

My Brilliant (Military) Career

by Phil Bock

Inspired by Jules Feiffer's memoir, "Backing Into Forward"

This light-hearted account of my Air Force service should be taken with the following caveat: I was fortunate to escape the Korean War through a combination of good timing and ROTC enrollment. If I'd been drafted out of college, I would have been a very poor soldier and most likely killed or traumatized by the experience. My brief active service was trivial (though my daughter was born on in Air Force hospital). My two promotions were undeserved and in no way affected my academic career. I escaped the Vietnam War due to age; my resignation in protest of that illegal action had no effect. My deep sympathies go to those men and women who were caught up in those conflicts. PKB

I graduated from High School in 1951 as the Korean War continued its slaughter. My options were limited but the safest way seemed to go to college and, that summer, I enrolled at Fresno State in my home town. Neither of my parents had gone to college, and FSC was quite inexpensive (as I recall, about \$45 per semester including fees!). I signed up as a music major intending to teach, probably in secondary school. Also, I enrolled in Air Force ROTC, curious about the courses and people.

English was required and I'd heard that Prof. Lyon was very good. My second semester with him we conversed and he strongly suggest that I take anthropology with Prof. Beatty. That lead to a major in Social Science with minors in psychology and English, plus many courses in theater and continuing study of piano with Miss Withrow. The AFROTC courses were not very demanding (geopolitics, military "science" and, I believe, laws and customs); once a week the cadets met for two hours of drill on the football field, and one year I played tuba in the marching band. I assumed that I would get a Reserve commission and do two or more years of active service, though my poor eyesight had already ruled out being a pilot.

The next requirement was a summer camp for cadets: eight weeks at an air base in Riverside, California. Compared to boot camp for draftees or enlisted men this was not very demanding. Classes, drill, and basic skills (making beds, saluting, care of uniforms), but no real preparation for command. I met some delightful people including a memorable pair of identical twins, the Charnovsky brothers, whom I cast in a cadet show doing a "quick change" routine in which one twin wearing fatigues was ordered to get into full dress, he would exit, and the other twin would immediately enter in full dress, and vice versa. It was the era of the McCarthy hearings and for the show I also wrote lyrics to "Baby, It's Cold Outside" with a sergeant ordering a sleeping private out of bed: "It's time to get up (But sergeant it's cold outside)/ You've got to get up"... The private makes various excuses and then reveals "My name is David Schine." (Schine was the partner of the infamous Roy Cohn during the McCarthy era.)

My only other memory from that summer of '54 is that having driven into L.A. with some friends, we were returning to base with a midnight deadline: the radio was playing a Rossini overture that was to end at twelve and, as the music accelerated so did the car. We made it just in time. I doubt that the summer training prepared any of us for a military career.

I assumed that when I graduated in the spring of '55 I would be soon called to active duty, perhaps in "intelligence" work. To my surprise, I had been nominated for one of the first Woodrow Wilson Fellowships (probably by Professors Lyon and Beatty). I was interviewed and, when selected, asked where I would like to attend grad school. Beatty had spoken highly of Chicago and I'd read Robert Redfield's books, so that was my first choice. I knew I would have to work fast to complete a Master's before the Air Force called.

I learned that my call to active duty could be put off until early 1957. I was unable to fly, so my services were not urgently needed. The time at U. of Chicago was wonderful—I passed the exams and did a paper under Redfield's supervision, receiving the A.M. in 1956; I also met my wife-to-be and deferred marriage until later—but that's another story. In January, 1957, I reported for duty as a personnel officer to Bunker Hill Air Force Base near Peru, Indiana. It was a TAC base, home to a Wing of fighter jets. To my surprise, I had been promoted to First Lieutenant during the interim. With my new silver bars, some officers expected me to have had at least some military experience. Wrong!

I tried to learn my job, helped by the enlisted men who did the real work, and found friends among the other new ROTC officers, especially Pete and Ray. I discovered that my regular duty was to review 300 Morning Reports that kept track of who was on base each day, and to sign them and any orders relating to transfers in or out of the Wing. My signature became shorter and less legible so I thought of the work as waving a magic wand over papers to transform them into Official Documents.

Major Jack Cotter was in charge of the personnel office in which I worked. He was a large, redheaded man, who always arrived promptly at eight and headed for his glassed-in cubicle, where a yellow pad and several carefully pointed pencils awaited on his desk. He would sit down, take a pencil and point it at the pad, put his head on his other arm—and immediately fall asleep. If steps approached his cubicle, the pencil began to move before his eyes opened. I learned my job from a corporal named James who also introduced me to some musicians with whom I moonlighted during my time there; one, named John Lewis—a vibe player—had been an auto designer in Detroit; he had a small combo that I joined, playing some weekends in northern Indiana. That summer, I was married in Great Neck, New York—also, another story.

The number of orders for transfer to other bases or to leave the AF soon increased exponentially. My writer's cramp was due to the imminent closure of the base and, as junior personnel officer, I was to sign all the transfer orders, my own the last, in effect to "turn out the lights." At this point my wife and I were living in the town of Peru, known

mainly as the early home of Hoagy Carmichael. After a brief leave, we packed up the Plymouth and headed to my new assignment: Eglin AFB #9, on the Florida panhandle, known as "Hurlburt Field," and my new C.O., Lt. Col. Merle Estes.

Colonel Estes was an old timer: he had flown in WWII, gone into the AF Reserve, then flown cargo and passenger planes for several years. Called back into active service for the Korean War, he now had a desk job with Air Base Group, the non-flying personnel who serviced the pilots and others by "housekeeping" the grounds and records. I liked him right away: he had a gray, lined face and seemed to be serving his time until retirement. He clearly discerned that I was not "military material," and our first serious encounter took place a few months later.

As the only officer who attended services with the small Jewish congregation, I had been elected President of the group. When Rabbi Wallach later ran off with the blonde wife of another member, the Colonel called me into his office. I vividly recall him shaking his head in wonder, saying: "Bock, I didn't think *you people* did this kind of thing." I don't know what I replied, but his surprise and sympathy struck me as unusual.

My job was similar to the previous base: waving my pen over various papers to make them Official. I recall two sergeants who shared an office with me, one a tall, rangy redhead from the South, the other a calm, patient young man who did most of the work. In Florida, I had a number of "additional duties," usually temporary, as when I was called on to substitute for the usual supervisor at the Officers' Club. (I'm sure many bottles of booze went missing that month.) For some time I oversaw the base movie theater, and, with greater pleasure, the nursery (babies, not plants). My wife was then pregnant and we lived in a small house in the town of Mary Esther, right on the Gulf of Mexico. She was taking a biology course at a college in Pensacola and I sat in on it; soon after, our daughter Marian was born in the base hospital.

My officer's pay was adequate to our needs and the birth was covered by the Air Force. Again, I made some money by playing with small combos on weekends but made few friends on the base. A lucky break came when I was appointed Base Testing Officer. In this position I oversaw the testing, mainly of enlisted men who hoped to upgrade or change their specialties in the hierarchy of skills and rank. Early in 1958 there was testing for junior officers who hoped to qualify for a Regular (rather than Reserve) Commission, insuring promotion and a possible Air Force career. This was an important opportunity for the pilots but, since I was also eligible to take this test I was required to take it first, under supervision.

Frankly, it was the kind of general knowledge test that I had always done well at, but everyone was surprised when, instead of the ambitious pilots, I was the one offered a Regular Commission! I was amused and amazed, when Col. Estes called me into his office to deliver the news, in words something like: "Bock, you don't want a career in the Air Force, do you?" Fortunately, I took a moment before I replied: "Well, sir, it is an unexpected honor and I really should think about it and discuss it with my wife." He looked doubtful, and I thought I saw an angle.

A day or two later, I went to see him. Keeping a straight face, I stood at attention and said, "We've discussed it and while it was not my intention in joining the military, it would be a secure career." He blanched, even grayer than usual. "However, if I might get an 'early out,' I think I would prefer to return to graduate school." It was a kind of blackmail, but I could see his relief. "I'll see what I can do," he smiled. I went home and applied to Chicago and two other schools. In another month I had my release. I waited 18 months in hope that that would secure my fulfillment of service, and in July 1958 we headed North to Cambridge and Harvard. (I suspect that the fact that I had a B.A. with highest honors, an M.A. from Chicago, and a record of military service contributed to my admission.)

Another reason for my ease in getting released from active duty may have been my success in another additional duty: I was appointed to defend two young enlisted men at their courts martial for various offenses.

I had met Pvt. Steed when I did some teaching of literacy on the base; I recall feeling that he was highly intelligent but had never had decent schooling. He caught on quickly to reading and when his trial took place, I was pleased to be his counsel. I don't recall his offense but I was able to get him sentenced to time served.

The other case was more serious. A young, black private had assaulted his Commanding Officer who happened to be head of the Military Police on the base. The prosecution may have expected an easy conviction, and there was some dismay when I got the case dismissed on a technicality. They probably found another way to punish him; I was never again asked to defend anyone.

Perhaps my mother was right—I would have been a good lawyer.

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