

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Army Me: Going Home

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Army Me: Going Home

Only a few months before entering the Army, my future—and my future whereabouts—were unknown. From Baltimore, surprisingly, I went straight home. I lived with my parents for the remainder of my military service. And commuted to Newark five days a week. In a civilian suit. In a new car (very small), I bought on my (also small) Army pay. Some of our neighbors never knew I was in the Army. Why should they? I was gone for only four months (Basic and Intelligence Training) and they never saw me in uniform.

The lack of uniform is explained by my assignment: Intelligence. Living at home is explained by my assignment to Newark. My being assigned to Newark is explained in detail in *My Life*. To summarize: I asked for it. When given the choice, I picked Newark over Paris or Hawaii or San Francisco. Why? Because I knew I'd get it. The better assignments they offered were highly unlikely, precisely because they *were* the better assignments. These were the cities chosen by everyone, but everyone could not go to these better cities because, to use a common unmilitary phrase, seating was limited. Each city had a fixed head count, but who in their right mind would ask for Newark? Me. And John, after I convinced him. Another friend, Rick, wouldn't listen and picked Paris. They sent him to Korea.

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The first thing I did after getting assigned to Newark was call Patty. The first thing I did when I got home to Union was call Patty. Before I started my new position in Newark, we were in each other's arms. Patty was the reason I never learned what life was like for the guys stationed away from home. Did they carouse? Chase women? I don't know because after work (except for Broadway shows) I didn't go wherever they went. I went to see Patty.

Here I was, fifteen years after moving away from Newark, back working in an ordinary-appearing job. I say it appeared ordinary because I was just another business-suited business commuter. The office and its employees also looked ordinary. You couldn't tell this was strictly by-the-book military by our looks. Out of uniform there was no saluting, no standing at attention, no military protocol except for referring to our officers as "sir." Rank was never mentioned. It was classified, as was our work. I can tell you only that most of it was background investigations for security clearances.

If I told you there was a mailroom, I guess it wouldn't be giving away any secrets. If I said I was assigned to take the place of a soon-to-be retired twenty-year enlisted man, that's of little interest to our county's enemies. And who would care about his identity more than twenty-five years later? But therein lies a tale.

On my first day, I was given my assignment and introduced to the current lord of the mailroom, one Wally Reumann. I was concentrating on his explanation of the job so it took me more than a few minutes to recognize him. Then I made the connection and asked him if I was correct. He confirmed my supposition, showing little surprise at the identification. Apparently, it happened a lot given the ages of new recruits coming into his sphere of command.

This was the Wallace Reumann, whose picture I—and millions of other powerless preteens—had seen for a dozen years in the back of magazines like *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*. His ads featured his face and form, and his ability to turn you into a *Marital Arts Expert in Ten Easy Lessons*. All through the medium of the U.S. Mail. This mail-order Wallace Reumann was a minor league Charles Atlas. But the oft-seen Mr. Atlas was, in fact, an aging figurehead. Wally was the real thing. I shook his hand. I saw him every day for a few weeks until I took over his job and he retired. Retired, that is, to run his business. Or should I say businesses. Seems Wally was not only running his mail-order martial arts business, but also a Karaté school right there in Newark. Not yet forty, he was leaving the Army after twenty years to devote his full time to the business he'd been running most of those years—from Army mailrooms all over the world. I was impressed.

Did I mention Wally was impressive? Six-foot-two, shoulders requiring special tailoring, a crewcut that looked like it could take paint off the wall, and the biggest hands I ever saw. Or shook. These hands were also the strongest I'd ever seen. Other people in the office used the new electric typewriters. Wally used a monster manual Olympic whose keys I could barely depress. Seated at the Olympic, Wally's hands played a rapid rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat, not unlike a machine-gun in both speed and power.

There was another memorable event soon after I returned to Newark. If you're old enough, I know you remember. If you weren't there, then you should have learned about it in school. This is the end of October, 1960 and the event was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Up to this point, my military career had been improving by unexpected leaps and improbable bounds. You might call

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it luck. I was too insecure with my future to call it anything. This little threat of a possible Third World War put my life in the military back into perspective.

I had returned to Newark just in time for Cuban Missile Crisis. I was back with Patty just in time to wonder if I'd stay there. Everything was coming back to normal and then, WHAM! Would our unit get involved? Would we go to war and my body be handed back to the Infantry? Would there even be time for that? If this war extended beyond Cuba, as Russia threatened, would there even be time to say good-bye? In the evenings, we'd sit in the park listening to the news on the car radio. I don't know which of us was more frightened. Only a week before, I thought I was out of the frying pan for good. Now we, and this superficial thing called civilization, were being threatened with the ultimate fire. The scare lasted about a week. The scars are still there.

Our service in Newark was mostly mundane. Our primary enjoyment was the free, thanks to the USO, theatre in New York. There were other amusements. A few of us would disappear to the basement when it was time to burn our waste (even our garbage was classified). It was a large Federal building with a basement three stories tall. We made a ball from masking tape and played stickball. Other diversions connected with this Federal building were parties with our fellow intelligence agencies. Especially memorable were the crap games with the FBI.

Another of my pleasures was reading the captain's Playboy. (Remember, I ran the mailroom.) There was some minor excitement the time he came into my mailroom to look for his delayed Miss March--and I threw him out. He complained to the Major. I was called into the Major's office and told to be more polite. Not the typical response you might have expected. As I said, after Basic Training my military experience was very atypical.

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