by, picked up our trays, and gave each of us a dog-tag with a corresponding number to hang around our necks while we were in the examining section.

The sergeant stuck his head around the door opening and motioned us outside. "All right, everyone get out here and line up!" As we trooped back out into the open hangar, the chill of the November morning pricked at my skin; I suppressed a sneeze. They led us around some partitions to a long series of tables, where serious-looking men, obviously military doctors, sat, surrounded by batteries of stainless steel and white-porcelain medical instruments. I was surprised to see that they already had our medical records. How had they done that? Did they subpoena our medical reports? No wonder they had made such a fuss over the guy who had failed to show up for the bus ride. These people really meant business.

Our long line of shivering men spent the entire morning going from one section to another. Every possible part of us was pricked, probed, prodded and pressed. The doctors' stethoscopes (which must have been thoroughly refrigerated beforehand) swept across practically every square inch of our bodies, in one test after another. Our medical records files grew thicker and heavier as the day went on.

At some point, we passed a group of men in civilian clothes who were standing with their right hands upraised. An officer stood before them with a small open book. The men were being sworn-in to the U.S. Army. Through a partially-opened door to the outside, I could see the slab side of an awaiting olive-drab Army bus. I overheard someone say they had passed their physicals and were on their way to Fort Benning, Georgia, to start Basic Training. The scene was a sobering reminder of what these realities were all about.

There were some of us who would not see home again---for how long? After the Vietnam War was over? For the Examining Station was also the "Induction Center" for many, if not all, of those who would be declared fit for duty at the end of their physical. Once more, a feeling of uncertainty came over me. I pictured Annette as a war widow and suddenly felt very, very sorry for her. I tried to suppress those unsettling thoughts until I happened to notice the glum expressions on the faces of several of the others in our group---they had also observed the swearing-in and had seen the bus. Their reactions mirrored mine.

The sergeant reappeared and announced that since the number of men being examined on this particular day was fewer than usual because it was almost Thanksgiving, we would forego lunch and continue right through until the day's battery of tests were completed. Several in our group had a surly response to this---I suspected they were probably still hungry from the leftover legacy of their "powdered" breakfast.

In the section concerned with rectal conditions, the doctor told an uncertain examinee to bend over and spread his cheeks. He leaned over, but instead of grabbing his buttocks, he gripped the sides of his face and pulled outward! The doctor stepped back and roared with laughter, then ducked behind a canvas flap and in a moment we heard more loud guffaws. Meantime, the fellow who had started the whole thing by spreading the wrong "cheeks" looked around in bewilderment at the rest of us who were trying to keep straight faces. None of us one could hold it back and we all exploded into laughter. It was a moment of comic relief for everyone---except for the poor guy who had been the "butt" of the joke, and who never caught on as to what it was all about!

From section-to-section we went, as the lines of men slowly snaked through each area. Up to this point, it seemed that I had passed all the physicals and if everything continued along the same course, I was becoming resigned to the fact that I would probably be drafted before the day was over.

Finally, we stepped up to the very last table---the foot doctors. The examiner, a burly Army Medical Corps captain, switched a big cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Says here---" snapped the scowling, heavy-set podiatrist, fingering my files, ". . . you've had an ankle injury." He furrowed his bushy black eyebrows and focused his beady eyes on me. "What *kind* of ankle injury?"

I decided to play it straight. Positioning my foot, I rotated around while my foot flopped from side-to-side-and made loud "crunching" and "snapping" noises that sounded awful.

The doctor's jaw dropped. His cigar rolled out of his pudgy mouth and plopped onto the floor. The medic's eyes bulged. "My God!" he gasped, "can you do that again?"

I did it again.

"He did it again---!" The clipboard slid out of his hands and clattered to the floor onto his still-smoldering cigar. Gasping for air, he reached down and retrieved his clipboard. The remains of the cigar lay flattened against the linoleum. Was my ankle *that* unusual? Evidently it was, because he snatched at a stack of rubber stamps, and with a quick series of loud "*WHOPS!*" stamped something onto several sheets of my medical records. The doctor pulled out the top page from the clipboard, handed it to me, and lit another cigar.

While a pungent cloud of blue tobacco smoke enveloped the medical officer, I stood there with the piece of paper in my hands, wondering what to do next. "Well, you're free to go," he puffed offhandedly, leaning back in his chair.

"Go to *where*?" None of this was making any sense to me.

"Home!" He motioned his cigar toward the dressing area. "You're medically disqualified---the Army would never want you with an ankle like that!" He glanced at my foot in amazement. "You think they're gonna train you to be a soldier and then you can't march?" The doctor shook his head. "You're outta here, pal!"

In a daze I dropped out of line and shuffled toward the dressing room. At the corporal's booth, he already had my basket waiting for me. In the few minutes it had taken me to go from the examining table to the dressing area, the doctor had evidently passed the word for them to release me. The Examining Station kept giving me reasons to respect it and also about which to feel vaguely concerned. If they were *this* efficient, then they must know a *lot* about me, which was unsettling. But for now, I just wanted to get out of there. I dressed, grabbed my overnight bag and hustled toward the main entrance. When I arrived at the front counter, there were some papers for me to sign and my bus ticket was already waiting for me. Again, I had a shivery feeling that they were ahead of things to an uncomfortable degree.

"The bus is waiting for you," the sergeant behind the glass said. By now, nothing surprised me about this place. With the skin prickling on the back of my neck, I made for the door before they changed their minds.

When I emerged into the mid-afternoon air, as before, the cold air blasted me in the face, clawing at my lungs. Settling into my seat, I turned and stared at the huge structure. From the outside, one would never suspect all the dramas that were taking place in there---for the hangar, as far as I was concerned, was a '*House of Death*'. How many young men had already passed through this "Examining Station" and how many more would yet come here---to eventually end up in a body bag in Vietnam? Or as a prisoner of war in one of the hellish North Vietnamese prison camps---perhaps mutilated and crippled for life? As I reflected on these things, the bus door slammed shut and the driver put the big machine in gear. With a shuddering roar the lumbering vehicle swung around and moved away. I was determined not to look back, and hoped I would never again see that place. In a few minutes we were through the gates and onto the main highway. Then---and only then---I relaxed, because I knew I was not going to be drafted. Not now, anyway. I reached inside my coat pocket and pulled out the paper the doctor had handed me at the last table.

As yet, I had not even looked at it. Unfolding the piece, I read the medical officer's stamped notation: "*I-Y Recommended*". Wondering what it meant, I turned over the paper and located a box that defined the various classifications: "I-Y" indicated that I could still be drafted, but only in extreme national emergencies. I thought about the others in my group, and felt guilty. Here I was---on a bus headed home---and they were still down there. Then, I heard someone calling my name. Turning about, I spotted one of the other fellows who had made the trip with us. He came forward and sat down beside me. We talked about our experiences---he said he had a medical condition that had disqualified him, and I explained what had happened with my ankle. Thereafter, we didn't have much to say to each other on the five-hour ride home. Both of us were lost in our own thoughts.

As the miles passed by, I mentally re-lived the Examining Station. The lines of shivering men represented the very male fabric of the country. As long as the United States had existed, willing men had periodically rallied to its defense. Up to now, for the most part, the causes that had called the men to arms had been worthy causes. But the current conflict in Southeast Asia seemed to somehow be different. Ever since the "Tonkin Gulf Incident" in the summer of 1964, we had heard about the

"Domino Theory"---that all of Southeast Asia would fall into the diabolical clutches of the "Reds" if we lost South Vietnam. That was why, we were there, we were told, to Save the World From Communism. Until now, I had generally gone along with that idea. But because the war and the draft now affected me personally, now I had to address some really big and important questions: Were we being told the whole story? Should we be involved in Vietnam in the first place? And---most importantly---Were the noble and precious sacrifices of the soldiers, sailors Marines and airmen going to really matter in the end? These were issues that had divided the nation and now had invaded my own life. The sight of the distraught married draftee had caused me to think seriously about such fundamental things as life itself. I thought about Felix King, my former ROTC Company Commander at Florence State, an outstanding young officer with a great future ahead of him, who had lost his life in combat in Vietnam a few months earlier; the only person I had actually known, so far, who had been killed there. But who else would go to Vietnam never to return alive? Some of the very men I had seen in the lines at the Examining Station? Friends of mine? Acquaintances? Would our involvement, in the long run, really be worth all the inevitable lost and disrupted American lives? Hours later, as the bus neared my hometown, my thoughts were still inconclusive and I suspected it would be a long time before I would ever know the answers to all those questions.

I knew were getting close to home when I saw the flashing red lights of the radio station's four tall transmitting towers in the distance. The station manager had been right on the mark when he had predicted I would be right back to work.

Dad was surprised to hear my voice on the telephone. Could he hurry down to the bus station and pick me up? "I'll burn up the tires!" he shouted into the receiver. In scant minutes, the white Chevrolet swept up in front of the depot and I was on my last leg home. Mother cried when I walked into the house. My sister had gone out with friends.

I looked at my watch. It was only about 7:45, and *'THE SEAGULL'* was just getting underway on its opening night. I decided to spring a surprise. Excusing myself, I dashed outside. In record time, my trusty Volkswagen was zooming across the O'Neal Bridge, headed for Florence.

There was a full house in Kilby Auditorium, judging from the the number of cars parked up and down the nearby streets. Entering through the side stage door, I cocked my ear. From the dialogue onstage, I knew the production was just starting the second act, and I could tell by the enthusiastic audience reaction that the performance was already a success. A musical bridge came right on cue--- whoever was helping the lady music director seemed to be doing all right.

I crept backstage to where the audio console was set up. Peering into the murky darkness, I spotted the music technicians underneath the tiny cue light following the script. Recognizing one of the stagehands sitting beside her in the shadowy gloom as her assistant, I tiptoed up to him, tapped his shoulder, and motioned to let me take his place. Like a ghost, I slipped into the seat. She whispered an instruction, that I hoarsely repeated back to her. With a little gasp and a big grin, she realized it was I who was now sitting next to her. The warm-hearted, elderly lady impulsively reached over and squeezed my hand as I touched my lips in a "S-h-h-h" gesture. "I'll surprise Annette!" I mouthed, and she nodded in understanding; in the dim light I picked up her wink. Everything so far was going according to plan! From where we were situated with the music console, I recognized Annette's short, dark hair outlined in a backlight on the opposite side of the stage. I was certain she couldn't see me.

THE SEAGULL continued on, as my friends onstage portrayed the famous Chekhov play. Fortunately, I still remembered everything from the rehearsals---all cues, the dialogue and the musical bridges were right on time. The cast and crew were in top form on this night.

While the stagehands and prop girls re-arranged the set for the third and final act, as our Russian musical score entertained the audience, from my perch in the darkened corner offstage I watched Annette as she moved objects into their proper places for the final act. I had to hold back a wild impulse to rush onstage and surprise her. Many times while I was in Montgomery, I had wondered if I would ever see her again, and there she was---just a few feet away---and she didn't even know I was back in town.

At length, the play reached its climax and the show was over. The house lights went up, the cast did their bows and the music soared to cap another dazzling Gladys Shepard production.

My friend at the music console was misty-eyed when she finally had the chance to speak to me. "Annette's just been moping around while you were gone!" The kindly woman dabbed her eyes. "She didn't know if you were ever coming back! No one else did, either."

"Where is she?" I was bursting with impatience. My earphones clattered to the table as I pushed back from the sound console. "I'll tell you all about it later!" I called over my shoulder, as I dashed backstage. A surprised cast member gave me a hearty thumbs-up. "Well, look who's back!"

The object of my affections was talking to another stage assistant with her back to me as I tiptoed up behind her. When the other girl, a prompter, saw me, her eyes widened. Puzzled, Annette turned around and suddenly she was in my arms giving me a big hug. Cast and crew erupted into applause, just as Gladys Shepard stepped onto the scene. "Well, Mister Halbert!" she greeted me with a flourish. "I do believe *some* people will do almost *anything* to get attention!"