

1953 1954 1955 1956 1957

THE FOUR YEAR HOTCH

*An Autobiography:
My Adventure in the Air Force*



Written by:

ROY REICHELT, JR.

&

ROY REICHELT, III

The Four Year Hitch

By: Roy Reichelt, Jr.
Roy Reichelt III

Copyright © 2013 By Roy Reichelt, Jr.

All Rights reserved. Except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in database or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the publisher or the author.

The events in this story about my life are true. However some of the names have been change and the dialog approximated.

The ISBN No. below is for printed version:

ISBN-10: 0988292637
ISBN-13: 978-0-9882926-3-5



Published by The Seashell Books
www.theseashellbooks.com

The constant statements by the older people, that the winters were colder or the summers hotter than now, are due to the tendency to magnify and remember the unusual while the ordinary is forgotten.

- Willis Isbister Milham

PREFACE

In the early 1960s, my wife, who had always expressed an interest in genealogy, started to research our family tree. It took about four more years before I caught the family tree fever myself and joined in the search. My interest has never wavered ever since.

While we have been able to acquire numerous family documents from sources both inside and outside of the United States, these documents only contain cold, hard facts such as census information, birth dates, marriages, deaths, etc. What was not available is any information about what kind of life our ancestors actually lived. So, we have not satisfied our natural curiosity about how they thought, lived, worked and raised their children. In order to hand down some family heritage to my children, grandchildren, and descendants, I decided to select an interesting period of my life and document it.

Once I made the decision to write this story, I had to decide on three things: First, what period of my life would I cover in the story and why; second, how much detail, sexual and otherwise would be included; and last, how many friends and family members' secrets would be revealed in the story.

I also agonized about the time frame I would cover. When I remembered past conversations I had with family and friends, two distinct periods came up in virtually every conversation; either their college days or their military service. Most young men living at that time had participated in one or the other of these activities right after high school graduation, so they became a shared experience. Whether going off to college or the military, you were probably on your own for the first time in your life. You had to make your own decisions and accept the consequences. Your parents were not there to help if you made a mistake. Since I completed college later in life, I selected the period right after high school graduation through completion of my four year commitment to the U.S. Air Force. Roughly, that covered the period from May 1952 to October 1957.

I now focused on answering my second question; how much sexual detail

The Four Year Hitch

and other off color information would be included. My own inclination was to document truthfully the experiences I had and to write them using the language which was actually used at the time. In my youth, both in and out of the military, the language used was heavily laced with profanity, and sexual exploits were discussed including intimate details in the barracks after dates. Some of the discussions may have even been truthful, but not many were when it came to talking about sex and women.

Then I considered how future readers would accept this openness. I thought of the people who bought expensive tickets to a Broadway Show and then sat through two hours of extreme profanity and nudity. After the show, these same people would rave about the authors dialog, profane as it may have been, and the wonderful performance of the semi-nude actors who played their roles to perfection. Then, on leaving the theater, these same people listened to two newsboys having an argument using the exact language used in the play and were shocked at hearing it used on the street. I decided that since I didn't want to offend anyone's sensibilities, especially current and future family members, I would keep the profanity to an absolute minimum and would only discuss the entrance and exit to sexual experiences. Future readers may fill in the blanks for themselves.

Lastly, I was faced with the problem of telling tales out of school; revealing actual names, dates and secrets which I knew of the individuals I interacted with. This proved to be my toughest obstacle. At first, I simply changed everyone's name, including my own, and wrote what I knew to be the truth and let the chips fall where they may. Then my son said, "Dad, you should use the actual names so we know who you're talking about." This sounded all right to me, so I edited this book and used the actual names in the story. I figured that it all happened so long ago that most of the players were either dead or wouldn't care anyway. Rereading the story after I had made the changes, I wondered what the individuals in the story had told their own children and grandchildren about this period in their lives; would they have wanted the truth to be known? This realization caused me to edit the story again and go back to the use of fictitious names and to also drop some of the secrets I knew about my friends and their families which had proved so interesting originally. My exploits and those of my own family I left intact.

The story you are about to read is basically true and reflects my life from May 1952 until October 1957. The events depicted actually happened, for the most part as described, but much of the information presented was obtained through barracks gossip (hearsay) and may or may not have been factual. However, since this story is written from memory some fifty-five years after

The Four Year Hitch

the actual events took place, there may be minor distortions caused by the tricks long time lapses play on the mind. This book is given with love to my descendents in the hope that if they continue researching the family tree, and I certainly hope they do, they can look back on one ancestor and know a little of his wondrous and adventure filled life.

THE FOUR YEAR HITCH

An Autobiography by:

Roy Reichelt, Jr.

Roy Reichelt III

CHAPTER 1

The Decision

~May - June 1953 ~

I walked along Shore Road heading for a meeting with some of my buddies at our usual haunt. I wasn't focusing too well today, and with each step I took, the sidewalk seemed to fight back. I was suffering from a super-sized hangover from a drinking bout the previous night. The pounding in my head was so severe I wished I could have left it at home.

It was the spring of 1953, and the hot, humid weather had moved into New Rochelle, New York early this year. It was also a year of mixed news reports. The good news was that the economy was strong and jobs were plentiful. The bad news was that the Korean War was still in full swing. The government was calling the Korea War a United Nations Police Action, but those of us who read the daily newspaper casualty lists faithfully weren't fooled. We knew it was a war. Another group of high school seniors had just graduated and joined those of us who came before them searching for work. I had graduated and turned eighteen a year earlier but still had not found a job.

Sweating, I finally reached my destination — the Alcar Delicatessen. I was proud of myself — I had made it all the way without tossing my cookies in the street or on the floor of the Alcar.

The Alcar was located in an old ramshackle, white farmhouse badly in need of paint. It was the only house left from the days when the area was dotted with small farms. The neighborhood which had grown up around the farmhouse was laced with tall apartment buildings and large, three story modern homes. The effect of these architectural changes made the farmhouse look strangely out of place, as if it were just sitting there patiently waiting for the wrecker's ball soon to come.

I entered the building and saw Tony, the owner, standing behind a counter stacked high with loaves of Italian breads and pastries. The counter

The Four Year Hitch

itself was framed by a wall of shelves loaded with assorted Italian canned goods. Hanging from the ceiling overhead on waxed cords, were delicious looking provolone cheeses, pepperonis and colorful strings of dried red and green peppers, garlic and onions. Normally the aroma filling the store was enough to make my mouth water, but today my nose was telling my stomach to rebel, so I just said a quick “Hi” to Tony, held my breath and walked past him to the back room.

The back room was furnished with hand-me-down furniture, a badly scarred kitchen table, two wobbly wooden kitchen chairs and a couple of overstuffed living room armchairs with stuffing hanging out in several places. But what would you expect — my buddies and I found the furniture sitting on the street curb a few months earlier and had just beaten the garbage collectors to it. With Tony's permission, we had turned his back room into a club house furnished with anything we could beg, borrow or steal.

I saw Joe as soon as I entered the back room. He stopped what he was doing and glared at me.

“Where the hell have you been?” he shouted. “We should have started an hour ago.”

“Ah, shut the fuck up!” I replied. “My head is killing me. I’ve got a hangover from hell, so don’t give me any of your bullshit.”

I felt miserable and questioned whether or not I really wanted to live. Once again, I attempted to drink the bar dry, and once again, the bar had emerged the undisputed champion. Hell, I couldn't even remember how I had gotten home, or even if I'd had a good time. But I figured someone would let me know, especially if I'd made an ass out of myself as I usually did when drinking. I really had to learn to hold my liquor better, if I was going to keep guzzling booze.

We were in the non-air-conditioned back room of the Alcar, which was actually an extension added to the original farmhouse sometime long ago. The deli was owned by a nice Italian guy, Tony Briscoe. He let us use the back room as a meeting place in exchange for doing odd jobs and making deliveries for him. Today we were meeting to continue a discussion started the night before, while we were tossing down a few cold ones at the Shore Road Tavern. At the time, I had been giving the guys the lowdown on my latest failed attempt to get a job. The interview had taken place earlier that day. One of my buddies, I think it was Joe, said, “Shit, since we can’t get decent jobs without first fulfilling our military commitment, maybe we should just go ahead and enlist in the service and get it over with. I’m tired of hanging around waiting to be drafted.” Joe’s idea sounded good to us but

The Four Year Hitch

we decided to delay finalizing anything until today when we were sober. Last night we were just too drunk to even find our way to the restroom let alone make a major decision.

I suppose I should introduce myself and the other members of the gang and provide some background to help you understand the predicament we were facing. My name is Roy Reichelt, and my buddies are Eddie, Billy, and Joe. I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1934, but moved to New Rochelle in 1942 when my father's government job was transferred to Fort Slocum Army Base from Governor's Island in New York City. I was about eight years old at the time of the move, and we had previously lived with my very protective grandmother. Prior to the move, I had been overly sheltered and was something of a Mama's boy. Now, some ten years later, I stood six feet tall and weighed 180 pounds. If I was still a Mama's boy, no one said so to my face.

Harold Joseph Lowry, called Joe by one and all, was my foster brother. We were just three months apart in age. Joe was a foster child whom the state had placed with my mother to take care of for a month or so. Mom had applied to the agency for a little girl, but until one became available, the welfare worker talked her into taking Joe, on a temporary basis, to live with us.

"It's just for a couple of weeks or so," the welfare worker had promised. "Just give him a temporary home until I can find a permanent foster home for him." She went on to explain that, "His mother is dead, and the father and the rest of the family are drunks. Joe has been in constant trouble since his mother's death, and the court ruled he cannot be returned to his family."

Joe was so lovable that the couple of weeks stretched into a permanent arrangement, and we became his family. With his blue eyes, jet black, curly hair and quick Irish smile, Joe was the better looking of the two of us and by far more popular. While Joe and I were the same age, I was a year ahead of him in school, and he was about five years ahead of me in street smarts. We considered ourselves brothers, which we truly had become.

Eddie and Billy Fell were brothers who came from an old, established New Rochelle family of Irish descent. Their grandfather, patriarch of their family, had been the Chief of Police for the City of New Rochelle, which benefited us on the several occasions we had gotten into minor scrapes. Their dad, a star athlete in high school and college, was well known and liked around town. Their mother was one of the prettiest and most popular girls in

The Four Year Hitch

the area during their courtship. Somewhere along the way, both parents had started drinking heavily which was a never-ending source of embarrassment to the brothers. But they handled it well and supported their parents to the fullest. The brothers, who were a year apart in age, were the brightest in our crowd.

The four of us had been close pals for about eight years. I graduated from New Rochelle High School in 1952, while the rest of the gang had graduated this year. It was now late May, 1953, and none of us had been able to find a decent job. It wasn't a case of not trying; I had been job hunting for over a year. No, the reason was simple — we were non-statistical victims of the Korean War.

Unfortunately, most of the male youth of the country between the ages of 18 and 25, were personally affected by the Korean War. To our misfortune, we fell right into the critical age bracket subject to the military draft. Oh, there was a way to avoid the draft. If your family had money and could afford to send you to college, you could receive a deferment. from the draft. Otherwise, you hit the pavement and attempted to find a job that paid a decent salary while waiting to be drafted. Of course, we hoped our draft number would never come up. We weren't against the war; it was just that no one wanted to die for a United Nations "Police Action." Hell, we weren't at all sure what our country was even doing over there or what the war was all about. But if our country had declared war, we were willing to join the fight. You know — my country right or wrong. But a Police Action left us a little cold. All we could do in protest was gripe. In the end, if drafted, we would serve our country's call, but we would do it reluctantly.

Our immediate problem was that no employer would hire us if we hadn't completed our Military Service obligation. Oh sure, you could get jobs delivering newspapers, being a bus boy, or stacking skids with soda pop — all of which I had held. But you couldn't get a meaningful job with advancement potential such as; in the Federal or State Government, the telephone or electric companies. You had no chance of getting hired.

Yesterday had been a particularly bad day for me. I applied a month earlier for a job as a bank teller, and in the intervening weeks, had progressed through three interviews and thought I had the job in the bag. My final interview was with Mr. Everett, the bank's personnel manager, and the interview had gone well. We stood and shook hands. I headed for the door with a smile on my face and my spirits soaring. At long last, I had received

The Four Year Hitch

and accepted a job offer. Just as I was about to open the door to leave, Mr. Everett stopped me.

"Roy, I don't see the Military Service Section of your application completed. It must have been an oversight."

"I haven't had military service, Mr. Everett." I had purposely left that area of my employment application blank in hopes it would be overlooked.

"I'm sorry, Roy, but I have to retract the job offer since the bank's policy prohibits me from hiring anyone still eligible for the draft. My staff should have caught this omission when you first submitted your application." He paused, and then added, "I'm very impressed with you. Come back after you get your military service out of the way, and I'm sure I'll be able to find a place for you in the bank."

I had heard the same line before after countless other interviews, and I was getting damned sick of hearing it! With a forced smile on my face, I thanked Mr. Everett and left feeling like a deflated balloon. With my ass dragging, I'd headed for the Shore Road Tavern to drown my sorrows with more than a couple of cold ones to share my latest rejection with the guys. I found them sympathetic to my tail of woe, for they were in the same boat. That's when we agreed to meet the next morning to discuss the situation, and Joe's suggestion that we join the service.

Back at the Alcar

I flopped down in the only empty chair in the back room of the Alcar and looked around the room. I immediately began to feel better. The rest of the guys looked as bad as I felt —like shit warmed over. What's that old saying, "Misery loves company?" We began to discuss our military service options which seemed to boil down to three. First, we could wait to be drafted, but that might take several years, and we didn't want to waste any more time; second, we could volunteer for the draft, which was the quickest way to get in the service; but then you were stuck in the army for two years, and you were sure to be shipped to Korea once you completed basic training.

None of us wanted to be a grunt in the army with a 99% chance of going to Korea. The army also appeared to be taking the majority of the casualties there. Finally, we could enlist in the service of our choice and perhaps stay together under the "BUDDY SYSTEM." The only drawback was that we had to sign up for three or four years instead of the two years we would have to serve if we were drafted. The discussion went around in circles for a couple of hours with no decision. During that time, I had the

The Four Year Hitch

distinct feeling we would all like to forget this crazy idea and go for a swim, but none of us wanted to be the first to chicken out.

Joe finally broke the stalemate when he suggested, "Let's just jump on a bus and go talk to a recruiter and see what kind of deal the military has to offer."

This sounded like a good idea to all of us, so we headed for the bus stop to catch a ride to the Recruiting Office. The recruiters, Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, were all located in the same building in adjoining offices. When we walked in the building, they converged on us like a pride of starving lions sensing dinner was at hand. Oh, they were all friendly and assured us they would give straight answers to any questions we had. Having decided earlier that we weren't interested in the Army or Marines, Eddie decided he liked the idea of joining the Navy, so he sat down and talked to that recruiter. Billy, Joe and I didn't want to be cooped up on a ship somewhere for long periods of time, so we decided to talk to the Air Force Recruiter.

The recruiters really poured it on, telling us of the opportunities for adventure and travel to foreign lands that the service would provide us. We would be taught a trade which we could use to get a good job in civilian life after discharge. Best of all, they said we could probably go through basic training together under the "Buddy System." When they finished the sales pitch, we couldn't wait to sign up. Hell, we even forgot that the travel they were talking about was most likely being sent to Korea. Shit, if the real truth were known, I think we were just tired of hanging around and would have signed anything to escape the boredom.

Our first order of business, before we made the final decision on what service we were going to join, was to take an unofficial pre-entrance examination to see if we were smart enough to pass the official exam which would be administrated to us in New York City. We sat down and took the examination which was so easy it was hard to believe anyone could fail it without trying. Well, that's where we had our first surprise of the day. Joe failed the exam and was told he couldn't join up. (In later years, I always wondered if Joe had failed the test on purpose since several months later, he enlisted in the army and had no problem passing the test at that time.) Of course, we were disappointed that Joe wouldn't be with us, but Eddie, Billy and I decided to go ahead and join without him.

Now was decision time. Eddie, impressed with the Navy program, signed for a three year hitch. Billy and I liked the Air Force program and had to sign up for four years. Well, at least two of us would stay together. Our acceptance was conditional on passing the official intelligence test,

The Four Year Hitch

the physical examination and some aptitude testing. These tests would be conducted the following week at the main recruiting station located on Whitehall Street in New York City. The recruiter gave us each train tickets, meal tickets, a couple of dollars for expenses and directions to Whitehall Street. We left the Recruiting Office in high spirits and headed for the Shore Road Tavern for a cold beer. Hell, where else do you think we would go with two bucks burning a hole in our pockets.

The next week, Eddie, Billy and I met at the New Rochelle train station and headed for New York City. When we arrived at Whitehall Street, we were handed a clip board with several additional forms and told to complete them. Once this was done, we handed the completed forms in and were instructed to remove all our clothes, except our shorts and socks, and place them along with all other personal effects in a wire basket. The baskets were collected and stored in a locked room, and we were given a metal claim check on an elastic band which we could wear around our wrist which would identify our basket when we went to claim it.

We were now ready to begin the physical examination. They formed us into a long, single file line with other half-naked men. It sure wasn't a pretty sight. The men's bodies were all this sickening white color from being covered up during the long, cold winter that had just passed. I thought to myself, *Shit, I guess we could all use some sunshine in our lives.* They made me take my glasses off for the physical, so the line of men blurred into a white blob with specks of black throughout. The men came in all shapes and sizes, short and tall, skinny and fat, with convex and concave chests and varying levels of muscle development.

I turned to John, a new acquaintance who stood in line behind me. "Hell, John, if we represent the men defending this country, I think the country may be in trouble. Maybe we should consider buying Korean War Bonds."

John looked around the room and laughed. "You know, you may be right."

There was just no way that I could see how this sorry looking group of misfits could be molded into a lean, mean, fighting machine unless someone had a secret weapon. I would later learn the military did have such a weapon, and it was called basic training. They had the training routine down pat. The required transformation would be accomplished with ease, just as it had been for the millions of servicemen who came before us and, no doubt, those who would follow.

The total examination required us to pass slowly through about ten different medical stations. Each was identified by a large number over the

The Four Year Hitch

station; each manned by a doctor and his assistants. As we moved through the stations, we were routinely probed, jabbed, thumped and then moved to the next station where it all seemed to be repeated again. We were at station five when we were told to drop our shorts and, in front of everyone, we were checked for hernias. This was accomplished by the doctor grabbing my left testicle and saying, "Cough," and then repeating the procedure with my right testicle. Oh sure, I'd had this test before, but not with a large audience looking on. Pretty far out stuff for a guy who had always felt a little embarrassed in high school having to shower nude with the other guys after gym class. *Well — it can't get much worse than this*, I thought. I was proven wrong at the very next station where they performed the hemorrhoid check.

I didn't know exactly what went on behind the screen, but I had an active imagination, and God knows I wasn't anxious to confirm my thoughts. Judging from the yelps coming from the guys sent behind the screen, it wasn't pleasant.

One of the guys, Bob, came out from behind the screen and said, more to himself than to anyone else, "Christ, don't tighten up or it hurts like hell."

I was next. The doctor sat on a little stool and had me turn my back to him, drop my shorts, bend over and spread my cheeks. "As wide as possible," the doctor said. Based on what he saw, he either said, "Move on," or directed us behind a screen for a further check.

What a job for a doctor, I thought, smiling to myself, *Sitting and looking at backsides all day*. I hoped for the doctor's sake this wasn't his only job. All those years of medical school seemed wasted while he searched for the perfect backside. It could, however, offer an explanation for the bored, disinterested look on his face. Anyway, I must have been okay, as I was waved through by the doctor and escaped being — impaled, as I had come to think of it.

Finally, we arrived at the last station of the medical examination which was handled a little differently than the rest. Unlike our previous examination, with everyone watching, the last station was a private office with just you and the doctor present. This doctor was also different from the rest. Where the previous doctors were rather abrupt and rushed you through, this doctor didn't. He was chubby, short, bald and wore wire spectacles with round lenses. He also had a pencil thin mustache and was quite soft spoken. In overall appearance, he looked rather comical.

"Hi there, Roy, please sit down," he said.

This impressed me right away, as I had been standing in that damn line for over four hours and needed to take a load off my feet. Then, leaning close to me and speaking in a low voice, he began to ask silly questions.

The Four Year Hitch

“Do you like your mother and father?”

“Of course, I love my mother and father,” I replied.

“What do you think of boys? Do you like them?”

I chuckled lightly. “Most of my friends are guys. Hell, several of us are here today because we decided to join the service together, so I guess I like them well enough.”

“How about girls, do you like them?”

“I really like girls, but they don’t seem to show any interest in me.”

He didn’t seem to like my answers, so he reworded the same questions and asked them again. I gave the same answers. With all these stupid questions, I started thinking he was a little retarded. Finally, he smiled and said he thought I was okay, signed my papers and told me to proceed to the next room to pick up my clothes and get dressed. Later, when Billy and I were discussing our experiences, I found out from him that the doctor was checking to see if I was queer. When I heard this, my face turned bright red with embarrassment, but you have to remember we were just young kids who hadn’t had much exposure to life, nudity or queers.

The staff reviewed our paperwork, and after we finished dressing, they told us if we had passed or failed. Those of us who passed were taken into a large room and told to take a seat. A few minutes later, an officer came into the room and told us to stand and raise our right hand. He then proceeded to administer the Oath of Allegiance. When finished with the oath, we were congratulated and officially welcomed into the United States Air Force. At this point, I started to notice a change in all the men in uniform. While earlier they were polite and courteous, they now became abrupt and bossy. Instead of asking us to do things as they had before, they now started shouting orders and demanded our immediate response. I said to one, “What’s the matter, buddy? You got a bug up your ass or what?”

“Airman, you’re in the Air Force now, so just keep your mouth shut, and do what you’re told. Who knows...” he added, “...given enough time, you may even learn to like it.”

That was the first time anyone ever called me airman, and I wasn’t sure if I liked it or not. Up to now, using my name, Roy, had been good enough for everyone. This made me question for the first time if I had made the right decision in joining up. It wouldn’t be the last time I had asked myself this question.

Fully dressed, and now officially sworn-in members of the United States Air Force, we were taken into another large testing room and given a series of aptitude tests. After the tests were graded and the results known, Billy and

The Four Year Hitch

I found that while we had both scored high on the tests, we also scored high in different job skills. This eliminated our chances of going to basic training and technical school together.

"What happened to the buddy system we were promised by the recruiter when we enlisted?" I asked.

I heard a phrase I was to hear many times in the future to explain just about everything, "The needs of the Air Force come first."

I later learned that recruiters could be compared to used car salesmen — promise them anything, but make the sale. In later years, when things went wrong, I would laugh and say, "The recruiter never told me about this."

Well, so much for the buddy system. Billy and I would be going our own separate ways from this point on. It's a pretty scary feeling when you realize that the lifeline of strength, support and the security you drew from your buddies had been severed. You were alone and completely on your own for the first time.

The career field I wanted to get into was IBM PCAM Data Processing. I really didn't know much about it, but I had an Uncle Bobbie who had told me it was the up and coming business of the future. The placement clerk told me that the Statistical Specialist School, which I had qualified for, was the same as the Data Processing School. I found out later that this was another lie. But at the time, I was elated at being selected to attend the Technical School of my choice after basic training.

After the testing was finished, the sergeant told us he had a surprise for us and led us into another room. "Since you're officially in the Air Force now, we're going to give you your shots before you leave. Just take your shirts off and line up. This will only take a minute."

At this point, it seemed to me that the Air Force couldn't do anything if you didn't first form a single line in alphabetic order. Anyway, we formed the required line, and you can be sure, no one was fighting to be in the front of this one. We were to receive shots for smallpox, cholera, typhoid, tetanus and yellow fever. Each of the first two shot stations were manned by two medical assistants, one on each side of me, and I received a shot in the left and right arm simultaneously. At the last shot station, we received a single shot in our left arm. I believe it was for yellow fever. I found out why they only gave a single shot at this station when my turn came. The needle went smoothly and quickly into my arm, and as I started walking away it felt as if someone had poured molten lead on my left arm.

"God!" I said out loud. "That was the most painful shot I've ever had!"

Most of us got through this ordeal with just a sore, aching arm. However,

The Four Year Hitch

my new found friend, John, got woozy and they had to give him a dose of smelling salts to bring him around. The guy behind John got sick and vomited all over the place, splattering the medical assistants and several of the guys nervously waiting in line for their shots. It seemed everyone started cussing and shouting simultaneously at this poor sick guy, but the noise dimmed as I hurriedly left the room, anxious to get out of there and away from the stink of the vomit which was starting to make me a little sick to my stomach.

Before leaving, I was told to report back to Whitehall Street on October 3, 1953, and from there I would be sent to Sampson Air Force Base, Geneva, New York for basic training. Other instructions would be forwarded to me by mail. The sergeant then issued me a service number, AF43215678, and said, "Memorize it. From this point on, all your Air Force paperwork will be controlled by the service number you were just issued. So you better remember it."

Hell, now it even seemed that I had lost my name for a number. Well, for better or for worse, this was one situation I just couldn't walk away from. Something I had done quite often in the past when the going got rough. I had made the first major decision of my life, and I had done it without help or guidance from anyone. I remember wondering, at the time, if that's what they meant when they said, "The Service will make a man out of you." Only two problems remained. What to do with myself until October 3rd and — oh yes, how to break the news to my parents. It seemed I had forgotten, on purpose of course, to mention to them that I was planning to join the Air Force. But after all, I had just turned nineteen in March and was now a man on my own fully capable of making decisions — wasn't I? I hoped October 3rd would get here in a hurry as there was going to be hell to pay at home until I got out of town.

CHAPTER 2

Breaking the News

June 1953

After thinking about it a while, I decided that choosing the right moment to break the news to Mom and Dad that I had enlisted was going to be critical — especially if I didn't want to be on the receiving end of a rash of shit. With that in mind, I decided that Dad seemed most relaxed at breakfast during the weekend. I would wait until then to break the news.

That Saturday morning, while Dad was enjoying his bacon and egg breakfast and thumbing through the newspaper, I decided to break the ice. “Did you enjoy the Friday Night Fights last night?”

I thought this was a cool move on my part, since the fights were Dad's favorite TV show, and he enjoyed talking about them. His love of the fights wasn't shared by the rest of the family — we hated them. But every Friday night, he hogged the damn TV making the rest of us miss all the good shows we liked.

“The fights were really good last night,” Dad replied. “The fighters were evenly matched, and for a change, there were no questionable decisions in any of the bouts. I really enjoyed them.”

Since Dad was smiling and appeared to be in a good mood, I seized the moment and casually said, “Oh, by the way, I enlisted in the Air Force last week.”

Well, I guess I wasn't as tactful as I thought I was going to be. I had no sooner gotten the words out of my mouth, when Dad, usually an easy going guy, jumped to his feet spilling his breakfast coffee on the table. I don't mind admitting, his reaction was so unexpected that he nearly scared the shit out of me!

“What the hell are you talking about? You can't do that without our permission. Don't you realize there's a war going on?”

Backing away from the table, I tried to explain that once you turned

The Four Year Hitch

eighteen, and I was nineteen, a man didn't need parental consent to join the service. At this point, Mom started crying, Dad kept shouting and I felt like shriveling up as small as possible and crawling into a corner to hide. I had planned this announcement carefully and tried to handle it as tactfully as possible. I couldn't understand what had gone wrong and caused this outburst. Then it hit me — it must be because I spoiled Dad's leisurely Saturday morning breakfast. Oh, I knew they would be upset at the news, but didn't realize they would take it this badly. Hell, I just didn't think joining the Air Force was that big a deal anyway.

Anyway, I was forced to sit there at the table and answer the same dumb, or so I thought at the time, questions over and over again.

"Why didn't you discuss this with us first?"

"When did you decide to join up?"

"Did someone talk you into this?"

"How come Joe didn't join up?"

I answered all of these questions the best I could, but none of my answers seemed to satisfy Mom and Dad.

Finally, with a look of disgust, Dad said, "Roy, this is the most irresponsible thing you have ever done! I'm very disappointed in you." With that last word, he yelled for the dog, yanked Biscuit's leash from the peg on the wall and took her for a walk in an attempt to cool down. I was grateful he had decided to take the walk because I don't think I had ever seen him this mad or hurt. I could imagine several other courses of action open to him that wouldn't have been very pleasant for me. Mom didn't say much. She just sat and cried, which in hindsight, wasn't a very pleasant experience either.

By Sunday evening, the yelling and crying had stopped, as if a code of silence had been dropped over us. This was replaced with my folks just sitting there quietly glaring at me from time to time and shaking their heads in disbelief of what I had done. Well, let me tell you, the silence was worse than the yelling and crying. To escape, I decided to go out to Long Island and visit my Aunt Angelina, Uncle John and cousin, Mark, for a couple of weeks and let things cool down at home.

Aunt Angelina was my mother's favorite sister, and one of the nicest people you would ever want to meet. I didn't get along too well with Uncle John, who was the nasty sort, but he tolerated me for the sake of my mother and his wife. So I gave them a call and asked if I could visit them for a couple of weeks.

"Sure, come and stay as long as you want," answered Aunt Angelina. "We will look forward to your visit. Your Mom told us about you joining the

The Four Year Hitch

Air Force, so you can tell us all about it when you get here.”

“Okay, I’ll be there tomorrow.” I hung up the telephone and went into the bedroom to pack my bag.

The next day, I arrived at Aunt Angelina’s and, as always, I received one of her warm hugs of welcome. I wouldn’t have received this great reception if Uncle John had been home. Fortunately, he was at work. If he had been home, he would have made some smart ass remarks to me. To say I was not one of his favorites would be an understatement.

My aunt and uncle lived in a nice colonial house in Huntington Station, Long Island. The two-story house had three bedrooms, a full basement and was situated on an oversized wooded lot. We had always lived in apartment houses because Dad didn’t want to get in debt buying his own house as he always felt the next “Great Depression” was just around the corner. Therefore, I was always impressed, and at the same time, a little jealous of my relatives who owned their own homes.

My cousin, Mark, Angelina’s and John’s son, also lived at home and was there when I arrived. Mark had just received his final unemployment check, so he suggested we go down to the local bar, the Dew Drop Inn, and have a cold one. Mark had a theory about work and a system to avoid it as much as possible. He would get a job and work long enough to be eligible for unemployment. Once eligible, he would find a way to get fired or laid off and start drawing his unemployment checks. He would stay unemployed until his benefits ran out and then find another job and repeat the process. I couldn’t blame him much because when he got a job it was at the low end of the wage scale. After they deducted social security and income taxes from his paycheck, his take home pay was the same or less than his unemployment check. When you considered the expense of working, transportation, clothes, lunches, etc., he came out way ahead by not working. I never could understand how all those highly educated college people working in Government couldn’t figure it out for themselves. Then they could redesign the system to provide people an incentive to work instead of an incentive not to work. Anyway, never one to turn down a beer, especially if Mark was buying, which didn’t happen too often, I agreed, and we headed down to the Dew Drop Inn.

I guess I should tell you something about my cousin Mark. For starters, physically and mentally we were just about as opposite as you could get. I was six foot tall, heavy set, had a light complexion, brown hair and eyes and was a mixture of Italian, German and Scottish. I was also considered intelligent

The Four Year Hitch

by most people I came in contact with. Mark was my exact opposite. He stood five foot eight inches tall, weighed 140 pounds sopping wet, had a dark complexion, black curly hair and was a full blooded Italian. He also had the hot temper associated with the Italian men. In addition, he was about seven years older than I was and had quit school in the seventh grade because, "They weren't learning me nothing," Mark explained.

I had looked up to and admired Mark as my big cousin while I was growing up. Being older than I was, he got to do all the exciting things I wanted to do but couldn't because I was too young. Whenever possible, I sought out every opportunity to hang around Mark and loved to listen to his stories about woman and his adventures. Oh, I knew most of his stories were just made up, but I got a kick out of them anyway. Of course, the older I got, the more we were able to hang out together as our family was very close knit and did most things together. After I turned eighteen, the legal drinking age in New York State at the time, I could go to bars and dances with Mark, and we spent even more time together.

Mark's hot temper had gotten us into several fights, most of which were over other men's women. Mark would usually be the cause of the fights by asking someone else's girl to dance, and if she refused, he would say something like, "Oh, you think you're too good to dance with me." Then, of course, the girl's boyfriend would get into it to protect his woman. Because Mark was so small, his adversary would always figure a way to drag me into the fracas, which was a sure way to insure we would lose any fight. Mark may have been small, but he was ten times the fighter I was. Oh, I could bluff some pretty good fight talk, but when it came right down to the nitty-gritty, depending on me in a fight was crazy. I often wondered how I managed to get dragged into these fights which Mark started, but I did have a theory. If a big guy got in a fight with Mark, the guy had no chance of winning. If he beat up Mark everyone would say, "What did you expect? You were fighting a guy half your size." If Mark beat him, everyone would say, "Did you see that little runt kicked the shit out of that big guy?" Now with me, they didn't have to worry on either of those counts, because I was big and almost never won.

While we were sitting at the bar drinking, I told Mark how badly the folks were taking the news about me joining the Air Force.

"Cheer up," Mark said. "Don't worry so much about it. Your folks will get over it in a few days. Hell, if I wasn't 4F, I would go down and sign up and go with you."

The Four Year Hitch

This could have been the truth, as Mark just about drove the recruiters crazy during World War II trying to enlist.

After a few more drinks, Mark said, “You know, Roy, I always wanted to work in a plant nursery. Since you have three months before you have to go to basic training, how about trying to get a job with me?” He chuckled and added, “Besides, this is my last unemployment check, and my old man is starting to hound me to get a job.”

Mark always liked me to look for work with him since he had the worst Brooklyn accent I had ever heard. He used “earl” for “oil,” would say “Torty Toid Street and Toid Avenue” for “Thirty-Third Street and Third Avenue” and so on. Because of his accent and his problem filling out job application forms, I acted as the front man when we looked for work together. Having a good gift of gab, I did the talking for both of us and would help Mark complete the application form. Well, Mark’s proposition didn’t sound too bad to me, as I had to find something to do for spending money until I went into the Air Force in October.

While thinking it over, Mark sweetened the pot by buying me another beer and told me he is going to introduce me to some easy women. Mark was always going to fix me up with easy women, but never did. Heck, I don’t think he even knew an easy woman, but I fell for this same line over and over again. You never knew when he might get lucky and hit on the real thing by accident.

Hell, where women were concerned, I never had much success on my own, but I jumped at every opportunity to meet them. It wasn’t that I didn’t attract women, because I did, it was just that whenever I got around them, I couldn’t act normal. I would get all tongue tied, giddy and act like an idiot which turned the girls off pretty damn quick. Woman wanted a cool dude, and I sure didn’t fit that description.

Finally, after a few more beers and some chit chat, I agreed to Mark’s job search idea. I decided that since I didn’t have anything better to do for the next few months, I would go along with his plan. Mark insisted that we start our job search early the next morning. Mark, who had never planted anything in his life, suddenly became an expert on nurseries and shared his knowledge with me. Finally, we left for the house and a good night’s sleep before we started our job search the next day.

The next morning I woke up at sunrise and rushed into the bathroom to shit, shower and shave. In my hurry shaving, which might have been

The Four Year Hitch

aided by a slight hangover from the night before, I nicked my face in several places and stuck some little pieces of toilet paper on the nicks to help stop the bleeding. I then picked out some clean clothes, suitable for job hunting of course, and got dressed. Well, here I was all ready to go, but where the hell was Mark? I went upstairs to his bedroom and found him still sleeping like a log. I went over to the bed and started shaking him which I had to do for about five minutes before I could get him stirring. Early rising had never been a problem for me, as I was a morning person anyway. Hell, I couldn't stay in bed past seven o'clock if my life depended on it! Mark was just the opposite. It took TNT to dislodge him from bed in the morning. His being on unemployment hadn't helped since he only had to get up early one morning a week to go to the unemployment office and sign for his check. Mark finally got out of bed, cleaned up and declared he was ready to start the job quest after we had coffee and donuts at the local diner.

We left the diner after breakfast, such as it was, and started to get into Mark's 1949 Plymouth Coupe, when Mark, able to see a little better after his coffee, took a look at my face and asked, "Roy, what the hell are those little papers stuck all over your face? Youse can't go job hunting looking like a bloody Christmas tree."

"I cut myself shaving," I replied.

"Well go back in the diner and wash those papers off your face so youse don't look like such a jerk."

I had to agree. All those little pieces sticking to my face didn't look to good. I went back to the diner's restroom and washed the papers off. They had dried pretty hard on my face and a couple of the cuts started bleeding slightly once the paper was removed. Holding some fresh paper to the cuts, I left the diner and jumped in the car. Mark started the engine and we were on our way.

Actually, it wasn't a bad start at all. It was still only eight o'clock in the morning, the sun had broken through the clouds and it now looked as if it would be a bright sunny day. Our spirits lifted, and we were sure we would be successful in our job hunt.

Riding with Mark was an adventure in itself. Once experienced, you would never forget. The reason Mark was 4F was that his eyes were so bad that he had virtually no peripheral vision at all, and his near and distance vision was not a hell of a lot better. I never could figure out how he passed the eye exam to obtain his driver's license in the first place. I guessed he had gotten one of his buddies to take the test for him.

He would just point his car in the direction he wanted to go and heaven

The Four Year Hitch

help other drivers if they got in his way. He didn't stop at most traffic lights, full stop signs and even drove past school buses as they were unloading students. For all that, he never got a ticket, even though he had been stopped and warned many times. A lot of the family wouldn't ride with him, but I found it kind of exciting and a lot of fun, especially after a few drinks.

On the way, Mark filled me in on his master plan for the job search. It seemed he didn't even know where any plant nurseries were located, but planned to just drive around until we saw one, stop and have me go in to ask for a job. After driving for about fifteen minutes, I spied a nursery a couple of blocks away, pointed it out to Mark and he pulled in. We jumped out of the automobile and walked up to the front door which was locked. The whole place looked deserted. A sign posted on the door stated that operating hours were from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. which wiped out Mark's, "All nurseries start work at the crack of dawn" theory. As luck would have it, there was a diner across the road, so we decided to pull in, have a second cup of coffee and wait for the nursery to open.

A little before 10:00 a.m., the nursery opened, and we crossed the street and went in. With me doing the talking, I ask the clerk at the front counter where I could find the manager.

"You can find him in the back room," the clerk said. "He's the bald, black guy with the huge belly."

Armed with this description, we looked around and finally located the manager. We approached him and, in my most charming manner, I said, "We're looking for work either full or part time. Do you have any openings?"

"Business has been slow, and I just had to lay off several employees, but if you come back in a couple of weeks I may be able to find something for you." The manager took his time and looked Mark over from stem to stern. Then he said, "I don't think your buddy is big enough for the heavy lifting that's required."

Well, little comments like that would cause Mark to completely lose his temper and he would begin to raise hell. Unfortunately, Mark heard the comment and was about to go after the manager. Not wanting any trouble, I dragged Mark out of the place before he had a chance to call the manager, "a dumb nigger" which would be a typical response from him when he was mad. I sure didn't want to be party to a race riot. Hell, blacks always scared the hell out of me anyway, and I could visualize Mark and me lying in the gutter all cut up and bleeding with a shiv in our guts.

With Mark still fuming, we drove away and started looking for another nursery. We found several, stopped and went in each and asked for work,

The Four Year Hitch

but always got the same answer, “We are not hiring at the present time.” It was now late afternoon, and I was all for giving up this stupid idea, which was making less and less sense to me as the day wore on. Also, it was getting pretty expensive with gas at .23 cents a gallon, and Mark made me pay half, probably to get even for those beers he bought me the previous night. But Mark insisted we try a few more places before giving up. Hell, I had never seen him this hyped up over a job before, so I agreed to keep looking.

By now, we were driving on some back roads near Central Islip, Long Island, and found ourselves in farm country with plenty of green fields, pastures and woods — truly beautiful country. I was sitting back relaxing and enjoying the scenery when we came to an area enclosed by a red brick fence, behind which were some well maintained gardens. A few minutes later, Mark spotted a large sign which had “EMPLOYMENT OFFICE” written on it and an arrow pointing to a white stone driveway.

“Christ, Roy!” Mark exclaimed. Just look at this place. It must be the biggest nursery on Long Island. Let’s try here for a job.”

Before I could answer, Mark turned in the driveway and followed the signs to the Employment Office. Finally, after a quarter of a mile drive, we arrived at a parking lot, which we found practically empty, and parked as close to the building as we could get.

I paused and looked over the building and the surrounding grounds.” Mark, this just doesn’t look like a plant nursery to me.”

“Oh, what the hell do youse know!” he answered, “What else would this place be out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But something about it doesn’t seem right to me.”

Following the signs, we climbed a large, outside metal stairway to the second floor of a two-story, red brick building. We arrived at a door with a large “EMPLOYMENT OFFICE” sign on it. We entered a rather large reception room filled with desks. A pretty blond receptionist about twenty-five years of age asked, “May I help you?”

As soon as I saw the blond, I started warming up to this place and decided a job here wouldn’t be too bad after all. Mustering up my most charming smile I said, “Yes, my cousin and I are looking for work. Do you have any openings?”

“Oh, very good,” the blond said. “Our Miss Jones is the employment officer. Do you have an appointment?”

“No we don’t,” I replied. “We were just driving in the neighborhood and thought we would take a chance and just drop in.”

The Four Year Hitch

“Fine,” said the receptionist. “I’ll just check and see if Miss Jones is free.”

She picked up the telephone and told Miss Jones that she had two male “walk-ins” who were interested in employment and did she have the time to see us today. A moment later, the receptionist hung up the telephone. “Please have a seat. Miss Jones will be right with you.”

Mark and I walked over to the waiting area, which was empty except for the two of us, and found some seats.

“We hit the jackpot!” Mark whispered. “They must have jobs open or they wouldn’t have us wait, and compared to the other nurseries we stopped at, this one must be the biggest on Long Island.”

“Mark, I’m getting more concerned by the minute. I’m just not convinced this is a plant nursery.”

“Of course it is, Roy. Youse is a dummy, and what the hell else could it be out here in the middle of nowhere? Just make sure youse don’t screw up our interview.”

This got my dander up a little. I was about to call him a dumb WOP, but before I had a chance to, Miss Jones walked in the room and introduced herself. She escorted us to her office, and we settled comfortably in overstuffed, green leather chairs.

“How may I help you?” she asked.

Mark nudged me in the ribs and I replied, “We’re looking for a job.”

Miss Jones looked at me and said, “Just what type of employment are you seeking?”

Well, this question kind of threw me for a loop since we didn’t have the faintest idea what kind of jobs nurseries offered. Seeing me hesitate, Miss Jones said, “Did you want to be attendants?”

Before I could ask what attendants did, Mark jumped in. “Yes, we would like to be attendants.”

Just then the phone rang and Miss Jones excused herself to answer it. Mark pokes me in the ribs again and whispers, “We got it made, Roy. The jobs are ours.”

“Hell, Mark, we don’t even know what an attendant does.”

“Don’t be so stupid,” Mark chided. “They attend the young plants until they are ready to be sold. That’s just the type of job we are looking for.”

Miss Jones had finished her phone call and turned her attention back to us. “Please fill out these employment forms. I’ll be glad to assist you if you run into any problems.”

Mark and I completed the employment forms — or rather I completed

The Four Year Hitch

the employment forms for both of us and turned them in to Miss Jones. She reviewed our applications and hired us on the spot.

“When can you start?” she asked.

“Would Wednesday be too soon?” I replied.

“No, not at all,” she said. “Wednesday would be just fine. We also have a program for our employees where they can live right here on the grounds and take their meals in our cafeteria for a modest weekly fee which we deduct right from your pay check. Are you interested in doing something like that?”

I glanced over at Mark who nodded, okay. “Yes,” I replied. “We would like to sign up for the room and board program as it is a little too far to commute here from Huntington Station each day.”

“Fine,” said Miss Jones, and handed us an additional form to complete and sign. “Just report here for work at 7 a.m. Wednesday morning, and I’ll get you moved in and introduce you to your new supervisor. Let me be the first to welcome you to our family. By the way...” she added, “...if you’re going back to Huntington Station tonight, just take the east road out of the parking lot, and you’ll save some time getting back to the highway.”

“Thank you,” Mark and I said together. We left the office and went down the stairs to the parking lot.

Mark was really happy. “Just the kind of work I always wanted to do,” he said. “The pay isn’t too bad, and we get to live and eat right here.”

We got into the car, and Mark took the east road out of the parking lot as Miss Jones had recommended. On the way out, we passed several large, five-storied, red brick buildings all of which seemed to have one thing in common — steel bars on all the doors and windows. We finally arrived at what must have been the main entrance to the place and passed through the tall brick and black wrought iron gate. I glanced back and read the bronze sign embedded on the brick wall and did a double take. The sign had engraved on it, CENTRAL ISLIP STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL. I turned to Mark. “You know what? Those nursery plants and flowers you wanted to take care of just turned into a large container loaded with nuts!”