

70

By Ken Kalish

So, today was tiring. I left the farm at nine for the Minneapolis VA, just shy of 220 miles south of here. I walked into the clinic at exactly one, the prescribed sign-in for my 1:15 appointment. Of course, it is also 220 miles from the VA to the farm. I got back just as President Obama began his Afghanistan speech.

I get paid mileage for traveling POV. To draw the pay, though, I have to get a travel chit from the appointment desk when my appointment is finished. Nice lady, pretty quick on the paperwork. A few minutes later I was at the authorization office. I pulled a number from the red doohickey, 77, and looked up to see which number was being served – 70. It shouldn't take too long, right?

Wrong. 70 was still at the desk ten minutes later. I looked up to try and figure out what the hang-up was, and at first I didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

70 was a twenty-something kid wearing a red USMC tee shirt, a pair of khaki shorts, and a black baseball cap with the letters USMC embroidered across the cap's sizing strap. The part in his dark hair ran straight up from his collar. There was a black brace of some sort that began just below his right knee and crawled up his leg to disappear under the shorts. Nothing unusual there. Every other person at the VA wears some kind of prosthetic, right?

But something wasn't right, so I looked back up at his cap. That part in his hair. It was almost an inch wide, exposing very new, very pink skin. He turned slightly to use his left hand to point out something for the clerk. He had to use his left hand. When he turned I could see his right hand was permanently curled into a loose fist. His thin right arm was frozen against his ribs, locked in that awkward 45-degree angle every medic recognizes immediately as the protective pose of one who has a fracture. Those khaki

shorts hitched up and snagged on the top of the brace revealing another pink scar, an angry, wide corkscrew running from his thigh to below the right knee.

I heard him say “no” to the clerk, that single syllable reminiscent of the nasal speech of a cleft-palate student I once tutored. The right side of his face smiled at her as he tried one more time to explain why his mailing address was no longer the long-term VA dorm.

He turned to the dozen of us waiting outside the door to say “Thorry,” then went back to the task of finishing his paperwork. I mumbled something inane like “No sweat,” and one or two others mumbled something. The tab machine recycled beyond 00 and was patiently waiting for someone to take 06. Just like when we were back in uniform, there’s always a degree of grumbling when a line of crotchety disabled vets has to wait for something so simple as getting a piece of paper. Not this time, though. Not a whisper.

It is going to take a lot of surgery to finish the reconstruction of the left side of his face. A flap of skin has been sewn over the place where his left eye used to be. There’s a crater where the left corner of his jaw used to be. His nose looks like someone tried to smear it sideways with a hot iron.

The office supervisor finally realized what kind of logjam was being created in the hall, so she fired up four more stations. It was the station next to 70 that called my number. I zipped through my paperwork and got mine just as 70 got his. It had been twenty minutes for him. 70 leaned to his left to jerk his right leg around so he could head for the door and make it to the pay window.

“Thorry,” he said again.

“No,” I said, “there’s nothing to be sorry about. Thanks.”

I softly patted his left shoulder; not knowing what kind of painful horror might be hidden under that red shirt, and waited for him to go ahead of me into the hall. The next guy in line was a fat wheelchair driver who, according to his cap, was a Korea vet. He

huffed and grunted as he backed his extra-wide chair into the line at the door, pushing the others back so the kid could get by unhindered.

“78,” one of the clerks called out.

“Hold yer horses” hollered the fat guy.

70 and I walked the fifty feet or so to the pay window where four others were lined up to take care of their pharmacy co-pays. Two windows were open, one served by a fiftyish balding guy and the other by a beautiful young brunette. The guy who would be next at the woman’s window was a tiny octogenarian wearing a WW II vet cap, and he watched 70 come down the hall. When she asked for the old guy’s paperwork he pretended to fumble with his wallet, and then waved 70 to the window.

The right side of 70’s face smiled brightly at the woman. “You’re gorgeous,” 70 exclaimed. The words were mauled by his injured mouth, but she understood.

“So are you,” she said, not missing a beat as she took his paperwork and examined his ID card. “And you look better now than you look in this picture.”

He laughed. She counted out the bills and change for him, he said “Thanks,” and then he walked jerkily away.

There is a moment the people in live theater call “the holy moment,” that brief pause between the end of a great performance and the beginning of the audience’s applause. There was a holy moment as we watched him move down the hall in search of his ride home.

We didn’t applaud or try to shake his withered right hand. I think I was the only person to actually speak to him or touch him, but as he walked past those of us still in line almost every one of us looked him in his destroyed face, nodded a silent greeting, and smiled – and the right side of his face smiled back at every one of us.