

Singing the Draft Board Blues

Steven Owen

I turned eighteen on July 5th, 1968. On that day, along with my cake and presents, like every other young man in the country who shared the same birth date, I received the privilege of registering with the Selective Service. There was a war going on in a place called Viet Nam, which was somewhere in Asia, a continent I had found little reason to consider until then, other than to be able to point it out on a geography exam in grade school.

But the war had been raging for some time. I had seen the battles on the nightly news. The commentators kept a running tally of how many of our soldiers had been killed. The war was becoming unpopular, especially among the group of free-spirited young people known as “hippies.” I wore my hair stylishly long back then, in a backwoodsman sort of way, and my friends and I had smoked a little weed because it was new and the thing to do, but I was not a hippie. I felt no burning need to change the world. The world as I knew it was just fine the way it was, as long as there were sparkling clear rivers to swim in, muscle cars to cruise around in, and someone willing to buy me a six-pack of beer on Saturday nights.

I was not one of those who protested against the war, and I thought those who did looked silly, but neither did I support it. I didn’t understand it—why we were there, in a place so far away, killing and dying. The logic was that it was better to fight the communists there than on our own shores. This is an argument I accept more readily now than I did back then. Perhaps, if I had been older, I would have been more enthusiastic about waging war on the Viet Cong. There is a quote often, and probably erroneously, attributed to Winston Churchill that goes something like “If you are not a liberal when you are twenty, you have no heart.

If you are not a conservative when you are forty, you have no mind.” At eighteen, I was long on heart and short on mind.

People I actually knew had begun to die in that place—Gary Owen, from up the road in Gasquet, a couple of years ahead of me in school and no relation but sharing the same last name. Soon there would be others, classmates of mine—Leonard Greville and Mac McDougal—guys I had hung out with, sat in class with, rode with on the school bus, guys you never suspected would die so young, guys who would never suspect it of themselves.

The war was there, though. It was with me and around me, and I was aware of it like you might be aware of some badass who lives in your neighborhood. He hasn’t messed with you, but you know he’s been to prison, so you keep your eyes pointed up the street when you pass his house because you really don’t know what he’s capable of.

And I was afraid. I have since faced things that would lead me to believe that I am not a coward. But back then I was truly afraid of losing my life to something that I considered a waste of my time.

Many of my generation left the country rather than fight in a war they did not believe in. I will grant that, for some, it was a genuine matter of conscience. But most, I imagine, were just scared like me.

I went down and registered for the draft.

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Shortly thereafter, I received a notice to report to Oakland, California, where I would be physically examined to determine if I was fit enough to go off hunting communists in Asia. A couple dozen of the boys I graduated from high school with got the same notice at the same time. This far down the road, if you were to place my old Del Norte High Warriors yearbook before me and open it to the senior class, I could not tell you who among those faces was with me and who was not, with a few exceptions.

We gathered near the corner of 3rd and K Streets behind the Ben Franklin store to wait for the bus. It was early, about 7:30 in the morning. Oakland was at least an eight-hour bus ride away. Many of us had never traveled that far from home. We likely carried sack lunches prepared by proud but worried mothers. What I am sure we had with us, though, was booze, lots of it, hard liquor mostly, easily concealed in a jacket pocket or travel bag. Though I was not a smoker, I had with me a pack of cigarettes on the theory that, if you burned through enough of them in a short span of time, you could “catch” asthma, a debilitating deferment in the eyes of the draft board. Unfiltered Camels. No other brand would do.

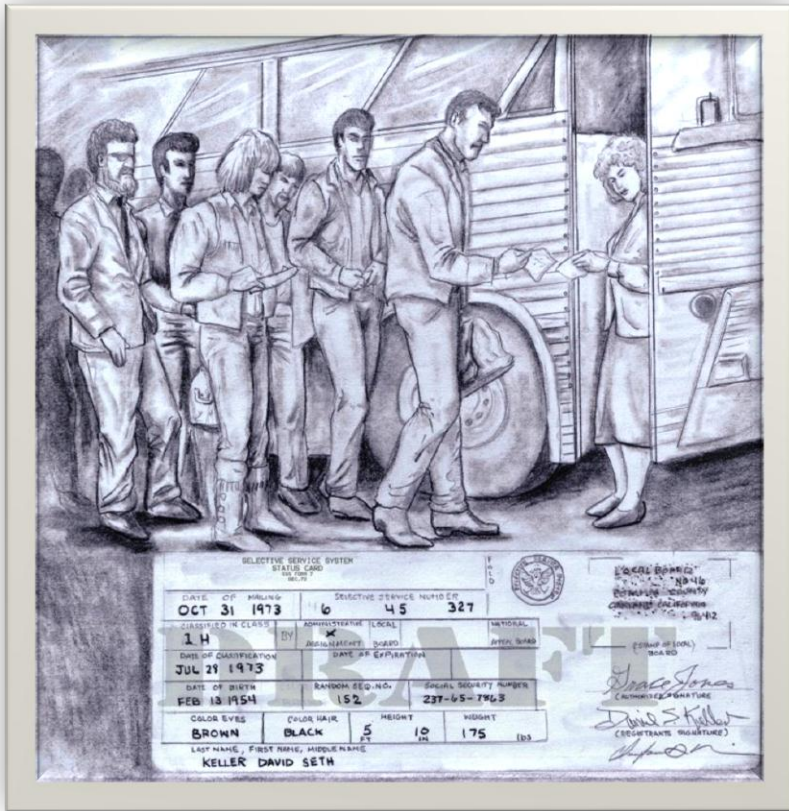
We boarded the Greyhound and pulled away from town, blue smoke rolling. By the time we hit Klamath, half an hour south, we were all drunk. Despite the driver’s pleas, we prowled the aisle and seat-hopped at will. We sang and shouted and cursed. We had commandeered our own traveling night club. At one point, our driver became so disgusted with our raucous partying that he shouted, “What’s wrong with you? You’re not going to war! You’re just going to your draft physical!”

It all felt the same to us. I tried to choke down one of the Camels and coughed so violently that I gave up, handing off the pack to a buddy who smoked.

We were not experienced drinkers. We burned out quickly. The booze put me into a restless sleep. I remember at some point hearing the kid across the aisle from me being sick and getting up to find a dry seat elsewhere. Later, someone wandered back, looking for a place to flop. “Oh, my God,” he said when he realized he had almost lay down in a bed of vomit.

When we got to Eureka, two hours later, the driver told the station manager, “I don’t know who’s taking these kids to Oakland, but it’s not going to be me!”

It was an over-reaction. We were done. They gave us a new driver and a new coach. Our old bus had to be side-tracked and hosed down, inside and out. Our replacement driver heard nothing but teenaged snoring, all the way to Oakland.



In Oakland, we were deposited in front of a large, plain building where the physicals were to be performed. Hundreds of other young men from the northern half of California were there for the same reason. Most of them looked just like us, eighteen- or nineteen-year-old white boys in blue jeans, madras shirts, and surfer haircuts. But there was also present a mix of ethnicities that we were not accustomed to seeing in the isolated corner of the state where we lived—Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians of varied nuance that we were ill-equipped to identify.

In our town, at that time, you were mostly either white or American Indian. There was one black family, the Sanders, who seemed to have a child in every grade when I was in school. In my class, they managed to fit two, Tom and

Martha. There had also been another black family stationed at the Air Force's 777th Radar Squadron in Klamath who sent their son to our high school for a year or two. His name was Glen Frisbee.

One of the first things they did was draw our blood. The guy in front of me was black. He was also bigger than any human being I had ever seen—solid muscle, built like a linebacker. He gave up a blood sample and sat on a table nearby.

I had not had my blood drawn before and made the mistake of staring at the tube as the blood pumped out of my vein. It made my stomach churn. I sat down against a wall, trying not to puke. Then I heard what sounded like a water balloon being dropped from chest high onto hard concrete. The linebacker had passed out and fallen off the table. The sound I heard had been his head hitting the floor. I stood up and joined the next line.

There was one guy there who definitely did *not* look like the rest of us. He didn't look like the Blacks or the Asians or the Hispanics. He was almost translucently pale, with long, stringy blond hair and a scraggly wisp of beard. Instead of jeans and a madras shirt, he was wrapped in a filthy blanket.

We were marched into a large room and told to strip to our shorts. A doctor went around the room and fingered our privates while we coughed on cue. The hippie still clutched his blanket tight around him. "Take that off," one of the medics growled.

He did, and stood there naked.

"Put it on," the medic said, shaking his head.

We passed our physicals, or most of us did. There may have been one in the bunch lucky enough to come up 4-F, but if there was, I don't remember who. Safe to say, the rest of us hated him. I was disappointed to find that I hadn't come down with asthma as the result of the one cigarette I had tried to hack my way through. I suggested to one of the doctors that I believed I may have had flat feet. Without even looking at my aforementioned, malformed dogs, he threatened to

put me in the paratroopers. If I bailed out over enemy territory, he reasoned, there was only a 50/50 chance I'd make it to the ground alive anyway. If I was killed on the way down, my flat feet would not be a problem.

The exams were over, and we had a few hours until our bus left to return us to our families up north. We (and this is what a bunch of naïve bumpkins we were) decided to take a stroll around Oakland. Worse than that, we got ourselves off into a residential neighborhood. We were walking past a row of houses when a big dog ran out to the street-side fence, barking at us. A very large and dark woman sat on the front porch of the house. Larry Kohse (I *do* remember *that* name) flipped the ashes of the cigarette he was smoking at the barking dog. The dog went ballistic and the woman came off that porch like a freight train. She cussed Larry Koshe out in a language that none of us had ever before heard, though we had no trouble catching her drift. Folks in nearby homes were beginning to poke their heads out of doors and windows to see what all the commotion was about. We beat a quick retreat back to the bus depot, threatening Kohse with an ass-kicking all the way. Some years later, I learned that the odd dialect the large, dark woman had been using that day was called Ebonics.

The ride home was uneventful. A few weeks later I received notice that I had passed my physical and had been classified 1-A. Officially, I was just the kind of fellow Uncle Sam was looking for to send off to kill communists.

I managed to put off getting drafted a while by going to school, taking classes at the local JC. But my heart wasn't in my studies, and I soon let my classes and my deferment slide. Soon after, the mail brought a note from the government. "Greetings," it began, a friendly enough salutation. The content of the letter, however, was more ominous. I had been drafted.

I passed time waiting for my report date by doing what I had been doing all along—cruising in my '64 GTO, partying with my friends, trying to get laid. My Aunt Delores, though, took particular offense at my being called up. She said she was going to write a letter to President Nixon and get me out of the draft. I don't

know if she ever did. It is more likely that the military had already filled their quota of recruits by the time they got to me, or maybe that the casualty count from the war was not as high as had been expected but, sure enough, along came another letter cancelling my draft notice. Aunt Delores took credit for that.

I took this as a sign that I should get on with my life. I took a job at the lumber mill, purchased my first brand new car, a 1970 Plymouth Duster 340, and got married.

About this time, the folks in Washington had begun to sense that the draft was losing its appeal. They decided to spice it up, make it more fun, and give it an element of chance, like going to Vegas or Atlantic City. (We didn't have Indian casinos back then). They came up with the "Draft Lottery."

If I remember correctly, it worked something like this: some bureaucrat in D.C. stood by a tumbler containing 365 balls, each marked with a date from the upcoming calendar year. The tumbler turned, and when it stopped, a ball was removed. If the date on the ball was, say, May 8th, that day was assigned the number one. If your birthday was May 8th, you would be drafted first the next year. The tumbler spun until all the balls had been pulled out and assigned numbers. If your birth date corresponded to a number between 200 and 365, you were pretty safe. If your number fell between one and 199, an Oriental vacation was likely in your future.

My number was 186.

Every month, I would trek on down to the local Selective Service office to check on the progress of the draft. The lady there was happy to opine on how many numbers the draft might gobble up in the next thirty days. In November of 1970, I stopped by to see how my number was holding up. "They'll probably get to you next month," she said, cheerful as ever.

I drove to Eureka the next day and enlisted in the Air Force.

Later, I heard that they had only drafted up to number 184.

But I was already on my way to Lackland and the wild blue yonder.