

Johnny Bruzzone: Pool Hustler

by Jerry Ratch

I was a coward and didn't want to get killed like Heimley. Heimley was a nut at high school. I saw him myself one night put his hand right through the windshield of this car he was working on, along with a monkey wrench. Sure, he was drunk, but that took something extra besides booze. He was that kind of a nut. So was his brother. His brother wore their mother's dresses, around their house anyway. Not at school. That would have gotten him killed at school probably, though everyone knew about him anyway. They just don't like having their noses rubbed in that sort of thing.

Heimley went straight into the Marines out of high school. He didn't wait for the draft to come looking for him. He signed up directly for the Marines. I think he was actually surprised that they took him, on account of he was so damn short. He was only five foot something, if that. I always thought he lied, frankly. He said it was real close to the minimum height requirement, but the Sgt. at the recruiting center sort of helped get him all straightened up and standing tall. I don't know how they do that sort of thing. They fudged it somehow. I think they were so happy when anybody showed up in those days, wanting to get into the Marines, that they kind of massaged the numbers. So, anyway, they took Heimley. No great surprise. And that was the night he put his hand through the windshield. Then he went over to Nam and became a hero. He threw himself on a grenade to save his buddies. No surprise there either. He was always like that. He probably would have put that kind of thing into the high school yearbook, if he'd thought of it. The guy most likely to throw himself on a grenade. Except people didn't even have that kind of foresight in those days, because things took a huge

turn for the worse after that. So, anyway, there must not have been enough of Heimley to come home in the standard issue body bag. I think they must have just blotted him up, what was left.

Our buddy Decker used to come home from work at O'Hare airport and tell us how many body bags they unloaded that day. The number just kept going up at an accelerating pace. That was when I went to a counseling center to resist, and found my way into this sort of underground they had for hiding guys. It was in apartments people had, mostly sympathetic girls all over the place in Chicago. And that was where I lived out my days for the duration of the war, and how I survived during that time. I became like some kind of toy for some of them, they could pass around and show off.

But I couldn't come back either, as my real self. And that was how this problem of who I was came about.

See, I used to be a pool hustler in high school. I won some pretty big tournaments around Johnson City, downstate Illinois, and some others around the Midwest when I was still in high school. That was how the draft got wind of me. One game was a pretty big one up at this pool hall in a bowling alley in Northlake. People came from all around the area to watch me play this real sharp hustler named Akron Joe. My name was just Johnny in those days. Johnny Bruzzone. I didn't go in for no made-up Hollywood kind of jazz. I was good enough that I could just be who I was, that's all, good enough for me. But I should have invented a name, a made-up name. Now I see why they did it that way, besides evading taxes, I mean. That right there is a whole other story.

