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A RESERVE OFFICER AT
WEST POINT IN THE VIETNAM ERA

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For Walt, Dave, and Carl

We talked of war. Johnson: "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea." Boswell: "Lord Mansfield [the Chief Justice] does not." Johnson: "Sir, if Lord Mansfield were in a company of General Officers and Admirals who have been in service, he would shrink; he'd wish to creep under the table." Boswell: "No; he'd think he could try them all." Johnson: "Yes, if he could catch them: but they'd try him much sooner. No, Sir; were Socrates and Charles the Twelfth of Sweden both present in any company, and Socrates to say, 'Follow me, and hear a lecture on philosophy;' and Charles, laying his hand on his sword, to say, 'Follow me, and dethrone the Czar;' a man would be ashamed to follow Socrates. Sir, the impression is universal; yet it is strange."

Introduction

Come fill your glasses, fellows, and stand up in a row,
To singing sentimentally, we're going for to go,
In the army there's sobriety, promotion's very slow,
So we'll sing our reminiscences of Benny Havens, oh!

O'Brien, Metcalfe, Arnold, et al., to the tune of "The Wearing of the Green"
(Benny Havens was the proprietor of a Highland Falls tavern; this West
Point song has multiple verses and is sung when the drink is flowing and,
sometimes, the tears.)

In 1999 I published a memoir of my teenage years entitled *The Biggest City in America*. Since then a number of kind (and hopefully not misguided) individuals have encouraged me to continue this story. The first memoir proceeded year by year and chapter by chapter, each chapter/year featuring a particular event or sequence of experiences that served to constitute and, hopefully, advance that difficult developmental stage which we term adolescence. Whatever adulthood might be, it does not proceed quite so deliberately as the years preceding it. This is a good thing, developmentally, but it presents those who would write of it with a different challenge, for while adolescence is an awkward adventure with difficult and commonly-experienced stages, adulthood is, for most at least, a hit-and-miss operation whose stages are sometimes reached, sometimes circumvented. The prominent developmentalist Erik Erikson was concerned that we not become trapped within a single stage and that we do reach his coveted final stage (achieving integrity and not succumbing to despair), but history and literature are filled with human lives that proceeded in herky-jerky fashion (T.

E. Lawrence and his friend **Winston Churchill** are good examples) but were still marked by significant accomplishments.

In his essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (which I taught at West Point), William James speaks of what he terms 'the holidays of life'. His point is that our lives alternate between daily

routines and occasional holidays (the latter delineated and perceived differently by different people) and that the two mutually define one another. The job that appears to be an endless holiday (my high school classmates considered the position of a taster at the nearby National Distillers plant to be such a position) is quite routine for the person doing it, for holidays are defined in part by their rarity. I once found myself in a hotel/spa steam room in the Sonoma Valley with a person whose job it was to pour free wine for the visitors to her establishment. She worked at one of the top wineries—St. Francis—so that the likelihood of people being disappointed with the product or personally combative with her was relatively remote. The climate was temperate, her work environment clean, the tasting room both heated and air-conditioned. While she poured wine in the Valley of the Moon, there were many people elsewhere, engaged in very different tasks—clearing minefields, cleaning septic systems, tarring roofs, greasing axels and doing stoop labor. “It must be a wonderful job,” I said. She leaned back against the tile wall, raised her eyes to the damp ceiling, and said, “You wouldn’t believe the stress . . .”

The underlying point is that adulthood is irreducibly routine, at least to some degree. Even the life of the adventurer falls into repeating patterns (and, to a degree, of deadly monotony for adventurers such as Robert Falcon Scott or Ernest Shackleton). This is not an altogether bad thing. If James is correct, we require such patterns in order to be able to define, understand and contextualize the experiences which constitute our lives. However, for the memoirist of adulthood (even adulthood in its early stages) it would not do to construct a paratactic narrative consisting of recapitulations of the routine, no matter how honest such a narrative might be: “In the year xxxx I did . . . In the year xxxx+1 I did pretty much the same . . .”

Hence the decision to write about a segment of my experience with common thematic elements, a segment occupying a decade, but only fractions (in some cases, small fractions) of the individual years therein. Thus, this is not an all-encompassing account of a post-adolescent decade, only an account of my military activities within that period.

The period itself, however, is one that is not without interest. (As I write, the political pundits covering the 2008 election are steadily debating the degree to which the memories and allegiances of the Vietnam era continue to define the intellectual, cultural and political conflicts of our own time.) I entered college and the reserve officer training corps at a time when most of us were largely ignorant of Vietnam and the conflict there. Eight years later, after I had completed college and graduate school and begun my active duty tour—first at Ft. Knox and then as an instructor at the United

States Military Academy—we were six months away from the Tet offensive. When I completed my tour and returned to civilian life, teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, it was in the wake of the Dow riots there and a year prior to the bombing of Sterling Hall. It is a period to which many future events and cultural phenomena are ultimately traceable. I am not attempting to write its detailed history, but rather to chart some of its direct effects on an individual whose life took him to several places that played a part in defining that time.

This is really not a fish out of water tale, but it is a fact that there were very few reserve officers at West Point (I am told that the official term is OBV's—obligated volunteers) during my time there, though the percentage was higher than normal. In average years at that time the forty-member English department at USMA would take on one or two reserve officers, in part for intellectual diversity, in part to raise the percentage of Ph.D.'s on the Academy faculty. During my two-year tour in the West Point English department there were eight of us, though not all were there simultaneously. This was the result of Vietnam and the career paths of Regular Army ('RA') officers, who opted to postpone or shorten teaching duties there so that they might obtain leadership roles in the combat zone. There was also at least one reserve officer (a Harvard grad who had been in my Ft. Knox Armor basic course) in the USMA Social Sciences department. None of these individuals have, to my knowledge, written at length about their personal experiences there, though Robert Moore coauthored an analytical volume with Joseph Ellis which focused on the history, curriculum and traditions of the Academy (*School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* [New York: Oxford, 1974]). (For an incisive, current assessment, see Elizabeth D. Samet, *Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point* [New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007]. Dr. Samet is a civilian professor of English at West Point.)

While it was relatively rare to have reserve officers at West Point—individuals whose perspectives were largely those of the civilian world—it was far rarer to have someone with West Point experience at Wisconsin in the late 1960's. (My office mate told me that there had been initial suspicions that my appointment was a calculated act—yet another in a long list of crimes and misdemeanors perpetrated by the department chairman.) While neither of these sets of experiences could be characterized as holidays, they were, by any measure, anything but routine. This is the framework for the ensuing story.

In writing a book such as this my principal desire has been to record my own memories. We have had various partisan accounts of

the period and it was not my intention to add to their number. As the pages became covered with words, however, and as I returned after multiple drafts, I realized the nature of the story that I was unconsciously telling. That story is a traditional military one—part farce, part comedy, part tragedy, with drinks and songs, early mornings, long nights and untimely deaths. It is also an academic story. Its central focus—West Point—is a unique academic institution as well as a unique military one and my time there was one in which the country's civilian institutions were transitioning from monasteries and finishing schools to light combat zones, from the world of the pre-war, tweed-clad don to that of the GI-bill graduate, the blue collar parvenu, the tenured radical and the academic entrepreneur. It is a story of American culture and American counter culture. It is, finally, a story of a time, a time in which (I have come to believe) we moved from too much regimentation to too little, a time of fellowship and, simultaneously, a time of mutual incomprehension. I have tried to portray it as I experienced it—with little sense, at the time, of the larger cultural currents in which we would all, later, be seen to have been caught up.

Several of my West Point reserve officer colleagues may be known to readers of this memoir: in particular, Paul Szarmach, now Executive Director of the Medieval Academy, and the late Emory Elliott, University Professor at UC-Riverside. Few will think of them as a Military Intelligence officer or Artillery officer, respectively, but I think of them in that way along with their accomplishments in medieval and American studies. John Hafner continues to teach at Spring Hill College after a period at Indiana University; Bill Morgan recently retired from Illinois State University. John, another Americanist, was a doctoral student at Wisconsin before going to West Point; Bill, a noteworthy Hardy specialist, served as my sponsoring officer when I arrived at USMA. I have lost track of Rod Johnson, a comparatist, and would very much like to reconnect with him. Rod, like Emory and I, holds an Illinois Ph.D. When last we met we spoke of his interest in the function of interpolated letters in novelistic fiction. Wally (E. Wallace) Coyle taught on the 'other side' (to be explained later); after a successful teaching and administrative career throughout Massachusetts he now manages his own consulting firm and teaches as an adjunct at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College. The eighth individual was the aforementioned Robert Moore. He was also assigned to the other side and later taught at the University of Maryland before pursuing a business career in northern Virginia.

My wife Judith (with our wonderful son, Jonathan) was there for all of it, making the routine a joy and the holidays more frequent in number. As always, I am indebted to her for her love and support. In

this case I am also grateful for her memory. I can swear to the fact that everything in this book is exactly as I remember it, but I have remembered it with her considerable help. Whether what I remember bears any relation to what others remember is something else again, but what I hope to present is not a history of the period, but an honest account of how the period struck me. If I am the oddity (always a distinct possibility) it is also true that the period created oddities, oddities who were marked by its events for a generation and beyond.

I would also like to express my thanks to my friend Mike Collins. Mike and I were not at USMA together, but we deaned together for seventeen years at Georgetown; he was a Signal Corps officer (one of the principal combat branches) and though we seldom speak of our military experiences (we seem always to be occupied with more recent things) those experiences are part of the bond between us. Mike studied at NYU with the distinguished Shakespearian Leonard F. ('Pete') Dean, my sometime department chair at Illinois. It is indeed a small world, one markedly enriched by the individuals it has been my pleasure and privilege to serve with and to have as friends.

Nearly all of the names in this memoir are accurate, but a very few have been altered to protect the not-so-innocent. The stories themselves are all true, which is to say they are recounted in precisely the way that I remember them. I have tried to reconstruct them in a way that my colleagues then would have considered fair and objective, and I have attempted to be honest with regard to the nature and limits of my own perspective. Samuel Johnson once said that to a grammarian all of the problems of the universe are reducible to problems of grammar. I have tried to leverage my experiences as a literary historian and fiction writer without succumbing to the temptations implicit in Johnson's warning.

One of the serendipitous benefits of working on a project such as this is the opportunity to reconnect with old friends. Genevieve Hart, a key administrator in the West Point English Department during my time there, is now back in the department. Gen was most helpful in enabling me to acquire the photographs of the department in 1967-8 and 1968-9. They originally appeared in the Howitzer, the West Point annual. She has also answered a number of my queries concerning the individuals with whom we worked.

I have also been fortunate to have the able assistance of Dola Haessig, Melody Galen and Matt Wells. Dola is the creator and maintainer of my website (www.richardbschwartz.com) and Melody and Matt provided exceptional help with regard to the reproduction of some of the book's illustrations. Paul Ackermann of the West Point Museum staff has been very helpful in responding to my enquiries as has my friend, Vin Caretta, who found some

information that had been lost to me.

My wife Judith has (as always) offered invaluable help, both in her service as a (reliable) check on my memory and in her ability to offer the advice and analysis of a trained psychologist. She is also a far more experienced and learned reader of military memoir than I. It was Judith who first thought that an account of my military experiences might be of interest to individuals beyond the members of our immediate family. Any readers who share that view should thank her for urging me to write it. I pray that there may be such readers and I thank her once again for her suggestion. As I remember those old days I am profoundly grateful for my wife and son. They were there each day when I returned. I am also grateful that I was able to return, when others could not.

Chapter One

ROTC

Let us toast our foster-father, the Republic, as you know,
Who in the paths of science taught us upward for to go;
And the maidens of our native land, whose cheeks like roses glow,
They're oft remembered in our cups, at Benny Havens, oh!

I left my home in Norwood, Ohio (a suburb of Cincinnati and the 'biggest city in America' without a hospital or cemetery within its borders) and arrived at the University of Notre Dame for freshman orientation in the late summer of 1959. Notre Dame was by then a national university but one that retained very strong regional ties. Two of my Purcell High School classmates joined me there, the Cincinnati area being a prime feeder for the university, though nothing approaching the alumni base on the north shore of Chicago, where one can still see Notre Dame leprechauns painted on garage doors in upscale neighborhoods. Among the many New Trier grads in my class (one of whom had dated Ann Margret) was Bob McNeill, son of Don McNeill (of the 'Breakfast Club' fame), who was destined to become the top math student at Notre Dame. There were students from St. Louis and from Detroit and other Midwest metropolitan areas, a few students from California and Texas and a large contingent from New York. There was even a student from Bermuda. My roommate, Tom Kelly, was from Fort Wayne. Nearly all of my friends and acquaintances enrolled in ROTC.

A feeling of overarching cultural change was palpable at that time. Fidel Castro had driven President Batista out of Cuba and had begun a term of office which was to span generations (and bring the Cuban Missile Crisis three years hence). Pope John XXIII called for the first Ecumenical Council since 1870. Hiroshima, *mon amour* and *La Dolce Vita* played in local theatres (the latter proscribed by the Archbishop of Cincinnati but, curiously, not by the Archbishop of Covington). Günter Grass published *The Tin Drum* and Philip Roth *Goodbye, Columbus*. Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*

appeared and Frank Lloyd Wright died. Nevertheless, the fifties' spirit persisted in many quarters. President Eisenhower invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to halt a 116-day-old steelworkers' strike and Postmaster General Summerfield banned Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the mails on grounds of obscenity (to be reversed in 1960). Jack Nicklaus won the U.S. Amateur championship; James Michener published *Hawaii*, James Thurber *The Years* with Ross and Rodgers and Hammerstein brought *The Sound of Music* to Broadway. "He's got the Whole World in His Hands" and "High Hopes" were popular melodies and the U.S. launched its first nuclear-powered merchant vessel, *Savannah*. Bill Mauldin's cartoons won the Pulitzer Prize for the second time, the first prize having been awarded in 1945.

While aware of some of these events, most of my fellow high school seniors/rising college freshmen were focused on more local activities and more personal concerns. I had chosen Notre Dame because of its traditions and because it looked and felt like 'college,' from the 1200+ acre campus (with two lakes and a golf course) to the songs and iconography of the (still not, to this day, politically correct) 'Fighting Irish.' I was taken by the university's architecture and ivy, its long quadrangles and many trees, its grotto, basilica and dormitory chapels and its growing academic reputation.

At the time, I was completely unaware of the fact that Notre Dame traditionally had one of the largest ROTC corps of cadets in American higher education. What I took at the time to be simple reality was, in fact, a statistical outlier. Approximately 20% of the student body was so enrolled. Where large universities may now graduate a dozen or two newly-minted lieutenants (and sometimes even pool their programs with those of nearby institutions to achieve a critical mass of students), in Army ROTC alone we had enough cadets (pron. kay-dets, by the noncoms) to form an actual battalion. In 2008 Harvard produced five commissioned officers; they (along with students from other local colleges) were trained at the ROTC unit at MIT.

I chose to enroll for two reasons. Both seemed eminently sensible at the time. First, there was still a draft, and every likelihood that I might actually be called upon to serve. It would be better, I reasoned, to serve as an officer, with an officer's pay, particularly if I was married and had a family to help support. There was as yet no large troop commitment to Vietnam, only a few advisers, and there was no talk of large scale student deferments or exceptions for married men with children. (Several years later it was mentioned that one of our ROTC cadre officers, an Infantry Captain, had been sent to Vietnam as an adviser. This was mentioned in passing by

another officer and given no more attention than would have been accorded an assignment to Germany, Korea, or, indeed, to a post in the continental United States.) The major buildup under President Johnson did not occur until I was well into my doctoral studies, years later. The prevailing assumption was that there was a good likelihood that you would serve in the military but little likelihood that you would serve in combat.

The second reason for doing so was that the students who elected to enroll in ROTC were exempted from the university Physical Education requirement. Better (we reasoned) to march in uniform than run through campus in loosely-organized groups wearing short pants. The jogging fad—often associated with Jim Fixx's book on running (1977)—did not begin until many years later. Back in that day (fall, 1959) the P.E. students were regularly subjected to ridicule by the student body, while the ROTC students were perceived as normal. These attitudes might not have been statistically supportable by the actual enrollment numbers, but they prevailed nonetheless.

At registration there were a series of makeshift booths operated by student representatives of campus organizations. It was like a job- or recruiting fair. (Do you wish to join the glee club? Do you wish to join the crew team? Do you wish to become a soldier?) I approached the ROTC booth and was asked by a senior cadet if I had any prior military experience. I told him that I did not and he responded, cryptically, "That's probably just as well." I signed up, noting that the ROTC program was divided into two segments: the introductory course (for freshmen/sophomores) and the advanced course (for juniors/ seniors). One could always exit after the first two years and still avoid the P.E. requirement. I later learned that some did so exit, though most did not. Juniors and seniors received modest monthly government stipends, an incentive to continue, but not one that was decisive (to my knowledge) for any of my classmates. The current wide-scale military scholarships with generous allowances for living expenses did not yet exist.

On today's university and college campuses one frequently sees ROTC cadets in fatigues and combat boots. Physical fitness is pursued zealously and students are introduced to the more physical aspects of soldiering far earlier and far more often than we were. Sitting in the rare book room of the Memorial Library at Wisconsin in the mid-late 1970's, reading eighteenth-century authors' journals, I would sometimes look out at the historic Red Gym with its castellated corners, next to the Wisconsin Union parking lot, and watch ROTC cadets rappelling down the side of this multi-storied structure. Nothing like this was required of us (or even imagined).

Rappelling was for Rangers, not for ROTC students.

We wore ('Modern Army') greens—pressed wool trousers and blouses, khaki shirts (with one-piece, adjustable, pointed collar stays), black ties, and polished dress shoes both for class and for drills. The collar stays looked like the bottom half of a set of football goal posts. The horizontal piece was hidden beneath the tie knot and the retractable side pieces were equipped with sharp points that were inserted behind the points of the collar tabs. They worked well when installed correctly, but looked ridiculous when they were not. When assembled hastily, as was often the case, one of the points would pop out (generally at the most inopportune time) and reveal the hitherto tidy, straight collar's hidden secret.

Except for the drills (simple marching), and for the assembly/disassembly of the M1 rifle, all of our classroom instruction was historical and theoretical. The six-week summer camp between our junior and senior years provided the practical application—along with the rude awakenings that accompany what, for junior officers, is a largely physical occupation. The Army later instituted a system in which a second summer camp could be substituted for the ROTC basic course—a fast track option for those who decided to join the program later in their undergraduate programs.

The most difficult challenge with regard to the uniform was to keep it looking fresh. None of us had irons or ironing boards in our dorm rooms and we did not have multiple sets of uniforms, so that we could have one dry-cleaned while we were wearing another. We were driven to extreme behaviors, such as pressing our pants between books to maintain the al-ways-fading crease. I would never eat in my uniform, for fear that it might be stained. Having once established this pattern I continued it while I was on active duty. I only had one backup blouse, held in reserve in case of a catastrophe. Fortunately, I never needed it, for it was fast becoming one size too small for me, the 32" waist of summer camp and 34" waist of Ft. Knox fast-fading realities. Since you are not allowed to carry an umbrella (or push a baby carriage) when in uniform, I did have to buy a raincoat when I was on active duty. One of my West Point colleagues had one that had belonged to his father-in-law. I bought it because the price was right and you could still see the marks on the epaulets of his two stars. I actually only had to wear it once.

Since we were required to wear our uniforms to our military classes, the preferred registration schedule was one in which the military class would come early in the day, with a separation of at least one period between that class and the remainder of the college curriculum. This would provide the time to change out of the uniform and into comfortable clothes. A jacket and tie were

required for dinner later, but this was a rule honored in the breach, with students wearing tattered or outrageously out-of-fashion jackets and god-awful, horse-blanket ties with wild geometric patterns as a form of protest. (During vacations we combed through flea markets and garage-sale racks for 'dining hall' clothing.)

This kind of schedule represented the ideal. The reality was that the vast majority of conscientious students picked their classes based on their course content (which could vary, even with some required courses) and the quality and reputation of the instructor and were often forced to forego the intervening free period. The result was that you attended all of your classes in uniform until you had a sufficient break to enable you to change clothes. There were some local-legend students who were capable of returning to their dorms and changing their clothes during the brief break between classes without compromising their ability to appear on time for their next class. This was a much-admired feat, one that was impossible for freshmen to even contemplate, since they were largely housed on a remote quadrangle by the Lobund Institute for germ-free research. With the ROTC building at the western terminus of campus, behind the Rockne Memorial (the student gym) and most classes in buildings at the opposite end of the elongated main quadrangle, it was difficult enough to get from class to class on time, much less return to the freshman quad to change clothes. With the exceptions of those (very rare) times in which the military class ended early, the feat could only be accomplished by those upperclassmen capable of changing their clothes with a speed approaching that of Clark Kent.

We had received some instruction in fast-dressing from our high school gym instructors. The gym had brass numbers affixed to the walls at regular intervals and attendance was taken by requiring students to 'cover their numbers' while the instructor/coach ticked off the numbers that remained uncovered. For punishment we were often directed to return to the locker room (on a lower floor), change into street clothes and then return to the gym and 'cover our numbers' in two minutes. We were then directed to return to the locker room, change back into gym clothes and be back on our numbers (again) in two minutes, the process repeating until some point or other was made. This particular form of 'activity' was also common for plebes undergoing 'Beast Barracks' at West Point. We had undergone our own smaller version of it in Catholic high school.

Regardless of whether or not we found the opportunity to change our clothes, one did not feel odd sitting in class in a military uniform, since there were so many others so dressed. The undergraduate student body was still all-male and the faculty largely so. Moreover, the university ethos was nearly as regimented as that of the service academies. Many classes began with formal

prayers and the curriculum in the arts and sciences was fully required for the first two years and largely required (with mandated requirements in the major) for the last two. Just as at West Point, if one wanted an array of electives, the only option was to overload. I graduated with 139 credits (plus some summer work); one of my pre-med classmates graduated with 154.

The administration was thoroughly autocratic, with an off campus 'dean of discipline' literally shining flashlights in car windows in an often vain attempt to insure chaste behavior. Alcohol consumption rules were strictly enforced, with the designation '21' permanently printed on the i.d. cards of those students who had reached the legal drinking age. There were also rigidly-enforced rules with regard to class attendance. A three-credit course permitted three cuts; a fourth resulted in automatic failure of the course. Any cut immediately before or after a vacation period was counted as the total number of cuts permitted in the course. This was a major incentive for the pursuit of academic excellence, since students on the dean's list were entitled to unlimited cuts and, hence, longer vacation periods. Dorm rooms (which varied widely in quality and size) were selected based on grade point average, though one could mix and match roommates and thus occupy a wing of a dorm with friends whose gpa's were of varied quality.

Dorm lights were turned out at 11:00 p.m. and 'morning checks' were required several times each week (to encourage attendance at mass). Students were required to be fully dressed when presenting themselves for morning checks. Preppy students who routinely dressed without socks had to present their case to a higher authority than the athlete ticking off names. (Athletes had to earn their scholarships; when I was a sophomore, for example, Darryl Lamonica, the Notre Dame quarterback and, eventually, great Oakland Raider, delivered our mail.) The residence halls were ruled by rectors, the floors by prefects (all C.S.C. priests). One of our rectors told us that if needs be, he had the authority (I am certain that this was a lie) to hold up our mail if that was necessary for disciplinary purposes. Had he done so I am certain that several of my hallmates would have resorted to physical violence in reprisal.

Since the dormitory room lights were turned off from a master switch at 11:00, those wishing to study beyond 11:00 in, for example, one of the nearby academic buildings, were forced to use one of their weekly-authorized 'midnights' to do so. The students often responded by rewiring the electrical circuits and sealing their rooms lest any light escape. The rectors and prefects regularly checked the showers and other common facilities in search of individuals violating the lights-out rules. While they did not, to our knowledge, inspect first class mail, magazine subscriptions were