

1964

## BUBBA & JOHNNY

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During my youth, I grew up in Southwest Miami, Florida; Tavernier, Florida; and Fort Gay, West Virginia.

I attended schools and churches and social events throughout those years, I attended what one might call “lily-white” schools because there were no blacks in attendance. Why that was, we never discussed in class.

We had the mandatory history classes where we were taught that “America is the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave”, that “all men are created equal” and that we should “love one another.”

We had Hispanics, Puerto Ricans, American Indians and even (in Miami) a few Hindus; but, we had no blacks.

In Miami, all the blacks — as far as I can remember — attended Miami High School. It was located on Flagler Street downtown so those who lived out where I did must have had one long bus ride.

But I never thought about that when I was a kid. I had my own problems adjusting to being a teenager enduring the social changes and the social pressures and a family breaking up.

It was a time of rushing hormones and the over-whelming need to converse with any carbon-based life form — to express all the lessons I had learned in under 18 years on the rock called Earth.

I joined the Army on June 15, 1964 in Coral Gables, Florida.

It was there that I took an oath “to support and to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

From Miami, I — along with two railcars full of teenagers — road a train from downtown Miami to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

The only thing I remember about that train ride was the never-ending poker games (which I did not participate in), the fact that there were armed

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military policeman (to ensure those given a choice between jail and the Army actually made it to the army) and that the whites and blacks kept apart.

At Fort Jackson, I underwent administrative in-processing into the Army.

Within days, I was on a bus to Fort Gordon (just west of Augusta), Georgia, where I joined Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Training Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Training Brigade for Basic Combat Training.

It was at Fort Gordon that I met — among about 100 others — two men who were from the same town in Georgia; but, who lived worlds apart.

I don't remember the name of that town; but, I'll never forget those boys.

Bubba came from "up the hill" in a town where that was important. He went to the "real" high school and lived the "right" life. The houses were big, the lawns manicured and the streets kept clean at city expense. The men worked and the wives were home-makers and club members.

Johnny came from "over the tracks." The houses were old and looked it. He was bussed to a county school, a long way away, along with all the other blacks. Both the men and the women worked, most at two or more jobs a day. Johnny's father farmed most of his family's food and made a modest living selling the surplus.

At Fort Gordon, we lived in an open-bay shared with about 52 other men. (An "open bay" meant that there were four walls on the building, but only supporting pillars within so that one could stand at one end of the barracks and see everyone and everything from there to the other end.)

Bubba and Johnny shared the bunk (double-storied) bed next to mine.

Johnny slept on the bottom bunk and Bubba slept on the top bunk.

I don't know how they came to that arrangement; but, both seemed content with it.



**Army Barracks Bay**

Bubba was a talk, lanky kid. He stood about 6-foot-plus and weighed 190-200 pounds. He was loud. He was boastful. He lived in “the moment.”

He excelled at anything physical. He could run like the wind, jump hurtles effortlessly and carry his backpack and someone else’s without any complaints.

He told endless, humorous stories about life in Georgia.

Johnny was a black man which we called “Negro” in those days. He was built a lot like me. He was about 130 pounds and about 5-foot-11-inches.

Johnny always had a smile on his face, a Bible in his footlocker and a hymn on his lips. He read that Bible every night.

Johnny had not played on any high school team, could run faster and longer than anyone in the platoon, and read all the time — mostly from his Bible.

Johnny didn’t talk much but when he did, his eyes would light up and he’d make you smile because Johnny lived a life of rather quiet contentment. He seemed to know where he was going but felt no need to proclaim in a loud voice about that destination.

Johnny believed in “God Almighty”. He did not swear and avoided conversations with those who did. He was constantly reminding other soldiers that “God’s last name is not damn.”

Johnny attended church ever Sunday. Bubba and I did not.

Johnny needed to be in church.

Bubba and I needed Sunday mornings to recuperate from the long week that had preceded it. Bubba did a lot of extra pushups because of his bragging and daring-do. (I did a lot of them because of my quick wit and unappreciated sarcasm of our army life.)

Johnny wrote home to his folks every day.

Bubba wrote about once a month.

I had no one left to write to.

Basic Training, for me, is pretty much a blur.

I remember that we learned everything by rote.

For example, over and over again, we learned how to assemble and

disassemble the M-1 Garand Rifle. It was a World War II vintage, heavy weapon and used an 8-round cartridge.

We would say the phonetic alphabet ("A is Alpha, B is Bravo, C is Charlie," etc.) until we could spell any word using those words. We had to know those words because it was those words that were used when we had to talk on the radio.

We learned to wear an M-16 Field Protective Mask. Calling it a "gas mask" would earn the punishment of doing 25 pushups. Bubba could never seem to keep from saying "gas mask." He bragged that his biceps grew two inches from the pushups he did during those 8 weeks of training.

We learned to rely upon each other. If one man did not complete the current requirement, the entire squad paid the price — normally, in the form of pushups or running forever around the drill field.

Corporal Brown, a long, lanky stern-faced drill sergeant was everywhere at once. If you made a mistake, he could spot it from half-a-football-field away. And you had to pay for your mistakes.

Johnny and Bubba became rather close friends. At night, they talked about their home town, high school experiences and growing up in a town so far removed from each other. Mostly they just laughed at jokes they shared.

I just sit and listened. I marveled that these two men had not been life-long friends because they acted like they had been.

Johnny and I had trouble learning to shoot because neither of us had handled a gun before. As a preacher's kid, guns were not even allowed in our house. Johnny said that if a black got caught with a gun "back home," he could expect to go to jail (if he was lucky) or prison (if his luck ran out).

Bubba, to whom a rifle had been a companion before he learned to write, could place hit-after-hit into the target anywhere within 400 meters of his weapon. At home, his truck had a gun rack and to drive without it was not an option among the "boys" he ran with.

We were constantly reminded that it was a rifle; not a gun. (A gun was an artillery weapon — more accurately called a "piece" — or a man's sex organ.)

Leaving your rifle, for any reason was tantamount to entering church

naked.

Bubba never left his rifle, but he had a bad habit of calling it his gun. He was, forever, running around the company parade ground with one hand holding his M-1 rifle high in the air and the other holding his genitalia, screaming at the top of his lungs, "This is my rifle. This is my gun. This is for shooting. This is for fun!"

Johnny left his rifle one time while we were in the field during the second-to-the-last week of Basic Combat Training. It had rained all week and we had spent the day on maneuvers running up and down hills.

We had just finished eating from our "mess kits" and drinking formerly-hot soup from our canteen cups in the half-light of dusk, and colder-than-ice rain in the Georgia hills.

Johnny had to "relieve" himself and for a brief moment left his weapon leaning against a tree. I saw his weapon but was too tired to think of any possible consequence of it being there.

Corporal Brown's voice cut through the night like thunder from a coming storm. "Who's weapon is this? Who's weapon is this?!?"

Johnny wiped himself and arose from behind a large bush. "It's mine, Sergeant," he cried out.

"Don't call me Sergeant! Don't you know a corporal when you see one, boy?"

As punishment, Johnny got to dig a hole 6 feet wide by 6 feet long by 6 feet deep — with an entrenching tool. (An entrenching tool was a wooden-handled shovel folding along its handle for easy carrying and storage. The shovel blade has a serrated edge for cutting roots. Opened up, it was 21½" long.)

Without hesitation, Bubba and I stepped forward to help him dig in that hard, Georgia red clay.

We did it because the three of us were a team.

Between the mosquitoes and the sweat and the cursing of the clay, we managed to get it done. It took us most of the night to do it. While our other buddies slept, we dug and dug and dug and dug.



**Entrenching Tool**

Corporal Brown inspected the hole.  
He inspected us.  
With a half-grin he looked and then nodded approval.  
“Now cover it up. We don’t want to leave a mess,” he barked.  
It was dawn when we finished. There would be no sleep that night for us. And ahead lay the march.

The march from the bivouac area to the “cantonment area” (where our barracks was located) seemed to last years instead of the three hours the training schedule showed. But we walked proudly. We had been tested and we knew we were now soldiers.

At the end of the eight weeks of Basic Training, Johnny, Bubba and I were transferred to Company A, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade — a part of 3<sup>rd</sup> Army for Advanced Infantry Training (AIT).

When we moved into the barracks, Johnny took the lower bunk and Bubba took the upper bunk. I claimed the top bunk next to them.

We endured eight more weeks of training.

It was here, in Advanced Infantry Training, that we were introduced to what we were told was the latest Army rifle — the M-14. It had an effective range of 460 meters (roughly 4½ football fields) and was lighter than the M-1 rifles we had carried in Basic Training.

There the three of us continued to enjoy each other’s company, but Johnny and Bubba spent far more time together. I never was much of a joiner and preferred to spend most of my time alone.

At the end of Advanced Infantry Training, we were give 14-day passes. Each of us decided to go home.

In those days, travel by bus was all we could afford, so all of us got on the same bus. They would get off in their small Georgia town and I would travel on to Miami to visit former neighbors, the Higgs.

We traveled in our dress khaki uniforms. Khaki was a yellow-brown, earth/dust toned strong cloth made of cotton. Each of us wore an Expert Marksman Badge for the M-1 rifle. We wore an overseas, flat cap.

Somewhere north of their town, the bus stopped in a small town near Baxley, Georgia. The bus stop was a 2-pump gas station with a convenience store that sold soda and snacks.

By this time, we were all tired, hungry and in need of a restroom.

Bubba and I got finished in the restroom faster than Johnny did, so we went into the store.

I got a candy bar and a Pepsi from the top-opening cooler.

Bubba grabbed a Coca Cola and began filling his arms with cookies and candy and potato chips. That boy could eat his weight in groceries.

About that time, Johnny entered the store.

The white man behind the wooden counter held his hand out across Johnny's chest blocking the doorway. "We don't serve your type here," he announced in a loud, gruff voice that could be heard through the small store and into the gasoline pump area.

Johnny looked at him, formed a half-smile on his face, nodded slightly and left the store.

I was insulted that anyone would refuse to serve a soldier so I walked up to the counter, placed my stuff on it and left without it.

I walked over to Johnny, shook his hand and said something like, "I can't believe he wouldn't serve a soldier."

Johnny said, "It's because I'm a negro; not because I'm a soldier."

I was shocked. That thought had never crossed my mind.

Standing about two feet from the front door, both of us looked back into the store where Bubba was still loading goodies into his arms.

I remember feeling a little disappointed that Bubba didn't leave when I did, but if Johnny minded, he never let on. He just stared — as I did — at Bubba's gathering of "loot".

Finally, Bubba walked to the counter and dropped what must have been over twenty-dollars worth of goods on the counter. On our salary of \$67-a-month, that was a lot of money.

The clerk said something like, "I can see, my friend, that you're a man who knows what he wants."

Bubba replied, "That Negro is my friend. You're not. And all I want is to be away from the likes of you. That man is a soldier and you're a punk."

With that, he stormed out of the door leaving the pile of foodstuffs on the counter and a smile on his face.

He shook Johnny's hand, placed his arm around his shoulder and we headed for the bus.

When we got to their town, the bus stop was another gas station.

There, waiting on the curb were two couples separated by about 10 feet.

The black man with his arm around his wife wore a brown suit and tie and a matching brown hat. She wore a dark blue dress with a hint of white dots and a white hat. They looked like they were standing outside a church. Both had wide grins on their faces.

The white man was in a farmer's overalls with a plain white — although dusty — long-sleeved shirt. The lady wore a plain light blue dress with an flowered apron. They held hands, straining to see through the darkly-stained windows of our Trailways bus.

I watched the reunion through the window of the bus.

Bubba was the first to get off — as he always was. He walked rapidly over to the white couple, hugging his mother and lifting her off her feet as he swung her around him one time and gently placed her feet back on the ground. He shook hands with his dad. The two men knodded knowingly at each other.

Johnny ran to his mom. He embraced his mother and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then, he hugged his daddy as his mom softly clapped her hands together, tears steaming from her eyes.

The three of them looked up just in time to see Bubba bringing his mother and dad over to meet his best friend.

The men shook hands.

The ladies hugged.

All six headed toward the Sundry Store, off to my diagonal left. (A sundry store was a kind of combination luncheonette and drug store.)

The four men lead the way, with the soldiers on the inside and their respective fathers on the outside. My two soldier buddies waved goodbye to



me as they walked away and both continued to talk to their fathers.

Both soldiers were smiling, laughing and talking all at once, animatedly waving their arms to illustrate some point or other. The fathers looked on proudly and just listened.

The two ladies trailed behind. They were giggling and obviously sharing those “I can’t believe how’s he’s grown” kind of gestures as they pointed to their respective sons.

Even from the bus, I could feel the love they held for their uniformed sons.

In other words, they were conversing just like long-time friends always do. Anyone who saw them would know they had always been friends for a long, long time although I knew they had never met before.

Johnny, Bubba and I had exchanged mailing addresses and made the solemn promises to stay in touch.

I never heard from them although I was surprised not to hear from Johnny.

Of course, I never wrote to them either.

But I’ll never forget the transition of those two men. Brought together by an Army they did not understand, they formed a friendship that they could understand.

I suspect they are great friends to this day.

I had almost forgotten about Bubba and Johnny until a story shared by my new-found friend Howard reminded me of them.

What I learned from Bubba and Johnny was that:

➤ Racial prejudice is about judging based upon the color of one’s skin. It’s seeing and believing that someone else is different and somehow inferior.

➤ Friendship is about the color of one’s commitment. It’s about knowing what’s important. It’s about caring — with deference. It’s about love — with understanding.