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E.M. Koeppel Short Fiction Contest

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My Turn In The Barrel

By

Robert O. Harder

SHORT BIO:

Robert O. Harder, a retired business executive, flew 145 heavy bomber combat missions during the Vietnam War. A writer, his latest book, *"Flying from the Black Hole: The B-52 Navigator-Bombardiers of Vietnam,"* was released in May, 2009 by the Naval Institute Press.

Christmas Eve, 1967

Travis Air Force Base, California

8:00 PM

The nurse had wheelchaired me into the Burn Wing, probably because an empty bed could be found in that part of the hospital. I wasn't burned, wasn't even wounded for that matter. Hell, I had yet to get over there.

I knew it was a "yet." I would have already been with my Vietnam-deployed bomber squadron but for a personal snag--the flight surgeons had decreed I couldn't handle the B-52's life support/oxygen system without nose surgery to straighten my deviated septum. Unfortunately, there were post-operative complications, and an ambulance had just raced me back to Travis.

Just hours earlier, I undid a week's worth of healing with a single, mighty sneeze. The gauze and cotton stuffed inside my rebuilt nose was blown out so forcefully the soft, inside nasal tissue hemorrhaged. That had immediately led to the morning's ambulance ride, a couple of blood transfusions, and a prolonged

stay in Travis' intensive care unit, where their trauma team finally got the bleeding stopped. After concluding I wasn't going to die on them, they hurriedly threw on new bandages--another emergency was queued up outside the IC ward--and packed me off in care of the aforementioned Burn Wing nurse.

Making no bones I was keeping her from more important duties, and despite my helplessness and acute discomfort, the tight-lipped RN rushed the chair into a semi-darkened room and unceremoniously dumped my carcass in the outside bed, tossing an over-the-shoulder comment that she'd be back, though I never did see that particular one again. The huge Travis medical complex cared for some of the Vietnam War's most grievously wounded men and it was apparent even to a layman that its grimmed-faced, green and white uniformed staff were stretched to their limits.

After thirty agonizing, lonely minutes it came to me I'd slipped through the administrative cracks and needed to take matters into my own hands. Not only had I been left rag-doll weak and unattended, my blow-torched throat was desiccated from days of open-mouthed breathing, and it was torture even to swallow. I badly needed drinking water.

I glanced anxiously around the dimly lit room looking for any form of relief, zeroing in on a hitherto unnoticed moisture-beaded aluminum container perched on the opposite side of the night stand separating the two beds. Before making my move,

however, and acting somewhat like a cat burglar on the prowl, I squinted hard at the shapeless shadows hovering about the inner bed. Nothing appeared to be moving, nor were there any animate sounds emanating from that direction, though such could easily have been masked by the hospital's steady background din. There did appear to be a drawn privacy curtain, however, and somehow I sensed another human presence.

Screw it. I was too distressed and thirsty to care about the niceties. Stretching out as far as I could without falling out of bed, I snatched the other guy's water pitcher and drank the sweet stuff down in one gulp from straight out of the container.

9:00 PM

Still nobody had appeared at my bedside, neither nurses to attend to my physical needs nor staff to fill out readmission paperwork, making me uneasy on both counts. In the military, he who is without documents does not exist, and I was growing increasingly desperate for more liquid. Although hospital staff continually bustled past the open door, not one person had entered. It didn't help that my raw throat could produce no useful distress signals and apparently the room was too dark for passing nurses to see my animated hand waving.

Extremely uncomfortable, with anger and self-pity building, my baser instincts took over. I began plotting ways to extract

revenge from the institution, settling on a guerrilla campaign: If sustenance was not offered, I would steal it from passing trays; if the staff withheld aid and succor, I would in turn not speak nor cooperate with them, but instead throw obstacles up at every turn; when I began worsening from their inhumanities, I would refuse emergency medication, spewing it out even if force-fed--one delicious idea trampled over another and I very nearly rubbed my hands in anticipation. Suddenly, from down the corridor--I couldn't tell whether to the left or right--people began yelling.

"Sergeant, you are not to be out in the hall without supervision," an authoritative female voice was bellowing. "Now turn that wheelchair around and return to your room."

"Get bent, lady," came the snappish reply, "I'm heading back to my unit. You people get out of the way!"

Heavy footfalls arose from several directions, presumably in hot pursuit of the runaway.

"Sergeant Wilson, stop this instant!"

The hurly-burly grew louder and louder, until the mob collided in front of my door. The sergeant glanced about furtively, recognized the cover my near-lightless room offered, whirled his wheelchair ninety degrees, and spun himself through the opening.

He never had a chance; two orderlies came from behind and grasped the chair's handles, yanking him back out along the same track he'd rolled in on. I could hear the white uniforms sternly admonishing the patient while they pushed him back to his cell, the fellow not uttering a single word in reply.

As the hubbub died away, one of the older nurses glanced into my room and did a double-take. Without a word to me, she marched to the end of the hall, heels clicking like a storm trooper's, and ordered somebody to "find out right now who's taking care of that new fellow in 223."

Meanwhile, I couldn't erase the image of poor 'ol Wilson as he charged into my room, no matter there'd only been seconds to take the scene in. His splotchy-red, deeply-scarred face had been knocked lopsided, his hair singed clean off. One eye was bandaged shut, like maybe there wasn't anything in that socket anymore; both arms were fried a crispy black/brown and still suppurating from massive burns. His withered legs were wrapped heavily in gauze, the right one bearing a fresh slash and oozing blood, probably caused by a sharp corner during his attempt at Escape & Evasion. Oh, yeah, his left hand was gone. He'd been pushing the wheelchair rim with its stub . . .

10:00 PM

God, but that pitcher of cold water had tasted good! Better than anything I've drunk before or since, including the frostiest of mugs on the hottest of summer days. It dawned on me how deeply refreshing just plain cold drinking water could be-- and was left wondering why we humans were so fixated on having to doctor it up in a thousand different ways rather than simply enjoying the stuff in its purest form.

While I was mulling over that bit of philosophy a terrifying scream erupted from the other bed, confirming there had indeed been a live person in it while simultaneously scaring the bejesus out of me. The man's painkilling drugs had apparently worn off, and though still not fully conscious the excruciating pain was enough to override his torpor and set him off.

"Morphine for Room 223!"

A couple of nurses armed with dripping needles hustled in and shot the fellow up until they shut him up. Judging from the multiple IVs and other paraphernalia I could now see tripoded above the bed--they had to pull the privacy curtain aside to get at him--I figured the guy for another near-terminal burn victim. On their way out, the nurses dropped off a fresh water pitcher and asked if I wanted something to eat. I shook my head no on the food, my throat was too sore to get anything solid past it, but gratefully nodded acceptance of the water. The one smiled

real nice, solemnly promising to bring back yet another ice-cold pitcher "in a couple of minutes." As they walked out, she dropped the readmission paperwork in my lap for signature. Silent orders were transmitted to all hands standing down the Travis Guerrilla War.

11:00 PM

The lights in the hallway had been lowered even further, with only the warmer, yellowish variety still left on. The wing was very quiet now, even more so than just an hour earlier, except of course for the constant moaning, the soft cries, the occasional shrieks. Those sounds never went away.

Without preamble, a candy striper appeared at my door, accompanied by a rolling cart full of what looked like holiday stuff. Wow. I had completely forgotten it was Christmas Eve.

"Would you like a present from Santa?" she asked, careful not to impose herself until she was sure of the reception.

I eagerly motioned her in, though not a little taken aback by the appearance of this most unexpected visitor. She was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, no doubt recruited from one of the nearby high schools at Fairfield or Vacaville and likely carrying notions of a nursing career. The candy stripers, all young female volunteers, had been so named because their red and white-striped uniform dresses resembled candy canes.

The girl smiled indulgently while I mimed confusion over which gift to chose, hoping she would hang around a while and talk to me. She was a classically pretty blond, her voice vibrantly alive, full of hope and promise. I became acutely aware I was but a few years older.

"Well, let's see," she said deliberately, like she was a fancy department store saleslady sizing up a well-to-do customer, "what do we have on our cart that you might like?"

I shrugged amiably. Whatever.

"Oh, here's something I bet will make you feel better!" She held up a little box wrapped in snowy white paper peppered with jolly red elfs, tied together by a silky-blue ribbon.

I gazed at her with what I hoped was a pleased expression, though it would have been hard even for my mother to tell. My face was a mix of red/white spots and dark bruises; my ballooned-up, black and blue proboscis now rivaling that monument attached to Jimmy Durante. In a word, I looked a fright.

No matter. Smiling broadly, she put the box in my lap, looked me square in the eye, and chirped, "Merry Christmas!"

With that she was gone, off to the next room.

11:30 PM

I couldn't stand it any longer; I had to open my present. I contrived to stretch out the little ceremony, very deliberately untying each of the blue knots--savoring each twist of the ribbon--then slowly tearing away the elf paper. Carefully, almost with trembling hands, I lifted the box cover.

Inside, individually wrapped in tissue paper--I was sure the candy striper had added that personal touch--were a dozen large jawbreaker hard candies. Of the red and white variety no less! I picked one out and popped it in my mouth.

It took a while, but my salivary glands slowly came to life. I drank a little water. More saliva. The candy began melting in my mouth, the soothing nectar trickling down my throat. Almost instantly, I felt the sugar rush and its welcome burst of energy. More importantly, the candy drip was easing the painful rawness in my mouth and gullet. For the first time in a long while I felt reasonably comfortable.

After a rather noisy but necessary round of throat-clearing I decided to show my appreciation by speaking it aloud at the now sacred spot where the girl had stood. They were the first words I'd been able to utter in over a full day.

"Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, little candy striper."

Midnight

A very agitated Wilson was about six inches from my face. The candy juice had acted like a tranquilizer and I must have been sound asleep for him to get in that close. It was his smell that woke me. The smell of bad breath and antiseptics, the smell of foul bandages and incontinence, the smell of rotting, burned flesh. The unmistakable scent of what should have been a dead man.

"Dammit, Ed," he sputtered, his lopsided good peeper looking past me at something only he could see, "what the hell is going on? I leave you in charge of the squad and here you are shackled up in a Long Binh whorehouse!"

I was too nonplussed to offer any explanation for my dereliction of duty, though thought it prudent to at least say something.

"Yes, Sergeant Wilson. I--"

He cut me off. "I ain't got time for any of your candy-ass excuses," he snarled, "just get the boys ready for the bomb drop."

Wilson held up the stub where his wrist watch used to be and checked the time. "Command Post says the F-4s will be over in ten minutes. Lay those markers out right now so them blind Air Force pukers don't drop that shit on top of us!"

I had no idea what to say or do.

"Jesus H. Christ, Ed. Get it in gear and move out!" He suddenly looked up, toward the sky, his blood-shot eye rolling white. "Here they come! Here comes the fighters!"

A moment later, his jaw dropped. "Something's wrong--they're lining up on us." He tried to wave the Phantoms off. "No, no, no! The Cong are over there! Over there in them goddamn hills, you stupid sons-a-bitches!" He was jabbing the forefinger on his good hand at the faded print of the Sierra Nevadas hanging above my head.

The sergeant was raising such a ruckus another herd of white uniforms had formed up and was thundering down the hallway.

"Oh, Jesus, here it comes." Wilson was beside himself, rocking back and forth in his wheelchair, panting and gasping like somebody trying to talk and flee at the same time. "Oh, sweet Jesus, Mary Mother of God . . ."

It was too late; the napalm got him again. As the canisters rolled in, he protectively threw an arm over his head--the one missing the hand--and sucked in his breath. The seconds ticked by. He made one last gurgling/strangling sound before collapsing in his wheelchair.

At length, one of the nurses standing quietly a few feet away, who apparently had been through this before, whispered tightly to her nearby colleagues that "I think it's over." Mercifully, their patient had passed out, his misery at least

temporarily eased, the man's body having crumpled into an odd little pile atop the canvas seat. A shrunken bag of skin and bones parked on a wheelchair seat, all that was left of United States Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Mack Wilson.

The nurses propped him upright, tucked a blanket around his shoulders, and slowly rolled the chair back down the corridor. One of the older gals followed respectfully behind, holding in her hands the Aussie bush hat the sergeant kept tied to the side of his chair but had been knocked to the floor when he tried to escape from the burning, jellied, gasoline bombs. The lady unconsciously fell into step behind the other two nurses, the three of them forming the cortege honor guard.

1:00 AM

Christmas Day

Sleep would not come. Only an hour earlier there was no staying awake and now I couldn't drop off to save my life. I could not stop thinking about Wilson, nor blot from my mind's eye the look on his face when he took the incoming.

The increased activity out in the corridor hadn't been helping either. I'd almost doze off, or at least begin drifting toward sleep, when the clattering would start up again. Four covered gurneys had passed my door since midnight, two in the last fifteen minutes. One of the somber-faced, dark-suited men

pushing the bodies had remarked to his companion that for some reason "they tend to die more frequently at night."

It was when the fifth gurney passed, with the dead guy's loose hand banging against the cart's aluminum framework--nobody but me noticed it--that things began to register. The broken-nosed, whiny schmo lying in my bed had his head up and locked. Here I was pissing and moaning and generally feeling sorry for myself about some rinky-dink aches and pains when, in fact, I was the luckiest patient in the wing, maybe in the entire hospital.

I had everything in the world going for me. In just a few short weeks, sixty days tops, I would be back to 100%. I didn't have any real pain--not true real pain, wouldn't be facing years of rehabilitative therapy, wasn't scarred for life or facing decades of skin grafts, remained in full possession of all my marbles, and still had the standard allotment of arms, legs, eyes, ears, and private parts. I'd even gotten a new nose out of the deal.

Not so the wounded at Travis, especially the guys in the Burn Wing. If they lived, men like Wilson and my roommate were so badly chopped up they would never be close to whole again--physically or mentally. They would have no chance of leading a regular life, or getting a conventional job, or marrying the girl back home. For them, there would never be any children or

grandchildren--no carefree walks in the park, no pleasant summer days on a golf course, no visiting Paris and touring the Louvre, no feeling the warm surf sloshing between one's toes while wading on an ocean beach.

Yep, I was one lucky guy--

A hard lump abruptly materialized in my throat and, even more unexpectedly, tears began flowing down my cheeks. As I reached in bewilderment for a tissue box to mop up the sudden mess, my roommate again cried out in agony.

"Morphine for Room 223!" came the call from down the corridor.

And then I understood.

Very soon now, I would be on my feet and returned to my bomber squadron. Very soon now, I would be headed to where all these other fellows had just come from. Very soon now, IT WOULD BE MY TURN IN THE BARREL.

The End