

Pacific Light

by David Ackley

Like convicts, draftees were prone to say it was all a big mistake, but for the half million of us called-up in 1961, the mistake was the same for all and the case was clear. We'd expected to be ground to slime under the treads of the Soviet armored divisions massed in eastern Europe, but the shooting war was cancelled, and, instantly redundant, we were consigned regardless to spend the next two years eating mess hall food, sleeping in barracks and feeling firsthand the jittery lassitude of an army in peacetime.

Which explains--if you want to call it that--how as a consequence of events in Berlin, Germany, I ended up a buck private at Schofield Barracks on the island of Oahu, HI, walking in the footsteps of Burt Lancaster, Frank Sinatra and Montgomery Clift, or if you prefer the fictional originals, First Sergeant Warden, Privates Sal Maggio and Robert E. Lee Pruitt.

Two storied, arranged in quads like dorms at the northeastern university I'd flunked out of, the barracks were high ceilinged and open to the winds off the mauka side of the island. Ours held the 400 men of the 9th Battallion, 1st Artillery: Battery A, 105mm howitzers; B, 155's; Headquarters--my battery--and the phantom C battery, which consisted of several sleek, eighteen or twenty foot long rockets, usually concealed under canvas, for purposes unspecified--and which weren't supposed to exist.

On second thought, forget I mentioned them.

From the open-sided lanai on the second floor we could see the pass scooped in the Kolekole Ridgeline where the Japanese dive bombers

rode in on the blinding rays of the morning sun to bomb and strafe Schofield and neighboring Hickam field on that infamous December day 20 years before. The nicks still to be seen in the 27th Infantry Barracks were supposed to have been made by their rounds.

Now and then, drenched in sweat and boredom, someone would yell from his bunk: " Come on back, Japs! Blow this mu'fucka UP!"

That was one option. Another was to assemble all the resident grunts, swabbies, and jarheads on one side of the island, jump up and down in unison, flip it over and see if life on the bottom was any better.

Duty day at an end, I was walking back from the motor pool with Sergeant Baker, our section leader, whippet lean in his starched and tailored fatigues, faded to the shade of lichen, against which my baggy uniform, brightly olive, both too new and too wrinkled, suggested we belonged to different armies. As in a sense we did, since he was R.A. --Regular Army-- and I was U.S., a draftee. He was a laconic Okie, who gave the impression he didn't much care what his section, mostly draftees, was up to once we were out of sight. I'd been in his section for 3 months.

He glanced significantly at my stripeless sleeve. " Didn't you make Pfc last month?"

I allowed as how I had.

"Maybe you want to git them stripes sewed on. Or we could stroll on over to the orderly room, see if the First Sarnt won't take the problem off your shoulders."

His way of speaking was so mild and easy, it was several seconds before I realized he'd just threatened to bust me back to private. I liked my rumpled, rankless uniform; it had the purity of the lowest of the low and I fancied it made me invisible. Nor did I care much about the eight dollars or so a month I'd lose along with the stripe. But I didn't want to stay on Sergeant Baker's wrong side now that I

realized he had one. So I sighed, and complied, hand sewing stripes on the one uniform that night, while the others went in a heap to have the job done professionally by the Fillipino women at the Post Laundry, and for good measure washed starched and pressed.

It threatened to be a long war, between the RA's and the US's but though they weren't always obvious we'd acquire our own victories. Better to trust the collective wisdom of the unwilling--axioms like "Never Volunteer" must have descended from inductees, millenia past, in Pharoah's army--than their willing opposites, or worst of all the enthusiasts, who you didn't want to be anywhere around...

Like our Battalion XO, Major Burndy, who at the outset of war games, when we'd opted for a separate peace by quickly shooting off all the blank ammo we had, prowled before us, forty five in hand, exhorting us to carry on the fray by other means.

"Don't just lay there, men. Keep firing. Make some noise. " He waved the forty five in the direction of the enemy. "Bang, bang." he said, by way of example. "Bang, Bang.Bang." He said, and warming to the task. "Bang,Bang,Bang.Bang-Bang."

His troops discretely eyed each other. Even from him, this was rare, almost sublime. Flaunting his exposure, he strutted in front of our position; but the troops on the other side had exhausted their ammo as well, and could be glimpsed reclining on their packs, smoking, gazing idly up through the foliage.

"Bang this," Rios said in my ear.

"Sir, I b'lieve you run out," someone called to the major. " You might want to put in another clip. "

Rios was amused by Major Burndy, but also despised him for a weak and sadistic prick and whenever Burndy came into the FDC tent, when we were out in the field, Rios would sing out in his cheerful

and penetrating tenor, " It's the Mongoose Killer!"

Burndy never acknowledged the greeting, but it invariably shortened his visit, so we knew Rios had scored. Mongoose--or mongeese, whichever--were everywhere on the island. They'd been imported to keep down the snakes (which, so far, had conceded defeat by failing to show up on the island), friendly little critters, that reminded me of scaled-down otters, humorous, easily tamed with a few scraps of food, as Rios had with the one which had come around the tent during a shoot on the big island. One day, Major Burndy showed up just in time to catch the mongoose's act--Rios had taught it to stand up on its hind legs and beg for bread balls. Burndy left and shortly returned carrying a pot of boiling water he'd taken from the field kitchen. He was an uncertain man in a profession that was always pressing for decisive action and as he dashed the boiling water over the poor thing he probably had his doubts but then, as usual, it would have been too late. As witness Rios was the only one privileged to call him out out to his face, although, in time, everyone took up the name. A small moral victory call it, emphasis on the small, not as satisfying as, say, tying Burndy naked to a stake and dousing him with boiling water, but all we could manage under the circumstances. Their side was ahead, having the big armament, and always would be we came eventually to realize.

Away from our desultory duties, the only way to keep the clock running toward discharge was the relentless pursuit of liquor, women and hand to hand combat. In that last category, Headquarters Battery had the advantage of a disproportionate number of certified badasses, despite the clerkish character of our duty assignments. Nagajima, in the survey section, was a member of the national Judo team. There was a college wrestler; a Korean green belt in karate; an innocuous looking little finance clerk who once called out the five guys who had been chiefly harassing him, mistaking his amiable grin for pliancy, and had all five on the ground

in about a minute each. In my section, Fire Direction or FDC, David Foss--Brute to his friends--an eighteen year old, six foot two street fighter from Milwaukee with a pigeon chest and unusually long arms was one even the certified deferred fucking with.

I was out of class among the real warriors, as I was reminded the night Brute woke me by pouring beer on my face through the mosquito netting over my bunk.

He was wearing a loose Hawaiian shirt that was a bit shredded with a number of slits across the front, one of which had a slight reddish stain. He wanted to tell me about the fun he'd had that night, in an alley off Hotel Street, where he'd got it on with a local packing a switchblade.

I imagined Brute grinning when he saw the blade: he was a tactician besides being big and tough and he liked it when the problem got interesting. So they went at it, him shuffling his big splayed feet in a half circle, his right up under his chin, his left below and a little behind his left knee; he'd drop his right shoulder like he was going to throw one and lean in with his torso, and the local, who was pretty quick, he said, would cut a lateral slit right through the flimsy material of the baggy shirt, which Brute offered as a torero offers the cape and the illusion of solidity behind it.

They went on in this way, Brute leaning in, the local slashing, getting nothing but shirt and air, but staying out of reach of those gorilla arms. Then he snorts, sucking air and Brute thinks, Next One, and when he reaches in farther, catches a little skin, Brute makes him pay, and leaves the blade broken off at the hasp in a crack and the local face down, whistling when he tries to breathe with his busted sternum and gore and snot all over his face, the Brute passing happily back onto Hotel Street, ready to call it a good night, though it had cost him his one good Hawaiian shirt.

Still, the inclination proved contagious. Being educated, older, a draftee, wasn't enough to hold back a spurt of aggression that had me rolling around in the motor pool dirt with the arrogant colonel's driver. I got a split eyebrow and Baker sent me to the dispensary for stitches. I fell, I'd insisted, according to accepted form. Since the other guy was unmarked, I was deemed the loser. And, in fact, I was.

In the latrine mirror, I examined the scar, turning from side to side to see it from the best angle.

After you'd been on the islands for a while, after all the standard picturesque images of palm trees, breaking surf, and dead volcanos began to get old, you began to see the light that was always there, washed and refracted, bleached and colored by the surrounding sea. Light trickled in ribbons through the jungle foliage or braided together with the wet after a sudden torrent in sparkling, dripping twists. Or rampaging in pink and vermillion across the black peaks of the Kolehole Range at sunset. Or filtered in pale green through the back of the wave that was cresting over you. Or even its black absence during the thick tropical night so palpable you wanted to rub it between your hands, so intense with tropical smells you were taunted in the mostly celibate barracks with dreams of coupling among the orchids.

On the morning of my first Chinese New Year, I walked alone at first light down Ala Wai Boulevard along the canal in Waikiki. On the other side of the canal began the hillsides which had been continuously lit into the early morning hours with fireworks, an endless upward cascade of detonations, starbursts, arcs, twists and showers rising from the houses packing the hillside streets, extension of the havoc we brought with our howitzers to other parts, percussions interlaced and constant with a rising and receding pom, pom, boom of cannon crackers, and cherry bombs, roman candles and rockets the night through. But it was growing light and

everything was quiet except for my footsteps, the air familiarly laced with the acrid smell of burnt cordite, and the light overhead was like a tender bruise, a color new to me that I couldn't name--deeper than violet, paler than mauve--and I was stirred by it and grateful as we are when the world distills for a moment a vision contingent to this time, this place, our eyes.

We fought, some of us at least, fucked, and drank our way through too brief nights of freedom, our immutably tedious and constricted days, and more than bearable weekends on the sands of North Beach, Waimea Bay, and Fort Derussy on Waikiki Beach itself, to an evening almost a year to the day from when I'd received my notice to report to the induction center in Manchester, New Hampshire in July of 1961. Rios had gone home to El Paso the week before, sleeping away most of his last month in the barracks so he'd survive until his discharge and avoid dying in the army. I missed him, but his departure meant that I was halfway home.

We were standing on the lanai, a little after sunset, the overcast sky behind Kolekole beginning to lose its light and shade toward the black faces of the peaks themselves. There were eight or so of us leaning on the railings that for the most part prevented drunks from falling onto the concrete patio and sidewalk below. I couldn't tell you now which were RA and which were US, a war more imagined than real, dissolved in the common fate. Like that other false war which had catapulted us here and left us for the two years of bored waiting that would later seem to have been surgically sectioned from our lives.

Brute was there, and Junior, a Tennessee farmboy. And Jim White, an ex-seminarian in survey section who'd dropped out of Chico State. Ralph Nagajima, the sleepy judo expert. McHenry, perennial winner

of the division talent show with his pleasant baritone voice . Others...All smoking, shooting the shit, looking toward the pass and waiting. It was pleasant to stand there waiting for something we didn't have to wait for, talking.

"What time they say?"

"Nineteen hundred."

"If it's the army running it, you know that aint goin' to happen."

"Maybe it's the navy."

"Fuckin' worse. You know the ship we come over on, supposed to take three weeks to get from Oakland to here. Took a month. A whole fuckin' month. We was a week late. Seven goddam days. Tell me about the navy. If it's the navy we'll be standing here Saturday week."

"I don't think it's the navy," I said. The others waited, disconcertingly. They didn't defer exactly, but on certain unpredictable matters, they listened as if it was my education talking. But I didn't really know who was in charge.

" It's just the government I guess. Civilians. Scientists."

"We're not going to see it from here anyway. Look at the clouds." This was Desmond, a born skeptic from Blue Hill in Dorchester.

"Who knows? It's about nine hundred miles away."

"Kiss my ass," Junior said. "Why didn't you tell me? You can't see shit from no nine hundred miles. I'm goin' over the px and get a beer." But nobody else moved and Junior stayed where he was. I don't know why. There wasn't a lot of curiosity left among us. I hadn't read a book in months. Maybe it was just a professional interest in

weaponry that we'd acquired in spite of our civilian selves. One thing you learn in the artillery, there's a universal satisfaction in blowing things up. Once when we'd gone on maneuvers with the armored cav, Battery B's 155's blew the track off one of their tanks with an airburst. The tank crew was impressed enough to present the gunbunnies with the mangled wheel as a trophy. Maybe the testers were just a bunch of guys eager to blow up something big just to see what would happen. I thought if you scraped away the surface reasons, you'd be left with that even if nobody would admit it. It's like war, in a way, ten years after the last one and everybody forgets and starts imagining what the next one will be like. A lot like Vietnam, it would turn out, a few years down the road.

The sky had grown black, dense with overcast, impervious to light. I imagined at best a flicker on the underside of the clouds like distant heat lightning, there, and as quickly gone.

"What time you got?"

I could see the green glow of the hands on the watch that McHenry had given me when he'd won a new one in the division talent show. It was straight up nineteen hundred and I was about to say so, when the peaks of the Kolekole range re-emerged in perfect outline against a dingy white sheet which had risen behind them and curled over our heads, turning the quad to dull daylight. It lapped us, coating our faces a powdery white, faces startled in profile or looking back at me. I could see my hands, our uniforms, our brass, glinting in the ashy light that was like nothing I'd ever seen before. After a time it drew down like a retracted curtain, but it left behind others, a red disc, a dying sun scalloped along its edge with yellow. And still others, blue, green and silver with a crackling fearful symmetry like the auroras I'd seen in dead winter at home, burning bright on and on.

What fed this durable fire? The flying fish, skittering into the light.

The albatross, ill-omened, consumed in flight. The coral reef,
barracks to millions. The frangipani and hibiscus. The mango, palm,
and palmetto. The sand. Paper houses, no sweat. Water. Air. A jade
cup. Hiroki.
Anything it wanted.

We were lapped by light, the consuming light.

