

## **#1 Recruitment** - Late May, early June 1966 – St. Louis, Missouri

Writer's Notes - Just after graduation from Forest Park Community College, St. Louis, Missouri and prior to induction into the Army on June 22, 1966.

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He entered the door marked "U.S. Army Recruiting Station." There were two desks, each with a man in military uniform sitting behind it and a chair with a plainclothes man facing the recruiter beside it. There were a number of different flags arranged in a row behind the two desks. On the wall behind them were the pictures of President Johnson and some other guy that Lou did not recognize. There were several chairs sitting along the wall. They were empty. Lou moved over and sat down in one of them.

Lou sat there nervously awaiting his turn. It was about 9:15 AM. He had arrived as close to opening time as he could. It was his day off. He had no classes that day, and he did not have to work. His parent's did not know he was here. They thought he had gone to school to study for his final exams. He had not told them where he was going because he did not want them worrying about him. He also did not want to discuss what he was doing. He was not quite clear about that himself. If anyone had told him two years ago that he would be looking into enlisting in the military, he would have told them that they were nuts.

After high school, his parents had talked him into going to college. Since he had no ideas about what he wanted to do with his life, he had acquiesced to their desires. He had no particular field in mind when it came time to enroll. He had decided to go to the local junior college. It was a lot cheaper than other schools, and since he had no real educational goal in mind it didn't make sense to do otherwise. Since he had no clear goal he decided to go heavy into the sciences. During the past two years, he had earned sixty four college credits with heavy load of science and mathematics. He had made all Bs and Cs. He knew he could have done better, but he never put forth the effort necessary to get As. Some of this was because he had to work forty hours a week to afford a car and pay for his classes. Part of it was due to his love for racquetball. He was addicted to the sport and spent up to twenty hours a week practicing and playing in tournaments when his schedule allowed him to. He was a very good player and still getting better.

His parents were expecting him to enroll in a four year college when he graduated in June. Lou knew that he would not. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. He had talked to his parents about this. They were encouraging him to get a degree in biology. Why biology he did not know. He was bored with school. He knew he would eventually find out what he wanted to do with his life, but the answer would not be found in the classroom. He had never liked school. Not because it was hard for him, but because he felt life was to be lived, not learned through the experiences gained from books. Lou had always been an avid reader. He would read almost anything. What he read had convinced him that his range of knowledge of the real world was sadly lacking. It was time to get out there and experience life.

Two years ago, Lou had decided that after college he would join the Peace Corps. It fit his idea of what a man should do. He firmly believed in the concept of service to God and country. The Peace Corps seemed an ideal way to meet this obligation. It probably came from his Catholic upbringing and the time he had spent with the Boy Scouts in his youth. The idea of serving others while visiting a foreign land appealed to his sense of adventure. From what he had read, it was not easy work. He was not put off by this aspect of service. He had worked for a living since the age of twelve. He had grown up with the concept that work is what a man did. Since he had taken his first job mowing lawns, he had never received an allowance. He had always bought his own clothes and had always given 25% of what he made to his Mom and Dad to help pay his share of the expenses of living at home. He never even gave it a thought. It was the way things were, and he was proud of his contribution.

Over the past two years, the United States had become more and more involved in the fighting taking place in the country of South Vietnam. When he had started school, it was a story of little import. At that time the U.S. had sent a handful of advisors to bolster the training of the South Vietnamese Army. The South Vietnamese government was fighting a guerilla war against the Viet Cong. South Vietnam was an ally, a member of SEATO. This organization, which consisted of various countries that served alongside of the United States during the Second World War, had decided to send military aid to the South Vietnamese government in accordance with treaties that existed between members of the organization. Now the war was expanding, and the United States was sending actual combat troops to bolster the South

Vietnamese Army. This was largely in response to the North Vietnamese sending in regular army units south of the demilitarized zone that had been established when the French chose to get out of Indochina.

Lou had familiarized himself with most of the facts surrounding the issue. Initially he had no feelings about what was happening one way or the other. It seemed to him that the South Vietnamese were in the midst of a civil war. If this were the case, then he was not in favor of the United States getting involved. On the other hand, his country had treaty obligations, and he did not feel his country should abandon its allies. The fact that one side was Communist further clouded the issue. Communism was used in his own country as a symbol for all the evil in the world. It must be sought out and destroyed by any means necessary. Lou had his own ideas on this matter. He was proud to be an American. He considered himself a patriot. His own country was currently involved in its own civil war. In this case it was the war being fought over the issue of civil rights. The communists of Vietnam were replaced in the United States by the bigots who seemed bent on denying the civil liberties of any portion of the population that were either of a different race or of a different view of right and wrong.

All of these things had a part in his decision to join the military. But they were in reality only side issues. Lou had a central belief that led to his choice. Americans were fighting and dying. It mattered not one whit whether it was a good war or a bad war. Americans, for whatever reason, were fighting and dying. While only nineteen years old, Lou considered himself a man. When your country went to war, if you were a man, you went to war. Of this he was sure. He knew there were others that did not believe this philosophy, but Lou knew himself. If he did not go, he would never be able to look himself in the mirror as he grew older. He was an American. From history, he knew that in order to be able to have pride in this distinction, he must earn the right. It was a question of honor. It was not a question of right or wrong; it went way beyond that. To not serve would disgrace him for life. Make him a lesser man. Other men could and would turn their back on their obligations. He felt sorry for them. They were men with neither souls nor convictions. They could not live their lives with honor.

And so Lou awaited his turn. After about ten minutes, one of the men got up to leave. The recruiting sergeant shook his hand and smiled. The guy turned and moved past Lou to the

door. Lou got a good look at the boy's face. He was smiling, but he also seemed scared. Lou knew the feeling. The sergeant got up, holding a file in his hand. He walked over to a filing cabinet and threw the file into the top drawer. He walked past Lou and went out the door. Lou was impressed with the way the man looked and moved. His uniform was immaculate. On his chest, over his right jacket pocket, were rows of ribbons and badges. Lou had no idea what they stood for, but they were impressive. Sort of like the badges you could earn in Boy Scouts. When he was in scouts, Lou had actually never gotten around to earning many, and those he did earn he never wore. He was sure that those he sergeant wore had nothing to do with the Boy Scouts.

The sergeant returned about five minutes later carrying a cup of coffee. He sat down behind his desk and waved Louis over. Lou took a seat next to the desk.

"What can I do for you?" the sergeant asked.

"I'd like some information about enlisting in the Army, Sir," Lou replied.

The sergeant smiled. "Well the first bit of information I'll give you is not to call me sir." My name is Sergeant Meyer. In the military, only officers are called sir."

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied. Then he too was smiling. "My name is Louis Merrins, Sergeant. I came down here today to get information about joining the Army."

"Exactly what kind of information do you want?" the sergeant asked.

"I read in the paper that you could take tests before you enlisted, and that if you did well on them, and if you were qualified, that the Army would then guarantee you placement in the position of your choice," Lou replied.

"And may I ask exactly what kind of training you're interested in getting into?" the sergeant asked.

"No, Sir. I mean, no, Sergeant. I am really not comfortable telling you about that at this time. I really just want to know if it is possible to take the tests," Lou replied.

"The answer to your question is yes. You can take the Army's placement tests before you enlist. As a matter of fact, they will be administering the tests downtown starting in about an hour. If you're interested in taking them today, I can give them a call and tell them you're coming," the sergeant replied.

Lou hadn't really expected to take the tests today. He was only on a fact finding tour. He had planned to get a lot of studying done today. On the other hand, what the hell. "Okay, Sarge, make the call," he replied.

The sergeant was on the phone for only a few minutes. He then gave Lou directions to the city courthouse in downtown St. Louis. "How soon will I get the results back?" he asked.

"It will take about a week," the sergeant said. He handed Lou one of his cards. "Give this to the man who administers the tests," he said. "They will send me the results. If you give me your phone number, I'll give you a call when the results are in."

"No," said Lou. "I'd rather you not call me at home. My parents don't know I came down here today, and if you called them at home, well, ah, just don't. I'll call or drop by in about a week."

Lou went down and took the test that day. It wound up there was a whole series of tests and it took over eight hours to complete them. It was late evening before he was done. The man administering the tests had actually stopped the testing around 4:00 pm. He told the group they had a choice of returning in the morning or staying over into the evening to complete the tests. Louis chose to stay. He had two final exams in the morning and worked that evening.

It was ten days later before Lou once again found himself approaching the recruiting office. This time he made sure to get there when the doors opened. He had made his decision and now wanted to get this business out of the way. He figured he would be the first one in. He was wrong. There were eight guys in a line starting at the door when he got there. By time the doors opened two minutes later, there were three more waiting in line behind him. At least there would be enough chairs available so that he could sit down while waiting. He just wished he had brought a book to read to pass the time. It would be a while. It was Sergeant Meyer who opened the door. He stepped out into the hallway and addressed the men about to enter the room. He told them he expected those who were waiting to keep quiet while he and the other sergeant interviewed the men. Anyone who did not abide by this rule would be asked to leave. Since there were only ten chairs in the room, those last in line would have to wait

outside for their turn. He spotted Louis standing there against the wall of the hallway. He pointed to him.

"You come with me," he said. Lou walked to the front of the line and followed the sergeant over to his desk. The sergeant sat down and indicated to Lou that he should sit in the chair next to the desk.

"I wasn't sure you were coming back," he said. "A lot of people don't, you know?"

"I can see why," Lou replied. "I've thought about this day a lot. I sometimes get a little scared thinking about what I'm going to do. I thought about maybe putting it off until the summer was over, but when faced with the inevitable, what the hell."

"So you have decided?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes and no," replied Lou. "Yes, if the Army is willing to let me train in the area I want training. No, if they're not. How did I do on my tests?"

"You did just fine," the sergeant replied. "As a matter of fact you did more than fine; you did great. I have a copy of the results here, and you can look to them if you want." Lou shook his head yes, and the sergeant handed Lou a piece of paper with the test results on it. "Let me explain the results just a little, so that you have some idea what you are looking at. As you know the tests you took were quite comprehensive in covering several different subjects. Some of the tests were designed to test your psychological makeup. In order to qualify for one of the Army's special schools, a recruit must score at least eighty in certain categories, depending on the particular school he is interested in. Only if the recruit has the necessary skill will the Army guarantee your training." The sergeant was smiling.

Lou looked over his scores carefully. The tests had been broken down into twenty-one different areas. In two of these areas he had scored in the mid-nineties. In every other area he had scores greater than one hundred. It answered his questions about his ability to qualify. He looked back at the sergeant with a smile on his face. "I did well," he said.

"You did great. As a matter of fact, when your test results came back, there was a cover letter attached from Colonel Hashisky's office. The colonel is in charge of recruiting in an area covering several states. Someone evidently took note of your scores and brought them to his

attention. You interested in seeing the letter?" Again Lou shook his head yes. The sergeant handed him the letter.

The letter suggested that Sgt. Meyer get in touch with this person immediately and get his name on the enlistment papers ASAP. In addition, Sgt. Meyer was to inform the recruit that, based on his scores, a spot would be held for him in the class beginning in the middle of July at Fort Benning, Georgia. The course was officer's training.

"Interesting letter, huh?" the sergeant asked. "I had a chance yesterday to talk with one of the guys downtown who administers the tests. Just interested in what made the colonel so interested in you. The test you took is given to any person applying for a government job, doesn't matter whether it's the military or the State Department. One test fits all. He remembered your test. Based on the results, he said you were eligible for basically any job in any government position that was open. In the civilian sector, these tests are considered almost the word of God. Once in a position, men advance more on the basis of their scores than their abilities. It is what makes the system such a mess sometimes. As far as the military is concerned, there are no training programs available that you are not qualified for. He was particularly impressed by your GT score. He said in all his years of testing, he had only seen maybe five or six scores higher. A score of one-twenty is considered exceptional. Yours is one-forty."

Lou smiled at him. "I'm glad I did well, Sarge. It's nice that there are people who think highly of me based on a test score. But you and I know it's only a test. I am smart. I know this and have for a long time, but it doesn't make me special. It's not something I earned. God just made me this way. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that intelligence is a highly overrated attribute. Now, I have a question. They can't make me go to officer's training school once I sign up, can they?" Lou asked.

"No," the sergeant said quickly.

"And I did well enough that I should be able to get guaranteed training?"

"Yes."

"As long as I prove I am capable of performing the job, they can't deny me my right to work in the job I choose, can they?"

The sergeant hesitated. "Well, that's only true up to a point. I can basically guarantee you the training you put in for, but once you receive that training, the Army has a right to assign you wherever they see fit. The training you receive will give you what is known as your primary MOS. That stands for Military Occupational Status. Because it is your primary MOS, the Army cannot change that without your permission. But they can give you additional training in another MOS. That MOS can never be your primary one, and with some perseverance, you can always get back to your primary MOS. The only exception is if you are unable physically to perform in your primary MOS. Then the Army has a right to change your status. Got that?"

Lou followed. "Yeah. In life there are no guarantees. It's not perfect, but I guess it's the best deal I'll get. Okay, let's get the papers signed."

The sergeant reached into his desk and pulled out a stack of papers that were clipped together. Looking at the top sheet he could see that much of the information had already been filled out. He knew where the sergeant had gotten the information. When he had taken the test the previous week he had to fill out several pages of information on himself. The sergeant had used that information to fill out the forms.

"What kind of training are you interested in?" the sergeant asked.

"Airborne Infantry," said Lou.

"What?" Up until now the sergeant had been talking to Lou in a low, conversational tone of voice. Now, suddenly, the volume control on that voice had raised several decibels.

"Airborne Infantry."

"I heard what you said," he snapped. "If you had told me what you wanted last week, we could have filled out these papers then. You don't need to be no damn genius to join the infantry." His voice was getting decidedly unfriendly.

"Bull," said Lou.

"What?"

"Bull. Last week you couldn't guarantee me anything. I did a lot of reading before I came down here. Let me clue you into some facts, Sarge. The Army is growing rapidly, and the president is asking Congress for even more troops. They are talking about activating the draft soon. The Army is going to grow faster than any other service. The war in Vietnam is an



infantry war. Hell, you know that, you're wearing a combat infantryman's badge on your uniform. The only place you could have earned that was in Vietnam. Most guys who are joining up think that getting into the Infantry is automatic. I know it's not. For every infantryman in the field, there are ten guys needed to support him - cooks, clerks, supply people, drivers, mechanics. The only ones who get put into the infantry are the blacks, and whites who are too uneducated to do anything else. Anyone else is going to wind up in a support position. Don't get me wrong, Sarge. I ain't putting those people down. I just don't want to be one of them. Last week if I had signed up for infantry, you would have put that on my paperwork. Then when I took the tests, the Army would have decided I was more qualified to be an officer in logistics or in an office somewhere. By taking the tests before I enlist, I can get certain guarantees. The Army makes the rules, Sarge; I'm only trying to follow them."

"Okay. What you say is true." He had lowered his voice again, although his tone remained not very friendly. His eyes had wandered over to the men sitting in the chairs against the wall. What Lou had said was true. Most of those men would enlist without ever considering what they would be doing with the next three years of their lives. Vietnam was not an unpopular war. Now that school was letting out, a lot of high school seniors would be drifting in. Signing up to fight for their country. Many of them would wind up doing some of the jobs Lou had mentioned. The Army had a couple hundred MOS, and all the slots had to be filled by people who were qualified. Still.

"Why the Airborne Infantry? You particularly interested in jumping out of airplanes?"

"No, Sir. I mean Sarge. Actually I'm afraid of heights. I want the Airborne because it's an all-volunteer outfit. I figure if I'm going to fight, I want to be surrounded by guys who aren't afraid of fighting. I figure anyone can be stupid enough to volunteer to fight for their country, but it takes a special kind of stupidity to want to jump out of an airplane before joining that fight. I am one of those stupid people, Sarge." Lou was smiling. He knew what he meant, but in saying it, the words had come out all wrong.

"You calling me stupid, boy?" His voice was still gruff, but there was a smile on his face. He was pointing to a badge that had a parachute surrounded by wings. Lou had seen it earlier and had suspected that maybe the sergeant was Airborne, but he was not sure.

"No, Sarge."

"So let me get this straight. You took the tests in order to get the Army to guarantee you training in the Airborne Infantry, even though you knew you were overqualified to go into the Infantry?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I get the picture. You got balls kid. Balls and brains; it's a good combination. You going to give any consideration to officer's training?"

"I hadn't given it any thought really. Today was the first time I heard of an officer's training program. I knew about West Point of course, but I really don't plan on making the military a career. If there wasn't a war going on, I wouldn't be here today."

"What do you got against the Army?"

"Don't get me wrong, Sarge. I have a lot of respect for men who serve their country for a living. I just don't think I'm cut out for all the discipline and regimentation that goes along with it. I sort of dread all the saluting and "Siring" I'll be doing over the next few years. I'll do my share of the fighting. It's what an Army does. But when the fighting's over, and if I am still around, I'll probably get out. I don't know what I want to do with my life, but I don't think being in the Army is it. Of course, I could be wrong."

"Yeah, you could be. I was. Okay, it's time to wrap this up. These papers are all filled out. All I need is your signature. You can report to the induction center in the morning."

"I'm afraid not, Sarge."

"What?"

"I won't be available until the 26th of June. I have a graduation ceremony to go to tomorrow. I need to give notice to my boss. And I want a week off before I report for duty. If it's a problem, I can come back then and sign the papers." The sergeant let out a sigh. He started changing the necessary forms.

"I guess the hard part's behind you now that you've made up your mind and you are getting what you want. Anything else I can do for you before you sign these papers?"

"No. I think you've done enough for me. I want to thank you for your time. I know you probably don't spend this much time with most recruits. As far as the hard part being over, I

think it's just beginning. The hardest part is this evening. When I tell my parents, all those papers may not mean a darn thing. They may just be my last will and testament."

Lou signed the papers that day. He knew he had just changed the course of his life. Where it would lead him and whether he would survive he knew not. But he had already made up his mind to enjoy the trip.