

When Johnny Comes Marching Home(less)

Stories of America's Homeless Veterans
and the Shelter That Gave Them Hope

A Personal Memoir

By

Ken Smith

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those American veterans who have witnessed the horrors of war, came home, found no peace, wandered onto our streets, and died;

And to the veterans who came to 17 Court Street in Boston, found that elusive peace, and were allowed to pass with dignity and honor.

Carry the battle to them. Don't let them bring it to you. Put them on the defensive and don't ever apologize for anything.

—Harry S. Truman

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a reflection on you that your name is not in here. I ran out of space to thank everyone.

— Ken Smith

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Foreword by General Colin L. Powell

Introduction

Once in a lifetime you are given a chance to make a difference. My chance came in the late 1980s when a couple of Vietnam veterans who had never done anything of the magnitude of what you're about to read embarked on a journey that led to one of the most successful veterans' programs in the nation.

After the Vietnam war ended in 1975, Vietnam veterans were quickly forgotten by the government and civilians alike. Sadly, in the years after the last American left Saigon, thousands of American veterans ended up not in comfortable homes with their families, but on the streets, homeless.

This is a story of how a small band of brothers changed the way our nation dealt with homeless veterans. Anti-war protestors, combat veterans, family members of veterans, lawyers, politicians and a few dedicated veteran advocates came together and changed the paradigm on the care and programs that were offered.

But the challenge was immense. Regretfully, two decades later, the problem of homelessness among veterans still exists and while the solutions are evident, there is not the political will to implement them.

When you're an unemployed veteran, homelessness begins on your mother's couch and then moves to your car if you have one and then quickly to the streets where the problems become huge.

Until this country gets serious and makes an effort to work on the underlining problems of more affordable housing, rooming house creation, and jobs, the problem of homeless veterans will be with us into the next generation.

Rooming houses were available until the mid 1980s when developers started to turn them into condos and all those marginal Americans who lived week to week in this type of housing—including many vets—were thrown onto the streets within a few short years.

The mentally ill vets were institutionalized until there was a cry by liberals that it was inhuman to let these Americans live in the group community environment, and it was

determined that they needed to be reintegrated into the mainstream. That came with a cost.

The reintegration strategy didn't work and never has worked, and nobody has ever had the fortitude to say it has been a failure.

The way we treat those American vets who are mentally ill and homeless and who live on our streets is borderline criminal.

Those who need to take medication every day to maintain a level head don't have anywhere safe to leave that medication during the day when they are not at a shelter and they soon learn that those pills are a commodity on the street, and they can be sold for quick cash. That's the reality on America's streets today. The mentally ill homeless veterans are selling the medication they need to survive.

The stories told in this book are stories that I remember—some good, some bad—but all are reflections of the human spirit of our nation's veterans.

So sit back and read some stories that I hope will inspire you to take action.

Chapter 1: Sketches of War

Before the shelter project in Boston and before my involvement with homeless veterans, I worked for an ambulance company. I was vaguely aware of the homeless that I saw on the streets every night but I paid little attention to them unless I was forced to pick one of them up and transport them to the city hospital. I usually got annoyed on that assignment because the homeless always reeked of urine or alcohol or both and I saw the task as a pain in the ass and didn't like those transports at all.

I also attended a weekly combat veterans' support group in Brighton, a section of Boston. In this support group which met every Tuesday evening were a bunch of other combat Vietnam vets like myself, and this weekly support group helped me to understand why I had some of the behavioral issues that I had.

After a year and a half, as we came to the end of the combat group meetings, our counselor, John Wilder, said, "I can't do anything else for you guys. You're on your own."

The weekly meetings that I had attended for close to eighteen months were something I looked forward to, and, like some of the other guys, I was pissed.

Then our counselor said, "You might want to take a trip to Washington D.C. and see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial."

I asked a buddy from the support group, Mark Helberg, if he wanted to go. He said it would work for him and so we made plans to attend an upcoming "Welcome Home Veterans" concert in D.C. that starred Peter Frampton.

A few weeks later we arrived in D.C. and like any veteran tourists we first went to all the battle monuments. The last one we visited was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

It was after the concert and after midnight when we both said, OK, let's go do this, and we drove to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, parked our rental car, and walked down to see the black granite slabs with the names we knew were etched in the stone.

I have never in my life been so moved.

Tears welled up in both Mark and me and we both set off looking for names we might have known. It spooked me that there was a Ken Smith engraved on the wall.

After about an hour of looking and crying I smelled the aroma of pot. I looked around and there was a treeline behind me and I could see maybe ten or fifteen people there. Mark and I started walking over to them.

As we got closer, we could see that they were all males and all had blankets, ponchos or sleeping bags that they were laying on, and all were talking softly.

“What do you want?” one of them said in the dark.

“Nothing,” I replied, “But you guys are here at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Any of you vets?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Two vets, both combat vets, Vietnam,” Mark answered.

One said, “What unit?”

I said, “Americal, second of the first 196th.”

“Twenty-fifth, Cu Chi,” said Mark.

It seemed all at once that smiles came over the faces of almost everyone there and one said, “You guys have any smokes?”

I said, “Yeah we do, and I’ll share, but I smelled the weed, so you share, we share.”

And with that introduction we were invited to sit down.

It was just after 2am.

One vet said, “Where you from?”

“Boston,” replied Mark.

“Fricken’ yankees,” said one of the other vets.

“Up yours, we’re Red Sox fans,” I replied.

The vet smiled and said, “No, you’re both north of the Mason Dixon, you’re fricken’ yankees.”

“Ah,” I said, “right. But you know, that didn’t matter in Nam, why’s it matter now? So, who are you?”

“First you,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Ken.”

“My name’s Alan, and I was born and raised in Alabama.”

“Well, you’re a long way from home,” said Mark.

The guy just looked at us for what seemed to be forever and said, “No, I’m not. I’m home right now.”

“Home? You live in D.C.?” I asked.

“I live here,” he said.

“Here in D.C.,” I said again.

“No, I live here at the memorial.”

“Whoa, wait a minute, you live here? Outside? Here?”

The vet said something under his breath and another vet said that we should pay him no attention, he’s been on the streets a long time, and we should sit down. This vet proceeded to roll a couple of fatties.

One thing led to another and after smoking the bones we all started talking about Nam. Each of them was a vet—about half were Army and half Marines.

Now the next thing I knew I could see the sun coming up.

“You guys hungry?” Mark asked.

They all looked at us both.

“Yeah, were hungry, you got food too?”

“Well, no, but we can go somewhere and get you guys something to eat,” Mark said.

One said “OK” and said something to one of the guys there about watching their stuff, and the rest, Mark and I included, started to walk up past the memorial to the street.

We found an ice cream truck but this one had coffee, rolls, doughnuts, and all kinds of things to eat, and Mark and I spent maybe thirty or forty bucks buying these guys coffees and stuff, and then we said our goodbyes.

Fast forward a few months and it became obvious to me, after meeting those guys at the memorial in D.C., that many of the homeless you see on the streets are vets.

Now Mark and I and one other named Peace Foxx were on a mission. In Boston there were three main shelters for the homeless and we visited each one and told the managers of each that we had important information for any veteran who stayed at their shelter. Like nitwits we stood up on tables during evening meal and said if anyone was a veteran we had some ways to help and invited them to stay after the meal to hear what we had to say. We

were shocked at the first meeting at the city shelter on an island in Boston Harbor when close to four hundred vets attended.

Our jaws were on the floor when we both stood there and said we were vets too, and we asked tons of questions and got an earful when we said they should all go to the Veterans Administration.

“You’re assholes,” one of the attendees said, “You don’t think we’ve been to the goddamn VA?”

It was then and there that I found out that the VA didn’t offer many services to veterans who were homeless.

From those days on, it was an uphill struggle.

Now it just so happens that I like to read. I mean like a book a day. Sometimes I’m reading two or three books at the same time. I get this skill from my mom, who is a voracious reader.

So I started to read all I could find about the homeless, and especially anything about veterans who were homeless. There wasn’t much but there was some new federal legislation I found called the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Act of 1987. The law originally created twenty programs for the homeless that were administered by nine federal agencies. I read the text of this act more than once, and my reading of this legislation would pay a huge dividend in the near future.

Mark and I had an actor friend with whom we would pal around. He wasn’t a vet, but was a good guy nonetheless. Jim Frangione was an aspiring starving actor in Boston and did all kinds of commercials and theatre acting. He had a place in the North End of Boston (which is like Little Italy) and we would hook up from time to time and go cruising for women.

Jim had the smallest apartment in the world—I swear it was no bigger than a closet—and we would sit around his kitchen table and shoot the shit. One night just before we went out, the idea of raising some money to help those we were seeing at the shelters came up.

We kicked around many ideas: potluck supper, pancake breakfast, or maybe holding cans at the entrance of supermarkets.

Then Jim said, “Why don’t you put on a play?”

“A play? A play about what?” I said.

“A play about veterans, and you can sell tickets and keep the money. But if you do this you gotta be a non-profit.”

Over the next few days we talked about how to start a non-profit and how to do a play. Neither of us were lawyers so we found someone who knew someone who knew someone else and eventually we got introduced to a guy name Danny Hoveniesian, a lawyer in Cambridge and a Marine veteran of Vietnam. It was our first solid move and Danny was the right guy at the right moment for what we needed. He helped us get the Vietnam Veterans Workshop started and did all the right things that were legal. It was a start.

The following week we had another bullshit session with Jim and he blurted out, “Now, I don’t think you could do this, but if you could, Jesus, if you could get this guy involved, oh my god, this guy could do this and he knows a lot about theatre and he could make this a successful event.”

“Who are you talking about?” I said. “What’s his name?”

“Mamet. Dave Mamet. He just moved to Cambridge.”

“What’s he do?”

“Duh,” said Jim. “Pulitzer Prize winner. *Glengarry Glen Ross*. *House of Games*. What—do you live under a rock?”

“What do you know about him?” I ignored the rock comment.

Jim went on about how this guy was a poker player and a man’s man. He lived on the edge and loved cigars. “He’s the guy you need. If you could ever get to him, he would be the guy, trust me.”

I thought about it that night and then I wrote this guy a letter. In the letter I said, look, you don’t know me from anywhere but I know who you are. I know you like poker and I know you like cigars and here is my offer. I challenge you to a game of poker and if you win, I’ll give you a full box of Cohibas. If you lose, you’ll put together a play about homeless veterans so we can raise some money to help my brothers here in Boston who are homeless.

The next day while I was working in the ambulance we were in his neighborhood and I walked right up to his door and knocked.

A guy answered the door.

“Is something wrong?” he said.

“Nope, I’m looking for Dave Mamet,” I said.

“I’m Dave Mamet.”

I handed him the letter and left.

He stood in the doorway and was reading the letter as the ambulance drove away.

Within a few days he called and said I can play in your game but I can only do it on Thursday night next week. Where’s the game?

At the time I was living in a condo in Dorchester and I gave him the address and directions.

The plan was coming together.

At the poker game there were a few ringers who knew more about poker than anyone else I knew. The idea was to let this guy win a few hands and then clean his clock.

The plan went well.

At some point during the game Mamet needed to either raise or fold. He said he could write a check as he was out of cash and I said cash only. So he folded and that started the development of *Sketches of War*, an evening of scenes and songs on the subject of soldiers and veterans.

Now, I didn’t know shit about theatre.

I had gone to Shakespeare plays when forced to in high school and I didn’t pay much attention then and never really understood any of the dialog anyway nor did I ever go to any of the theatres in Boston.

Our first meeting with Mamet about how this was going to happen was huge. He said, you know, we need a big name. Someone who will pull people to the show and I have just the guy. But I want *you* to ask him.

I said to put the guy on the phone.

Mamet made a call from his small office he had in Cambridge and handed the phone to me and said, this is Al, see if Al will do this with us.

I took the phone and said, “Al, my name is Ken and I’m a combat Vietnam vet and I’m a new friend of David’s and we need to raise money to help the veterans who are homeless. I don’t know you, but David said if you could help, it would sell tickets and I want to know if you can help.”

There was a long pause and Al said, “Put David on the phone.”

I handed the phone to David and all I heard was, “Yeah, yup, sometime the first week of October, ok, yup. I will tell him.”

David hung up and said, “That’s good, that’s very good. Al Pacino said he will do this.”

I was floored.

Al Pacino? Like the *Godfather* guy?

“Yes,” said David. “The guy who also does theatre and did *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* in the 1970s, you know, by David Rabe.”

“What the hell is *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*?” I asked.

“It’s not important,” said David. “What’s important is that he’s a great actor and his participation will help bring others to the cast.”

Over the coming weeks, in an office donated by David’s friend Dick, who also owned a hotel in Cambridge, David pieced together one of the most memorable nights of my life. I made other calls at David’s suggestion, and before you knew it, David’s name had brought in Christopher Walken, Donald Sutherland, Dennis Franz, Charlie Haid, Kevin Bacon, Michael J. Fox, Don Ameche, W.H Macy, Bob Paxton, Atlantic Theatre Company, the Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society of the New York Police Department, and many more actors and helpers. There were so many people who were going to help it blew my mind.

One in particular sticks out in my mind—Michael Merritt. Mike was a combat Vietnam vet like me and he was a good and dear friend of David’s. He was David’s set designer. It wasn’t long before I found out that Mike succumbed to cancer brought on by his exposure to Agent Orange. I miss him even now. He was a good guy.

As the event got closer to opening night all kinds of media attention was generated and David made some deal to have this event at one of the most beautiful theaters in all of Boston.

On October 10, 1988 *Sketches of War* was performed at the Colonial Theatre. It sold out and we raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. The night was magical.

At the event I first met Howard Levine, a lawyer from one of Boston's top law firms. I didn't know it at the time, but the help and experience of Saint Howard the Dragon Slayer would put us on the map as an organization and as a charity.

At the event we had Medal of Honor recipients that we had flown in from around the country, and we had all the big money people in the city and all the usual politicians were also in attendance. As I said, the night was magical.

Now, at about the same time, news came out that the Boston VA Hospital was moving from its current downtown location in Boston's financial district to a new state-of-the-art facility across town. The building that the VA was leaving was going to be sold.

The GSA owned the building and the federal government was getting ready to take offers on the twelve-story, 200,000-square-foot historic building right next door to Boston City Hall and smack in the center of the most expensive real estate in the city.

That's when the light bulb went on in my head: the Stewart B. McKinney Act for the Homeless. The government would first be required to offer the property to a non-profit that deals with the homeless. Little did anyone else know, and the idea of getting a federal building worth maybe forty million dollars was slim to none and slim left town, but it was worth a try.

I knew it would take a very special person to shepherd this into reality and I knew just the person.

Howard, the lawyer I met at *Sketches of War*.

The shelter was about to be born.

Chapter 2: Extension Cord Sully

With the assistance of Howard the Dragon Slayer, we got a ten-year lease on the old VA outpatient clinic at 17 Court Street and set up our shelter for homeless veterans.

When you walk in the front door there is a large first-floor meeting room. Lunch and dinner was served in this room, and there also were some alcoves on the first floor that were part of the original building when it was a bank a hundred years ago. The building is actually on the spot of Ben Franklin's original printing press and is an historic landmark building and the area in downtown Boston is known as the Financial District.

At the time of this particular event it was in the early 1990s and we had been in the building for maybe a year, and it was a rough ride. The building had twelve floors, including basements and sub-basements, and each of the first four or five floors was ten to twelve thousand square feet. It was large. The windows on the first floor had holes where snow and rain came in and there was no AC and the fluorescent lights blinked on and off sometimes with no warning.

At the time I allowed smoking in the building as I thought it helped generate some calm from the chaos that was happening every day. Most of the vets who presented themselves at the shelter were former or current drug or alcohol addicted and smoking was something I also did, so I condoned it.

As you entered the building you were met by a security crew culled from the actual homeless vets who lived in the building and their job was to insure no drugs or alcohol or weapons came into the building. This crew was known as Vet Guards and there will be a story or two about them too. At that time we had an area near the front door we called the Penalty Box where anyone who came into the shelter intoxicated was sent to wait for one of the substance abuse counselors (SAC), who were other homeless vets in alcohol or drug recovery. Intoxicated vets were required to sit in the penalty box to be evaluated for possible transport to a detox facility. If you refused, you were told to leave. Those were the choices you were given at intake.

It's hard to explain the smell of the shelter, but a lot of time was spent cleaning and the most prevalent smell I remember was the smell of antiseptic. One member of our crew—his name is Ron Masse but I called him “Ronnie, Rickey and Louie” as he was actually three different people all wrapped into one—and his crew were responsible for keeping the place clean and his staff was also tasked with the general maintenance of the building. Sounds simple, but there were heating issues, power issues, plumbing issues, and construction issues, and RR&L and his crew, including all the volunteers of the shelter assigned to his department, were responsible for many of the improvements. I remember that many visitors often commented to me that the shelter was not what they expected.

It was clean.

At the time of this incident we had maybe two hundred veterans who slept at the shelter overnight and another three hundred who came in during the day for lunch or just to get out of the weather.

The place was busy.

One day an older veteran arrived via taxi and I took an immediate interest in his needs. He was a WWII vet who was in his late eighties or early nineties and he had discharge paperwork from the hospital. He had been cared for by his wife for the last fifteen years, and now he was homeless. His wife had recently passed away and he had no other relatives, not one. It didn't take long for someone at the local hospital to tell him to go to the “vet shelter” and when he arrived I just happened to be at the front desk.

This vet was at Omaha Beach on D-Day and spent the war as an infantry soldier all through Europe. When he came in that first day he had the look of a deer in the headlights in Maine and I could see immediately he was confused and somewhat anxious. Periodically I helped the staff with the intake forms for new arrivals and at the time that this vet showed up we had a three-bed sick bay where we would hold someone on the way to a medical facility or if someone had just come back from the VA hospital. I thought we could find this guy some nursing home care and I would attempt to get him placed with the Veterans Soldier's Home at the very least, so I pulled some rank and had him placed in this medical unit within the shelter on the first floor right after he arrived. It carried no duty assignments and a “no work” profile, and we had a medic assigned to the sick bay 24/7.

After intake of this vet, and because it was a Monday, we also had our weekly town meetings and at this particular town meeting that night I let everyone attending know that I expected them to assist me with the care of this older vet.

At the time it was known to me that there was an underground barter system in place that was well known to anyone who was homeless. “You give me one of your smokes and I will let you have one of my smokes” was the rule, and when I have something or when I get my check we do a payback. As I remember, this old guy smoked Camel non-filters and when he arrived that day he had a full carton—compliments of someone at the hospital, I would imagine. Anyway, it didn’t take long for the vultures of the shelter to volunteer to sit with him and smoke his smokes. When I saw this happening I got furious and set the rule. You smoke one of this guy’s smokes and you’re out of the shelter for a week. That stopped the free lunch with this guy’s only commodity.

After a few days, I got to talking to this guy and he was a character who had a keen memory. I asked him what brought him to the shelter and he teared up. He told me about how his wife was the love of his life, how he regretted having no kids, and how he missed his wife.

I told him I was trying to make arrangements to have him sent to the Soldiers’ Home and he seemed grateful

A few more days went by and I was notified that this vet had been approved for a bed at the Soldiers’ Home run by the state, but it would take a few weeks to get him a slot.

One day melded into another and soon other events had my attention.

At 3am on a warm night I got a call from the duty officer, Dick Fox, who watched the shelter from 11pm to 7am. He told me that the old guy had passed away about an hour ago.

I asked what happened and Dick told me that the old vet just stopped breathing.

The overnight medic had found him when he was making his rounds. An ambulance was called and the vet was taken to the emergency room and the duty officer had just got a call from the hospital that the old guy didn’t make it.

I was sad and said thanks and told Dick I would see to some of the details when I went into work.

As usual, events happened and I lost track of everything and about four or five days later I got a call from the hospital. They said, look, this old guy who was brought into the ER last week has no relatives and his last address was the shelter. What do you want to do with the body?

Whatta ya mean? What do *I* want to do with the body?

If you don't come and collect the body this guy will go to the pauper's cemetery, where all homeless people go.

I then called a meeting of senior staff and wheels went into motion.

We called a bunch of funeral parlors and they all said that it would cost somewhere north of \$3,000 for the basic funeral service and a box.

Jesus Christ, I thought, we were eating cheese sandwiches for lunch and we had little to no money, so three thousand was like three hundred thousand.

Then one of the funeral directors, a veteran, said, you know Ken, in Boston, you can have a wake in your home and since the shelter is your home, you can have him waked at the shelter.

I thought about that for like two seconds and then asked how would that happen.

The director said, "We'll provide the casket. We'll use one of the demo caskets that the casket company gives us to showcase and we will pick him up at the hospital and we can have him embalmed and then brought to the shelter in a hearse. If you cover the costs of the embalming and the costs of the hearse, it will be less than a thousand."

Well, next thing I know, the wake at the shelter for the WWII guy was in full swing.

"We'll have him ready tomorrow and deliver him around 2pm," said the funeral director.

I called RR&L and said I needed to have a chapel built in one of the alcoves on the first floor.

"Really?" said RR&L. "Like an alter and a cross type of thing?"

"Yes, like an alter and a cross type thing and a kneeler if you can do that too."

In what seemed like less than an hour, there were ships' carpenters (homeless Navy vets) and a crew from RR&L's department (including one guy named Sully who was a few cards short of a deck) all at work with power saws and nails banging and all kinds of construction noise and pretty soon there was an actual chapel. I was impressed.

The next day, right on time, the hearse shows up at 2pm and they wheel the borrowed casket into the building and put the casket onto the saw horses that were made to hold the deceased at eye level. Just like at a real funeral home, I said to myself. At the time, we also had an honor guard and I posted a guard at either end of the casket and there was a plan initiated to have this vet guarded all thru the night. The next day he was to be taken to the Massachusetts National Cemetery for veterans on Cape Cod and arrangements were made to have our donated bus take forty volunteers to the burial.

All seemed to be in order.

I sent out the word that we would have our own internal memorial town meeting for the deceased that night at 7pm, and I went to my office to work.

About an hour later RR&L came into my office and asked me if I had a minute.

I asked what the issue was and he said he would prefer to speak to me downstairs and I went with him not knowing what the hell I was walking into.

We went to the first floor and he took me to the alcove chapel and it was a work of art. It looked like a real church and I was impressed and said so.

Then RR&L said, "You want to look?"

"Look at what?"

"You know, you want to take a peek? You know, in the casket?"

I was bullshit. Jesus, don't be so disrespectful.

Then RR&L said, "What do you think he's wearing?"

We figured that the hospital or funeral home might have left him in his old pajamas. We went to the casket and RR&L opened it up.

There was the old man, naked as a jaybird.

"Jesus Christ, he's got nothing on," said RR&L.

We closed the lid and I asked for some volunteers to go to our in-house thrift store (we called it Filene's Basement) to see if there was anything we could fit this vet into so he wouldn't be buried naked.

The only volunteers who responded were elements of the Rump Rangers. These were guys who were known homosexuals. They stayed to themselves and never gave any problems to anyone.

I was grateful and within an hour, the old vet was dressed in what looked like an old Army Class A uniform. No rank, no nametag, no hat, no shoes, but a uniform nonetheless.

I was pleased.

At 6:30 I went to the first floor again and saw all the preparations for the memorial ceremony.

Tables and chairs had been moved and there were maybe a hundred vets in attendance already.

I saw that there was a speaker's podium placed in front of the casket and I made my way there to prepare myself for the eulogy.

I then looked at the casket and was not sure what the hell I was seeing. Coming out of the end of the casket was a bright yellow extension cord.

I turned to the honor guard at that end and said, "What's that?"

The honor guard said, "Not sure—you need to see Sully."

I then out of the corner of my eye saw RR&L standing with his worker, Sully.

"What the hell is the extension cord coming out of the casket?" I said.

Right then and there I saw this guy Sully go white.

"RR&L told me to do it," he stammered. "I didn't want to do it, but he insisted."

"He told you to do what?"

"He told me to bare the wires at one end of the extension cord and wrap them around this guy's ankles."

I was stunned and not sure what the hell to think. I said, "Now, show me!"

We went to the casket, and sure enough when we lifted the end of the casket we saw wires wound around the skinny ankles of the old WWII vet.

"What the heck is this?" I yelled.

"Calm down," said RR&L. "We only wanted to make this memorial service special."

"Special, whatta ya mean special?"

"Well, we were going to wait till you gave your order for everyone to stand and salute the guy and we were going to open the casket and plug him in. We think the jolt of electricity will make him sit up."

“Sweet mother of Jesus, are you insane? Get those wires off of him right now. Jesus Christ, what the hell were you two thinking?”

And so our venerable old vet was given a nice wake and was allowed to rest in eternal peace.

Chapter 3: Town Meeting and the Fight

Every Monday night, regardless of who you were, if you slept in the shelter, you were required to attend town meeting. Town meeting was established to flush out the gripes and groans of the homeless veterans who lived at the shelter and to open the floor to anyone who lived in the shelter for suggestions and ideas. Some of the best ideas about running the operation of the shelter came from town meeting. It was raucous at times and one particular meeting stands out in my mind.

To get an idea on how this town meeting worked, imagine two to three hundred veterans in a room, most of them smoking, all sitting and listening to whoever was the designated speaker. To get the “floor” you had to be recognized by the facilitator and most of the times it was either Mark Helberg or me. No profanity by any speaker was allowed, or if you did swear, you had to pay a twenty-five cent fine per cuss.

This particular meeting came after a visit from Larry Holmes and Evander Holyfield to the shelter. That week they were in town promoting their fight and they both stopped by the shelter at different times and they each gave us a signed set of boxing gloves.

Now, this town meeting at times could get a little crazy. Vets would gripe about the food, about no hot water in the showers, and about almost anything else, and the intent of the meetings was to let some of the steam out of the population. It worked.

Attending these meetings were mothers of veterans who had been killed in combat. Known as Gold Star Moms they acted like everyone’s mom. They listened to personal problems and they prodded and they cajoled each vet to get back on his feet.

It was this group of a dozen Gold Star Moms at each town meeting that collected the “swear pot” monies, and on this night, like every other town meeting, I started the meeting off by placing a twenty-dollar bill at the table of the Gold Star Moms.

“Thank you, Ken,” said Nicky Likely, whose son had been killed in Vietnam. Each mom knew I could swear like a truck driver at a rest stop.

Attending the meeting was everyone who lived in the building and most of the staff also attended as it would be a time for a vet to complain about any staff member, me included.

This particular meeting was going along fine with the reading of the usual announcements when a particular vet—I will call him Jimmy—stood up to take the floor.

This vet was a classic case of drug and alcohol addiction in recovery, somewhat of a loner but he was smart as a whip. He was very educated and the kind of guy who made tons of friends quickly.

After he was recognized to take the floor he screamed out, “Pay attention, everyone!” And he then proceeded to outline a major gripe about me. Mostly the gripe was around a friend of his that I had barred from the facility for a month after his third violation for alcohol.

Then he delivered the punchline: “Ken Smith, I challenge you to a boxing match!”

The place erupted. He was playing the crowd well.

“You and me,” he ranted. “Next Monday night. Right here in town meeting in front of everyone. I’m going to kick your ass!”

Again, the place went nuts.

He then sat down but only after what seemed to me to be half the vets coming over and slapping him on the back. “Yeah, Jimmy, you tell him, yeah.”

That’s how the Great Fight Night started.

The rest of the meeting was soon over and everyone was in groups and I remember Mark coming over to me and saying, “Whattaya gonna do?”

“I guess I have to fight him,” I said.

“Jesus. You sure?”

Well, as I saw it, I had no option other than to fight him.

We were about the same height and weight, and he may have had an inch or two on reach. Anyway, I saw no way out of it.

The rest of the week all I saw was one vet after another coaching this guy. “Here’s how you do a rabbit punch, Jimmy.” “Here’s how you do an uppercut, Jimmy.” “Here’s how you do a one-two.” It went on like that all week long.

I had no coach other than my friend Mark repeating, “So, whattaya gonna do?”

The more I thought about it, the more I thought I could talk some sense into Jimmy on the night of the fight. I waited for that time to come.

I was amazed again by RR&L on the night of the fight—no shit—his team built a friggen boxing ring on the first floor of the shelter, as close to a professional ring as you can see at any boxing gym. How he did it, where he got the stuff, I don't know, but on the night of that town meeting, we had a ring. Including the bell.

Usually we had maybe two hundred vets in attendance at any town meeting and we let other vets from other shelters attend the meeting too if they could get permission to come, but this night, with the space the ring took and what seemed like triple the crowd, I swear it was close to five hundred guys, all packed in like sardines, all smoking and all talking at the same time.

Like usual we started the meeting and all everyone wanted was the fight.

Now, when I saw Jimmy I had to laugh.

He was in black satin boxing trunks, had a black satin robe, a black towel around his neck like a scarf and was wearing the set of autographed Larry Holmes gloves.

"Jesus, Christ, this guy is drop dead serious," is all Mark could say to me.

Mark was in my corner and he helped me get the other set of Holyfield gloves on, and I stayed in my blue jeans and just took off my shirt.

There was a guy at the shelter who I swear was right from Las Vegas and he had gone down into the thrift store in the basement and put on a tuxedo. He was the ring announcer.

"Let's get ready to rummmmmble!" he bellowed.

I can't even begin to explain the atmosphere. The place was electric. You could feel the vibes and the smoke was thick.

We went into the center of the ring with the designated referee (one of the Rump Rangers) and this was the time when I thought I could talk some sense into Jimmy.

"Now, Jimmy," I said, "You know, we can put on a little show here, and this can end as a draw, and we both can look like heroes."

His eyes were as large as dinner plates and he was looking right through me. He put his face right next to mine, like an inch away, and all I could think of was that this guy was *possessed*.

We went back to our corners and Mark put the mouthpiece into my mouth and said go get 'em.

The bell rang and all hell broke loose.

The crowd was screaming loudly and as soon as I started out to the center of the ring, like a bull on fire Jimmy ran from his corner straight at me.

I stepped to the side and he ran right by me.

The crowd was screaming "Get 'em Jimmy! Kick his ass Jimmy! Hit 'em, Jimmy!" and other things to encourage my opponent.

Nobody was rooting for me.

Jimmy turned around quickly and came at me with haymakers and he was off-balance and I swear he was foaming at the mouth.

We took a few shots at each other, but Jimmy's glanced off my gloves and nothing was to the head.

The crowd now was going into a lather.

"Get 'em Jimmy! Kick his ass!" the vets were screaming, and all I remember was trying to stay away from the poorly thrown punches that Jimmy was trying to deliver.

It was chaos, and it seemed to last forever.

Finally a bell rang and I went to the corner.

Mark did the shit you see on TV. He poured water on my head and he had a towel wiping the sweat from my shoulders and head, and there was a spit cup and I was sloshing water in my mouth and spitting just like the other corner was doing.

"Whattaya gonna do?" said Mark.

"I'm gonna knock him out."

The bell rung.

Now I went to work.

This round started a little bit slower and Jimmy came at me less like a bull and more like a possessed man on a mission.

I stepped to the right, stepped to the left, and threw a right haymaker that connected with his left temple.

He dropped to the mat.

The crowd went silent.

The ref started a count and I was sent to my corner and slowly Jimmy got up.

He was hurt but not knocked out.

After a standing eight count I was called back into the ring, we touched gloves, we were in close to each other and Jimmy tried to throw an uppercut.

I stepped back and his glove caught nothing but air.

I sent a left jab that connected square on his nose.

It was a hard jab and I knew it when it landed.

It was all in slow motion.

I could see his face turn and his mouthpiece popped out and again he went to the floor.

But no shit—again, after an eight count, he got up.

Now I knew the only way to end this was to get serious and while I didn't want to hurt him, by now I was ready to end this stupid charade.

I waited till the count was done and we tapped gloves. Then I went crazy.

I went right at him and threw a combo of punches. I wasn't sure what the hell I was doing but it was a hard body punch to his left kidney that did the trick.

I could hear the air leave his body when it happened.

Again everything slowed down and it seemed like I was somewhere else.

Jimmy went down to the canvas and this time the count went to ten. The medics were using smelling salts to get him to his feet.

The bell rang and I was declared the undisputed champ.

I retired right there on the spot. Never again did I fight any of the clients.

Chapter 4: Cable TV and the FBI

Nowadays we all have cable TV but back in the early 1990s cable TV was a treat, and not many people in the Financial District of Boston had cable TV.

The mayor of Boston was a fan of the shelter in his public appearances but not a happy camper when we were in private. Developers were still stinging about losing out on getting the old VA clinic and they could give the mayor more money than we could give goodwill.

I met with the mayor a few months before the annual Army-Navy game and asked, “Can you help us get cable TV? The cable company is telling us that we can’t have it installed and it will be two more years before they can service our building. What’s odd is that some other buildings around us have cable TV but the cable company insists we’re not going to get cable for two years.”

The mayor said he would try to help, but the end result was no cable TV.

Then RR&L came along with an idea that I had to think about.

“You know,” he said, “we have experts here in the shelter that could splice into the main cable trunk in the street. Nobody would know and we could do this simply.”

“How?” I asked.

“Well, when the cable guys, who happened to be vets, were working in the street setting up other buildings, we saw where the main junction box was placed and it’s at the same height as the basement of our building. I could have a crew drill our way to the main cable junction box, we could then splice in and nobody would know.”

I don’t know what came over me—whether it was the thrill of doing something wrong or the idea that I was pissed that we couldn’t get cable for the Army-Navy game and even the mayor couldn’t get us cable—but I told him to do it.

RR&L said we’d need some special drills and some tools but he knew where to get them and we can rent them and this will take a week, two at the most.

So, the next day, as I sat in my office, our comptroller asked me if I approved a tool rental for \$425 for the engineering department.

I said yes.

I seldom went to the basement of the building, and during the week and a half while this drilling and tunneling was going on I never went to see what was happening.

I thought that what I don't see, I don't know.

Each day melded into the next and most of my days started off by going over the reports of the shelter operations from the night before.

This review of overnight activities usually took an hour or two and while I was in the middle of this exercise I got a call from the front desk duty officer who said, "You better come down here. The FBI wants to talk to you."

I said the FBI, you sure?

This guy who was on duty was all business and said, yup, and he's asking for you by name.

Now, I didn't know what the hell was up, but I figured the FBI, Jesus.

I went downstairs and sure enough, here was the classic FBI guy. Dark suit, white shirt, sunglasses. He might as well have had FEDERAL AGENT written across his forehead.

"Can I help you?" I said.

"Are you Ken Smith?"

"Yes I am."

"Can we speak in private?"

On the first floor near our front entranceway was our three-bed sick bay, and nobody was in this room at the moment so I asked him to follow me.

We went into this office and the FBI guy closed the door and said, "What are you doing?"

At first I thought, "What am *I* doing? What the hell are *you* doing?"

What came out of my mouth was, "What am I doing? What do you mean by that?"

This FBI guy then took off his sunglasses and I could tell he was pissed.

He said, "*What are you doing?*"

I wasn't afraid of him and actually got a little pissed myself and I said, "Look, I don't have a goddamn clue as to what you're talking about. Show me your badge."

Bad move.

He not only had a badge, he had a friggin gun.

"Now, this is your last chance," he said. "What are you doing in your basement?"

“Holy shit, I swear,” I said, “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about, but you and I can go to the basement right now.”

He said, “Lead the way.”

As we walked to the stairwell to get to the basement my mind was racing. What the hell was this guy’s problem?

As we went into the basement I heard the drills and I thought to myself, “Holy shit, someone turned us in.”

As we came around the corner, for the first time I saw what he was talking about. It looked like something out of a diamond mine in South Africa.

Three guys had the biggest goddamn drill I have ever seen in my life. Dust was everywhere, and they had on hard hats and goggles. They looked like coal miners.

Two vets were on the drill and one guy was putting stuff into a wheelbarrow.

The FBI guy said, “What’s this all about?”

Now, I knew better than to bullshit the FBI so I told the truth.

“We’re drilling for cable TV.”

“*What?*” he said.

“We’re drilling for cable TV. There’s a cable TV junction box right in the middle of the street outside our basement. Nobody who is doing this right now—none of the guys you are seeing doing this work—is guilty of anything. I am.”

He calmly said, “You’re drilling for cable, like cable for cable TV?”

“Yep. The Army-Navy game is in two weeks and we don’t have reception here and we asked everyone including the mayor and nobody could help, so this was our plan. All we want to do is put in a little splice so the guys can watch the game. I know it looks bad, but we can stop it right now and I don’t want anyone held accountable but me.”

With that, the FBI guy took a small radio and said something about standing down.

When I asked what he was going to do, he said, “Look, I’m a veteran too, I know how valuable this place really is, this is the financial district and right across the street from where you have been drilling to get cable TV is a big bank. Every alarm they own is ringing and they thought, well, they were convinced that you homeless vets were planning on robbing them by drilling into their vaults.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Go figure.”

Less than a week later the cable company came and hooked us up to cable TV and gave us the account for free. We rented a large projection TV and all the vets watched the Army-Navy football game in our mess hall. Compliments of the FBI, I’m sure.

Chapter 5: Madison Square Garden

The shelter had an all-service honor guard made up of volunteers from the vets who lived at the shelter. We were very proud of the services that they performed.

We had vets from the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and the Coast Guard, all in uniforms and all with flags, and each time this honor guard went to a funeral, I was proud.

We had mock rifles donated that shot blanks and we had a commander of the honor guard along with a weapons detail that marched at the front and rear of the honor guard and could shoot a twenty-one gun salute at funerals.

The idea came up to have this honor guard present the colors at the Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden in New York City when Bill Clinton and Al Gore were nominated.

At the time, George H. W. Bush was the president and it was a given that Clinton and Gore would be the nominees. We had sent requests to both campaigns and asked both candidates to come to the shelter for a tour. One day I got a call from some event planner from the Democratic convention saying that our request to have the honor guard present the colors at the Democratic National Convention had been approved.

At the time I had a woman on my staff named Lori Rubin and she was tasked with getting all the details and arrangements in proper order and it seemed everything was on target.

The day came that we were supposed to depart for the convention and we didn't have the train tickets promised to us, so I raided the petty cash account of the shelter and took just enough money for train fare for twenty two of us.

The train ride was great and we all were psyched about being on the stage at Madison Square Garden at the Democratic National Convention.

We arrived at Penn station six hours before we were needed. The convention hall was connected to the train station and after getting lost a couple of times and going through

tons of security, we finally found the person who was tasked with getting us ready for our grand performance.

“OK, your team is on at 5pm and you can wait here till its time for you to march on,” said some young gal who had clipboards and radios and all kinds of badges hung around her neck.

“Wait here? Wait right here? OK, but we need a place for our honor guard to change into their uniforms, where should we do that?”

“You can do it right here as we don’t have anyplace set aside, there is no ‘green room’ or anything we have planned around this.”

I was fuming. “So, you mean, we change right here? In this hallway?” (Actually it was the big concourse that goes around the entire Garden.)

“Yes, that’s what we have for you.”

“OK, now there must have been some kind of a mix-up as we never got the train tickets for the trip down here and I had to lean on our petty cash to get one-way tickets and we need reimbursement for that and of course tickets going the other one-way to get us back tonight.”

The young gal was not sure what to do about *that*, and said, “I’ll work on getting that taken care of, but in the meantime; you can get your staff organized and I’ll come back in a while.”

“OK,” I said, “Can you also tell me when we’re going to get our dinner? The person we talked to said that you guys would provide some dinner to these guys. Are you going to do that before or after we go on?”

Again, the young gal looked at her clipboards and talked on the radio and then said “After” and walked away.

Now, getting an honor guard ready to perform is not rocket science, but all kinds of things needed to happen. The vets had to change into their class-A uniforms and the gear bags needed to be unfurled and prepped and I wanted to make sure we did this right, so I had them open the gear bags, get the flags out and get ready for a full dress rehearsal that went on for almost three hours. I found a soda machine and got everyone something to drink and began to worry about nobody at all coming to talk or brief us on what we were about to do.

I sensed that all of the reasons we had come to this particular event were becoming unglued and somehow I knew that what was about to happen wasn't going to be good.

After what seemed like a good hour or two, I realized that our plan which had been so well put together was now coming off the rails. Now, the idea that we would present ourselves as the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans, representing all homeless veterans across the country, just didn't seem to be happening right.

The young gal who was responsible for us came back and said. "Look, it's time that you guys get ready to present."

Mark Helberg and I lined up the honor guard and I gave them their final mission orders which was to remember that they were representing all veterans who were homeless across the country and I told them that I was very proud for doing this and to make me proud by walking tall.

As the honor guard marched out into Madison Square Garden's stage the place erupted and people stood on their chairs and people were screaming and there were flags and banners and music and I remember an announcer saying something like "Ladies and gentlemen please stand for the presentation of the colors presented by the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans."

I could see the smiles on each an every vet's face. It was an incredible moment, one that I will forever remember. As I looked around Madison Square Garden I could see tens of thousands of people clapping and screaming and I looked around the upper deck where the private boxes were and they all were filled with all kinds of dignitaries of some kind or another. I thought to myself we had done a good thing.

The honor guard remembered everything that I had asked them to do. They performed flawlessly right on cue and it couldn't have gone any better. Everything was right on time, right on target, and it was like we had practiced forever and all the practices worked out.

Now, on a signal it was time for us to leave the Madison Square Garden stage and go back to our assembly area.

We marched out to where we had our gear and our equipment and the young gal who was the event planner came and shook my hand and Mark's hand and said everything was great and my first question to her was did she find out when we would be fed because everyone was hungry. She said she would be right back in a couple moments and the honor

guard, in the middle of this concourse started taking off their uniforms and some guys were absolutely butt naked with no underwear and not caring as people walked by and it was around that time that the young lady returned.

She told me that she had tried very hard but this is the best she could do for meals. She had with her about ten or twelve box lunches on a cart. In these box lunches were a sandwich, an apple, a bag of chips, and a Coke. I told her that with all my staff included and with all the members of the honor guard we had twenty-two people that I needed to feed, so another ten or twelve box lunches were needed.

She said she was sorry but that was all she could do.

It was around this time that I started to get little real angry as I thought about how we didn't get our travel paid for, about how we didn't really seem to have a place to get dressed or changed and because I was the advocate that I was, I became angry at this young gal who was the event planner.

I told her that I needed to have a conversation with her boss and she said that was impossible but that I could either call or e-mail him when I got back to Boston and she also told me that she did not have the authority to give us any kind of tickets for the train ride back and she said that if we wanted to we could wait outside this door while she double checked, and she pointed at a door. I said OK we can wait out there and she said she would be back.

Without really thinking about it I told everyone to go through that door and that I'd meet them in a moment because I wanted to take one more look around Madison Square Garden with Mark.

"Can you believe it?" I said. "We did it and then we got screwed in the process."

As Mark and I walked through the door the others had gone through I realized that we were going outside, literally *outside* of Madison Square Garden onto the streets of New York and everyone assembled was looking at me as if to say "What is it you want us to do now?"

I was furious. I thought about how we have been promised certain things and none of those things had been delivered. I looked across the street and there was a McDonald's and I told everyone to make their way to McDonald's. I pulled out my credit card and told a member of my staff that everyone was to go to McDonald's and get some dinner even if they had been given a box lunch.

On the way over to McDonald's Mark and I decided that the best course of action was to call the media. I found a phone book and in the phone book I found the number for the ABC News headquarters in New York and I picked up the phone and asked for the assignment editor on World News Tonight and somebody came on the phone and I said, look, my name is Ken Smith I'm in charge of the homeless veteran honor guard that was just at Madison Square Garden for the Democratic National Convention and I have a huge complaint, a huge complaint, and if you want, you can have someone come and I will give my complaint on tape.

About thirty minutes later while standing outside of this McDonald's, a news truck with a cameraman and reporter came up and asked me if I was Ken Smith from the homeless veteran shelter. I said yes.

The interview lasted maybe ten minutes as they said they were on a deadline, and for the most part it was a rant by me about how I felt that these homeless veterans had not been given the proper respect. I told the interviewer that we had been promised transportation from Boston and that didn't happen; we been told that we needed to change in a hallway that was a public hallway in front of everybody in the convention and it embarrassed these guys to have to do that; that we had been told we were going to be fed and while I was looking up at the private boxes in Madison Square Garden I saw that people were eating cracked crab and beef bourguignon and here we are, homeless vets, and yet we were given a box lunch—actually, we were given less than a full complement of box lunches. And now here we are standing outside of Madison Square Garden and we're hungry. I said I didn't have enough money to get all of these homeless veterans back to the shelter in Boston because I spent what little money I had buying them dinner at McDonald's and I thought that it was an embarrassment that this had happened to American veterans even though they were homeless. Shame on the Democratic Convention planners, I said.

The reporter and a cameraman left and I went into McDonald's. Fifteen minutes later a guy came across the street from Madison Square Garden and identified himself as the boss of the woman who had told us where we could change and was the one who'd given us

some box lunches. He pulled out three \$100 bills and said to please get these guys some dinner here and he will make arrangements for the train tickets to go back to Boston.

Then another guy approached me. Bud Bershoni said he was an American veteran and that he'd seen on the news what happened to us. He said, "I'd like you to know that I own a hotel here in New York and I'd like you to be my guests. I want you all to stay at my hotel tonight and I'd like to give you a better dinner than you'll get at McDonald's."

The staff member whom I had with me then told me that she had been checking her voice messages in Boston and that there were all kinds of politicians trying to contact me. It seems that Ted Kennedy, John Kerry, Barney Frank, and a host of other Massachusetts Democratic dignitaries were attempting to reach me and explain to me that what happened was a complete mix-up.

We all went to the hotel and sure enough we all were given rooms and fed dinner and the next morning Bud paid for tickets on the train to get us back to Boston.

After we arrived in Boston from the train there were a slew of media trucks parked out front of the shelter and I immediately knew that my interview on ABC News had caught national attention.

I brought everyone into the shelter and I told those reporters in attendance that I would be speaking to them soon. I went to my office and there were messages from everywhere, including a message from Al Gore.

As I was sitting in my office I got a phone call from Barney Frank who proceeded to rip me a new ass because he said that I disrespected Democrats, that I was ungrateful for what had happened, and that there was going to be a new Democratic president and that he, Barney Frank, was disgusted with my actions and found me to be unpatriotic and that I had just made a ton of enemies.

Over the next two weeks I received phone calls from both Democrats and Republicans, all telling me one way or another what they thought of me. Some were good, some bad.

One of the phone calls was from a senior Republican consultant who told me that the honor guard would be welcomed at the Republican National Convention to be held in Houston and that he would send me the information about how we would have transport to Houston and how we would be well taken care of by the Republicans.

Chapter 6: Coffins at DOL

The shelter had been running for a while when I became aware of a special Department of Labor grant program that was used to help homeless veterans. The grant was out of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training Service.

This DOL grant was competitive and I always prided myself on getting our grant writing staff to outline and submit the best grants in the nation.

The veteran in the VETS post as the Assistant Secretary at the time was a retired air force general and he was a good guy. He also had on his staff a couple of good guys, but for the most part his staff had no clue about dealing with homeless veterans and I was determined to educate them.

I had asked a number of times for a meeting with this assistant secretary to back-brief him on employment and training of the homeless veteran population.

The staff of the secretary would always find a way to either postpone or cancel the meeting.

After this happened a number of times I decided to make good on a promise and a threat to this general's senior staff. I told his staff that I would be in Washington D.C. on a certain day and would be coming to the office of the assistant secretary at a certain time.

If there were no meeting, I would order coffins to be delivered and placed right outside the window of the assistant secretary's office. Then I would call the media and say, "This office, the office of the assistant secretary for veterans employment and training, which is supposed to be helping homeless veterans, is in fact, by not doing anything, killing my brothers."

Now that was a bold move, and one that I called "guerrilla theatre" and one that I learned from David Mamet. Mamet would take his right hand and pat his chest and say, "Theater has a place in everyday work," and I knew that by saying I was going to send coffins to this guy's office, I had better be prepared.

I had my staff call most of the funeral homes in the greater Washington D.C. area and explain that I wanted to rent a coffin for an hour, and would pay for the transport and the cost of the hearse and the attendant that I would want standing by the coffin and told them the exact street address (right outside the office of the assistant secretary). I said I would pay in advance, and on a call from me, I wanted the coffin delivered, and placed on the sidewalk for a movie shoot that would last one hour.

I then tasked my staff to reach out to the D.C. police department and get a permit that would allow me to do a film shoot from point A on this street to point B, and I wanted the area cleared of any cars the night before, as I need this space to conduct my movie shoot.

Right at 10am, I walked into DOL with Mark Helberg and we ran into Tom Keefe, one of the good guys on the staff of the assistant secretary.

“I know you said you were coming, but really, no shit, the assistant secretary is extremely busy and I’m not sure we can get this done today,” said Tom.

In attendance with us was our dear friend Greg Bresser , whom I had known for years. Greg was a senior member of a large veterans’ organization. Greg kept saying, “Jesus, don’t bring any coffins, don’t bring any freakin’ coffins.”

As I sat there and talked with Mark about the next step, out of the office came the assistant secretary.

“Welcome, Ken,” he said, “I’ve heard a lot about you. Come in and let’s chat.”

As we entered into the meeting conference room, his other staff—who I thought were absolute dicks—attempted to tell this assistant secretary that I had blackmailed my way into this meeting.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Were you going to have coffins put on the sidewalk outside my office?”

“Yes sir, it’s true. It’s not a reflection of your commitment to the veteran who is homeless, but it is a serious reflection on some of the dicks who work for you.”

With that, the general smiled.

“OK, Ken, you have my attention. What do you want?”

Many times during the following years, I would wait for the part of any meeting in D.C. where someone in authority would say those exact words: “What do you want?”

After the meeting with the assistant secretary, the Department of Labor expanded its services and programs and made all kinds of funding available to lots of small nonprofits around the country.

The general was a man of his word and did much of what I said was needed and what would help.

Chapter 7: When Johnny Comes Marching Home(less)

The Department of Veterans Affairs was hosting a national summit in Washington, D.C. in February of 2004 on the subject of homeless veterans. I saw this event as the perfect time and place to get more national attention and more federal funding allocated to help out the tens of thousands of homeless veterans around the country who were sleeping under bridges and in their cars—by again, using a little guerilla theatre.

I had just finished reading a book about the World War I veterans and the Bonus March they had organized, when they demanded the bonus monies promised to them after serving in the Great War.

We can do our own Bonus March, I thought. We can replicate the March of WWI veterans in 1932 and bring thousands of homeless veterans from the greater D.C. area, organize them into a group, have them march in formation, and end right in front of the VA headquarters. We'd let the VA know that a summit about homelessness was good, but programs and funding were better. That was the seed for "When Johnny Comes Marching Homeless Again, Hurrah!"

An event of this magnitude and the logistics behind getting this done were huge. On my staff were two crackerjack gals, Lori Rubin and Tempie Thompson, who did ninety-eight percent of everything. All I mostly did was media and fundraising for the costs associated with the event and attempted to stay out of their way.

Our bean counter at the shelter made us a budget and it would cost (if we did what we thought we could do) for parade permits, police details, rentals of trucks, buses and cars and general logistics and travel, hotel rooms and meals, somewhere north of one hundred thousand dollars. That was, and still is, a lot of money.

I remembered the guy in New York who offered us the hotel deal during the democratic convention. I called him up and said, "Can you help?"

Bud Bushani said, "I'll take care of the entire thing."

What a miracle.

The logistics involved getting vets from Boston, New York, Philly, Baltimore, and the greater D.C. area assembled in a park across the street from the White House were enormous. It was a piece of work and a sight to see.

After the advance staff arrived in D.C. the day before the event, I was meeting with Lori and Tempie at the hotel in D.C. and we were looking at the weather.

“It’s going to rain,” they both said.

I called RR&L back in Boston who was scheduled to have the supply truck leave at around 11pm that night and said, “How many ponchos do we have in storage?”

He said he would call me right back and he did, and said we have almost two thousand as we just got them from GSA surplus and they are still in the boxes. The GSA surplus guy of new England was a godsend and we had all kinds of stuff offered to us—even a parade tank.

Add all of those boxes onto the truck right now, I said. We’re going to need them.

The next morning, while we prepared to receive the buses and trucks and staff at the assembly point, the supply truck that had traveled all night now had ponchos to hand out to the first two thousand lucky homeless vets. It was just the thing as it made the whole event seem more organized, now that I think about it.

We were scheduled to march from the Department of Veterans Affairs main headquarters that was under renovation (“wreck world”) to the temporary headquarters where the VA secretary was located, known as “tech world.”

This was a twelve-block march and the order of march was being handled by the senior staff. We culled out of the homeless vets assembled anyone with a rank of E-7 or higher and gave them command of a full company of eighty vets. We had over seventy-five companies fully staffed.

We marched eight across and ten deep per company and it was amazing as I heard the calls: “Alpha company, form up here, Bravo company form up here, and Charlie company form up here.”

One of the vets, an E-8 said, “Sir, we need another battalion designated as we are now at full battalion strength.”

Now, I was an E-4 in the military and knew when I was in over my head. I handed this vet a radio and said, "Top, you're in charge of getting this whole march on its legs. Anyone gives you any grief, call me on this radio. My handle is "Command One" and I will tell whoever gets in your way to stand down."

We also had trucks and buses and a flatbed eighteen-wheeler with concert speakers and a podium and microphone on it. All of this sounds simple to organize, but without this guy stepping forward and taking charge, it would never have been done.

At the same time, Lori and Tempie were logistics masters and soon, right around 10am, the D.C. police leading the march with four police cars gave us the "You're good to go" signal and off we went.

Our honor guard, in full uniform and with no ponchos, was leading us.

Following this honor guard we had a twenty-one-man weapons detail, again in uniform, no ponchos, carrying the mock rifles we used for funerals, and this was followed by the First Battalion of Homeless Vets, followed by the sound truck (eighteen-wheeler) and the Second Battalion of Homeless Vets and then buses, and the Third Battalion and more trucks and on an on. The entire compliment was just over six thousand strong and we had maybe thirty trucks and buses.

Since it was raining (a light rain, but cold), we didn't have many people on the streets, but we could look into the office building windows as we marched along and see signs saying "Support Our Troops" and "God Bless America" and some that said, "Shame on our government for so many homeless veterans" and people were crowding at windows.

Some of the streets had office buildings on both sides and it was law firms and the usual D.C. businesses of the government and I saw a few of the women crying as we marched by. We made a turn to march by the White House when all of a sudden my radio crackled.

"Command one, command one, you're needed at the front of the march, on the double please, the Secret Service wants to talk to you."

Jesus, the Secret Service, what the hell did we do? I wondered.

I made my way from the rear of the march, where I was checking on the caboose elements of the march, to very front, and sure enough, in trench coats with the radio things in their ears, were maybe a half dozen agents of the Secret Service.

“You need to surrender your weapons right now,” said the guy who appeared to be in charge.

“What, I need to what?” I said.

“You need to surrender the weapons right now, from those veterans”—he pointed at the weapons detail—“and when your march goes by, and you have turned the corner over there”—and he pointed like a block or two away—“we will return them to you.”

One of the agents took me aside. “Look, this is no bullshit, do as he says, or this whole thing will be shut down. All of us are veterans and we know how important what you’re doing is, so do as we ask and we will make sure the boss hears about this.”

I went to the commander of the honor guard and told him to have his weapons detail place their mock rifles in the trunk of the big black SUV that seemed to have come from out of nowhere.

This all took maybe twenty minutes and during this time, we had “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” like a theme song on the speakers of the flat bed. The vets waiting in line, who actually were standing in the rain, started to sing, but they put the words “When Johnnie Comes Marching Homeless Again” into the song and I smiled.

Radio, TV, and print reporters were asking me what had happened with the Secret Service, when all of a sudden the order of “all clear” was given and the march continued.

I told all the media to check in with Lori and Tempie, and I resumed my walk to the back of the march, checking each and every company as I went by.

Now, I graduated from boot camp of the United States Army in 1971 and was in a military parade for that event, and that had maybe five hundred graduates at Ft. Dix, but this march was not rehearsed for weeks like that graduation was, but done impromptu—and I was beaming. It seemed that each homeless vet knew that what we were doing was important. The order of march was tight, and a formation for each company had someone walking on the outside calling cadence. It must have looked like this was planned and practiced a hundred times. It wasn’t.

As I went down the order of march, it seemed the first two thousand homeless vets wore ponchos and the rest were just marching in their coats in the rain. I had an appreciation of how the Civil War generals of the South must have felt. I had no poncho but

was wearing a Court Street all-weather jacket when I saw the old vet. He had to be in his late eighties I thought, and here he was, marching with us at the back of the march, and he was in a light coat—soaked through—and no hat.

I called on the radio and got the supply truck.

Do we have a field jacket on the truck? I asked

No sir, we have no jackets or any ponchos left.

I asked for RR&L to come find me at the end of the march.

When he showed up he was wearing his poncho.

Take this old vet and get him onto one of the trucks, I said, riding in the cab with the heat on.

But right there, in front of me, RR&L took off his poncho. His shirt was dry. He took off his shirt and I watched him take this old guy's coat off, then his wet shirt. He put his dry shirt and then the poncho onto this old guy.

"I got this problem handled, boss," said RR&L.

I was never so proud of anything I ever saw. I knew then that we were brothers.

My radio was crackling again with all kinds of reports and requests. I halted the march for ten minutes for a coffee break.

The canteen truck was loaded with hot coffee and urns of steaming hot chocolate and I thought it was a good time to have that process started. A squad from each company came and was handed the coffee and hot chocolate for that company. I was amazed. The canteen truck was staffed by mess sergeants that were again culled from the ranks and I was thankful for Lori and Tempie who had made another decision that made me look good. Our supply truck was also carrying five thousand MREs and I said if anyone is hungry, pass those out too.

We were two blocks from the VA headquarters and I had a small advance team of scouts going out in front of the march calling me on the radio from time to time to report on what was in front of us.

The lead scout said, "You need to come to the front of the march right now."

"What's up?" I said.

“You’re not going to believe this,” said the scout I had placed in charge. “We just came from the VA headquarters and they’re evacuating the building.”

“Evacuating? Was there a fire reported?”

“No, they’re evacuating the VA headquarters because of us! They think we’re going to storm the building.”

“No way—why do you say that?” I asked.

These scouts were hand picked by me in advance and while they were homeless vets, they were not dressed in ponchos and they were smart. They had come from Boston and the leader and one talking to me had actually been a Marine scout sniper in Vietnam.

He said, “We got to the building and all of a sudden tons of people were leaving and pretty soon it was a swarm of people, all walking fast and almost running out. I saw two guys talking and one had a Marine baseball cap on and I said, ‘What’s happening?’ This guy who worked in the building said, ‘Everyone has been evacuated because the homeless vets are going to attack and storm the building.’”

My radio was cracking again saying the cops wanted us to keep the march moving and I said “Saddle up” and told the scouts to keep giving me any Intel they could find.

We now were one block from the VA and there were tons of people lined up on both sides of the street, thousands it seemed, and most were VA employees who I am sure were wondering what the hell we were going to do.

It was like the accident-on-the-highway syndrome had taken effect and they all wanted to see what we were going to do.

By a complete coincidence, Tempie Thompson had a dear family friend named Kari who worked at the VA headquarters as a senior policy analyst. Years later I was told that everyone at the VA headquarters went to their windows to take a peek while we were still blocks away, and Kari was shocked to see Tempie in the crowd making its way to the VA on the protest march.

The honor guard and the weapons detail made its way to the front of the VA headquarters and turned and wheeled to be facing the front door. The weapons detail was right behind them and I could see for the first time that they were all soaked to the bone.

The First Battalion of Homeless Vets kept marching and when they got a half block away, they too wheeled and closed ranks.

Other marching elements let the sound truck advance, which was still blaring out "When Johnnie Comes Marching Home Again." It pulled up right next to the honor guard.

Other trucks, buses, and the rest of the homeless veteran marchers all came together under the direction of the E-8 whom I had placed in charge at the beginning of the march. It was a sight to see.

Now standing in front of the VA headquarters in Washington D.C. were thousands of homeless veterans, all in formation, and as a result, the VA evacuated the building. I was stunned at the sight.

Lori and Tempie had written a statement for me to read and it was less a rant and more a demand that the veterans administration fund more programs and open empty beds at VA hospitals to those who were homeless when it was snowing or raining out. I remember getting ready to read this prepared statement when my scout got me on the radio.

Sir, here comes Jesse Brown he said.

Sure enough, walking down the front steps of the VA headquarters was VA Secretary Jesse Brown.

Jesse was someone I knew and respected.

A combat wounded Marine from Vietnam, Jesse was an advocate for all veterans for many years and someone whom all veterans respected.

We had a set of stairs at the back end of the flat bed, so you could simply walk up onto the truck and get to a microphone. A couple of times I had walked up and down during the course of the march myself.

I watched as Jesse, and Jesse alone, walked up those steps.

"Mr. Secretary," I said, sticking out my hand, "Welcome to the project to shelter homeless veterans."

"Hello Ken," and he took his left hand and shook mine (his wound from Vietnam was to his right arm). "Would you allow me to have a few words with the vets?"

"Absolutely, sir." And I stepped away from the microphone.

Jesse welcomed all of those marching. "Brothers," he said, "I know that most of you feel that the VA does not care and you have been forgotten. I give you my solemn promise that

we are going to increase funding for projects to help you, all of you, and I want you to know you have a friend who sits in the chair of the secretary of veteran's affairs."

The assembled vets—wet, cold and in formation—let out a cheer.

Jesse turned to me and said, "Ken, nobody else could have pulled this off." He told me he got a call from the White House that we were on our way to his offices. "I'm impressed," he said. "I thought because of the rain you might have postponed, but I can see that you brought your grunts."

"Mr. Secretary, this is in no way a reflection on you," I said. "And I want you to know, Democrat or Republican, this is nothing more than me showing you a small sample of what is out there nationwide."

Jesse thanked me again and walked off the platform to an audience with some of his senior staff, all in trench coats and hats and umbrellas; and I proceeded to give my speech. Again there was a huge cheer from the vets.

We ended the march at the very park where we started and the supply truck handed out all the MREs and amazingly the rain stopped and the sun started to shine. I saw that as a good sign and prepared myself for the coming three days. We were guests of the secretary of veterans' affairs at the Homeless Veterans' Summit and I was sure there were more things to happen.

Chapter 8: Tribes

After working at the shelter for a number of years, I began to see patterns of pathology among the homeless vets. These were guys who were once fully functioning human beings. They were trained to kill and then thrown into an environment of unimaginable stress. Then they were discharged from the military and asked to become normal healthy citizens overnight.

Many vets were able to return home and lead productive lives. The guys who found their way to the shelter couldn't make the transition. Without societal support, they fell victim to a wide variety of addictions and diseases. The struggle became too much and they dropped out of society to live on the streets, and in many cases the only crutch they had to get them from one day to the next was their addiction.

While at the shelter we gave every vet the respect they deserved—and often received nowhere else—for me and my staff the emotional toll of dealing with these shattered men, once young and vital and considered our country's finest and now reduced to homeless misery, was too much. We had to create some emotional distance and make sense of the chaos in our minds.

In response to what I was experiencing every day, I began to compartmentalize to myself each vet that entered the program. I would place them into one of a series of tribes that I had imagined in my mind. This sorting process made it possible for me to create appropriate responses to a wide variety of problems.

The Tribe of the Alcoholians, as I called them, was the largest tribe of homeless veterans. These tribe members had one thing in common: they drowned their pain in alcohol.

There was the Tribe of the Methadonians, and this tribe was comprised of former heroin addicts that had been weaned off of heroin and switched to the use of methadone. This tribe comprised the hardcore street homeless and there was a network and hierarchy of Methadonians that saw each other every day as they went to clinics to get their daily dose of methadone. This tribe was brutal. It was Methadonians who found the new fresh

homeless out on the streets, veteran and non-veteran alike, and preyed on them either at shelters or on the street. Methadonians usually traveled in a pack and usually there was one who was the pack leader. Whenever I encountered them on the street they reminded me of a pack of snow wolves.

There was the tribe of the Neuroliptians and Psychotropians, and this tribe was comprised mostly of psych clients. They usually had glassy eyes and a bucket of pills given to them by the VA. The members of this tribe came in all shapes and sizes. Some took very good care of themselves and others would spend the night sleeping underneath a bridge because they would skip off of their meds and not remember where they were or where they were going.

In addition to these tribes, there was a small group of vets who were newly homeless—typically they had been kicked out of the house by a wife or girlfriend. I came to see them as the tribe of the Virgins. On the streets of large cities the Methadonians sought out Virgins at train stations, bus stations, and late at night in parks and parking garages. Usually the fresh homeless were reluctant to admit their predicament, and many quickly fell prey to the street-savvy Methadonians.

Some vets were members of more than one group, such as the Virgin vet who had been kicked out of his girlfriend's apartment because he was an addict or she couldn't handle his violent post-traumatic stress episodes.

There was a policy at the shelter that if you presented as intoxicated or if SAC (substance abuse counselors) had any suspicion that you were hooked on some drug, you were tested on the spot and given a choice: Detox or get out.

I speak about homelessness as a business and the detox side of homelessness was big business. Most alcohol-addicted vets took upwards of thirty days to wean themselves off of the dependency of alcohol. During this time they more often than not were in a detox facility that charged the insurance of the homeless (Medicaid), or if the vet were lucky enough to get into a VA detox, the same thing occurred—you and I, with our taxes, paid for this service. What always amazed me, but shouldn't have, was once the veteran was dried out, the detox facility usually sent them right back into the lion's den, right back onto the streets with little to no follow up.

Let's take a look at some math. If a detox program averages thirty days, and if the insurance paid \$125 per day (I think it's more), then the average detox stay for an Alcoholic was \$3,750.00.

I know off the top of my head that vets we serviced sometime needed three, four, and maybe ten detoxes to get free of alcohol. You can see the investment.

Only those who have been touched by the effects of someone they love being an alcoholic can fully appreciate what I am telling you. It's as if the veteran fell down Alice's hole and what you thought you knew, you didn't.

Ninety percent of all the vets who presented at intake at the shelter were drug or alcohol addicted.

Ninety percent of those were Alcoholics.

It would seem that if anyone wanted to get serious about making inroads with the homeless veteran, one of the first things they would want to do is to increase the capacity of detox beds nationwide. The larger the city or region, the more need for detox beds.

The second thing you would want to do is to ensure that upon discharge, the homeless veteran was placed in a program of some kind. Halfway house, sober house, something that allowed the veteran to continue on a path of recovery. It's a huge gap in the treatment system and one that is as prevalent today as it was twenty years ago.

Homelessness is a business. Detox facilities get fed clients from the population of the homeless. I would venture to say that they get better than half of all their clients from this environment. Someone or some agency should study this issue, as I am sure that hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year drying out a homeless Alcoholic and then a month later, he checks into another facility.

When someone leaves detox there needs to be better aftercare planning. It's a waste of time and effort to work hard to dry someone out and then send them right back to the exact same environment that got them alcohol addicted in the first place.

When it comes to detoxing a heroin addict the price increases and the success rate drops. Weaning someone off hard core drugs takes patience and medical care. What perplexes me is that no one has come up with a better option than methadone.

I have first hand experience with the Methadonians. Each time a Methadonian goes and gets the dose of daily methadone, within an hour they are glassy eyed and most just want to nod off.

After seeing this at the shelter a number of times, I made a hard and fast rule: no sleeping during the day. This angered the tribe so much that one day they picketed the shelter. Most everyone who participated in this picket of the shelter were Methodonians, and it included tribe members from other shelters. There must have been sixty Methadonians who were walking in a formation like they were in a union picket line right outside of the shelter. All were chanting, “Hey, Hey, ho, ho, Ken Smith, has got to go.”

Mark found me and said, “The media is on the way and we need a plan.”

From inside the shelter it was hard to look out to the front of building, but I was alerted by security that a couple of TV trucks had just pulled up outside and a few print reporters were outside too.

I waited maybe ten minutes and walked right out the front door and approached the one Methadonian who I knew to be the “alpha” of the group. This guy (whom I will call Mike) was street savvy and I saw him talking to a TV reporter. A few of the group shouted “It’s him—It’s Ken Smith,” and that caused the TV reporter to turn to me and the camera man too.

I walked up to Mike the Methadonian and said, “It’s a little chilly out here today Mike, so I’ve instructed the mess sergeant of the kitchen to serve you guys hot black coffee while you’re picketing,” and then told the TV reporter that this group of former heroin addicts were picketing the shelter because we wouldn’t let them come in and sleep during the day.

The TV reporter, sniffing a story said, “Are you discriminating against former addicts?”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “Each of the veterans in the shelter fought for the right of these guys to picket us, and while we disagree that taking heroin is a lifestyle that is good, they are all still veterans out here and when they decide to stop nodding off after taking drugs we will let them back in.”

The group again started with “Hey, Hey, ho, ho, Ken Smith, has got to go.”

Just then the mess sergeant walked out pushing a cart with a coffee urn and paper cups and said, “Hot coffee—getcha hot coffee here,” almost like he was at Fenway Park.

That night, all three of the major TV stations played the picket of the shelter on the news and within ten minutes of it playing the phones at the shelter lit up.

“Good for you guys—good for you standing up to those jerks,” was the most frequent response.

“I was a heroin addict once, and you’re right, they need to get off methadone,” said a few.

Mostly, the big picket line was a bust.

And then there were the pills.

After having the shelter open a month or two, it was obvious to me that the pills that were handed out at the VA like Chiclets were a commodity that was traded on the streets.

In response, we started a program where every single vet needed to turn in all of his medication to “sick bay,” and each of the vets then had a container supplied where the meds were stored. We didn’t allow anyone to have anything—Tylenol, aspirin, eye drops, nothing.

At first this was a huge pain in the ass. It meant that we were in charge of every veteran’s meds and since no one took their pills at the same time, the sick bay was always busy. At the same time, some of these pills were related to legitimate pain management, and that worried me.

Mark came up with a great idea and had the medics rotated around in the sickbay and nobody knew until that day what medic job they would get.

At the same time, Mark (who is very good with numbers) had an audit done on all the pills and he did this on no set schedule. One day it was on a Monday, and a week later on a Tuesday and then two weeks later on a Saturday.

During the time that we were handling the pills of the vets, not one vet complained about having his medication stolen.

It was a few months later that an older vet came up alongside of me in the dinner line and said, “You have no idea, do you?”

“Idea about what?”

“You have no idea how great it is that I don’t have to fend off the nitwits who were always after me for my pills. I have cancer and cancer pain and the VA has given me a

prescription that controls that pain and now, all I need to do is go to sick bay, sign out my dosage, and bingo, I am as right as rain.”

One tribe that didn't like the new policy of handing over all your medication was the Neuroliptians and the Psychotropians. They were selling their pills out on the street and this policy put a dent on that quick.

At the same time, we saw an improvement in that tribe as nobody now had to remember to take their meds. There was a med call every evening at six o'clock and again at nine, and then the medic would do an audit to see who did and who didn't come for their meds. We made a rule that if you missed med call twice, your privileges at the shelter were reduced. It had an impact.

In my introduction to this book, I wrote, “What we do to the vets who are psych problems and on the streets is borderline criminal.” That's true then and it's true now and someday, someone is going to formulate a better plan than handing a bucket of pills to someone who needs to take one a day, every day, whether they think they need it or not, because if they don't, they rocket off to the dark side of the moon. Nobody should be in that position. What happens frequently is that they start feeling good, they don't take the pill, and before you know it, they are baying at the very same moon the pill is helping to keep away.

Chapter 9: The Rump Rangers' Secret Meetings

Not all of the tribes were associated with drugs or destructive behavior. There was the tribe of the Rump Rangers—the homosexuals who had been in the service before the time of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” They usually were fastidious in their appearance and if you didn’t know they were homeless, if someone didn’t tell you, you would think they lived in an apartment or had their own house. They usually kept to themselves and while there were a few openly gay vets who you could obviously tell were homosexual, the vast majority that I came to know didn’t talk or show any sign of their sexual proclivity. This was either because this was simply how they chose to present themselves, or it was because they had been conditioned by society and the military to suppress their sexuality. To be “outed” in Vietnam was not a positive life event, and could result in immediate discharge and even physical harm.

The tribe of the Rump Rangers has been stigmatized by society for too long. I don’t care what your personal sexual preference is. I don’t want you trying to push yours on me, and I won’t try to push mine on you.

I also don’t want to think of being in a foxhole with anyone other than someone who is an American. Sounds weird, because the argument that gays can’t serve is ludicrous. Gays have been in our military since the days of George Washington. Alexander the Great was gay, for God’s sake. It’s not about being gay when the bullets are flying, it’s about protecting each other because you’re an American.

Let those who think it’s wrong for gays to be in the military step forward and throw the first rock. You won’t find me in that pack.

Now, just because you’re gay doesn’t mean you should get anything extra either. If my use of the term Rump Ranger angers anyone, well, then you haven’t been around anyone who is gay. They call each other way more colorful things than that.

One night at around two o’clock I was awakened at home by a call from the overnight duty officer who said you better get in here right now, I have a huge problem.

When I asked what the problem was, he said security had broken up an orgy.

Orgy? Oh my God, the vets brought women into the building?

No, that's why you need to come in and I can explain when you get here.

I said I would be there as fast as I could. I lived in a suburb of Boston and it took me over an hour. Now in the middle of the night the streets of Boston are empty for the most part and as I drove into the shelter I was thinking that for some reason, one that I couldn't fathom, someone had been hurt, and my mind raced.

I arrived at the shelter and was met by the duty officer at the front desk who said, now, you're not going to believe this but we have sixteen guys in the vault downstairs. The supply vault with all the towels and linens.

Before World War II the shelter's building was a bank, and in the basement were two huge bank vaults that had been in the building for over a hundred years. When I say these vaults were huge, I mean really *huge*. One had a door that was twelve feet tall and weighed twenty tons, and the other was big enough to park a dozen cars.

In one of these vaults we stored the most precious supplies that the shelter needed. These were sundries for the most part—the disposables that you and I take for granted: soap bars, shampoo, toilet paper, sheets, towels, and pillow cases. Most of the daily mundane things that are in your home right now that you're not thinking twice about were under lock and key because if they weren't, they would disappear.

So that night we found a bunch of guys in the vault.

Were they stealing stuff? I asked.

No, they didn't take anything, the duty officer told me as we made our way to the vault, but you got to see this for yourself.

Now, I knew that at the shelter there were homosexual vets, and to myself I called them the Rump Rangers. They worked in the laundry and kitchen, did a good job, and up until this very minute I had never had any problem with any of them.

As I turned the corner in the basement and saw the vault door open, I could see our security staff, the vet guards, all in uniform, and I thought to myself, this can't be good.

Walking into the vault I was stunned.

Standing facing the wall were sixteen naked vets, all at attention, all butt naked, with vet guards holding billy clubs interspersed behind them.

The captain of the guard was a guy named Bert, and I said, “Bert, what the hell is going on?”

“Sir!” he said. “Corporal Mitchell was on his rounds on his overnight detail when he heard sounds coming from the vault. When he investigated he found these veterans having a sexual orgy, sir. He came to me immediately and I activated the Broken Arrow plan as you have directed, sir. I woke all the vet guards and we came as a unit and lo and behold, these guys were doing wild thing to each other here in the vault. We had them all turn towards the wall and stand at attention until you could arrive, sir.”

Jesus Christ, I was stunned.

I recognized one of the Rump Rangers—Stephen, the guy who volunteered to dress the old vet who had died a few months earlier. I said to the captain, “Have them all get dressed and when that one gets dressed, escort him to my office.”

I turned and left and thought to myself, holy shit, what the hell am I going to do about this?

I asked the duty officer to have someone from the kitchen bring me a pot of coffee, and I went to my office to wait.

Ten minutes later the captain of the guard and another vet guard brought Stephen into my office.

“You can wait outside,” I said to the captain of the guard.

When the door closed, I said to Stephen, “You want a coffee?” and I poured myself one.

“Thank you sir, yes, I could use a coffee.”

“OK,” I said, “Now, tell me what happened.”

“Are you sure you really want to know this?”

“Yes, I’m sure, and tell me the truth. I’ll be asking others the same question. For your information, they called me at home in the middle of the night, and now I’m here, and I will find out the truth. Be honest.” Then I added, “I remember you helped me with the old vet who died, so just blurt it out. Tell me.”

“It was our regular Thursday night get together.” He said.

“OK, when you say *regular* Thursday night get together, what do you mean by that?”

“Well, I know you’re straight and I don’t want to insult you, but every Thursday night, at midnight, we gather in the linen vault and couple up.”

“And do what?”

“We do what you do—we have relations and we take care of each other and we listen and try to understand the latest information about AIDS. I don’t know what to tell you—we couple up.”

“And how long has this been going on?” I said.

“For as long as I’ve been here, and that’s been over a year.”

Holy shit, I thought to myself, that’s over fifty times and this is the first time anyone knew?

“So, what made this time different?” I said.

“Well, a new arrival, Daniel, you wouldn’t know him, well, he got excited and started to scream, and before we could stop him, well, the guard must have heard it, and then, the lights went on and the captain came in with all his men and bullied us against the wall.”

“So let me get this right. This happens every single Thursday night, and tonight someone who is new to the shelter screamed in excitement and one of the vet guards heard him, and that’s what got this whole thing started? That about it?”

Just then there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

In came the captain of the guard.

“Sir, there are about twenty-five vets downstairs at the front desk right now demanding to see the vet you are interviewing. They’re loud and waking up everyone. Half the shelter is awake now and the duty officer is requesting you come to the front desk, he said it’s almost a riot.”

“Tell the duty officer I’ll be right there,” I said, and closed the door. “You know what this is about?”

“Yeah. They think they’re all going to be thrown out of the shelter—but the reason we’re here is because it’s the safest, cleanest, and most well run shelter in the city. And it’s sober, which is nothing like the other shelters and they know, well, they all know me and

they think you're telling me right now that I am barred because I'm gay. They will do as you tell them, but you need to be fair and punish those of us in the vault and leave them alone."

"Follow me," I said.

We went downstairs and sure enough, as I got to the first floor I could hear the ruckus: Fucking fairies, you woke us up you fucking fairies, I am gonna kill your ass, and I heard others saying, fuck you, and all kinds of nasty things were being said.

"Attention on deck!" someone shouted.

I walked into the large dining room and there was almost the entire shelter in attendance. The vets from the basement were in a group, surrounded by about twenty vet guards.

"Gentlemen," I said, "With the exception of the following people, everyone is go back to bed right now," and I pointed at the vets from the basement.

And there was a group of maybe twenty who were clearly Rump Rangers, and I said, "They stay here too—everyone else back to bed."

One guy in the back of the room went crazy and said, "I don't know who the fuck you are, but this is bullshit and I am gonna have me some trouble, as I got woken up by these assholes, so why don't you just leave and let us handle this issue?"

I turned to Burt, the captain of the guard. "Have Grady escort this one out for me please," I said.

Now Grady was six-foot-three and weighted in at over two hundred and seventy-five pounds and was as black as you can be black.

"Fuck you!" said the vet. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

One vet said, "He's the vet who started this place and you just stepped on your own dick. He's the boss of all the bosses."

The vet looked at me, looked at Grady and said, "I'm sorry, please don't kick me out."

I told Grady to have him put outside and he could return only at town meeting and make his case for readmission, which was in three days.

"Don't you ever tell me what to do!" I shouted at him. "You think this is a game?"

I then turned and looked at everyone else and raised my voice again.

"I SAID GET TO FUCKIN' BED!"

The room cleared in three minutes.

I was left with the culprits, the vet guards, and twenty other Rump Rangers.

I told the captain to let all the guards also go to bed, that he had done a good job and I was fine with just Grady with me in the room. The captain thanked me and all the vet guards went back to bed.

“Now,” I said, pointing at the rest of the attendees, “I know. I know more than you think I know. I know about Thursday nights. You have violated the rules of this facility and each of you”—and I pointed to the group who were in the vault—“each of you is suspended from this facility for one week. When you return, you will be forced to go to the ‘cot squad’ and all of your privileges that you now have are gone. This takes effect immediately and you are to clear out your lockers, and be out of this building in thirty minutes.

“To the rest of you: I know you see the value of being here. It’s safe, it’s clean and nobody steals your stuff, and for once you have a place, a locker, hot showers, and a place to put your valuables. Now, you all will return to your beds right now and if I *ever* hear of anything like this happening again, you all will be sent out with the same penalty.”

Each of them looked at me for what seemed to be forever. I was expecting some push back and then suddenly they all left the room.

The only one remaining besides Grady and me was Stephen. “That was fair,” said Stephen, “and I’m truly sorry. Someday I hope you understand that we didn’t do this to hurt anybody.”

Chapter 10: JD (Just Dog)

The shelter had been open less than a year when I got a call from the duty officer to come to the front desk. There's a guy standing in front of me who wants to meet you, he said.

I made my way to the front desk and standing at the counter was a guy who looked like he had escaped from a Nazi concentration camp.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"You Ken Smith?" he said.

"Yes."

"My name is Roger and I'm a combat Vietnam veteran. I was a dog handler with the CAV (1st Calvary Division) in '67-'68. I'm here because I am about to pass. I have non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and it's a matter of time before I go. I walked plenty of trails in II-Corps sprayed by Agent Orange and I am sure that's what got me sick. When I was in Nam, I had a dog named Rocco and I did eleven months in country with him as a scout dog. One day, on a patrol, a booby trap mine exploded and Rocco and I were injured. They evac'd us both out on the same bird. Because I lost part of my left foot, I was medially discharged and because Rocco had shrapnel, they were going to put him down.

"I asked Senator Ted Kennedy to intervene on my behalf and I was one of the very first vets to ever get to keep his dog. To make a long story short, over the years, Rocco had pups. I usually kept the alpha male of each litter and called him Rocco Two. This here is a pup that was born eight weeks ago. He has all his shots and has been to the vet a number of times making sure all the right things have been done. I want to donate him to you guys here at the shelter because soon I won't be able to care for him and I thought you guys could keep him for me."

I was stunned.

"Sure, I mean, sure, we would be honored," is all I could think to say.

The vet left after dropping off a bag of food. He also left me his address and phone number and told me to call him if the dog didn't work out.

A month or two later I called the number to tell him thanks and found that he had passed that very day. His wife was grateful when our honor guard went to the wake and the funeral. We took the puppy with us and the vet's family broke into tears when we showed up.

Now we had a dog and during that first week I started to call him Rocco.

The first town meeting after the puppy was donated we gathered together like we always did in the mess hall after chow on a Monday and on that night I had a plan to introduce Rocco and to let everyone know that this was their dog too. The puppy needed to be walked, fed, and cared for, and I wanted each and every vet to take a part of that responsibility.

That was the plan, but then all hell broke loose.

"I don't like the name Rocco," said a large red-headed Irish vet named Paddy. "Sounds like a pizza parlor, and if we all are going to take care of this dog, we should each be given a vote on what its name should be."

Others agreed and that started the marathon town meeting that went from seven in the evening to almost eleven. Four hours of trying to find a name for the dog.

I swear we went from Alpha to Zulu and every other name you can think of. One of the vets had a wife who was pregnant at the time and he had a book of baby names and we went through those too.

Hour after hour we struggled to come to some consensus and the tensions were getting thick.

We had agreed early on that a vote of fifty-one percent would do the trick, but no name ever even got to forty percent.

Sometimes democracy can be ugly is what I was thinking to myself after the hundredth or two hundredth vote.

Finally at the back of the room an older vet stood up and screamed.

"Goddammit, I need to work in the morning! Just 'Dog.' Call him just 'Dog' and let us all get to bed!"

We put the name to a vote. It was unanimous, and that's how Just Dog or JD was named.

Now we didn't have a dog house or any place for the pup to sleep and we were allowing it to sleep under the front desk as we made it a little bed there from blankets that the vets took from the supply vault.

I remember one vet in particular took charge of this dog and set a schedule of when it was walked, where it was walked, and who could walk the dog. The plan required two vets to walk the dog, as some thought someone might want to harm the dog once it was known that it belonged to us.

We took the puppy to the huge animal hospital in Boston as we didn't have a vet nearby and we were told that this was a purebred German Shepherd and we should take care that it got exercise and was trained right.

After a few months this little puppy grew huge. After a year it was full grown and weighed in at over a hundred pounds.

The routine of taking the dog for walks and making sure it got its exercise was a coveted assignment. Vets would sign up months in advance to have the privilege of taking the dog three blocks to Boston Common to allow it to do its business and have a run.

At the same time, while the dog slept under the desk as a pup, it became common for the dog to hang out at the front desk.

The front desk was a busy place as intakes happened and transports were arranged and deliveries were always happening and one day, Steve Smith (no relation), who was a crackerjack SAC counselor, came to me and said, "You know, JD is the best SAC counselor we have."

"Whatta ya mean?" I asked

"Well, when a vet comes in and is wet [that is, under the influence of alcohol], we let the dog sniff his hand and that usually starts the vet to crying. It's so much easier to deal with the vet when he knows he has bottomed out and the dog gets them to do this almost by design. I was wondering if we could continue to do this with the dog, you know, kind of like a treatment plan?"

Well, that's interesting I thought, and said sure, as long as the dog wasn't kicked or hit in its line of duty, I saw no problem.

That led to JD also working with the psych clients. The same result would happen. I was amazed.

Somebody should write a book about this dog, said a few of the vets; he has the ability to turn the meanest, angriest vet from a jerk into a crying baby. You need to bottle what this dog is doing, said others. No pun intended.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, JD did his job and earned his keep. It was almost too good to be true.

One day, after hundreds and I betcha thousands of vets who were helped by JD, he broke off his leash and chased a squirrel right into the street and was hit by a car. He did not survive.

The two vets who were with him when this happened were crushed and both within a week were on a psych ward at the VA. I felt bad myself and we had a ceremony at the next town meeting and everyone was in tears, me included. We all remembered what JD had taught us.

No matter what, we were brothers.

Chapter 11: Bravo Company Black Cats

At the shelter the second and third floors were general sleeping dormitories with about 125 veterans per floor. These floors were set up military style and each vet had a locker and either an upper or lower bunk. The second floor housed Alpha Company and the third floor housed Bravo Company.

One day I was approached by a group of veterans from the third floor and they said, may we have a moment of your time?

I stopped in the hallway and the gist of their request was that they had a new mascot. It was a small black kitten which they had appropriately named JC—Just Cat. They wanted my permission to keep this cat. They said it would help with their recovery and that each of the members of the company would pitch in and pay for any expenses.

I was floored. We had a mascot already—JD the dog—and at first I was going to say no, but then one of the vets started to cry and talked about how he had a cat before he was homeless and this would be the perfect tool to help with his and others' healing.

I caved and said, "What I don't know, I don't know."

Anyways, that's how the third floor became the Bravo Company Black Cats. A few months later, I had t-shirts made for each member of this floor and presented them at town meeting and it seemed at the time to work the magic that was promised.

Now, of course, we had a dog already as our mascot, and JD had full reign of the whole shelter. And now he couldn't go onto the third floor.

Weeks went by that turned into months and things happened and things changed and I remember it was the spring and RR&L was outside the shelter, on the side facing City Hall Plaza speaking to someone from the mayor's office about a permit we needed for something.

Suddenly a cat came flying off the top of the building.

Now, if you're a cat lover (and lots of people are) please stop reading here.

This cat that came off the tenth floor roof was chased up twelve flights of stairs by the dog and when it got to the roof, because we had an herb garden up there, the door to the

roof was open, and the cat raced out and went right off the roof and landed within ten feet of RR&L and the mayor's staff member on City Hall Plaza.

The splat was huge, I was told, but the cat still had a little life left in it and started to run in circles on its side.

"Holy Mary Mother of God, is that a *cat*?" said the older Irish woman staff member from the mayor.

RR&L was stunned and didn't say anything.

"Oh my god," the staff member of the mayor said, "You're throwing cats off the roof!" and she ran the fifty yards back to the entrance to City Hall.

RR&L called on his radio to his staff and soon the cat was scooped up and a crew was there with hoses watering down the scene of the crime.

I had no idea any of this had happened. I was sitting in my office doing paperwork.

I get a call from the watch officer at the front desk. You're needed down here at the front desk right now as we have animal control officers from Boston PD and they're pissed. Something about throwing cats off the roof.

My first thought was the Bravo Company Black Cat.

I said I'll be right there and made a beeline for the elevator and stopped on the third floor.

Anyone see the cat? I asked.

And sure enough, there was the black cat, sleeping on somebody's bunk, all curled up and purring.

Well, it wasn't *our* cat, I thought. This is bullshit and I was mad as I made my way to the front desk.

"You the director?" said the animal control officer.

"Yes I am, how may I help you?"

"We have a report from the mayor's office that you're throwing cats off the roof."

"Well, that's bullshit and you can see for yourself. Come with me—nobody threw anything off of anywhere."

I took these officers up to the roof and they looked around and saw the herb garden and one said, you know, I didn't think you guys would do something like that, but we had to check it out.

Now, as we looked over the side of the roof, we saw the crew cleaning the spot where the cat had landed and one officer asked why are they cleaning now?

I replied that every day at this time we did what they were seeing and it wasn't unusual for this to happen as we did the same thing at the front of the building.

They took some pictures and left.

I went back to my office and it was there that my secretary at the time, Tempie Thompson, had heard about this and said you know, RR&L was there when it happened

I then made a beeline down to the basement to see RR&L and I had keys to everything and opened a door into the maintenance tool crib and there was Sully with a real dead cat.

"What the hell is that?" I said.

"It's a dead cat."

"I can see that, but what are you doing with a dead cat?"

"It jumped off the roof and committed suicide. RR&L told me you wanted it stuffed for your office."

I didn't know what to think. "This guy is actually crazy" was my only thought at the moment.

"Get that cat into a plastic bag and find me RR&L and send him to my office on the double!"

When RR&L came into my office he had the usual half of an unlit cigar in his mouth.

"You wanted me boss?"

"Tell me the story, truthfully."

The story I got was that all around the shelter there were restaurants and doughnut shops and dumpsters and there were rats and rats brought feral cats and somehow, nobody knows how, one of these feral cats ran in the front door of the shelter. Our German shepherd saw the cat and started chasing it. The cat ran up the stairwell twelve flights of stairs with JD in hot pursuit.

On the roof, the cat jumped—thinking who knows what—and just at that exact time this mayor staff person and RR&L just happened to be outside, right below, having a meeting.

Splat.

From that day on the roof door was secured and our relationship with the mayor's office never was the same.

Chapter 12: 5858 PAPA and the Quarry at Mamet's Farm

In the late summer of 1988, just before the big push for *Sketches of War*, David Mamet invited Mark Helberg and me to his farm in Cabot, Vermont.

I'd love to come, I told him, but I have no way of getting there and it's a four-hour drive, but thanks for the offer.

"You know," said David, "You could call Dick Freidman and say, you have spoken to me and I'm willing to have his girlfriend try out for the theatre camp I run—but only if he gives you and Mark a ride to Burlington Vermont in his plane."

I said what the hell and went off to find this guy Dick and relay the message. The offices for the fundraiser were in the hotel complex that Dick owned. I found Dick in his office. I relayed the message and he said, "You sure? You sure that's what he said? He told me a week ago that there were no open slots left. You sure that's what he said?"

I told him yes, I was sure and that we were to be at the airport tomorrow night or the deal was off.

In about an hour—I'm sure after Dick had talked to Mamet—I was told to be at the airport at 7pm the next night for the quick flight up to Burlington, Vermont.

When we got to the private airport outside of Boston, sure enough, there was a private plane, with the pilot, and Dick and his girlfriend waiting.

"Hurry up, you're late," said Dick as Mark and I climbed into the twin-engine private plane. The last thing Mark and I looked at was the tail number. It was 5858P—or 5858 Papa, as you would say on the radio.

Once on the plane the pilot asked Mark if he wanted the copilot seat and I sat in the back with Dick and his girlfriend.

Dick was explaining to her that we had a special relationship with Mamet and was gushing about how he and Mamet were going to his house in Martha's Vineyard the following week.

Now, Dick was a successful developer in Boston and worth tons of money, and I learned later that when the Clintons went to Martha's Vineyard on their presidential vacations they

took every year, they would stay at Dick's house that he kept just for weekends and holidays, I would think. This guy was personal friends with the president.

The flight was maybe forty-five minutes from wheels up to touch down and it was twilight when we landed in Vermont.

We taxied to the private part of the Burlington airport and Dick had a car ready for his girlfriend as she was going to the college campus that Mamet's Atlantic Theatre Company was using for its theatre camp, just outside Burlington.

"You guys need a ride?" asked Dick.

"Nope, Mamet said wait here and he would have someone pick us up," I said as Dick and the pilot got back in the plane and taxied away.

Mark and I lit a smoke and I said, "How cool is this dude?"

After a while, with Mamet not showing up, and it getting darker, I wondered if we had made the right choice.

"Do you have his number?" Mark asked me.

"No," I said.

Just then, around the corner in a 1954 restored Land rover came David Mamet. The car looked like it belonged in Africa. It had all the cool stuff you can imagine, and it was a convertible with its top off. He was grinning like a little kid.

"You guys ready to go to my farm?" he said.

"Oh, yeah," I replied.

"Well, on the way to the farm, I need to stop at the theatre camp and do a few things and then we can go and get a bite to eat and I will then show you guys the farm."

"It's a deal," I said. I climbed into the passenger seat and Mark jumped in the back. We had like no baggage and we each lit a smoke and off we went.

Half an hour later we pulled into a college campus and sure enough there were maybe thirty people who came out to meet us. Some I had met in the production meetings of *Sketches of War* already in Boston, and I identified some as members of the Atlantic Theatre Company. Mark and I walked around and were having a good time.

And then all of a sudden all hell broke loose.

People were screaming and I remember fireworks or something exploding and people were running out of the building and I wondered, *what the hell is going on?*

“It’s a scene,” said one of the folks from the ATC. “It’s just a rehearsal and we wanted to show this scene to David.”

Jesus, they played real in this camp, I thought. It’s not the Boy Scout camp at Yagoo that I remember, that’s for sure.

After an hour or so, David said let’s go to the farm and again, we jumped into the really cool Land Rover.

We drove for about forty-five minutes. All of sudden we were out in the middle of absolute nowhere and while driving David turned off the headlights.

Holy shit. It was pitch black. Not just dark black but *black* black. I got a little nervous.

“I guess you know these roads, huh?” I asked a little sheepishly

“Yeah, we’re close to the farm and I wanted to let you guys see the night sky.”

I looked up and holy shit, I was in the Milky Way.

“How cool is this?” said Mark.

And after a few minutes David turned on his lights and we drifted into the driveway of what looked like a normal Vermont farmhouse.

It was dark and I had no idea what the hell was around me, as you really couldn’t see more than fifty feet.

David led us to a door and just walked in.

“You don’t lock your doors?” I asked.

“Not tonight, and I’m not afraid—we have good neighbors here,” he replied.

We went inside and we were smack dab in the most awesome kitchen I have ever been in. All stainless and granite and tile and modern, and I said, “This was an old farmhouse?”

“Nope, this is an addition, and above this kitchen are a couple of bedrooms and you and Mark can take one each.”

We made ourselves some dinner, and the fridge was packed with all kinds of good stuff. I was thrilled as we sat around in the kitchen and shot the shit.

David told us that on this property there was a quarry. “They took the base stone for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from that quarry.”

“No shit—you’re telling me that the stone from this quarry was used in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Can we see it?”

“Well, not tonight, but we can tomorrow,” he said.

“How about at sunrise?”

“Sunrise—that’s at like 5:15,” said David.

“That works for me. I think that looking at that quarry, with the knowledge that stone from there was placed in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, would be cool.”

“Well, if you’re up,” he said, “We can go.”

David then gave us a tour of the rest of the farmhouse and I was blown away. The original house had the big fireplace and upstairs were a couple of other bedrooms. David showed us where he would be sleeping and then said, guys, I’m bushed, let’s get to bed.

Mark and I made our way over to the addition, which was connected by a hallway, and went into the kitchen.

“How cool is this place?” I said to Mark.

We sat and shot the shit about how the fundraiser was progressing and we decided to go outside and have a smoke.

It was pitch black out and the stars shone like I have never seen them shine again.

“I wonder that this place looks like in the daylight,” Mark said.

“I’m curious too. I guess we’ll find out when we go to the quarry at sun up.”

“Yeah, like who’s gonna wake us up? You?”

I said, “Yeah, I will.”

And we went to bed.

Now, I know I am not the only one with this gift, but somehow and I am not sure how, I can tell myself to wake up at a certain time, and almost by magic, I can wake up around that time. Give or take ten minutes, and it’s usually accurate.

I told myself to wake up at 4:45 and sure as rain, I woke up at 4:45. I went to Mark’s room and he was snoring.

“Wake up dude, its time to go to the quarry.”

“Go away. Jesus, it’s the middle of the night.”

“Get out of the bed,” I said. “I’m gonna go wake up David.”

I went downstairs, cutting through the kitchen, and made my way to the bedroom that David had showed me earlier last night.

I grabbed his foot that was sticking out the end of the bed and pulled.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, what, huh? What?”

I said, “David, it’s Ken. It’s time to go the quarry.”

“Yeah, yeah, OK, wow. OK, I’ll meet you in the kitchen. Let me get dressed.”

I went back to the kitchen and Mark wasn’t there and I made a pot of coffee and went back and Mark was still sleeping and I said, dude, we’re going to the quarry, wake up.

This time he got up and I went back downstairs and there was David making some tea. Mark came down all sleepy looking and we headed outside to the Land Rover and holy crap—the farm was *huge*. Like really huge and the building was like out of *Architectural Digest*.

“Wow,” is all I remember saying.

Mark was smiling too and we headed down a dirt road and there were turns and hills and turns and more turns and then David said, we’re here.

We got out of the car and walked through some trees and there was the quarry. It was filled with water and the sides had to be fifty feet down.

“Holy shit,” was all I said.

We stood there for ten minutes. The sun was coming up, the birds were chirping, and squirrels and other animals were up looking for breakfast.

I said, “Let’s go for a swim.”

“I didn’t bring my bathing suit,” replied David.

“You were born in your bathing suit.” I looked at Mark and both us started taking our clothes off.

A minute later both of us were in the water and then David came crashing in too.

We were swimming in the quarry where the base stone for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial came from and it was metaphysical to me. I had this feeling like I was being baptized again and I felt something larger than me telling me that what we were doing for the homeless veterans was the right thing to do.

We stayed at the quarry for an hour or so, and I remember the sun got higher in the sky, the water got warmer, and Mark and I jumped off the cliffs and swam all around this magical and mysterious pool.

It was a day to remember.

Chapter 13: Thanksgiving Turkeys

The shelter had been open a couple of years, and one thing we could count on were lots of volunteers coming to help us serve Thanksgiving dinner.

Seemed that whole families came—the dad, mom and the kids—and they would roll up their sleeves and wash dishes, clean, serve food and it never ceased to amaze me.

It was about a month before Thanksgiving and the mess sergeant came to me and said that we were going to be about thirty-five turkeys short of our goal.

We usually fed about five hundred vets on Thanksgiving, as vets from other shelters came to Court Street because the meal was served on china, not paper, and you drank from a glass, not a paper cup, and you ate with real forks and knives, not crummy plastic.

“Are you sure?” I said.

“I’m positive. We need to get more turkeys.”

In front of the shelter, thousands of people walked every day to get to their jobs. Most were bankers and lawyers and professionals, so I went down to the office of RR&L and said, “I need a sandwichboard sign. The sign needs to say this: ‘PLEASE HELP. WE ARE SHORT TURKEYS THIS THANKSGIVING. PLEASE DONATE A TURKEY AND FEED HOMELESS VETERANS.’”

I said I needed two of these signs, with the same message on both sides and I wanted them placed on either end of the sidewalk in front of the shelter.

Everyone thought I was nuts, but they did what I asked and the carpenters had the signs built quickly and the painters went to work.

The next day, before sun up, the signs were placed outside and I waited to see the reaction.

Starting at around 7:30 people came into the shelter and said, here, here’s twenty bucks, buy a turkey; and others would write a check for \$25 or \$50 and say, buy a turkey.

The next day, the wheels came off the bus.

We had maybe forty turkeys brought in by donors.

“Holy crap,” said the mess sergeant. “We’ve met our quota and the signs did the work.”

I thought, well, let's leave the signs up for a little while longer, and holy crap—twenty, thirty, and sometimes forty turkeys would be dropped off every day.

We had so many turkeys we had to call a cold storage warehouse that had huge freezers and ask how much it would cost to store some turkeys.

The manager of the storage was a vet and said, I can give you three pallets where you can put your boxes or crates and as long as I don't need the space, its free, my donation.

From the time the signs went up until Thanksgiving, we collected well over six hundred turkeys.

We had a terrific Thanksgiving—and every single Sunday night, all year long, the homeless vets enjoyed a turkey dinner.

Chapter 14: The EPA Raids Court Street

We had been open maybe three years and because of Congressman Joe Moakley's tireless efforts we had an earmarked grant that allowed us to renovate the shelter with \$4.2 million, and at the same time we had a HUD grant to build some single-room occupancy units (SROs); we were going to have a rooming house of fifty-nine units at the shelter.

This meant construction and construction teams working at the shelter.

It was a dream come true with a ton of headaches.

There were workers, trucks, deliveries, and noise that you couldn't imagine. The architect, Rich Griffin, was onsite almost everyday and the construction company was headed up by a guy called Joe Albanese and between the two of them, the old, decrepit infrastructure was changed right in front of my eyes.

We had a guy who was the clerk of the works, Tim Mchale, who I remember as a character and a half. This guy was a minstrel who played guitar and sang with a group of holy rollers. This led to many a town meeting with a "Kumbaya" singalong that cheered up the vets week after week while this work was being done.

The shelter had additional floors that needed work, and we had no budget to do that work, but one day RR&L came to me and said, you know, we'd save a ton of money if we did our own in-house construction demolition and we used the vets who are in the building to tear down the walls. We can bring those floors to a shelled state and it will be less money when we do the construction.

It also will keep the guys busy—at the time, we had maybe three hundred vets who came to our lunch every day. I said, fine—organize it and let me know what you need.

After a week, a plan was hatched and Lori Rubin and Tempie Thompson even got Congressman Joe Kennedy to come by and swing a sledgehammer to show our idea of "veterans helping veterans."

This demo de-construction went on for months.

We had dumpster after dumpster filled and hauled away, and soon, the dream that RR&L had brought to me was showing promise.

You could walk through one of the shelled upper floors and look from end to end and see nothing. It was ready to be constructed into something and that was the plan.

One morning I arrived at the shelter and I saw all kinds of police and what looked like unmarked cars parked in the street.

Jesus, I wonder what's going on in the neighborhood, I thought.

I went into the building and went to my office and started on the overnight reports. After thirty minutes or so, I saw a stack of mail on my desk and at the top of this stack was the newest issue of *Playboy*.

Now, I could say that I subscribed only to read the articles. No one would believe me anyway, so yes, I actually did peek at the naked girls from time to time.

I was sitting at my desk leafing through this new *Playboy* when the door to my office flew open without any warning or knock.

In walked a woman in a blue jacket and right behind her was a guy wearing the identical blue jacket. The woman looked at me and said, "You Ken Smith?"

Just then the guy behind her put a round into a shotgun—the sound was unmistakable—and I looked and saw as he turned to look at the door he just came through that on his jacket it said FEDERAL AGENT. I thought, holy shit, what the hell is this?

"Please move away from your desk," said the woman.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"We're federal agents," she said.

"Federal agents of *what*?"

"We're federal agents of the EPA."

"The EPA—they give you guys *guns*?"

This woman then moved her jacket and she had a gun too.

"Move away from the desk," she demanded. "You're in a lot of trouble, Mr. Smith."

"Trouble for *what*?"

"If you cooperate and tell us everything, without lying, I'll see what I can do to make sure you don't go to prison."

"Holy shit, did you just say *prison* to me?"

"You're in a lot of trouble."

Now, I'm no lawyer, but I had friends who were lawyers, and I said, "Am I under arrest?"

She said that if I impeded this search warrant, I very well could be. She was now sitting at my desk, going through papers, and now others came into the room.

One guy came and asked for my computer password.

"Dickhead."

"What, *what* did you call me?" he said.

"The password is 'dickhead,'" and I smiled.

Now, come to find out, there were maybe seventy-five agents going through the whole shelter. They had vets downstairs filling out statements and they took away the radio I used and she said I couldn't answer or use the phone and I was getting pissed.

"Am I under arrest?" I said.

When no one answered I started to leave my office.

"Where you going?" the boss lady said.

"I'm leaving."

"I'm not done talking to you."

"OK—am I under arrest? Yes or no."

"Do you want to be?"

"Stop answering my question with a question. I have witnesses here. Am I under arrest, yes or no?"

"No," she said, "but you could be."

I left the office and went to the elevator and went down to the first floor.

There was complete confusion as I saw other federal agents, all wearing blue jackets that said FEDERAL AGENT and some with shotguns like the guy in my office.

RR&L came right up to me,

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You got me. Something about the environment I would imagine—this is the EPA," I said.

"Holy shit," he said.

Just then—by a complete coincidence—a lawyer friend of Saint Howard came into the shelter with another lawyer. They were going to ask for a tour.

I had seen this guy before, and asked, "Are you a lawyer?"

"Yes, I am. My name's Tom Sobel."

Well, timing is everything. "Mr. Sobel, can you help me figure out what the hell the EPA is doing here, scaring the living shit out of hundreds of homeless veterans?"

"EPA, federal agents, here, now?" He looked around and said, "Do you know who's in charge of them?"

"Yeah, some woman is in my office with a guy with a shotgun and I would assume she is."

"Show me," he said.

I took him to my office, and by now, agents were wheeling out file cabinets, they had taken phones, computers, all of our financial records, and when I got to my office the boss lady was there still sifting through stuff on my desk.

"Who are you?" she said to Tom Sobel.

"I'm a lawyer. Do you have a warrant for this search?"

She looked at Tom and then at me and then went to a folder on my conference table and took out some forms.

"I tried to give this to him when I entered into this office but he was belligerent."

"Belligerent? That's bullshit; you told me I was going to go prison if I didn't do as you said."

"I never said that," she said.

Tom was reading the documents and said, "Where does it say you can hold people here against their will?"

She looked kind of funny and said, "We're not holding anyone."

Tom said, "I was just downstairs and you had people told they couldn't leave and they were being forced to fill out statements."

"They're doing that voluntarily," she said.

I then saw Tom turn to the guy with him and say something about going back to the office with the paperwork that the EPA lady had given him and they were going to file an immediate motion with federal court alleging all the bad shit that this woman and the EPA agents were doing.

"I'll get an order stopping this and will be back," he said to me, and left the building.

“So, you have lawyer friends. You’re going to need them,” sneered the boss lady.

I told everyone I saw to have the staff assemble the vets, including any staff on the first floor, for an emergency town meeting.

Once I got to the first floor I could see agents sitting with vets and someone said, “Attention on deck!”

“I have been told by our lawyers that you do *not* have to speak to any of these federal agents,” I said. “You do *not* have to show them any identification. You do *not* have to write any statements for them unless you want to. If you want to, then do it—otherwise, listen up. You are about to be handed a blank piece of paper”—I had paper and pens handed out— “and you are to write down every single thing that has happened over the past thirty minutes from the time these people came into the shelter to this very minute. You are to date this paper, put the time on this paper and have your buddy sitting next to you sign this paper as your witness.

“I want you to write down anything that you were told, and anything you were asked for.”

Just then the boss lady came into the room and gave me a look that could kill.

“Now, this includes staff and I want you to write down anything and everything that you know they have touched or taken.”

The boss lady’s face looked like she was smelling shit. “Tell them that this place is a danger to their lives,” she spat.

“This lady says this place is a danger to your lives,” I mimicked and then said, “Remember, you are United States military veterans. All I want to hear is ‘aye aye sir!’”

The place erupted with “Aye aye sir!”

And the federal agents who were talking to vets seemed to know the gig was up. We weren’t going to take this attack lying down.

In about an hour, the EPA boss lady said, “Here is the list of things we took that were sanctioned in the search warrant and I need you to sign here.”

“I’m not signing anything,” I said.

“Well, that’s a huge mistake because you need to sign right here,” and she pulled out her pen.

“I’m not signing anything! Arrest me,” I said.

“Don’t push your luck, Smith. We know what you’ve been doing and we’re going to prove it and you and your minions are going to jail.”

The room was as quiet as a tomb.

“Well, then if that’s what you need to do, then that’s what you need to do,” I said. I sat down and like everyone else I started to write down what had happened from the time I walked into the shelter that morning.

Tom came back in about an hour and said, “Let’s go to your office. This is serious and I want some answers right now.”

We went to my office where all the files, all the pictures—everything that was not nailed down—had been taken.

“What did you do with the asbestos?” he said.

“What asbestos?”

“The asbestos that was disturbed when you did the demolition.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said.

Now, without radios or phones (the EPA had taken them), I sent a runner to get RR&L.

“This is Tom, our lawyer,” I said. “He’s asking me about the asbestos that was taken from the floors we did demo on, and I have no clue what the hell he’s talking about.”

“That’s bullshit,” said RR&L. “We didn’t take any asbestos from anywhere, its still there; we never touched it, ever.” RR&L was a licensed plumber. He continued, “I know what asbestos is and I have seen it wrapped on pipes for the heating system, but we never touched anything, I swear.”

“Show me,” said Tom.

RR&L, Tom and I then went floor by floor with RR&L showing him, here, here and here is asbestos and you can see, we never touched anything.

“Did you get permits for the deconstruction?” asked Tom.

“Yes,” said RR&L, “and the EPA took them, along with all of our tools and our files. They even took my personal calendar—my black book in my back pocket.”

“Did you *give* it to them or did they *take* it?” said Tom.

“They *took* it, and they searched me and made me empty all my pockets and they did the same to everyone on my staff.”

I then told Tom that we had had every single person in the shelter, staff and client, fill out a statement and then had that statement witnessed.

He told me that was a good thing and to get those statements to his office right away. Now I was pissed.

It was obvious to me that some developer who lost out on the building was using the EPA to find a way to shut down the shelter.

“What do we do?” I asked Tom.

“Well, the EPA went to the architect’s and the builder’s offices this morning too and did the same thing that they did here. They went in loaded for bear and right now they have thousands of documents that I don’t have, and they are trying to assemble a case that will attempt to show you have had veterans remove asbestos and somehow they will attempt to show you were responsible.”

“Do I call the media?” Calling the media had been a reliable default strategy in past crises.

“Nope. You don’t say a word to anyone without clearing it through me, you got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you don’t have anyone else saying anything either, got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll have an environmental company here within the hour doing air quality tests and nobody is to ask them anything, show them anything, or interfere with them in any way, you got that too?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, they have disrupted this operation and I have an emergency meeting at federal court in an hour and I will try to make some sense out of all this, in the meantime, you don’t go to the floors where you showed me the asbestos and you try to get this place back in some order.”

“Yes, sir.”

For weeks thereafter, every single Monday-Wednesday-Friday morning from eight to nine o’clock, I would sit in this lawyer’s office and answer questions, one after another.

Did you do this? No.

Did you do that? No.

And on and on and on and on.

Then one day Tom said, "They have convened a grand jury. You may be required to testify."

"Sure," I said, "Let me know the time and the place. I'll tell the truth and let a jury hear about what dicks the agents had been when they came in and attacked us."

"No you won't. You will answer 'yes,' 'no,' or 'I don't know.' And you will remember the questions you were asked."

Weeks turned into months and operations returned to normal. One day, Tom called and said come to my office right away—the US attorney wants to speak to us.

I went to the law firm that I had been going to for months, and Tom was sitting with a pile of paper. This stack of paper had to be five feet tall.

"Do you know how much money this firm has spent defending this case?" Tom asked.

"No, I don't."

"Well over a million dollars."

I was floored. Where was I going to get that kind of money?

"I'll do another fundraiser," I said, "and I will pay back every dime."

"That's not important, but you and I will be walking over to the US attorney's office soon and you are to keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking, you got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Now, what was strange was that Tom was younger than me, and yet I knew he was a crackerjack lawyer. He had filed a lawsuit against all the major tobacco companies on behalf of the state of Massachusetts and he was in line to make millions. Personally and for the firm.

We walked the few blocks to the US attorney's office and I could see that the place was humming. We were led into a conference room that held about twenty-five people all sitting around a huge conference table. One of the people was the boss lady from the EPA assault team. She did not look at me.

Tom and I were placed directly across from the US attorney.

The meeting started with the US attorney telling Tom some legal mumbo jumbo and then he said, "We are not going to pursue this case any longer."

My ears perked up.

Did he say he isn't going to pursue this case any longer?

The US attorney then went on to say that there would be no media, no grandstanding on either side, and that paperwork would be drawn up that would kill the investigation and we would all go our separate ways.

He then looked at me and said, "Are you satisfied, Mr. Smith?"

"I'm not," was my answer. I thought Tom was going to slap me.

"And why is that?" said the US attorney.

"I want an apology and I want my *Playboy* back."

As soon as I said that, Tom said "Excuse us for a moment please" and grabbed by arm and dragged me outside the room.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" he said.

"What?" I said. "They did this, not me, and I want my *Playboy* back."

"I will buy you a fucking case of *Playboys* and we are going back in that room and you're going to shut your mouth, got that?"

"Yes sir," I said, and we walked back in.

When we had gone back in and resumed our seats, the US attorney turned to me and said, "Mr. Smith, Ms. D—— has something to say to you."

To my amazement the EPA boss lady looked at me. There was a moment of silence. Her lips quivered and she took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled through clenched teeth.

Nobody could have heard it.

"Can you speak up?" I said.

"I said I'm sorry," she nearly shouted.

The US attorney told Tom that all of our property would be returned.

The next day, a big truck showed up and unloaded all of our stuff at the front door.

Weeks later, at Tom's house on the North Shore, we had a laugh at the way the meeting went.

“You know, you almost cost me my job. The chairman of my firm said to let you guys sink if I thought you were guilty at any time,” he said. “But after seeing what you guys do, and speaking to those that they said were guilty, I knew that the right thing to do was to jam this case up their ass.”

“Thanks,” I said, and a friendship was born.

Chapter 15: Conference Room Shootout at Brown Rudnick

Not long after the building had been successfully leased by the Vietnam Veterans Workshop, and not long after Howard “The Dragon Slayer” Levine had secured all of the needed permits and legal stuff, he called me and said he wanted to have a heart-to-heart discussion about the organization.

I went to his office near South Station, on the eighteenth floor of a large building, and waited in the reception area till his secretary, Joyce, came to get me.

Howard will be meeting you in Conference Room B, she said.

I went into this room and holy cow—I was hypnotized. The view was just spectacular. Presently Howard came into the room with another lawyer.

We were seated and Howard said, “Ken, I want you to just listen carefully and don’t say anything until I’m done. Over the past three months, the corporate lawyers here at the firm have reviewed the original articles of incorporation and the bylaws, and we have some serious suggestions that we want you to consider. As the president of the organization, I thought it prudent to bring these suggestions to you, but first there is the matter of who is the corporate counsel for the charity. Now, legally, right now, Danny is the corporate counsel and we have nothing against him or what he has done, but for us to make the changes we will discuss, and for you to decide that those changes need to happen; we—our firm—would have to be the lawyers of record.”

Now, I trusted Howard—but I wondered what the hell he was trying to do?

“You, Mark, and Peace are the main characters in this play about Court Street,” he continued (talking to me like Mamet would), and I think that in order to keep control of the organization, as you have stated to me in the past, one of your biggest concerns is control of the building. To make sure that nobody takes away all that you and the others have worked hard to build, there is a need to restate the bylaws and that can only happen when you, the president and chairman of the board, say so. We have restated these bylaws so that you,

Mark, and Peace would be the founding members and nothing, absolutely nothing can happen to this corporation without the express permission of the members.”

He then handed me a ton of papers, all written in legalese, and said, “Read these and let me know if this is what you were thinking about when we discussed the plan for you, Mark, and Peace to keep control.”

The first document I read was what looked like a form that said that Howard and his firm were now the official lawyers of the Vietnam Veterans Workshop.

It was only one page. I read it twice and signed it.

The other pages stated that only the members of the organization would have the final say on things that mattered. If anyone were to try to take the building to do anything contrary to our mission, they would have to deal with me, Mark, and Peace.

I signed those too.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Well, now, we need to gather the others who have been with you from the start, and they need to know from you what you have signed. We can host that meeting here, in our conference center, next Wednesday night at 7pm, and if you wish we can send out the invites today.”

I said, “Let’s do it.”

I went back to the shelter and found Mark. “Dude,” I said, “Howard just gave me a ton of legal paperwork and the end game is that he has developed something legally so that nobody can take control of the workshop, and there is now something called members, and you me and Peace are the only members.”

Mark and I wondered what that meant in the grand scheme of things, but one thing we did know was that Danny wouldn’t be happy, that’s for sure. It was painful because Danny was a really generous guy and without his legal assistance in the early days, we never would have gotten off the ground.

We had to face the music. I called Danny and asked if we could meet him later that day and he said he was really busy, but that we could stop by his house later that night, around 7 or 7:30.

I met Mark and we drove to Danny’s house and knocked on the door.

Danny lived in a modest house in a suburb of Boston called Sommerville, but his pride was his excellent homemade brew.

“Come on in guys,” he said, “I have a new set of brews ready and your right on time to sample them with me.”

He went into his basement and took out three dark brown bottles of homebrewed beer and got three Pilsners that were chilled.

“Here’s to us,” he said as he poured the beer in his glass.

Mark and I followed with a toast of our own, and then the meeting with Howard came up, and Danny said, “I got a notice from Howard to attend a meeting next week, you guys know what’s up?”

Mark looked at me and I said, “Well, that’s one of the reasons we came over tonight to tell you what happened.”

As I laid out the story, and said as president that I had signed the paperwork in preparation for the paperwork next week, I could see that Danny becoming infuriated.

“What the hell have you done?” he shouted as he threw his Pilsner glass into the fireplace. Broken glass went everywhere, like shrapnel, and I could see that this wasn’t going well.

“That’s intense,” was all I could think to say. I got up and said, “You know, if this is how you’re going to act, I’ll see you next week,” and started to leave.

Danny kept yelling but this time he directed his anger at Mark, who said, “Jesus, Danny I wasn’t even there,” and was trying to calm him down, but it wasn’t working.

I went outside, lit a smoke and wondered what the hell actually did happen. Were all lawyers this way?

Finally Mark came out and said, “You know, he is really, really pissed. Mostly at you, but really really pissed.”

The rest of the week I thought about the meeting that was coming up. I trusted Howard and knew he was doing what needed to be done, but at the same time, I knew it would never be the same with Danny or any of the others who had first assembled for the *Sketches of War* fundraiser.

The day came for the meeting and it was cloudy and rainy and I thought, great, just how I feel.

With Mark I went to Howard's office at 6:45 and was brought into one of the biggest conference rooms I had ever been in. There had to be thirty seats, with one huge chair at the head of the table. It looked like a throne. Howard came in and sat in that chair, and others, one by one, came into the room. There were maybe fifteen of us and I could feel the tension in the air.

One of the guys attending was Jeff, and he was a know-it-all kind of guy and he couldn't wait for the meeting to start. "I talked to Danny and this is bullshit," he was saying to anyone would listen. Others in the group nodded their heads in agreement and I knew, as Howard looked at me, I needed to exercise some presidential timber.

"Jeff," I said, "You're talking out of order and if you continue I will dismiss you from this meeting,"

With a look that could kill, he continued yapping.

"I said, if you don't stop, I will dismiss you from this meeting. As president of this organization, I will tell you to leave and if you don't I will call security and they will escort you out of this room."

He just wouldn't shut up.

"So," I said, "By the authority vested in me as president of the Vietnam Veterans Workshop, you are dismissed from this meeting and you are now officially being told to leave."

You could have heard a pin drop.

He didn't move.

"Did you hear me?" I raised my voice.

He said yes, and that he would be quiet, but I knew I needed this guy out of the room

"Leave right now," I said.

He looked around and everyone was looking at him, then at me, and then at him, and he said, "You think you're in charge—and you don't know shit. You're going to waste all the efforts that have been ongoing to help homeless vets."

In reality, over the past few months it had been Mark, Peace, and I who had been going to the shelters and dealing with the homeless vets. This guy Jeff was pissing me off.

Just then, Peace said, "Get out man," and that seemed to shock everyone.

As Jeff was leaving he had some comments. I let them go.

I then said, "I want to call this meeting to order and have Howard explain to all of us the new structure of the workshop and why we are moving in this direction."

Howard was the kind of lawyer who smiled as he was chopping off your legs. He had this very intense but softspoken way about him. To him, this was all business and he proceeded to hand out to everyone the very documents I had seen and signed the week before.

There was the "pregnant pause" as everyone read what I had read and signed.

Then a vet named Scott said, "This is illegal, and Ken Smith doesn't have the authority to sign these documents without our approval."

Howard didn't miss a beat and said "Scott, that's just not true. According to the current structure, there are three incorporating directors: Ken Smith, Mark Helberg, and Peter Murray. All the rest of you are advisory board members, and also according to the current structure, Ken Smith, as president, has the full and absolute authority to do this."

I imagined in my mind that Howard was saying in his best Dan Aykroyd voice, "Scott, you ignorant slut..."

Everyone was in a state of semi-shock as Howard outlined that the "incorporators"—myself, Mark and Peter—were now to vote on the amended articles and the new and restated by laws.

Danny's face was telling me everything I needed to know. He knew that Howard's law firm had done its homework and this meeting was a mere formality. Danny is a good guy and I miss his friendship, but this was business and the meeting went right there from bad to worse.

One of the vets attending stood up and said, "This is absolute bullshit, just like Jeff said, it's a takeover and its all because of Smith," and he slammed his chair into the table and walked out.

"*That* was intense" was all I could think of at the moment. The way the week was going, in my life I needed fewer of these intense moments.

Then another and another and finally Danny stood up and left too.

Mark, Peace, Peter, and a few others and I were the only ones left.

“According to this paperwork, the members will be Ken, Mark and Peace,” said Howard, “and those three can expand to a legion of twelve if they want. They will make sure that nobody can sell the building or take away anything from the efforts of the Workshop without approval of the membership. The structure is one that will stand up in a court of law. It will allow the members to rid themselves of anyone who is brought into the structure”—employee, board member, or anyone, is what I remember him saying—“anyone who does not take care of the homeless veterans as prescribed by this document and then voted on by the members.”

I looked around and could see that everyone left in the conference room had their game faces on and I said, “So, from this moment on the structure has changed. That’s that.”

The meeting adjourned and as I left, I could see that this meeting had taken its toll on Howard. He didn’t have his usual happy face and I wondered what was next.

Chapter 16: HUDVET and the Meeting with Andrew Cuomo

In what seems like a million years ago, I met Andrew Cuomo, the current governor of New York. It was during the administration of former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, when Cuomo served as chairman of the New York City Homeless Commission, which was charged with developing policies to address the homeless issue in the city and to develop more housing options.

Andrew ran a program that did for the civilian side of the homeless population what we were doing with veterans. He was all business and had strict rules on what you could and couldn't do if you stayed at the programs he operated, and it was a success. I can't understand why it wasn't duplicated around the country.

Andrew is a shrewd thinker and a smart guy. At the same time, he is a drop-dead Democrat and I thought that sometimes his politics and that of his family got in the way.

After running the program in New York City for a number of years, he took a job at Housing and Urban Development. The idea was that he was going to build out programs for the homeless from within a massive federal agency.

Nobody understood how hard this guy worked more than me. I had one operation; he was dealing with the federal government, congressional committees, and of course the White House.

Because we were anointed one of the thousand "Points of Light" by then-President George H. W. Bush, and because of the antics at the Democratic National Convention and the March of the Homeless Veterans on the VA, I was *persona non grata* within the current Democratic administration.

Because many of the homeless veterans were disabled, I sought out through my friend Greg any info he had on the President's Committee on People with Disabilities and worked hard to get a meeting with a guy named Tony Cuello, its chairman.

At this meeting, I was going to propose a gathering of a coalition of organizations, to foster unity within the new American with Disabilities Act of 1990. While attending a

meeting at the offices of this committee in downtown D.C., I met a veteran name Bill Pitman.

Bill was a Massachusetts guy, a graduate of Boston College, smart as a whip about politics at the local, state and national levels, and at the time a dear friend of Greg Bresser, who brokered the meeting with the President's Committee.

I thought the meeting at first was a waste of time as it seemed to me that there was a disability mafia that had a strange hold on anything to do with this new disability legislation, and the hopes of getting a disability coalition to work on the issues of homeless veterans seemed slim.

What did come out of that meeting, however, was a lunch with Greg and Bill Pitman, who at the time seemed to be a very unhappy camper while working at the President's Committee.

"The committee is not paying attention to veterans with disabilities," is what I remember Bill saying,

After lunch and on my way back to the airport, Greg, who was driving, said, "You know, HUD is the agency that has all the money for the homeless. You should see if you can get in to see the secretary and see if HUD can have a liaison for veterans."

I thought he was right, but getting an audience with a secretary of *any* agency was tough, and double tough because of what the administration remembered about the March of Homeless Veterans and the Democratic Convention.

I went back to Boston and sent off a request for a meeting. I didn't think I would hear anything back, ever.

Two weeks later, I got a call from a woman named Jackie Lawing, who was in the Office of Programs for the Homeless. She suggested that we meet.

It just so happened that I had a scheduled meeting in D.C. the following week. I said I would buy her a coffee and explain who I was and what I was seeking.

She said, "I know who you are, almost everyone who has anything to do with homelessness does, and to be truthful, I'm meeting to ensure that you're not going to have a march on HUD, and to let you know that while I welcome your participation, I think you're nuts and doing more harm than good, sir."

Well, she spoke her mind, I thought—that's for sure.

“OK, well, I don’t know you so I won’t tell you what I think,” I said, “but I’ll wait till after the meeting to tell you.”

Things got crazy for the rest of the week and I almost missed my flight, and I remember being the last guy on the plane. After landing in D.C. I took the subway to Georgetown, where I had a favorite hotel that was somewhat cheap and surrounded by restaurants.

A few months earlier, my secretary at the time had booked Mark and me into a hotel at DuPont Circle and I remember going into the bar of the hotel with Mark and saying, “Oh, yeah, we have hit the mother lode.” The bar was packed with women. Tall women, short women, white women, black women—all kinds of women, it seemed.

Mark and I went up to the bar, and the bartender—also a woman—said, “What can I get ya?”

We each ordered a beer.

“Is this place always this packed with women?” said Mark.

“Yeah, it is,” said the bartender. “What are you two doing in here?”

“What are *we* doing?” replied Mark. “We’re looking for women. What do you think we’re doing?”

That’s when the bartender leaned over and said, “This is a gay bar, boys. From six to ten it’s women, and after ten it’s men. You two gay?”

Yikes! Both Mark and I almost jumped out of our skins.

“Gay? No,” I said. “Jesus, thank you,” and we both left.

From that moment on, I stayed in Georgetown and never looked back.

Anyway, the meeting with Jackie Lawing was in the HUD building in the cafeteria, which was huge.

I called her office after I arrived and she said she would meet me in the lobby and we could sit and chat for a few moments.

She showed up at security and was nothing like what I had pictured in my mind when talking to her. She was drop dead beautiful, a stunning red head, and was dressed like Anne Taylor—very professional.

She said, “Thank you for your time, Mr. Smith. Let me be blunt. I’m here because I know you’re trying to do to Secretary Cisneros what you did to Secretary Brown of the VA, and I am not going to let that happen.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” I said, “You’re way ahead of yourself. First, I don’t care what you think of me. That’s not important. What *is* important is that this is the largest funding agency in the federal government for programs for the homeless, and nowhere, *nowhere* in your agency is there *anyone* who is tasked with answering questions, writing position papers, or advocating for homeless veterans, and then reporting to the secretary. Yet veterans constitute one-third of the homeless.”

“You’re right,” she said, “But it’s our understanding that veterans who are homeless get their benefits from the VA.”

“Yeah right. Are you a veteran?” That was a question that I asked of people whom I knew were not veterans. It would get a response, one way or another.

“No, I’m not, but my family has a strong veteran history and don’t think that you can try to ‘guilt’ me, Mr. Smith.”

I like that, I thought to myself. She stood her ground.

“Well, if you were a veteran,” I said, “you would know that the VA does not have a housing department to assist veterans who are homeless. It does have a mortgage department, and you can buy a house with a VA guaranteed mortgage—but only if you have sterling credit and get a bank to approve you. That’s tough to do when you’re homeless, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What do you want?” she said.

Ah, the magic words for which I had been fishing came out of her mouth.

“I want a staff position, not for me, but a position in this agency. I will help you find the right person to staff this new veteran’s liaison for HUD, someone who understands veterans, and who can then advocate from the inside on actions and programs for the homeless veterans’ population.

She looked at me with a straight face.

“You’re serious—you want me to see if there can be an advocate position developed inside of HUD that is designed to work on the issue of homeless veterans, and you want to help me find that person?”

“That’s right, “ I said. “I will bring to the table OPM and DOL and some other veteran organizations and will help you to help yourself by getting someone who understands how the veteran community works.”

“Well, let me see what I can do,” she said, “and in the meantime, I along with others here at HUD are carefully watching what you’re doing and I’m sure that the report I give upstairs from this meeting will help us determine our response to you.”

I thanked her for her time and made my way over to the Rayburn Building for a meeting with a congressman and thought, well, we shall see.

Weeks went by and other agenda items were taking my time and energy. Then I got a call from Jackie Lawing.

“Can you come to a meeting with Andrew Cuomo?”

“Sure, when?”

“Tomorrow,” she said.

Now Andrew Cuomo was someone I knew. At the time he was the assistant secretary at HUD and had been brought in by President Clinton to help streamline and work on solutions for the homeless. He was a good guy, smart and savvy, and someone I could trust. Andrew, like me, was an advocate.

I landed in D.C. the next day and made my way to the HUD building. Again, I can’t emphasize to you that this place was *huge*. After going through security and getting a stick-on badge, I made my way to the Office of Community Planning and Development.

Waiting for me there was Jackie Lawing.

“Good morning and thank you for coming on such short notice,” she said. “Andrew is scheduled for travel for the next week to ten days and I thought it would be prudent to have the meeting here today, so maybe some wheels can get into motion.”

I was brought to a conference room and asked if I wanted a coffee, and soon others arrived and I could sense that somehow, wheels were turning.

The meeting started without Andrew and the agenda was clear.

“Mr. Smith,” began Ms. Wainwright, who was someone I didn’t know, “Jackie has told me that you had a plan that would place a veteran here in HUD to act as an informational contact for veterans’ organizations.”

“Yes, I do have a plan, and as Ms. Lawing has told you, the reasons are obvious, as HUD is the principle agency tasked with the issue of homelessness.”

After some discussion of what the duties were to be for this liaison officer—the veteran—into the room walked Andrew Cuomo.

After exchanging pleasantries, he said, “Well, I’ve been briefed about the idea, which I think is good, and what’s left is the mechanics of making it happen and after my travel I will have a decision from the secretary and will inform you of our decision.”

Now, I knew when to fold my cards, and so I said, “Thank you,” and got up to leave.

Ms. Lawing walked me to the elevator and said, “Don’t do anything foolish.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like what you did to Secretary Brown,” she said.

I putted around D.C. for the day and made the last plane back and got back into the swing of things at the shelter.

Now, over the following weeks, I had discussions with my friend Greg, as it became clear that our friend Pitman was not doing well at the President’s Committee.

“We need to work on getting Pitman out of there,” said Greg. “It’s getting bad and I think if we don’t find him something soon, well, I don’t want to think about what might happen.”

Greg asked me if I knew anyone at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and I said, yes, I knew the director, Jim King.

“Can you call him and see if we can get Pitman tasked to my veteran’s organization as a liaison until we can work on getting him placed with HUD?” he asked.

“I can try,” I said.

I called the office of OPM and asked for a meeting with Jim King, who was a player from the Massachusetts community who was given the job of sorting out all the federal jobs that President Clinton was handing out after his election in his first term.

At the time, Clinton was embroiled in his Monica stuff and by a complete coincidence, the secretary of HUD had his own personal scandal that he was dealing with.

“Ken, I’ll be honest,” said Jim. “The only way to get this federal employee tasked to a nonprofit is to do an Internal Personnel Adjustment—IPA—or something like that.”

I thought to myself, everything in the government has some acronym.

“Can you do that?” I asked.

“I can try,” said Jim, and he told me he would get back to me in a week or two.

In the meantime, there were these two Pauls at the President’s Committee, both senior to our guy Pitman—and as far as I was concerned, both dicks. I thought that neither of them had any interest in helping veterans with disabilities.

“We need to get him moved out of the President’s Committee,” said Greg in a call a few weeks later. He sounded anxious. “It’s going to get nasty if we don’t do something soon.”

I said that I hadn’t heard from my friend Jim King over at OPM but I will check in and get back to him.

I called Jim and he called me right back.

“Timing is everything, Ken,” he said. “I just today found out that with a little of this and a little of that, the move of the current DOL employee from the President’s Committee to the vet group can be done, but your guy Pitman needs to have approval of Tony Cuello, the chairman of the President’s Committee, and he needs a signed document by the veterans’ organization saying they will accept him and will have him working on disability rights for vets.”

“I’ll get right back to you,” I said.

I found Greg and told him what he needed to do, and he said that Tony Cuello might be an issue.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s not a fan of Pitman’s,” he said.

“Jesus, well, then let me see if I can get my friend King to call him and see if that does any good.”

I called Jim King right back and said, “You know, I’m going to be brutally honest with you. I don’t know Tony Cuello at all. I have the vet group all set and they will do anything we ask, but this guy Cuello—well, could *you* make a call and ask him for me?”

King said to hold on and he dialed the President's Committee and put me on the call with him.

"Jim King over at OPM for Tony," said King.

Next thing I knew, Cuello was on the line and the two of them went through the usual small talk between senior government types, and then King said, "Tony, I have Ken Smith of Boston on this call with us, and he has a request that I think you should consider. Ken? You there?"

Jesus, talk about being on the spot.

I told Cuello that I knew Pitman, and that I knew he was having some issues there at the President's Committee, and thought it might be a solution to have him moved to a veterans group, where his skills would be better used. I said I would have called him myself, but that Jim King and I had just been talking and Jim decided to make this a conference call.

"Well, I know Mr. Pitman and he is a fine staff member, and we would be missing him dearly if he left," said Cuello. "But if you two think that he could do more for the veterans community by being tasked over to the veteran organization, I will support the move."

"Thanks, Tony," said King and mentioned something about meeting him at some event later in the week. Cuello hung up.

King stayed on the line.

"Now, I did my part, you need to do yours," he said.

"What part is that?" I said.

"You need to stop attacking anyone who doesn't agree with you about the issue of homeless veterans," he said. "You embarrass this administration and as you already know, you have a reputation as a troublemaker."

"If you think I'm too outspoken I'll step it back a notch," I said.

"Good. Let's see if we can get this paperwork flowing."

Over the coming weeks, calls with Greg and with Pitman turned into a huge paperwork issue as there were tons of things to sign and tons of forms to fill out, but finally, one day Greg called and said, it's done, Pitman has been moved over to me and I wanted to say thanks.

"No sweat," I said.

"We still have to find a way to get him to HUD," said Greg.

I said, "I haven't heard anything from Andrew but would continue to follow up."

Weeks turned into months, and almost a full year later, Andrew Cuomo was made secretary of HUD.

I kept up the requests to have HUD place a veteran into a position that would help the homeless vets and one day I got a call from a guy named Howard, who was Andrew's chief of staff.

"Ken, can you come down for a meeting with Andrew next week?"

"Sure," I said.

Howard asked if I could coordinate the other attendees to see if we could make this veteran liaison process work out.

I called Greg and said that we need to bring some firepower to this meeting.

I then called Jim King and asked him to come to a meeting with Andrew Cuomo over at HUD the following week.

"Sure," he said, "if you buy the coffee."

I then called the general whom I had met with the coffins and said, "General, can you attend a meeting with the Secretary of HUD next week?"

"Absolutely," he said.

Greg also had some other veterans organizations agree to send a senior staff member and before I knew it, we had fifteen people from our side going to this meeting.

A few days later I called Howard, Andrew's chief of staff.

"You're bringing a general and Jim King from OPM?" he said. I could sense that he was impressed.

"You bet, along with some other senior members of veterans groups and of course the candidate we have in mind—a guy named Pitman."

The meeting was set for midweek.

I flew into D.C. the night before and did dinner with Greg and Pitman.

"This is our chance to have you tasked inside of HUD," I said to Pitman. "You could do wonders for all the small veterans' non-profits and maybe even work on some of the legislation that doesn't have any mention of veterans."

"I know what to do," said Pitman. "Just get me in the room."

The meeting with Andrew Cuomo couldn't have gone any better. Andrew's office seemed to be as large as a basketball court, with tables, couches, and chairs all done up nice, with coffee and snacks, and instead of the paper cups and plates it was all china. I was impressed.

"Let me call this meeting to order," said Andrew, and he asked that we all identify ourselves, and we then went around the room saying who we were and what group or agency we were from.

There was the general from DOL, Jim King and his deputy from OPM, guys from DAV, VFW, Legion, AMVETS, NCOA and of course me, Greg, and Pitman.

Andrew had a similar crew, with folks from all over HUD, but the one who stuck out was Jackie Lawing.

"Now, as I understand it, Ken," said Andrew, "you think a veterans liaison placed here in HUD would be beneficial to the issue of veterans who are homeless—is that the idea?"

"Yes sir—," and before I could get another sentence out of my mouth, Greg jumped in.

"Andrew, what you really need is a committee, a group of veterans from veterans organizations who can help you with your outreach to the community of veterans nationwide. I suggest you start a committee that reports to you and is tasked with getting your word out to the twenty-three million Americans who are veterans."

I was floored—it was the first I had heard of this. But it was a unique way to get the meeting rolling.

Then Pitman spoke up. "Mr. Cuomo, you don't know me, but I'm a combat Vietnam veteran with a Purple Heart, and I think the idea of this new committee would be very helpful to you and to HUD."

"Sir, you have the authority to build this committee," added Greg, and he rattled off the federal rule and section and paragraph numbers like he was a lifetime bureaucrat.

I was floored. Jesus, this was a done deal—Pitman and Greg had this planned. It's brilliant.

Then Pitman said, "The committee, which could be called HUD-VET, would be tasked with keeping you in the know about anything that affects veterans as it relates to HUD."

You could have heard a pin drop.

“I like it,” Andrew said, “and once I have counsel check out what you have said, Greg, and once I know I have the statutory authority to do this, then I will make that happen.” He turned to Howard. “Let’s get this done. And let’s make Greg the chairman of this committee. Now, let’s talk about how we can move Mr. Pitman over to HUD as my veteran guy.”

All of this went down in thirty minutes or less, as Andrew looked to King for answers about the IPA and the general from DOL chimed in about how smart a deal this was and how it would assist veterans now in federal housing.

I saw grins appear on all in attendance when Andrew said to me, “So, Ken, does this mean you’re not going to have a march with homeless veterans outside my office?”

I could only smile.

Pitman was at HUD within a month, and he was given a senior staff position working right next to Andrew’s personal assistant. Within months, legislation that affected the way monies were spent on programs that affected the homeless now stated that one group eligible for assistance was homeless veterans.

The battle had been won but the war continued.

Chapter 17: The Steam Company and Our Heating Bill

The shelter was a huge old building. One of the largest expenses we had operating the building was the heating bill in the winter.

The first bill we got was just over \$45,000 and it was for just one month. I about choked. This will sink us for sure, I thought. We needed a plan and we needed one quick.

At the time, we had a contract with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that paid us \$100,000 per month for one-hundred and fifty emergency shelter beds, and this was a winter contract and was only good from November 1 to April 1 of the following year. We used that money down to the last nickel for food, laundry, staff, medical equipment and all kinds of bills that never seemed to stop. We kept the place open 24/7 offering hot showers, lockers, and clean beds, not cots. Homelessness was a business.

At the time, we were only using three of the twelve stories of the building and yet, in order to keep pipes from freezing on vacant floors, we needed to maintain a base level of heat throughout the building.

We were screwed, I thought. Where are we going to get the money to pay for the heat?

One day RR&L came to me and said the hot water heater, or whatever it was that was giving us hot water, had died, and we had no hot water for showers.

“You need to get the heating company in here,” he said, “They are the ones who have the experience and knowhow to replace this equipment. It’s not a traditional hot water heater system. It uses steam and it’s complicated, and it’s had it, it’s broke beyond any plumbing repairs at all. We’ve kept it alive with bubble gum and paper clips, and now it’s gone, completely broke, and I can’t fix it. We need a new one.”

When RR&L threw up his hands, I knew it had to be totally broke.

The steam that heated our building was produced in a giant steam energy plant eight blocks away, and like most large Northeast cities, in the winter you could see some thermal leakage from safety vents they had in their systems. Occasionally, if you walked through downtown Boston, you would see a vent that was shooting steam into the air. Homeless people would huddle up near these vents, as it was a cheap way to stay warm when the frost hit the pumpkins.

We were maybe three months behind in our payments to the steam company when I asked for a meeting with the general manager.

I assumed he thought we were going to talk about the outstanding bill, but my agenda was to get them to replace the hot water heater.

The meeting was at their offices and like most businesses, they had a large conference room and this one overlooked South Station. I remember it was cold that day as I walked to the meeting, and when I arrived, it was toasty in the conference room. Betcha they didn't have to pay for the heat, I thought.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith," said the general manager as he entered the room. He began the meeting by saying that he supported America's veterans and was grateful that I had asked for the meeting, as just that very morning, he was discussing with his accounting staff how we were over \$150,000 in arrears on our bill and he didn't want to have to turn off our heat.

I told him that I had brought a check for \$15,000. While it was only ten percent of what I owed, I was willing to make a payment plan, but only if he had a replacement for the hot water exchanger that fed our building. We were out of hot water for showers.

"We would love to say we could replace that exchanger, Mr. Smith, but you must know that it costs more than \$15,000 to remove and then replace the gear."

"So what are you telling me?" I asked.

"I need a firm commitment from you on how you are going to pay the balance on this bill, and then we can talk about how we can get your hot water fixed."

What this guy didn't know was that RR&L had monkeyed some kind of system where he had rigged up five one-hundred-gallon electric hot water heaters all connected to each other, and they were allowing vets to take showers on schedules. While not the best solution, it beat taking a shower in cold water. I never asked where he got the hot water heaters and actually didn't want to know.

We had put a shower policy in place similar to what they have on Navy vessels, and that is after you get wet, you then turn off the water, you soap up and get cleaned and scrubbed and shampooed, and then you turn the water back on to rinse off. Not the best deal for sure, but for a homeless veteran, it beat a cold shower.

This GM went on about how close we were to not having any heat in the building at all, and I told him we would not take the threat of freezing lying down.

“You mean to tell me that you would turn off the heat to our building because we’re three months behind in our bill?” I shouted.

“Please, Mr. Smith, we are a business, and as such we have to answer to our investors and to our board. I can’t say what we will do, but nobody, the homeless shelter included, is immune from being shut down.”

I regretted giving the guy the check for \$15,000 but couldn’t take it back. I got up and left the meeting even as the guy was talking to me.

“Please, Mr. Smith, you need to find a way to pay the outstanding bill or we will be forced to shut off the heat,” were his last words as I left the room.

I went back to the shelter and called a meeting with Mark and RR&L.

“The steam company has us by the short hairs,” I said. “They will be turning off the heat soon and we need a plan, something to protect the building from burst pipes, and at the very least we should have some commercial construction heaters ready when it happens.

“You can’t do that,” said RR&L. “They run on kerosene and the smell would gag you and it might even be illegal to have them in the building running. I’m sure the fire department would close us down in a second if they knew that’s what we were doing to heat the building.”

I then told RR&L to show me where the broken hot water heater thing was, as I had no clue what it even looked like. I thought we might find a way to get it going again.

He took Mark and me down to the bowels of the sub-basement and what I saw shocked me. This room, the sub-basement, was maybe thirty-five feet high, eighty feet long, and sixty feet wide. As you entered, you were on a catwalk. You went down a set of stairs into this dark and smelly cavern. In the middle of the room was something that looked like a giant octopus. This thing was the size of a small truck. Maybe bigger.

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

“That’s a set of steam flow valves that feed other buildings around us,” said RR&L. “Our building is on that valve system too, and what the steam company would do would be to come down here and shut off that valve right there”—he pointed—“for our building.” He

then pointed at one of the large wheel-type valves you see that open dams on TV to help with floods. “They would put something on that wheel valve that’s like a seal, and that would turn off all the heat.”

My mind was racing.

“Are you telling me that in this building, *our* building, we have a set of valves that feed *other* buildings?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I am telling you,” said RR&L.

A radical plan was gelling inside my head. I needed to do some serious homework before I put it into play.

I had one of the best and brightest from our staff go to the city of Boston planning and licesening department and research if there was any legal documents that showed that the steam company had ownership of any equipment in our building. I wanted to see if there were some grandfather laws or some document that clearly showed that the steam company had a legal right of way to have that valve in the building.

My plan was simple.

If there were no documentation showing that they had a legal right to have that valve in the building, then I would invoice the steam company every month for the exact same amount of steam I was using. If the bill were \$45,000, then the invoice to have that gear in our building would be, for that month, \$45,000.

A week later, I got the notice in the mail that the steam company was turning off our heat.

“On Monday at 3pm, we will send into your building one of our engineers who will turn off your heat for lack of payment,” read the notice.

Great, bring it on, I thought to myself.

Sure enough, the engineer guy shows up Monday at 3pm. He has a few other people with him. The engineer says, “Look, I’m so sorry, I’m a veteran, and I don’t want to do this, but it’s my job, and I have no choice.”

I said, “We’re not giving you access, and you can go back to your boss the GM and hand him these documents.”

I had written a letter explaining that, effective immediately, we were now going to agree to a lease for the valve in the sub-basement, and the agreement stated that the lease was to run in perpetuity, but the first payment was the exact amount of the total outstanding bill. Included in the lease was also an agreement for a new hot water exchanger and that would be part of the new, signed agreement. Failure to sign the lease would force us to remove the valve from our sub-basement and we would charge the steam company the amount of money it would cost to have the valve removed professionally. I signed it as the chairman of the board of directors and president of the Vietnam Veteran's Workshop and said that I only wanted to deal with the chairman of the board of the steam company. Failure to sign the agreement would force me to begin dismantling the valve immediately by first shutting off all valves on the system—in essence, turning off the heat to four or five large office buildings in the neighborhood around our property.

The engineer read what I had printed, looked at the invoice, and smiled.

"You sure you want me to bring this back to the GM?" he said.

"Yup, and tell him I will not be taking his calls, only the calls of the chairman of his board. Tell him I think he's an asshole for sending you to turn off our heat, and remember this—tell him this exactly as I tell you—are you ready?"

"Sure," he said.

"Tell him, 'You pull a knife, I pull a gun. You put one of mine in the hospital, I put one of yours in the morgue.'" I asked him to repeat it back to me.

In the Mamet movie *The Untouchables*, that was a line that had stuck in my head.

Within an hour, I got a call from the mayor of the city of Boston.

"Have you lost your mind?" said the mayor. "Come to my office right now. I want to hear this from you to me in person."

Since we were neighbors, all I needed to do was walk maybe fifty yards to City Hall. I was there in less than ten minutes.

The mayor was bullshit.

"You can't do this. You *cannot do this!*"

"Well, legally, I can do this, and I'm going to do this." I also said that when I go back to the shelter I'm going to call the media and explain to them that I can't let the steam

company shut off our heat, and as a result, have come up with a solution that the steam company has rejected—a fair solution—and they got so mad about it, they called the mayor.

The mayor looked at me and narrowed his eyes.

“You wouldn’t do that.”

I said, “You know I will, and I have no choice. You know that they have me backed into a corner and it’s not my fault. Help me find a better solution.”

The mayor made me agree that I wouldn’t call the media and said he would talk to the steam company himself about making a deal. Just as I was about to leave he asked me if I had threatened their GM with putting him in the morgue.

Looking at the mayor, I winked. “Let me know when you have something to discuss,” I said as I left his office.

Over the next couple of days, the deputy mayor of Boston (the guy who really ran the city) came to visit me on a couple of occasions at the shelter.

“How the hell did you know the steam company didn’t have paperwork that allowed them to have that valve in the sub-basement?” he asked.

“I didn’t know,” I said, “and I still don’t. But regardless of that, let me show you something.” I brought him to the shower room. “We have hot water, not from the steam company but from this,” and I opened a door that showed the five hot water heaters all connected together.

“This is what we are forced to do.”

The deputy mayor pulled me aside. “You have helped someone close to me,” he said, “really close to me and my family. I will make this work, but don’t call the media.”

The next day, the engineer who came to shut off the heat from the steam company showed up. “Well, I don’t know if you’re crazy or if you’re a genius,” he said, “but I’m here with a crew to put in the new hot water exchanger.”

“Really? When?” I asked.

“Right now,” he said, “We have it on the truck outside. It will take us about a week to take out the old system and get the new one installed, but that’s what I was told to do. I also wanted to give you this.” He handed me a VHS copy of *The Untouchables* and he said, “I

watched this the other night with my wife and about fell out of my chair when I heard Sean Connery say, "You pull a knife, I pull a gun. You put one of mine in the hospital, and I put one of yours in the morgue."

He then smiled at me and went to work.

Over the next month or so, I met with the deputy mayor of Boston a couple of times and he said all of our outstanding bills had been taken care of, and that soon the governor was going to give us a new homeless assistance contract. I was to make sure I put money into that contract's budget for heat.

Chapter 18: The Birth of Vet Tech

We had on our staff a guy who was a graduate of Notre Dame, Jim Yates, and he was a regular rocket scientist when it came to government grants and their requirements. He was smart, worked hard and was actually in the guard or reserves as an officer.

He came to me one day and said the Department of Labor has a grant specifically for the homeless and it's about getting homeless veterans trained and job ready. He wanted some guidance on how best to approach the grant.

"Well, what could we teach them?" I asked.

"Well, we could teach them how to drive our bus. It takes a special CDL license to do that, and when someone has that license, they can drive tractor trailers."

"Good idea. What else?"

"We could train food service cooks, as we are serving well in excess of 350,000 meals per year, and we could get an instructor and have real-time experience as part of the training."

"Excellent. And what else?"

"We could train vets how to fix computers," he said.

"Another great idea. What else?"

"Well, we could train security guards and those are easy jobs to get."

That then led to the idea of a special training program for homeless veterans known as Vet Tech.

We made Vet Tech's grant application for just over a half million dollars and we waited.

Months went by and other things were happening when one day I get a call from someone at the Department of Labor congratulating me on the awarding of the Vet Tech grant.

"You were selected," is all this guy said.

Then the calls from the politicians came in.

The offices of Senator This and Congressman That said, you know, we gave you a letter of support for that grant and the politician would like to come to the shelter and do a press event.

I didn't even know that they had been asked.

I found Jim, the Notre Dame guy, and said, "Did you get support letters from politicians?"

"Sure—I went to the entire Massachusetts delegation and got a letter from each one."

"Well, they all want to come to the shelter for the press announcement that we were awarded the grant."

"*We were awarded?*" he said.

"Yes. Congratulations, you did a good job."

Now, the business of putting this grant into effect started.

I had paid little attention to the grant's budget as it was being written, but now as I went through the numbers with the comptroller I was amazed.

"There's money for new computers in this grant?" I said.

"Yes. For the computer factory part of this program there's money for twenty-five new computers."

"There's money for the bus? *Gas money* for the bus?"

"Yes, there is that too," he said.

"And am I reading this right—we have money for staff? Trainers and—holy cow, am I reading this right?—there's money that somehow goes to the state? How'd that happen?"

"We are the awardees of the grant, but actually, technically, the grant goes to the state and they get eighteen percent for administration."

"Well then we need to have the governor here when we do the press announcement."

At the time, the governor, Bill Weld, was a Republican, and everyone else, and I mean *every other politician in Massachusetts*, was a Democrat.

"That might cause some issues," cautioned Jim.

"Well, the state is the grantee—so tell everyone that I said the governor has to come."

A few days later, at the press conference, here come the two senators Kennedy and Kerry, three or four congressmen, and of course the governor.

Each took credit for the program and each talked about how much they loved veterans. I knew that Senator John Kerry, who was a vet, was one of the few who gave two cents

about what we were doing. Congressman Joe Kennedy was there and he was on the Veterans' Affairs Committee of Congress and I knew he cared.

At the event, though, I was taken aside by an aide to Senator Ted Kennedy.

"We were called about this grant," he said, "and wanted you to know that we stuck our necks out for you and this program."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't exactly have a stellar reputation inside the administration. And when a grant like this is down to the final selections, and a decision is needed, they call the delegation. We stuck our necks out for you. The senator doesn't even know, but I wanted you to know, as a senior member of his staff, that we stuck our necks out for you guys."

I knew then that it was true; it was Kennedy's office that had done this.

I am sure that John Kerry had a hand too, and maybe Barney Frank, but the real juice, the real reason we were selected, was Ted Kennedy, and I vowed to never forget that.

When it came time for my comments at the press conference I thanked them all for attending and I made a special effort to point out that without the efforts of Senator Kennedy and his staff, this grant would not have been possible.

After the cameras left, I was approached by one of the staff of a congressman in attendance.

"Why'd you only give the credit to Kennedy?"

"I thanked you all," I said.

"Well, you went out of your way to thank Kennedy, and I don't think he did squat."

It was right there that a light bulb went on in my head.

This is how the game is played.

In the future, I was determined, that there would be a series of press announcements, and at each announcement each attendee would be credited with the award.

As time went by, Vet Tech became a national model and even today, it still shines.

Chapter 19: General Colin Powell Delivers the Commencement Address

Vet Tech had been on its feet for close to a year when I read in a D.C. newspaper that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, was going to be in Boston for an event at Harvard University at the end of that month.

By a complete coincidence, our Vet Tech program was set to graduate our very first group of homeless vets. They had each learned one of several skills: drive the bus and get a CDL license, fix computers (at the time, that was a hot topic), cook in the mess hall and get a job at the airport working for the company that prepared all the airplane food, or be security guards who protected the shelter and also worked the graveyard shift at various security companies around the city. I thought to myself how cool would it be to have the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff be the commencement speaker.

I sent a letter to his office at the Pentagon with my request for the general to be our speaker. With typical military precision, a week later I had a colonel on the line, asking me what the hell was the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans.

After a few moments of backfilling him in about what we were and what we did, he said, “You’re telling me that today, in the United States of America, we have veterans who are homeless?”

“Yes sir,” I said, “I have a building full of them, and there are thousands more on the streets of every city.” I proceeded to tell him about our training program, which to us was a huge success. Our graduation ceremony coincided with the general’s visit to Harvard, and if the general could possibly be our commencement speaker after that Harvard event, it would inspire the veterans who were in the program and give a sense of dignity to every homeless veteran in our shelter.

Of course our little graduation ceremony could not compare with that of Harvard University—at least not on a scale of pomp and ceremony. But to our homeless vets it would be life changing. For each graduate the Vet Tech program meant a door opening to a humble but free existence, away from the charity of the shelter and the humiliation of living their lives on the very streets they had once helped to defend.

“Let me get back to you, Mr. Smith.”

I had been around the block enough times to know these words meant “Sorry—no.”

I started to work on a more realistic locally based graduation speaker. I arranged for the commissioner of veteran’s services for the city of Boston to be our speaker, and I was grateful to have him.

Then my phone rang. It was the colonel.

“If you can make the ceremony from two to three o’clock in the afternoon, the general would be honored to attend,” he said.

I was so thrilled that I started to babble. “Can we plan on that?” I asked.

“General Powell is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” said the colonel. “If he says he will be there, I think you can definitely depend on that, Mr. Smith.”

I asked if it was OK to have some media, as we had already planned on inviting the media. The colonel said sure, the more the better.

At the next town meeting the atmosphere was electric. All the veterans came alive when I announced the graduation of Vet Tech students would be conducted at the end of the month from two to three in the afternoon—and the commencement speaker would be General Colin Powell.

Everything seemed to go into overdrive.

RR&L and his staff somehow got their hands on two hundred gallons of paint, and every wall and door and piece of trim got a fresh coat before the event. We set up the first-floor meeting room with a speaker’s podium and a stage and made the place look four-square ready.

On the graduation day, the Vet Tech grads, family members, staff, and other homeless vets were shaved, showered, and dressed in their best clothes and assembled in the meeting room and in the hallways. Members of the media lined the room up against the walls. All the TV stations were there. The air was charged with expectation.

At two o’clock sharp, through the front doors of 17 Court Street, in uniform, walked General Colin Powell.

I saw the Americal Division patch on his shoulder and knew right then and there that it was somehow destined to happen. After introducing myself I told the general that I also

had served in the American. He gave me his million-dollar smile and said, “Welcome home, Ken.”

The event was a huge success. The media were tripping over themselves asking questions that had nothing to do with the graduation of the homeless veterans; on that day I learned from the general how to politely answer a question without answering a question. I watched him duck and weave around loaded questions and then always bring the answer back to the fact that here in this shelter, veterans were learning new skills and graduating. Homeless veterans were looking for a hand up and not a hand out, he said—and that is something I will forever remember.

General Powell didn’t have to take a detour from Harvard to visit our shelter, but he did, and for that, every homeless vet was grateful.

Chapter 20: Joe Moakley Meeting and the SRO Deal

Congressman Joe Moakley was chairman of the Rules Committee in Congress. He also had his district offices in Boston, less than two miles from the shelter.

We had been in the shelter business about a year and a half and it was obvious to me that without some significant capital investment to improve the obvious deficiencies in the building, we were going to lose the battle of keeping the place alive. The building had antiquated plumbing, faulty wastewater systems that backed up all the time, poor electrical systems that kept me up at night, broken elevators that made each elevator ride a crap shoot of either getting to the floor you wanted or getting stuck for hours, toxic asbestos on most floors, and a host of safety issues that would take millions of dollars to fix and repair.

One day I was meeting with Howard Levine at his office and going over some legal issues and I said, we need a godfather, we need someone—a senator a congressman, *someone*—who can step up and help us, or this program is going to capsize. Water was coming over the gunwales is how I think I put it.

It seemed that every month the little money we were getting was pouring down a hole of “repair this or repair that” and each time we spent the money on a repair, two more things needing immediate repair would pop up that were just as critical. It was a triage of building maintenance that never quit.

We were burning the candle at both ends just trying to keep the systems alive. I felt like I was in an old movie, with a ship that was always on the verge of breaking down, and I was stuck in the engine room, with the engine smoking oil and the grinding sounds of gears not working right surrounding me.

Howard’s suggestion was to see if we could get a meeting with a congressman. I said I would do what I could. When I got back to the shelter I wrote a letter asking for a meeting with Congressman Joe Kennedy. A few days later a senior member of his staff called me. He told me there was no way he could do anything to help us with getting a grant or an earmark to do any of the repairs. “You’re going to have to look elsewhere,” he said, “and my suggestion is to try to get a meeting with Joe Moakley. He’s the senior member of the delegation and he could help if he wanted.”

I then sent a letter into Moakley's office and didn't hear back for weeks. I forgot about the request until one day, the chief of staff of Moakley's office called.

"The congressman will be in town next week," he said, "holding meetings with constituents on Wednesday and Thursday, and I have blocked out fifteen minutes for you to come in and speak to him personally on Thursday. You and one other person may attend, because we don't want a room full of people. Be prepared to answer the questions of the congressman and be prepared to authenticate any request with evidence."

What the hell did that mean? I thought to myself, be prepared with evidence? I thought it best to bring Howard Levine to this meeting, as he had both a softspoken manner and a keen mind. He reminded me of a ninja warrior in the way he did things, as he usually dressed in black and he could attack and dissect you with words like no one else I had ever met.

Plus he was a super lawyer.

The day of the meeting, I met Howard at his office and he drove us to the congressman's offices, which were only a few blocks away. After we parked and headed into the building, Howard told me to do most of the talking to the congressman and to speak from my heart. Joe Moakley was a WWII vet who served in the Navy, said Howard, so no Army-Navy jokes.

We entered his office and I could see that this guy was wicked busy. There had to be twenty-five other people in the waiting room and there were no empty chairs and so both Howard and I stood our turn to get in to see the congressman.

After twenty minutes or so, a door opened and our names were called by a young guy dressed in a shirt and tie who looked like he was in high school.

"Sir, this is Howard Levine and Ken Smith. They are here to speak about the homeless veterans shelter over on Court Street," said the young guy. That was our introduction. He turned and closed the door behind him. I saw that there was someone else sitting in the corner with a pad of paper. He didn't even lift his head up—he was just writing away.

There were three chairs in front of the congressman's desk, so I took one and Howard took another and we waited.

Congressman Moakley was a barrel-chested man. Not that tall, less than six feet I thought, and he had an unlit cigar in his mouth.

He was reading something and, like the other guy, had yet to lift his head up to even say hello or to shake our hands.

“So, Smith, what do you need?”

The question caught me off guard—it came out of nowhere and he said it without looking at me. He was still reading some papers.

Then he looked up at me and his eyes were intense. He was looking at me and focusing on me and I felt at that moment that we were the only two people on the planet.

“Did you hear what I said?” repeated the congressman.

“Yes sir, sorry,” I managed to say. “I wanted to make sure my answer made sense and I didn’t embarrass myself. We need a way to get a government grant or a set aside, or some way to help us to repair the infrastructure of the old VA hospital on Court Street downtown.”

“I know that building well,” he said. “I have been to it many times. I’m a veteran too.”

“I know sir. I know you served in the Navy in World War Two and that’s why we came to you.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Smith. You came to me only after you went to Kennedy and he said come to me.”

“Right, that’s, that’s true,” I said. “Sorry, I forgot about that for a moment.”

“Now, for the last time, as I am very busy, what do you need?”

Howard saw me floundering and jumped right in.

“Sir, this homeless veterans program is in dire need of federal funds to help repair some of the critical life-safety issues associated with the general maintenance of a large, former federal building that has been neglected for well over forty years.”

The congressman was now looking at Howard. “How much do you need?” he asked.

“We could use one dollar and we could use ten million dollars, but the simple fact is we are between a rock and hard place in assembling a capital campaign because the needs of the building are immense.”

Moakley looked at me and then at Howard and then at me again, and said, “OK, I will see what I can do.”

Just then the door we had entered into his office opened. Somehow the congressman either rang a bell or someone was listening, but somehow, right then and there, the meeting was over.

The guy who was sitting in the corner of the room never even looked up and never stopped writing.

As we walked to Howard's car I said, "Well, that was a waste of time."

"I'm not so sure," said Howard. "He seemed interested at the very least."

I wasn't sure we were in the same meeting, I thought to myself.

Howard dropped me off at the shelter and later on that day I met with a woman who had come into the shelter looking for some work. She seemed totally out of place—she looked as if she belonged behind the cosmetic counter at a major department store. She was very well put together and had that same Anne Taylor look that I remembered from Jackie Lawing at HUD.

Carla was my age—late thirties—and she was a development director from a major nonprofit and was in between jobs.

I've taken a job that doesn't start for a few months, she told me, and I've walked by this place for close to a year. I want to help, and will do the work of development for a fraction of what I was being paid at my last job. I have an idea on how you might get some federal monies and I have experience in applying for funds from various agencies.

I thought her proposal had some merit, but she needed to see that our offices were extremely crude, and in fact the only office not in use at the time didn't even have a ceiling. It was located on the first floor and was some kind of teller counting cage from when the place was an old bank, I imagined.

I took her into this office and she looked at me and said, "Are you serious?"

I said that well, maybe this wasn't such a good idea, and I was getting ready to thank her for her time when she said, you know, I only want to do this part time, as I have children, and I can do most of what I need to do from home, and I would only come in here to show you my work and get some of the answers I might need for any applications.

At that time, the idea of telecommuting was brand new and I didn't know anyone who worked from home.

But I liked the way she presented herself and we got down to the details of pay and what she could bring to the table.

“Let me do this for two weeks from my home and I will then come in and show you what I’ve done,” she said.

Since we had some success with getting funds from DOL I thought, what the hell, two weeks is a short investment and if she didn’t bring anything in, well, no harm. no foul.

Two weeks in the shelter were like dog years.

So many things happened during those two weeks that I completely forgot about Carla.

One morning I got a call from the front desk saying that some woman had come into the shelter and needed to meet with me.

I was busy and said, please tell her to wait as I am in a meeting and will be down when I am done.

Fifteen minutes later my secretary at the time, Ellen, came into my office while I was reviewing overnight reports and said, “There’s a woman named Carla outside. She says she works here and has a meeting with you.”

“Jesus, send her in,” I replied.

Carla came into my office, again dressed like Anne Taylor and this time carrying a briefcase, and went right to the conference table. She pulled out a small phone book of papers, divided them in half, gave me half, and kept the other half.

“This is a grant application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development,” she announced, “and in this request, we’re asking for funding for fifty-nine SROs, or single room occupancy units, to be built here at 17 Court Street. I have reviewed the timeline for this grant submission and we have until the day after tomorrow to get this grant submission paperwork to HUD. There are some items that I need help with, mostly budget items, but also some statistics and some history.”

My jaw was on the table. This was a hundred and fifty page document of a kind that I had never seen in my life.

“You did this?” was all I could say.

“Yes, over the last two weeks I put this together at home,” said Carla. “Aside from the budget items, the only parts missing are the required letters of support from congressmen or from a senator, or both. They can be added after the submission, so we don’t need them

today, and if we could get them sent into the grant officer with a request to have them placed into the submission file, that would work. Do you have anyone you can call or write too and get that kind of letter or letters?" she asked.

"I knew just the guy to task to that," I said.

She then asked if we knew anyone inside of HUD, as her experience was telling her that lots of nonprofits from around the country were submitting grants, and it helped to have a champion on the inside, someone who could at least make sure the grant was given a full review.

Again, I said I knew just the guy: our man Pitman was now at HUD and I would ask him to make sure we got an honest review.

But first we had to complete the financial sections of the grant. There had to have been thirty pages of budgets and numbers in the submission that Carla wrote. I knew when I was in way over my head, so I asked Ellen to get both the Notre Dame guy Jim and the comptroller Don to come to my office on the double.

When they both arrived and were introduced to Carla, I slid my copy of the grant submission over to Don the numbers guy and asked Carla to share her copy with Jim. Both of them dove into the document and minutes later they both looked at me, and said, this is incredible, this is absolutely incredible.

"The timeline to submission is in two days," I said, "and we need to agree to either send this in or not."

"It's a no-brainer," said Jim. "It has legs, it's well written, and has all the required materials that they have asked for, and I vote to send it in."

Don said the same and I said thank you to the both of them and told them they could go back to their offices.

Carla then told me that her new job was coming faster than she thought and while she wanted to continue to do work for us on a part time, volunteer basis, she had to report to this new job and couldn't do any other grants for us.

I thanked her and told her to submit to my secretary her hours and I would make sure she got paid for the time she had given to us.

The grant went out by FedEx to HUD at the end of that same day.

Now, we already had a grant from DOL and we had a grant from the state for operations, but that was about all the revenue we had coming into the program. Another grant would be a godsend.

I told Jim that I would handle both Senator Kennedy's office and Congressman Moakley's office when it came to support letters for the HUD grant. I made the calls, and the staff said they would send in support letters.

I remembered the DOL grant media issue and told myself if this grant were approved, there would be *two* separate and distinct press events.

Weeks went by and then I got a call from our guy Pitman at HUD: "Your grant is in the short list, and I've done all I can do. I made sure that it got a proper review and I am not in the group who makes the selections, and that's good as it would be a conflict but they know that I have at least asked about this specific request. By the way—where the hell are you going to build fifty-nine SROs?"

"We have tons of room here," I said.

"Each SRO, as I read the requirements, each room needs to have an outside window," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Each SRO room has to have a window—a window that looks outside."

"Whoa, wait a min, you sure on that?"

"Yes, I'm sure," he said. "Double-check the grant requirements."

Later that day I did just that. Sure enough, Pitman was right: each room had to have its own window looking to the outside.

Sounds simple, but when you took into consideration the shape of the building we were in, well, we had an issue.

Weeks went by and I got a call from Moakley's guy. "You have been awarded the SRO grant," he said.

"Holy mackerel!" I screamed. "Thank you so much!"

Half an hour later I get a call from Kennedy's guy.

"Congrats," he said. "You have been awarded the SRO grant."

I was flying.

We had done it—or I should say, Carla had done it.

I called a meeting with Mark, Jim, and Don the numbers guy.

“We need to get set for this action,” I said. “This is going to change the way that the whole shelter works. We will now have permanent housing here, and we need to get ourselves steeled to the idea that we will soon be in the housing business—the permanent housing business.”

Every two months there was a board of directors meeting of the corporation. I prepared myself to present the SRO plans at the next meeting when I got another call from Moakley’s guy. He said, “The congressman has successfully submitted legislation that has awarded your group \$4.2 million in an unrestricted grant that will allow you to make the material changes to the shelter that you discussed.”

I almost dropped the phone. When it rains it pours.

Now, between the Moakley earmark and the SRO grant, we had over eight million dollars in federal monies to change the way the shelter would work.

It was a good week.

On the board we had an architect who was a Vietnam vet, and he took the SRO grant and the special funds that Moakley had awarded us and came back in a month with a plan that was drop-dead terrific.

We would have a new kitchen, a new dining facility, a new sick bay, new general shelter dormitories and of course, fifty-nine new SROs, each with its own window.

I was impressed and amazed.

Chapter 21: The Bunker and the Plan to Help Veterans with PTSD

One day I received a call from Joe Kennedy's office. The aide said we have a guy we want to send over to you. He's not a veteran, but you need to help us find him some work. He's here from Argentina on a hardship visa and he is a good guy and he just needs a break.

You don't tell a congressman to go pound sand, so I said, send him over.

A few hours later, I was called to the front desk to meet George Mendoza.

George was older than me and was dressed like he stepped out of a Bogart movie. He even had one of those scarf things—an ascot—around his neck. He was in a suit and he had a fedora and carried an umbrella. If you have ever seen the Dos Equis beer commercial that talks about the most interesting man in the world, that guy reminds me of George.

“Hello sir, my name is George Mendoza and I would like to help you with your program to assist those who have been in a war and are now homeless. I am not a veteran of the United States, but I can relate to being homeless, as my home has been in Argentina and now, I am here, because of the war.”

The war he was talking about involved all those generals who were killing innocent people in Argentina just because they wanted to tell the truth.

At the time, we had a new state contract and one position I had open involved working as a case manager with the vets who lived in the building. I thought that if we could get George into that position it would curry favor with Kennedy for something later. I was learning how the game was played.

I told George that I had a job, but it was hard work and the vets could be tough.

He grinned a grin that I will remember forever. “You will not be sorry,” he said. “I will do this job and make you proud.”

A week later, George started and he was given forty homeless vets to manage and monitor. I used to joke that the counselors or case managers were actually sheep dogs, as they were always chasing someone for something.

A few months later while I was walking through the shelter, a vet pulled me aside.

“I want to be placed in George Mendoza’s group,” he said. “Please don’t tell my current case manager because he might get mad.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you want to move to Mendoza?”

“You don’t know? Nobody’s told you?”

“Told me what?”

“George Mendoza gets the most respect of anyone you have working here at this shelter. He uses some way to get vets approved for benefits nobody ever knew about. He also holds a group meeting twice a week on his own time.”

“A group of what?”

“A combat group. He holds a combat group and I’m a combat vet.”

I said I would see what I could do and went to find Mark.

“What you hearing about this guy Mendoza?” I asked.

“Holy crap, the guy is like a saint,” said Mark. “He comes in early, stays late, comes in on weekends, works with the combat vets, and he found some way for each vet to get sixty bucks from the city of Boston on some emergency shelter grant or per diem thing nobody ever heard about.”

“So, he’s working out?”

“Oh yeah. If we had five more of him we would be sitting pretty.”

Now, I usually left the day-to-day operations of the shelter to the ops staff and tried my hardest to steer clear of making decisions that impacted the way the operations manager, Scott Charlton, did things.

I found Scott in his office.

“Scott, I would like you to move Peter F. from his case manger to George Mendoza.”

Scott looked at me and said, “He talked to you didn’t he?”

“Who talked to me?” I said.

“Mendoza—he said something to you after I told him not to, didn’t he?”

“No, Mendoza didn’t talk to me, but what would he say if he did talk to me?” I was curious.

“He wants to start a combat support group for the guys with post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“Why does he want to do that?” I asked.

“The combat vets love him and somehow the guy can sit for hours just listening and letting each guy talk himself silly.”

“You think it’s a good idea to let him do that?” I asked. “He has no formal training of any kind and those combat vets can get a little squirrely.”

“Well, for a guy with no training he has a gift that makes the combat vets love him,” said Scott.

“Then let’s see if we can make it happen.”

George asked for a special room or collection of rooms on a floor that wasn’t being used and said if he could have that space, he would like it known through out the shelter that it was only for the combat vets.

A safe place.

A bunker.

I saw no harm in it, and talked it over with Mark and he saw no harm in it. That was the birth of the bunker.

The bunker was spacious with a casual atmosphere, almost like a frat house living room at college. It had couches, chairs, tables, a TV, magazines, and newspapers. Somehow all of this happened with George and RR&L getting the work done in less than a week.

I waited a few weeks and then one morning I made my way to the bunker.

I opened the door and there had to be thirty vets in this room all sitting in a circle, all smoking, and some with tears in their eyes.

I knew as soon as I walked in without knocking that this could be intense.

“Hello commander,” said Mendoza. “You are my general and I am proud to show you what we have built here for those who have given so much.”

One guy pointed right at me said, “Who the hell is he?”

“Who is he?” said George. “He’s the one responsible for you sitting in this room. Without him, there would be no bunker at all.”

The vet came over and shook my hand. He looked like he had just stepped out of a Hell’s Angels movie. He had tattoos, long hair, a biker jacket, thick boots—the classic wanderer with a Harley parked outside.

He said, "My name is David. I was with the Ninth Marines in Vietnam. Thank you for this. It was needed."

The First Battalion Ninth Marines, I knew, had experienced unspeakable brutality in Viet Nam. For its heroic actions in the valley near the Song Nu Yi River in 1966, North Vietnam's President Ho Chi Minh boasted that he was going to kill them all, so they should just consider themselves *Di bo Chet*—the walking dead. In defiance the Ninth Marines adopted the taunt and made it their own. They proudly became The Walking Dead.

Years later, David, like so many other Vietnam combat vets, was still very much alive. Damaged, but alive.

"Welcome home," I said to David. "I'm just stopping by to welcome all of you here, and I just wanted to know if there was anything we could get for you?"

"We could use a coffee machine," one vet said.

"We could use a working phone—even a pay phone," said George.

I made a mental note and left.

I went to find Mark and said, "You been in that bunker up on the third floor?"

"Oh yeah, it's great."

"I was just visiting and there had to be like thirty guys there."

"I know," Mark said. "They're coming from other shelters across New England. The word is spreading about George."

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"Group. All-day group."

"Well, he said he needed a phone up there. Any idea why?"

Mark looked me in the eye. "He gets the guys to call home. They talk to their mothers."

"What?"

"He gets the vets to call their mothers. Some of these guys haven't spoken to their moms in years, and George thinks it's a good thing. We should give him a phone."

I hurried to find RR&L. "How hard would it be to wire up a phone for the bunker?" I asked.

"Already done that. Just waiting for you to give the green light," he said.

The next day, the bunker had a phone line.

Peace, one of the founding members of the workshop, had served in the Ninth Marines. Peace worked at the phone company and came into the shelter when he could to help out. A few days later I found him sitting in the cafeteria.

“Can you keep your eye on the bunker?” I asked him. “I wonder about that guy Mendoza and what the hell is happening up there.”

“Don’t worry, it’s good stuff,” said Peace.

The legend of George Mendoza was growing.

George had a wife named Monica and he brought her into the shelter one day. What a class act this woman was. She seemed very European and I could tell she was George’s backstop on all things emotional. They had a slew of kids I found out, and I was glad that I had made the decision about hiring this guy.

Over time, the bunker became the “in place” at the shelter. Vets who had come through our doors as completely broken men were put back together by the work that George was doing every day.

I met one vet while I was sitting having a coffee on the first floor. I often sat alone at a table and did paperwork downstairs and most often everyone left me alone. Because it was raining out—really raining hard with thunder and a dark sky lit by lightning every couple of minutes—it was high tide in the shelter, and as I sat doing my paperwork I paid no attention to how crowded it had become downstairs.

Sitting there reading and signing documents and just doing work I remember a vet asking in a tentative voice, “Is it OK if I sit at this end of the table? There are no more chairs left.”

It made me look around. The place was jammed. Maybe four hundred vets were crowded into this one room, and yet it was as quiet as a library.

“Sure,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Dennis. Dennis Wilson.”

“Where are you from?”

“North Carolina. But I haven’t been back there in years. So I guess that right here is where I’m from. It’s as good a place as any.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About three months. I know you’re busy. Sorry—I can find another place to go,” he said as he got up find another place to sit.

“No, please, I’m done,” I replied. I had been about to leave when it hit me that this guy had been in our system for over three months, and I had no clue who the hell he was. I wondered how many others had come and gone whom I had never gotten to see or to talk to.

I also wanted to do some research about how we were doing with the services we offered, so I asked Dennis, “What’s the best thing about this place so far?”

“The bunker.”

“You’re a combat vet?”

“Yeah, Marines, in ‘67 and ‘68. How about you?”

I said I was a combat vet in ‘71 and ‘72. I asked him what made the bunker so special.

“Well, Mendoza got me to spill the beans.”

“If you don’t mind my asking—spill the beans about what?”

Dennis thought for a moment before raising his head and squaring his shoulders.

“About how my little girl and wife died. I hadn’t told anyone, anyone at all, but George made me feel so good about telling the story and for the first time in a long time, well, I feel cleansed after I spoke the words—the words about what happened.”

Then there was a pregnant pause, and nothing was said for maybe two minutes and I knew he wanted to keep talking.

“I’m sorry for your loss. How’d they die?” I asked.

“In a fire. They died in a fire.” With these words his demeanor and his very being seemed to change. It was like a tightly coiled spring suddenly relaxed. “You see—” he spoke to me by looking me right in the eye—“I was working at the post office at the time. I got the job right after Nam. Did as I was told, didn’t make waves, and made second-class carrier quicker than anyone in my group. I had a route and everything. One day I discovered that a girl I went to high school with was living on my route. We got together and pretty soon I was married, and it seemed to happen so quick I can’t remember even asking her to marry me.

“One year to the day after we got married, she gave me Becky, the love of my life. A sweet, blond, blue-eyed little girl. My life changed forever on the day she was born. I did my job at the post office as usual but I would rush home as soon as I could to help with feeding and bathing and whatever was needed.

“Then four years to the day after we were married, Becky went into a closet in a bedroom. Our best guess is that she was playing with matches. The house caught on fire and my wife died trying to save Becky.

“In the twelve years since that day, I ain’t never been sober—except when I came here. After sobering up and getting a place that was safe and clean and surrounded by brothers, I took a job at the hospital. I work nights, cleaning. Then a month ago I started with the combat group and George and me started talking about how much pain I had inside of me and how, if I didn’t talk about it, George said, it would kill me. I cried for almost three hours as the story spilled outta me. George did what no one else ever did. He listened.

“When I was done telling my story, George gave me a hug. ‘It’s OK,’ he said, ‘It’s OK to miss them—but they wouldn’t want you to be like this.’ And you know what? He was right, they wouldn’t want me to be like this.”

I was stunned and I didn’t quite know what to say.

“Well, remember to help another brother when you see one here and you can tell that he needs a friend,” is all I can remember saying.

From that moment on, whatever the bunker needed, the bunker got.

To this day, I am grateful to George for all the pain he helped to heal in the thousands of veterans he has touched.

Chapter 22: All Hands on Deck for the Homeless Vet (A Fun Fundraiser)

At Columbus Avenue and Arlington Street, not far from the shelter, is the Park Plaza Castle. The massive stone structure was built in 1897 as an armory for the First Corps of Cadets, a Massachusetts military organization established in 1741. The name fits—on the outside the armory looks like a Romanesque castle with a six-story hexagonal tower and crenellated ramparts. Inside, it's big—you could park tanks in the main 15,000-square-foot exhibition space.

At that time the armory was in disrepair. One day we had a visit from the guy who was in charge of building maintenance, who happened to be a vet. He was their version of our own RR&L.

"You think *you* guys have problems? We have issues you can't even imagine," he said.

One thing led to another and he invited us for a tour. We said let's go see what you have.

Myself, RR&L, and a few of his staff went for the walk, as the armory was only four or five blocks away. It was incredible to see how big this place was and how cavernous it was.

"You know, you guys should put on a fundraiser here," the guy said. "I know I can get you the warehouse price for a rental."

My mind started spinning and I said I would get back to him for details and pricing.

I went back to the shelter and wrote out a plan for an event.

I called it "All Hands on Deck for the Homeless Vet."

The theme would be military equipment on display and the idea I had was to get as much camouflage netting as I could beg, borrow or steal and then drape the whole place in this netting. We'd set up within the giant hall all these different areas.

We called the National Guard commander and begged for any kind of military equipment we could get for the night—howitzer cannons, Jeeps, large trucks, anything. The place was big enough to drive the stuff right inside.

We did the same to the Air Force and Navy military bases around us and pretty soon we had just what we needed—authentic props that showcased our theme.

At the same time, we rented one of those large spinning spotlights you see at movie premier openings and had that system set up outside. We added a red carpet and an awning, just like they do at the Oscars. It was almost like a movie opening.

We planned a mess tent (food service) area inside with horderves, a triage medical area set up showcasing some of the military ambulances we got to use, and then a simple stage area making sure we had plenty of room to add 125 tables of ten. You can do the math on the number of people we could hold.

I wanted to sell the tables for \$2,500 per table. For that kind of money I needed to have an angle to get people to come, and a way for them to walk away from the fundraiser and never forget the event.

We had done events with movie stars that had worked out nicely, but this time the angle was we were going to invite people to the event, have them buy tickets, and feed them dinner. Sounds simple enough, but the idea had a twist when it came to *what* we would serve them for dinner.

The secret sauce we were going to deploy was that we were going to feed them military food: Meals, Ready to Eat (MREs) and donated bottled water. We did have the tables set up as if there was going to be a catered meal, complete with breadbaskets and wine glasses, centerpieces, and the usual china and silverware you could rent from any caterer. We told the caterer that we would come and pick up the needed stuff, make sure it was handled correctly, we would place it onto the tables, and I made sure that we would then take the stuff back to the shelter, run it through our own dishwasher before wrapping it again in plastic and returning it to the caterer. Our pricing from the caterer was generous.

Those attending were going to get a show, as we had some stellar local comedians as part of the night, and I was planning a speech about homelessness and we were going to give some “thank you” awards to politicians as our grand finale.

When you get a commitment to an event from a politician, they always want to know the exact start and finish time, and if there is any way that they can speak to the attendees. It makes the pol’s night if at the same time you give them a warm welcome and some kind of recognition award, even if there is little they have done. They remember these events, and they have someone on their staff who keeps a record of how many were in attendance, and if there was any media.

The most successful events—the ones that garner the most attendees—are the ones that have the most media in attendance. The way to get the media is to promise some surprises and have some good visuals. We had the Raytheon Patriot missile on display (actually a display and not a real system) but it was good enough along with all the other props we had. The media came in droves.

What made this event special to me is that we built a walkway into the hall, and everyone had to come up this ramp way and ask permission to “come aboard.”

We had someone do the traditional “piping” you hear in all the old navy movies and while it took time for all the people to attend, we had their picture taken shaking hands and getting saluted by myself, Mark, and others from the staff in uniform.

I put on an admiral’s white dinner uniform and all the staff were decked out as officers or enlisted men of a U.S. Navy battleship.

The night of the event, we were almost thirty tables short of our head count goal of attendees. We had actually sold the tables, but the companies that bought them had said, “We won’t be attending, and you can offer this table to veterans.”

In order to keep the feel of a sellout, I invited as a guest each and every member of the shelter who was not working the event.

The shelter vets lit up when they were told that they could come too.

I can still see in my mind, the inside of the event, we had overhead lighting and one of our best moves was to ask a professional theatre company to help us with setting up the props and the lighting.

The place was like a huge cave, and it’s hard to explain the smell, but the camouflage netting was made of the same canvas that old summer camp tents were made of, so the place had a very unique, but subtle smell.

Vets in uniform, using flashlights, guided people to their tables and handed them the program for the night. The attendees all wanted to see their company’s name and ad, and to read the goodwill messages placed by those companies that couldn’t buy a table but had bought a business-card-sized ad inside the program. Another vet would come and offer the guests either a cold beer, a glass of wine, or bottled water, all donated by different liquor stores and liquor distributors. Everything was four-square and going smoothly.

We asked the attendees to walk around the armory and explore the military equipment on display. They all did, actually climbing into the trucks and ambulances and Jeeps and watching videos of how the howitzers fired, and videos on how the Patriot missile system worked shown on the TVs we had placed next to the displays of the guns and the missile systems.

At the event we had been lucky to get Harold Russell, a two-time Academy Award winner for the 1946 movie *Best Years of our Lives* to be one of the featured speakers.

Over the years, Harold became a dear friend and mentor to me, and was to become the best man at my wedding. At the time Harold was in his late seventies and his mind was as sharp as a razor. I had spent many a summer evening walking on Craigsville Beach, near Hyannis on Cape Cod, listening to Harold's stories. He had met and talked to Presidents Truman through Bush and for over forty years was the chairman of the President's Committee on Disability. From his Hollywood exploits, to his trips to Eastern Bloc communist countries as an ambassador of the World Veterans Federation, where he would bring used prosthetic and orthotic devices, he would keep his eyes and ears open for anything and everything. He was an amazing American and good and dear friend.

One other thing: On June 6th, 1944, an explosion had blown off both of his hands.

By manipulating the hooks he had for hands, this guy could button his shirt, light a match, and do anything you could do with all your fingers. It was amazing for me to watch and learn from this inspiring man.

The evening was moving along fine, and the room had filled up and it was time to start the show.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the MC said, using the stage and speaker system. "Please take your seats and prepare yourselves for an evening full of good fun, entertainment and guest speakers."

Of course the senators had to speak to the crowd first, and I introduced Senator Kennedy and then Senator Kerry, who each made their speeches and then said they needed to move onto other events. The vets and I were grateful that they attended.

We then put on the stage Steve Sweeney, who is one of the funniest comics I have ever encountered. He has a very unique Boston skit that had the crowd in stitches.

After Steve, and as the crowd was wiping the tears from their eyes from laughing so much, I went to the stage and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, dinner will now be served. Please pay attention to your server, who will guide you through the process of preparing your meal."

You wouldn't believe the responses.

"What'd he say?" said one woman close to the stage.

"He said you need to cook your own dinner," said a guy sitting at the next table.

Just then a whole corps of volunteers went to each table and dropped a case of MREs , still in the case lot box, and started opening each case and putting the meals on the center of each table.

People were in shock.

"What's this?" I heard again. "What do we do with this?" I heard again and again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "on each of your tables are this evening's meals. They are the exact same meals that our troops eat when they are in the field and you can ask your servers how best to prepare these delicious meals. You will see on the tables we have added some condiments to season up your own meal," and I left the stage and started to walk around.

Now, many of these tables were filled with business executives from law firms, accounting firms, and large businesses in and around Boston. Mostly someone at one of these large firms would buy the table and then somehow, staff would be selected and told to attend.

Well, the reaction was just what I wanted.

"Holy Christ, he's feeding us C-rations," I heard one guy say out loud.

"Is this really dinner?" said one woman to whom I thought was her husband.

"Be quiet, Dolores," is all I heard. "Yes, it's dinner and it's what soldiers eat."

"Is this what they feed them at the shelter?" a few asked out loud.

Now cases of water, still wrapped in plastic, were being put on the tables. I could hear the vet volunteers explain how you heated your MRE by using a nifty little thing called the "flameless ration heater," or FRH. It's a flat pouch that contains finely powdered iron and magnesium metals, and table salt. To activate the reaction, a small amount of water is

added, and the boiling point of water is quickly reached as the reaction proceeds. You put the ration heater next to your sealed MRE and it makes it nice and toasty warm.

The place was buzzing.

One member of the print media came over to me.

“Is this really dinner?”

“Yes, it really is dinner,” I replied.

“What if someone complains that they spent a lot of money to come to this event and you feed them a military meal?” he asked.

“Yeah? And?”

“What would you say?”

“I would say that this is a fundraiser, and any money I can save by using a perfectly good, *very good*, actually, military meal, well then that’s more money we can use over at the veterans shelter.”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m as serious as a heart attack,” I said. “Now, sit down and eat your dinner, and then tell me what you think when you’re done.”

There was a buzz in the room and a few people got up and left. The majority were thrilled and some actually asked me to sit down and show them how to prepare an MRE.

“Do you have any spares?” people asked.

“I want to take one to my boss,” said a woman who was dressed to the nines. “He won’t believe this.”

We continued with the event and it was time for Harold to speak.

When he took the podium the place stood and clapped for what seemed forever.

Harold was a natural born speaker and a great storyteller. He talked about his exploits as a disabled American Veteran and how proud he was to be in attendance at the fundraiser that night. Then he said something that has stuck with me to this day: “You feel sorry for the man with no shoes—until you meet the man with no feet.”

After his speech and at the end of the evening, I sat with Harold for a while.

“You did this, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Did what?” I said.

“You feed these people C-rations and they didn’t complain, did they?”

“Well, Harold, what I did was give them a dose of something they don’t usually get. I gave them a flavor of life.”

He smiled. “Come see me on Cape Cod next week. I enjoy our walks and talks.”

I was humbled and honored by his invitation.

Chapter 23: Point of Light #142 and the White House Meeting

President George H. W. Bush had a program called “Thousand Points of Light.” The Vietnam Veterans Workshop, the corporate entity that ran the shelter, was designated as Point of Light #142.

Here’s the story behind how that came to pass and what it meant to the Project to Shelter Homeless Veterans to be a Point of Light.

I used to have regular meetings with Howard Levine at his office. Sometimes we would go to the ground floor of his law firm where there was a coffee shop and he would volunteer his time to educate me while we drank a cup of coffee. I remember these meetings helped me to keep on track with the myriad legal issues that were flying around me—things that were complicated at times and mostly to do with the management of a large nonprofit.

At one of these meetings, Howard said he knew Andrew Card.

Now Andy Card was a huge player in the Bush administration and had an office at the White House. Andy had been in the Massachusetts political arena for quite some time and then went national. He was a power broker and someone who could help us with the issues we were having with Health and Human Services (HHS), which was the federal agency somehow tied to the shelter as custodian of the building. It was a complicated situation and might need a major leaguer like Andy to help get the paperwork sorted out.

Howard said he would get back to me after he requested a meeting with Andy and before I knew it, there were plans for the both of us to go to Washington and meet at the White House.

We arrived at the White House in what we thought was plenty of time for our appointment. This was before 9/11, and yet the level of security was still unbelievable to me. It took us maybe forty-five minutes to go from the outside gate to the waiting room, right outside of the Oval Office and near where Andy’s office was located. We both were scanned, X-rayed, questioned, and at least a half dozen people looked at our drivers’ licenses.

As we finally entered the White House, I was taken by how small the place actually is.

On TV the building looks like a palace, and maybe it is, or maybe we went in the back door, but the hallways were small, and the waiting room was in the corridor and *that* was small. It all just seemed smaller to me than I had expected.

Harold Russell had told me a story once while walking on the beach in Cape Cod about how a Republican had met a Democrat and asked him how come he was a Democrat? The Democrat said, well, my father was a Democrat, my grandfather was a Democrat, and I'm a Democrat.

The Republican said, well, if your father was a horse thief and your grandfather was a horse thief, would that make you a horse thief?

The Democrat said no, that would make me a Republican.

I hoped I got the chance to use that line while at the White House.

After maybe twenty minutes of waiting, a nice lady asked us to step into Andy's office and he would be right with us.

Again, the office wasn't that huge to me—I've been in bigger offices at Boston law firms. But it was nicely furnished.

Howard had told me that Andy was doing us a favor and not to act nuts. I wondered what he meant.

Andy Card came into the room, shook our hands, looked us right in the eye and said, "What do you want?"

The magic sentence in Washington.

"We think we need some help with HHS," said Howard. "There seems to be a major hang-up with our paperwork, and we would like to thank you, the president, the vice president, and the administration for allowing our application for the old VA hospital in Boston to be approved, as we think there were moments when we were not sure it would happen."

"Well, I can't call HHS," said Andy, "but I will pass along your thank you. However, I am on a committee to have nonprofits recommended as Points of Light and I will handle that myself if you can get me all the things I need."

"Thank you so much for your help," said Howard, and that was that.

While I wasn't disappointed, I really wanted to see the president.

As we were leaving, a group of security guys came down the hall and out of the corner of my eye I saw George H.W. Bush leave the Oval Office and walk into some other office.

There goes my once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of the president of the United States, I thought.

We rode back to Boston and I could see that Howard wasn't that thrilled with what we did.

"Andy can't do anything for us about the building," he said, "and that's not a good thing."

"Well, the brothers have been looking out for us this far," I replied. "I'm sure they will continue to help find a solution to our paperwork issue." I said this as a reference to my belief that spirits of the vets who didn't make it back alive from Viet Nam were looking out for us.

We made the trip back and during the next couple of days I was absorbed with other things. Then I got a call from some guy at HHS.

"Your application and all your paperwork connected with the deed and the lease and—actually, well everything, all your paperwork is ready."

"Ready for what?" I said.

"Ready to have signed and cosigned and we can then legally turn the building over to you."

"When can you do this?" I asked.

"How about Tuesday of next week?"

I was thrilled. Our plan had actually worked. The government had turned over an old VA hospital to a group that worked for homeless vets. Maybe those 58,272 men and women whose names are etched into the slabs of polished black basalt of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial really were our guardian angels.

I called Howard and found Mark and we made plans for the trip.

I don't want to make it sound like I'm ungrateful, but the event was done in under ten minutes. We drove to some obscure building in D.C. or Maryland, found the guy who had the paperwork, and we all sat in a conference room and signed on the dotted lines. Howard scoured each page, then read it again and took the originals and gave the HHS guy copies.

We had done the impossible was all I could think.

We headed back to Boston and had our own celebration planned for the next week.

While we were planning, I got a call from Howard.

“We’re going to be selected as a Point of Light,” he said.

“Wow. Uh—what’s that mean?” I said.

“It means that the president of the United States knows who we are, you nitwit,” he said.

Well, then that has to be a good thing.

I know in my heart of hearts that Andy Card, after telling us that he could do nothing for us, had picked up the phone and called someone at HHS. He would never admit it of course, but without that meeting with me and Howard and Andy, Court Street would never have happened.

We had our celebration at the shelter complete with champagne and balloons, and sure enough, we soon got the call and the official White House paperwork that we had in fact been selected as Point of Light #142.

Chapter 24: Air Force One

One day, a few months after we had been named one of President Bush's Thousand Points of Light, my phone rang.

What is it *now*? I thought.

"Ken Smith, please. This is the White House calling," said the voice.

I had plenty of friends who were big-time practical jokers and I said, "Yeah, right," and hung up.

A minute later the phone rang again.

"This is the White House calling and please do not hang up," said the voice. "We have someone who wishes to speak with you."

I still wasn't convinced but then a woman came onto the phone and identified herself as the White House liaison for the Points of Light.

This woman (I will call her Betty), said, "Mr. Smith, the president is anxious to meet his Points of Light. He will be in town next week for a fundraiser and would like you to meet him at the airport when he deplanes Air Force One. You can have a photo op. He does this all over the country."

I made plans to be there, and a week later, after passing through all kinds of security, I and maybe six other people were in line to meet the president.

The governor was there, and some big shot Republican businessmen were there and right on time, the big Boeing 747 that was Air Force One taxied right up to where we were waiting.

While we were waiting I had met Betty and she said to me that once the plane has stopped, they will bring a stairway over to the aircraft and you will line up with the others at the bottom of that stairway and the president will shake your hand and the photographer will take your picture, and then you will go home.

After five minutes, the stairs were wheeled over and sure enough George H. W. Bush came down the stairs followed by his wife and about ten other people.

At the end of the stairs was the governor and some of the businessmen and after a moment or two, the president went one by one to those points of light standing in line.

When he came to me, and as he was shaking my hand, I said, “Mr. President, I will trade you a tour of the homeless veterans shelter for a tour of Air Force One.”

The president looked at me kind of strangely and said, “You want a tour of Air Force One?”

“Yes sir, I do, and for that I will trade you a tour of our homeless veterans shelter.”

The president turned and looked at one of the guys walking behind him carrying a clipboard and said, “Bill, arrange for this veteran to get a tour of the aircraft for me, please.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” is all I heard.

Within five minutes it was over. Everyone was leaving and this guy Bill came to me and said, let’s go.

We walked up the exact same stairs that the president had walked down.

I stopped at the top of the stairs, turned around and did that wave you see the presidents do.

We then walked onboard and into a huge hallway and to my left I could see a bedroom. Through the door I could see a bed and the bedspread with that big logo of the presidential seal that you see on podiums when he speaks.

“Can I look?” I said to Bill.

“Sure, but don’t touch anything,” he said, following me in.

Wow—here I was in the airborne bedroom of the most famous and most powerful man in the world.

I looked around and saw a bathroom.

I walked in and said to Bill, “Do you mind?”

I closed the door and was talking to myself. “Holy crap, I’m on Air Force One and I’m going to pee where the president pees.” I lifted the seat, did my business, and was looking around and saw a basket with soaps and pens and a few notecard-type-things all with the presidential seal. I jammed as many as I could into my pockets, flushed, and opened the door.

Bill was there. “You know, we had planned on giving you that stuff when the tour was done,” he said.

“You were watching?” was all I could think of to say.

“It’s my job. Now let’s look around.”

We went through the entire aircraft and there was an office that the president uses, a conference room, a sick bay, a galley and all kinds of seating areas that had couches and tables. I could see all kinds of people cleaning and Bill said, follow me, and we went up some stairs.

What I saw next blew my mind.

Now, usually we think of a pilot flying a plane with a co-pilot and on huge planes, maybe one other guy. Here on either side of the aisle, on the flight deck of Air Force One, were all kinds of people—maybe a dozen on each side—all with computers and radio headsets on. I was awestruck.

“This is the communications system that keeps the president in the loop,” is all Bill would say.

He then took me to the very front of the flight deck and asked if I wanted to sit in the pilot’s seat.

“Oh yeah,” I said.

I took a seat and thought, OMG, I’m driving the plane of the president.

We then left that deck and I was introduced to the commander of the Secret Service, who said, “You’re the guys who did that March in D.C. a while back, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir, we are.”

“Well, like you, I’m a veteran.” These Secret Service guys are trained to never show emotion—but I got the message.

He showed me all the neat stuff the Secret Service had on board—all kinds of weapons and secret things I said I wouldn’t talk about. It was very cool.

We continued through the plane and I got to see the kitchen, where there were like ten chefs or workers all cleaning and prepping and the whole tour seemed surreal. We continued on to where the press sat and it looked like a regular plane, except to me it all looked like first class seating—no cheap economy class for the press.

At the end, sure enough, Bill presented me with a small bag and inside were cufflinks, a pin, pencils, pens, notepads, napkins, and a coffee mug, all officially inscribed “Air Force One.”

It was a tour to remember.

Chapter 25: Oliver Stone Visits the Shelter

Before we founded the shelter, as I have said, I was in a combat support group with about a dozen other veterans. We met every Wednesday night starting at seven o'clock and the meetings usually lasted till nine. Usually, we would start arriving at the vet center around 6:30. On this one night, when I arrived, Mark was already there. It was right after Christmas, 1986.

"Hey, the VA is sending us to the movies," he said excitedly.

"The movies? What movies?"

John Wilder was our counselor and he said, "The VA is buying tickets for you to go and see the new Oliver Stone movie called *Platoon*."

"What's it about?" I asked.

"It's about Nam," said Mark, "and this guy Stone, the director, he was a grunt."

"Crap," I said. I was looking forward to group.

"Well, this is a special VA treat," said John, "You can hold onto whatever you need to talk about for another week."

After everyone had arrived, we piled into a VA van, and John drove us to the theatre.

When we arrived, we saw that other vets were attending too. John brought us up to the counter and said, "Whatever you want guys, it's on the VA."

We all ordered large popcorns and large drinks and everyone got a box of candy.

"This is the only thing the VA has ever done for me," I said to Mark.

"Yeah, well, enjoy."

We entered the theatre and because this was some kind of premier showing, there were no coming attractions.

We sat down, had a little chitchat for maybe a minute or two, and the theatre went dark. Now if you have seen the movie *Platoon*, you know, it starts out with a vet arriving in Nam and it just gets more intense as the movie continues.

There are scenes in that movie that any vet who served in Vietnam, and who was in the infantry, can relate to easily. The scene where the character played by Charlie Sheen was

accused of sleeping on guard duty while out on patrol sticks out in my mind. Someone from the unit I was in actually did something like that, and the consequences were intense.

The night battles and the general jungle noises and the combat scenes portrayed are etched in my mind, even today.

I don't know how long the movie was—an hour and half, two hours—but I felt like I had been in a marathon when finally the movie was over and the lights came up.

I looked around and not one of us had eaten any popcorn, drank any of our drinks, or eaten any of our candy.

“Holy crap,” said Mark. “Can you believe it?”

I couldn't, and I my only thought was that I was going to have serious nightmares that night.

Some of the vets liked the movie and some didn't, but most agreed it was the most intense war movie they had ever seen.

As I expected, that night in bed I was tossing and turning, I got sweaty, and in my mind I was back in the jungle again. I had flashbacks of when I was out on patrol and could smell the smells and remember things I wanted to seriously forget.

All week long I had different sensations that I hadn't had for years.

A traffic helicopter would go by and I would cringe.

I had an ambulance call to one of the islands in Boston Harbor where there is a police firing range. There had been a minor accident, but while I was there I could smell the cordite from the officers who were taking pistol firing practice.

It seemed that I got little or no sleep that whole week.

Finally it was the night for group, and I went extra early.

I was one of the first to arrive and John Wilder said, “Are you OK?”

“No,” I said, “I am not OK. Whose lamebrain idea was it to take us to that movie? I haven't slept all week and I'm still walking around on pins and needles.”

“Well, sometimes remembering is good,” was all John would say.

The group met that night and every single one of the vets, with the exception of one called “Cookie man,” was pissed about the movie.

Cookie man was in a coma. He didn't talk, didn't really participate, and his eyes were a million miles away.

For two hours we blasted John for what he did and the VA for what they did, but looking back at it now, it had a purpose. We needed to go and see that movie and learn what had happened to each of us. It was cathartic and now I see the wisdom of going.

Back then? Well, I was just pissed.

Fast-forward a few years and the shelter at Court Street was open and thriving. One day someone on the staff of Senator Kerry called me and said, "I hear that Oliver Stone will be in town."

Now I didn't know this guy, but I knew he was famous and I had some harebrained idea he might take an interest in the shelter. Through this staff person I sent out an invite for the director to come to the shelter.

I also knew that if we could get Oliver Stone to the shelter it would make news. That's how I had conditioned myself to think: let no opportunity go unexploited. I alerted my staff to send out a press release about Stone coming, when and if I gave them the green light.

A few hours later the staff person from Kerry's office called and said Mr. Stone will be there at five o'clock, but he doesn't want any media to attend. He wants to do this privately.

I thought about that for maybe two minutes and at the time I was cocky and thought I knew everything. I told the staff to send out the press release anyway.

Sure enough, at 5pm here comes Oliver Stone, and at 5:05 here comes the press.

What I didn't know was there was some unrelated controversy that was playing out that had nothing to do with the shelter, and the press ambushed the guy.

I could tell at once he was pissed.

He was such a professional that he gave his attention to each member of the press, did some interviews, and walked around the questions that he didn't want to answer. Fifteen minutes later, when he was done and the press had left, he looked at me, came up face-to-face, and called me an asshole.

I deserved it.

He wasn't what I thought he would be. He was a grunt and I had done to him what I would never want to have happen to me. I had walked him into an L-shaped ambush.

To this day I am sorry for what I did. I was so smart I was stupid.

Oliver Stone is a class act, and I am proud that he made the movie *Platoon*.

Chapter 26: Stand Down and the San Diego Trip

The shelter had been open a few years and as a result, in certain circles we became very well known. Sort of.

There was this great veterans' advocate in San Diego named Robert Van Keuren and this guy, almost single-handedly, had developed a program in an area of the country where there were thousands of homeless vets. California has the right climate and there is a huge military presence in San Diego, and it doesn't hurt that it has Tijuana on its border. You put all of those ingredients together and it's lightning in a bottle.

San Diego was a haven for homeless vets. And some of those vets were *very* hardcore.

One day I got a call from this guy and he says, you got to come to San Diego as we are showcasing our newest program called Stand Down, and I want you to see this in action. "Stand down" was a term most combat Vietnam vets were familiar with, as often—but not often enough—while you were fighting in the jungle, if your unit was lucky you were sent to the rear for a stand down.

The idea this guy had was to do a three-day stand down in San Diego and provide a place where homeless vets could go and get a clean set of clothes, have a hot meal, get looked at medically, and even have a dentist take a look at dental problems. They'd sleep overnight in tents. At the event, the VA was in attendance, helping vets file claims for disability.

Overall it sounded like a good thing.

Mark and I arrived at our hotel after a killer flight that seemed to take forever, and then quickly made our way to the address that we were given to see this event first hand.

When we got close to the address, there were these big "MASH" tents set up in a park, and each tent was a station and as we walked around there were singers, a large BBQ area all smoky and smelling good, and tons and tons of vets milling around.

Bobby Van Keuren was beaming, and even to this day, there are stand downs held around the country.

However, when the event was over and Mark and I were alone with Bobby, I said, "You know, my friend, three days out of the year, when vets get services at a stand down, is less than one percent of the year. What happens to these guys the other ninety-nine percent of the time?"

Bobby got wicked pissed. "What? You think you know everything? You're now a Mr. Smartypants and have all the answers about veterans who are homeless? This event saw 2,300 homeless vets in three days, and those guys, our brothers, got hot food, new sneakers, fresh water, we even had the friggin' DMV on site getting old parking tickets washed and new licenses done—so what, that wasn't worth it to you?"

"Look," I said, "I don't mean to make it sound like I'm ungrateful, but step back—take a *big* step back. What happens to those 2,300 homeless veterans tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or the month after that? I'll tell you what happens: they go right back to what they were doing, which was drinking or drugging or scamming or pan handling, and what did you do? You gave them three days' of peace, a new pair of sneakers, and a shower. Jesus, Bobby, when we went on an R&R in Nam at least we got a whole friggin' week. You gave them three days and all the people that helped you pull this together feel great and everyone is patting themselves on the back about pulling this off and you know what? It wasn't worth it, because you're not doing any follow up."

Holy crap, the guy wanted to fight me.

"You're an asshole," he said. "People *told* me you were, and now I see with my own eyes what they're saying. You really *are* an asshole."

The trip was off to an auspicious start.

Living in San Diego at that time was Joan Kroc, the widow of the founder of McDonald's. (Ray Kroc had died in 1984; after pursuing her philanthropic activities for nearly two decades, Joan Kroc passed away in 2003). Mrs. Kroc had generously donated millions for a new state-of-the-art shelter for the homeless in downtown San Diego. When I say this place was sweet, I mean real sweet. Called St. Vincent De Paul, it was run at the time by Father Joe Carroll.

This guy was a crackerjack homeless advocate and could really get things done.

I wanted to meet him, and actually, I think, he wanted to meet me.

Anyways, Mark and I had a day to kill so we went over to this shelter and I learned a few things about how to deal with people.

There were women, children, vets, non-vets, and illegal aliens, all in the same place and all living like a family.

That was what Father Carroll did; he built and maintained a family of America's discards.

I knew that's what I needed to learn. How to relate better to those who were homeless. I needed to learn to listen more, and this was the teacher.

Father Carroll had the deepest eyes I have ever seen. He literally could look right into you. That was what I thought when we met.

I shook his hand and he looked right at me as he held my hand, and at the same time he did one of those "grab both hand handshakes" where he was holding one of my hands with two of his.

"You're in pain, Ken," he said, looking right into my eyes. "I can see it on your soul."

Holy crap, this guy is good, is all I could think.

"Well, father, we're all in pain—all of us who work in this business of the homeless—and I can see you're in pain, too," I managed to reply.

"Touché." He smiled. "I have heard about you and wondered what you were like and now that I've met you, I see, well, you're exactly what I thought you would be."

"What about me?" chimed in Mark.

"You, my son, well, you're a man on a mission, and you will leave here today with God's blessings."

We got a tour of this spanking-new facility, had some lunch prepared by the clients, and then it was time to do our one last chore. Senior staff of the mayor of San Diego had asked us to explore the possibility of having US Navy "Barracks Barges," which were in deep storage in San Diego Harbor, converted to homeless shelters for veterans.

"We won't use any city real estate," is what they said in the meeting that Mark and I went to. So Mark and I had an appointment to meet with the Navy guy who was in charge of the mothball fleet that sat in San Diego Harbor.

Before our meeting, Mark and I took a ride over the bridge to Coronado as I wanted to see where the Navy SEALs trained, but we had no clearance to get in through the gate and onto the base, so we settled on a visit to the hotel Del Coronado.

If you ever get the chance, go see this jewel of a hotel.

While there, Mark and I thought what the hell, let's go out on the beach; and since we had our luggage in the car, we liberated a towel from the hotel, put on our bathing suits, and went for a walk.

The beach was amazing, and the sights—OMG, these California women were wearing tiny G-string bikini things and I think Mark and I both snapped our necks that day.

After a while, it got hot, and I thought it would be refreshing to jump in the water. Without even sticking my toe in to feel the temperature of the ocean I ran maybe forty yards at top speed across blazing hot sand from where I had dropped my towel and right into the water. As soon I had made contact with the water, I knew I had made a *huge* mistake: the water was like *ice*. I don't know how cold it actually was, but it was cold enough to give me an ice cream headache as soon as I went underwater.

I ran out as fast as I ran in.

"Cold, huh?" was all Mark could say.

"Yeaaaah! Cold!"

We went back to the hotel and got a hot coffee. I sat on the veranda and thought about how many earthquakes this part of the country had, and I was grateful to be living in New England.

We then went on to our meeting with the navy guy and got a tour of a barracks barge. I couldn't imagine ever using these things as shelters. The insides of this mothballed barracks barge was a rabbit's warren of rooms, corridors, and who knows what. Like most Navy boats, it had a particular smell to it of oil, paint, and latrine. I wondered how you powered something like this, and how a guy like RR&L could get this hulk working. This concept would never work, I said to myself. Besides getting the homeless vets here every day, and on an off, where the hell would set up your programs?

There were tons of hiding places and little sneaky areas that I would imagine a homeless vet would find—you would need five hundred security guards to make sure that the vets did what they were told.

I also wondered what would happen if someone fell overboard. Who would be in charge of that?

It was a decent idea. At least someone was thinking. It was an idea that needed to be looked at, but in the end, the logistics would have killed you.

Mark and I made our way to the airport after our report to the mayor's staff and I said no more of these kinds of trips where we come to figure out someone else's headache. We needed to focus on what we have been doing in Boston and see if we can do it better.

Mark agreed.

But a month later we were on our way to Miami, doing almost the exact same thing.

Chapter 27: Cookie Man

There were all kinds of vets who attended our combat support group that met weekly, but no one was as interesting to me as a guy named Steve whom we called Cookie Man.

Cookie Man was a combat Vietnam vet who looked to be no more than 140 pounds soaking wet. The first couple of meetings that he attended were uneventful as he just sat back and listened and never said anything.

Just around this time, the space shuttle Challenger blew up. We all remember that it had the teacher, Christa McAuliffe, on the flight, and I can still see in my mind the launch and then the unexpected and horrific explosion.

Like most Americans I was shocked and saddened, but after a week or two, I moved on. Cookie Man never did.

Somehow, and I am not sure how, the explosion and the destruction of that shuttle played in a loop in his head. It became a chore at group when all he wanted to discuss was the shuttle explosion.

A couple of times some of the vets in group would get angry and say, Look, this is a group about combat in Vietnam, not about a space shuttle blowing up, and as many times as it was said to him, he always brought back the explosion as something he needed to get off his chest. Tears would be rolling off his cheeks as he said that he had seen something like that before, in Nam. Everyone would roll their eyes and again attempt to tell him that the shuttle was never in Nam.

Cookie Man was a vagabond kind of guy and nobody really knew where he lived or where he worked. When pressed he said that he did odd jobs and lived in Cambridge.

One night, after group, Mark and I followed him to see where he went. We had nothing else to do, and it gave us some insight to who this guy was.

After driving around for maybe half an hour, he took off like a bat out of hell and ended up at a large apartment building.

“This building is owned by John Wilder,” I said. John was our counselors at group.

“You sure?” replied Mark.

“Yes, I’m sure, and it looks to me like this guy is living with John. Can that be happening?”

That was when we came to understand more about John Wilder.

He was more than a counselor. He actually cared for veterans.

Years later, in a conversation with John, well after group and well after I had left the management of the shelter, John said, you know, Cookie Man was in Nam in the late sixties, and a 122mm rocket exploded maybe forty yards away from the bunker he was in. He could see where it landed in another bunker opposite to where he was. The bunker that took the direct hit was full of medical staff and when the all clear was given, Cookie Man was one of the first on the scene looking for survivors. When he arrived at the site of the rocket blast, the inside of the bunker was something that no human being should ever see. It resembled the refuse pile at the slaughterhouse, with the burned and mangled parts being the former medical staff who had been treating Cookie Man and others just before the rocket attack.

Now, twenty years later, the shuttle explosion played on TV and on CNN the broadcasters were talking about the explosion when one asked, “Do you think any of them could survive?” Another said, “No, they were blown up and burnt beyond recognition,” and that’s what sent Cookie man into a tailspin about the shuttle explosion.

It was around this time that I was morphing into a veteran’s advocate and every so often I would lock horns with the VA. Mostly about simple stuff, and mostly about one vet at a time.

Fast forward, and the shelter has been open maybe six months, and they were very rough months. One day, on my day off, I got a call from the shelter duty officer asking for some advice and counsel.

We have a huge problem, he said. There must be a psych doctor over at the VA hospital who is not doing his job. We’re getting fifteen hardcore psych clients a day—vets who are off their medications and well beyond any help we can offer. These hardcore psych clients are a loud distraction to all the others we’re trying to help, and they take up eighty percent of our staff time every day.

They were still our brothers, psych or not, and yet, the VA wouldn't or couldn't do anything about the problem.

I made my way into the shelter an hour or so later, got to the front desk, and sitting in the penalty box was a marine—a *big* marine. This guy was six foot four, by the looks of him he worked out, and he had the body to show for it. He was muttering to himself.

The best treatment we had to offer at the time was our puppy: JD, the German shepherd that had been donated to us by the dog handler from Nam. The dog would walk over to the troubled vet, start licking his hands, and pretty soon, the vet was petting the puppy and distracted enough where we could attempt to make arrangements to have him sent over to the VA to get his meds right again, or to get him admitted into one of their psych units. Most times we drove the vet in our van with some of our vet guards along for the ride, but sometimes this had to happen in a police car, and that could get ugly.

I went to the sick bay and found the medic on duty.

"What's the problem with the VA?" I asked.

The medics who did work for us were overworked, underpaid, and did the work of angels. When they said something was really broke, it was.

"There's a doctor on duty at the VA and he keeps saying he's not a homeless counselor," said the medic. "He won't even let me give him a heads up that I am sending this guy over there, and I've tried calling several times. Last time, they just hung up."

"Let me see if I can get this guy on the phone," I said. "Get ready for a transport and see if you can find the captain of the guard. Have him get six or eight of our biggest vet guards and have them out of uniform and ready to travel with me. Also, tell our bus driver we're going to the VA hospital using the bus."

All of this took maybe thirty minutes, and when all was ready, I went over to the vet, with the leash for the puppy.

This guy wasn't even on this planet. He was talking to who knows who, and had eyes that had dark circles under them. He was physically there, but at the same time, not there. He reminded me of the vet in the scene in the latrine in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

"Hey troop, you wanta help me take JD for a walk?" was all I said as I held up the leash. He looked at me and then at the dog and again at me.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll take the dog for a walk.”

I told him that because we were in the city, they forced us to take the dog on our bus to the place where we could do the walk, the dog park, but that I was going too, and handed him the leash and said, clip it on and let’s go.

We walked onto the bus and Bert the captain of the guard had a half-dozen vet guards all sitting and talking and paying us no attention. I said, let’s go.

Twenty minutes later we pulled up to the VA hospital and while the psych vet and the vet guards walked JD on the grass at the front of the hospital, I made my way to the ER.

When I got to the ER there was a nurse’s station and one nurse said, “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, my name is Ken Smith and I’m the director over at the vet shelter. Is the psych OD in at the moment?”

“Well, he is, but I think he’s busy at the moment.”

Just as she was saying that, I saw some guy, in scrubs, eating Chinese food watching a TV in a room right behind her. Without even asking, I walked right around her and into the room and did it so fast, she was right behind me and I said, “You the psych OD on right now?”

The guy was eating from the takeout container with chop sticks and he looked at me and then at the nurse right behind me who was saying, “I said you were busy doctor, please Mr. Smith, leave this room right now.”

“Who are you?” said this guy.

“I’m Ken Smith, the director of the vet shelter downtown, and I wanted to come here and have a discussion with you about how you’re not working with us on the psych clients we are seeing every day.”

The guys jumped up, grabbed a phone into which he yelled “code green” or code something, and then he said to me, “Get out!”

In what seemed to be ten seconds, all kinds of people were in the ER: federal cops with guns, other nurses, orderlies, and all kinds of people.

One guy I recognized—he was in charge of one of the vet centers.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded.

Before I could say anything this doctor said, this guy—and he points at me—is a threat to this facility, he walks right in and is telling me that our facility is not a help to the supposed psychiatric clients he gets at that veterans’ homeless home, or whatever they are calling that dive downtown.

I’d had it.

“Let me tell you something, you punk,” I hissed at him. “I came here with every intention of working with you and your lousy attitude. Now you’ve pissed me off. I promise you this, you will be sorry the day you screwed vets who have psych issues and I swear that I will be back and when I come, I will not come alone.”

I turned around and went back outside and told everyone to get back into the bus and asked the driver to take us to another VA hospital maybe thirty miles away.

Boston had four VA hospitals and the closest was the one we were at, but there were others and I knew the director of one personally and he had told me to call him anytime. I called this other VA hospital, and the director told me to come right in. We showed up and the psych OD there interviewed the marine and admitted him right away and we left.

I had read a *New York Times* headline once that said, “Derwinski Confirmed as Veterans Secretary.” This was a direct result of President George H. W. Bush. Bush had elevated the office of VA administrator to a cabinet position. I was determined to get the issue with the VA not working on psych clients solved and wrote a letter inviting the secretary to come for a personal tour of the shelter.

Two weeks later I got a call from the office of the secretary and some guy said, “The secretary will be in town next week, can you make time on Tuesday evening at seven for the tour?”

“Yes!” was my response.

Sure enough, the secretary, along with a few of his staff, showed up right at seven. He couldn’t have come at a better time. It was what we called “high tide”—right after mealtime—and due to the inclement weather at that moment we had five or six psych cases sitting in the penalty box.

The secretary came in, got his tour, and said he was amazed at what we were doing. Just as we got to the front door and he was getting ready to leave he said, “Ken, what do you need?”

I told him that we were having a serious problem with one VA hospital in particular—actually one psych OD in particular who was not responsive to the needs of vets who were in crisis. Just as I said that, one of the vets who was in the penalty box stood up, started reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, dropped his pants, and started to urinate on the floor.

We both watched as the staff of the shelter went to work. They didn’t yell, they didn’t scream, it just was a fact and they dealt with it. They took care of the pee on the floor and made the guy pull his pants back up.

I said, “Mr. Secretary, I invite you to listen in on the call I am about to make about that very vet you just witnessed.”

I took the secretary into the sickbay and using that phone I called the VA and asked for the psych OD.

I got the very same guy on the phone from two weeks ago and I was trying to tell him that I had a psych case to refer when this guy goes off like a Chinese firecracker. “I TOLD YOU ALREADY SMITH, AND YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED ABOUT CALLING HERE, YOU CALL AGAIN AND I WILL REPORT YOU TO THE POLICE.”

Just as he stopped screaming, the secretary came on the line and said, “This is Secretary Derwinski and I am here at this shelter on a tour and I want your name and your VA identification number.”

The doctor screamed back, “NOW YOU’VE DONE IT SMITH—YOU’RE IMPERSONATING A FEDERAL EMPLOYEE!”

The secretary hung up the phone, opened the door, waved to one of his aides, and said, “Get me the director of this VA hospital on the phone right now.” Then he calmly said to me, “How do you do your psych transports, Ken?”

I said, “We do them with our own van. We have security ride along with our staff medic and we sometimes trick the vet to go along by using our dog.”

“Why don’t you load him up, and we’ll follow you to make sure that this vet will be admitted.”

We did what we always do—got the prep paperwork done and the van loaded, and sure enough the secretary’s car with his aids followed us all the way to the hospital.

When we arrived, there had to be forty people waiting for us at the front entranceway, including the director of the hospital.

I started to walk the vet and the security guards towards the ER and the director said, “Ken, this marine is going right to the psych unit and we can take it from here.” Two hospital aides escorted the vet to an elevator bank.

The secretary asked who was the psych OD whom he had talked to earlier.

As he stepped forward the guy who had been such a dick whined, “Mr. Secretary, I had no idea it was you sir. You see, this shelter wastes a lot of our time with clients that are not—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Secretary Derwinski looked right at him and said, “You’re fired.” And he then turned to the hospital director and said, “I want him out of this rotation and I want this fixed and fixed now, and when these guys from Court Street call and tell you they have a psych case, you are to dispatch one of *your* vans and *your* security and you are to work with this team in the care of these veterans. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the director said.

As they took away the vet who was in crisis, I walked by the nitwit doctor and whispered, “Asshole.”

He gave me a look that could kill.

The next day, the director of the VA hospital made an unannounced “first” trip to the shelter and after a thirty-minute tour said, “Ken, I had no idea.” From that moment on, the issue of veterans in psych crises was smoother.

I told the director about one vet in particular whom I was concerned about—Cookie Man. The director gave me his card and on the back he wrote his home phone number.

“Have this vet come to our shop, ask for me, and I will have the chief of psychiatry take a swing at his case.”

Cookie Man was going to get the help he needed.

Chapter 28: John's In Trouble

Floyd "Shad" Meshad has been working with veterans since 1970. Shad was a medical service officer during the Vietnam War and even though I have never met him, the stories I have been told about him reminded me of the psych officer you would see from time to time on the TV show MASH.

It was his work, along with another, that was the impetus for the vet centers around the country. Like lots of combat Vietnam vets around the country, I owe him a huge thank you. The best thing the VA ever did was take his model of community care for combat vets and expand it nationwide.

The shelter had been opened for a few years when I got word that the VA vet center national director was not happy with John Wilder, the guy who had led the group I attended.

Seems that there is politics everywhere, I thought.

The big reason that John was in trouble had to do with "body count." The VA was developing its vet center funding based on the actual number of vets that were counseled at each vet center and it reminded me of the body count system that was used in Vietnam to keep score of who was winning and who was losing.

Without telling John I made an appointment to meet with the regional director, the guy who was John's boss's boss. This guy, whom I will call Clyde, was a nice enough guy, and getting the appointment wasn't hard, even though Clyde was in a different New England state.

The day of the appointment I showed up a bit early to get the lay of the land. This guy's office was typical government. Sterile is how I remember it, with very few things that told me anything about the guy.

When I went into his office after his secretary had announced me and offered me a cup of bad coffee, the first thing this guy says to me is, "Ken, I've waited a long time to meet you, and I wanted to thank you for what you do for veterans."

“That’s great Clyde, I appreciate that.”

There was a little more small talk, nothing real important, and then I dropped a bomb.

“If you don’t back off of John Wilder, and if you don’t find a way to keep him in his position, I will find a way to stick forty feet of guardrail up your ass.”

“Excuse me?” is what I think he said.

“You heard me,” I said. “I understand, and know, that John Wilder has been put in the crosshairs by Art Blank, the national director. John is one thing the VA has done right. Back away from him, or I will come to the table hunting bear.”

“Excuse me?” said Clyde again.

“You heard me, and don’t make me come back here again,” and I got up and left, even as Clyde was trying to talk to me.

A few days later, the usual vet center counselor who came into the shelter every week showed up.

“You can’t stay here,” I said.

“What? Why?” he asked.

“Have your boss call Clyde,” I said, “and don’t come back in here again until your boss makes the call. Have him tell Clyde that until I hear from Wilder, you and anyone of your team is *persona non grata* at this shelter and I am spreading the word to the other shelters too. You will have to find another way to get your body count.”

Now the guy who was coming to the shelter was some junior guy and he didn’t know squat about the politics and his whole job really was to come into the shelter and identify vets and let them know about VA benefits and set them up with an appointment at the vet center clear across town. They even gave the vets two subway tokens to come to the “important meeting” at their shop, and that is how they got their body count.

I then leaned on my contact at Congressman Kennedy’s office.

“Look, I said to Jim Spencer, I did you right by that Mendoza guy, and you need to help me out here. There is a guy who runs the whole national show for vet centers, and he along with his district one director is putting the wood to one of the best counselors that the VA has ever produced and it’s all about body count.”

“Whatta ya mean?” said Kennedy’s guy.

“What I’m telling you is that every vet who comes into the shelter, along with vets from other shelters, are being counted as vets who are getting counseling from vet centers. It’s happening nationwide, and they are even trying to recruit vets who are Canadian, for God’s sake.”

“Are you sure of this?” said the Kennedy guy.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure.”

“And you think Art Blank knows of this?”

“I know he knows, and I’m telling you that it’s a nationwide issue to get the body count as high as they can, to get the budget increased. Even a moron can figure it out, but your guy who sits on the Veterans Affairs Committee doesn’t see it, as well as the chairman of the committee doesn’t see it, and I know the media would love a story like this.”

“Whoa, wait a minute, before you go off to the media, let’s see what we can find out.

A few days later I get a call from John Wilder.

“What have you done?” he says.

“Whatta ya mean?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, what have you done?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, two weeks ago I get a call from Clyde, who says, ‘You think that Smith can protect you?’ Then two weeks later, out of the clear blue, Clyde is now my best friend. What did you do?”

“I only told him that you were a good guy and that the VA would be stupid to lose you.”

“Just so you know,” said John, “the VA has changed the way that they count vets who come in for services, and now the whole game is changing. Just out of curiosity, how did you get a meeting with Clyde anyway?”

“I asked for it.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t have done that. It looks like I cried to you about a problem that I was handling on my own.”

“John, I know you’re tough and I know your heart’s in the right place. The VA has to wake up to the other good counselors, the other Johns around the country, and stop with the stupid body count.”

“Who told you about that?”

“What? Body count? It’s obvious, John. I can see it and so can others.”

Weeks went by and one day I got a call from Art Blank.

“You know, Mr. Smith, it wasn’t necessary for you to go to the congressman to voice your concerns; you could and should have come direct to me.”

“Yeah. right,” I said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter 29: The Bank Robbery

Every day at the shelter at ten in the morning there was a huge influx of vets. These were vets who lived in other shelters for the most part, and they comprised the three hundred or so who came every day for lunch.

The lunch program wasn't something that was funded by any grant, as the state gave us money only for those who lived in the building. The state paid us \$2.42 per day per vet, and we needed to serve each vet breakfast and dinner from that money.

You couldn't even go to McDonald's with that budget, and so we supplemented.

We sent work crews every day to the wholesale food distributors and offered our services for anything that they could give to us. We worked for our food.

The produce wholesalers would give us stuff just before it was spoiled and I can remember working with the large frozen food distributors and offering to clean out freezers and walk-ins for anything that they could give to us to feed those who came to our shelter.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday we had an eye clinic that taught medical students by giving eye exams to homeless vets, and twice a month we had the largest law schools bring their senior students, under the guidance of a practicing attorney, to help with any legal issues that any vet presented.

In order to sleep in the building you needed to give four hours a week back to the shelter. It was your payment for what you got. These volunteer hours were monitored and if you wanted to come into lunch every day, you also had to work. There was KP (kitchen police), a daily clean-up crew, a latrine crew, and trash needed to be dealt with every day, and then the whole cycle needed to be reset for dinner later that day.

There were all kinds of people coming and going this one particular day and intake was busy and sick bay was busy and of course there were also AA and NA meetings that were being conducted.

So all in all, the place was wicked busy.

We also had crews that would stop the traffic outside our building most days as we swept the street and conducted a police call (military term for picking up trash) and we had deals with the local doughnut shops and restaurants around our neighborhood to come and take whatever food they had that was extra when they closed every night.

As a result, the lunch menu was never the same two days in a row.

Nobody ever went hungry and I have fond memories of some hotel meals from conferences that were cancelled or weddings that were called off and banquets that cooked more than they could use.

This one day in the late spring we had our doors open, the windows on the ground floor were open and it was busy. Homelessness is migratory and it was busier in the spring and summer months than in the winter.

The usual staff was working and the place was humming right along.

The eye doctors had a waiting list of vets sitting in chairs along the wall and it was a day for the lawyers so we had more than our usual amount of traffic. At the same time, vets were showing up from Florida and other warm southern states as the word had spread to head to Boston for one of the only vet shelters in the nation. I was checking on the mess sergeant in the kitchen on the first floor and his needs when I came around the corner into the dining room area and saw three or four Boston cops, all with guns out, turning right, then left then right again.

Holy shit I thought, they have guns out.

Just then my radio went nuts.

Command one, command one, come to the front desk right away.

I saw the cops looking at me and so I walked around the corner to the front desk and holy crap, there were like a dozen other Boston cops with guns out.

"Can I help you?" I said to one who looked to be in charge

"Did someone just run in here?" he asked.

I looked at the front desk officer of the day and said "Well?"

"Not really, sir, I mean we've been busy, and of course people come and go, but nobody ran in here, at least I don't remember anyone running in here."

"Why? What's going on?" I asked.

“Someone just robbed the bank right around the corner and the teller put in a dye bag and we thought, well, sorry, we thought he might have come in here.”

This guy was just getting ready to leave with the other cops when the front desk guy says, “You know, there is that guy in sick bay; he had the trouble with the transmission fluid all over his hands.”

Now, transmission fluid is red and the cop looked at me and I looked at the door to the sickbay and we both started walking that way. The cop opened the door and here was a guy, no shirt on, no shoes, just blue jeans, with two medics trying to wipe off what they were told was transmission fluid.

The cop said, “FREEZE!”

And it was like in the movies—next thing I knew, two cops had this guy handcuffed and they were walking him out the door.

“What the hell happened?” said the medics.

“The guy robbed a bank and got the dye pack all over him. You two nitwits were treating him for exposure to transmission fluid.”

An hour later some detectives approached me and they said, you know, the guy isn’t a vet—how’d he even get in here?

Good question, I replied.

From that moment on, no matter what happened, before you were let into the building we made sure that you were a United States military veteran.

Chapter 30: Time to Move On—And New Ideas

I remember the exact day I decided to call it quits.

After working at the shelter for nearly ten years, I was burned out. Working with homeless veterans is richly rewarding and at the same time extremely exhausting.

Much had happened during those formative years at Court Street, both on the job and in my private life. I had gone through a divorce that was somewhat contentious. I have not written about my children or my family but all of these factors contributed to my difficult decision that enough was enough.

There had been newspaper stories about the EPA, stories that I wasn't a vet, stories that I overspent the shelter's budgets, stories I was a fraud and a con man, and on and on. I know what happened at Court Street and how hard it was to get this shelter on its feet and those who were there know what happened and how hard we worked. I have always held my head high about what I did, and why I did it.

There are times in everyone's life when you just know its time to turn the page. That time for me came and I accepted it. I had done what I could do, built what I could build, and I know I left 17 Court Street in good shape, and that others could come in and continue the battle.

I have always been fascinated by technology and computers and I consider myself to be somewhat of a savant about how things work in cyberspace. Like many of you, I live everyday on the net, checking email, going to news sites, and I even have my own website at kensmith93.com.

I left Court Street with no real plan or place to work, and found myself in a series of consulting jobs and technical sales jobs, and yet I always kept my focus on the veterans community.

During the last eight years I worked for a national veterans non-profit as its chief technology officer, and recently left to find another challenge. As I look around I see the stars are aligning again as they did in the late 1980s, with lots of veterans returning from war suffering from PTSD and few services to help. If we don't get in front of this problem with proactive intervention, or if we let happen to this generation of Iraq and Afghanistan

veterans what happened to the Vietnam veterans, than we didn't learn anything. We will once again have a large surge of veteran homelessness and a surge of suicide (which has already started), and a slow degradation of self-esteem that will affect another generation and their children not yet born.

We've been at war for over ten years now and tens of thousands of veterans have come home and are now experiencing PTSD first hand. Not only does PTSD affect the veteran, but it affects his mom, dad, wife, girlfriend, kids, and friends. For female veterans who have PTSD the condition is even more challenging as there are fewer resources for them to turn to.

I recently came up with the idea of a one-stop toll-free national veterans hotline. The idea is one that is simple and yet complicated.

Simple because it would consist of one phone number that a veteran, a family member of a veteran, or a friend of a veteran could call nationwide and get the most up-to-date information on almost any subject related to veterans.

Kind of like a veterans 911.

Complicated because it requires hundreds of folks who care and who can volunteer two hours a month to man the phones.

It wouldn't be a counseling hotline nor would it attempt to offer anything other than good quality intel on where to get benefits for veterans near to where the caller was located, what services the veteran was entitled to, and where to apply for special educational opportunities.

The idea would be to have this hotline staffed with volunteers.

The volunteer could be you. The reader.

To be a volunteer you wouldn't need to be a doctor or a nurse, a social worker or clinician, but just you, Joe Doe American. If you care about our veterans and would like to find a way to help, this would be it.

I imagine that a volunteer would go through an online training program of a couple of hours, interacting with instructors and learning how to answer the questions of the caller and how to log into a website and make any notes needed for any subsequent follow up.

The volunteer would need a computer, of course, but nowadays most everyone has one. Each volunteer would need to commit two hours per month of their time, and using some

fancy-schmancy SIP-Trunked PBX technologies, calls would be routed to the next available volunteer at the time of the call, right to their home phone or cell phone.

I can imagine tens of thousands of calls per year from veterans and the families of veterans, and each caller would be given the same information as the call before them as all the volunteers would be reading from the same knowledge base of information. I see a huge developed database driven by zip code that outlines all of the benefits and services for any veteran as one of the keys to success.

This is not just a fantasy—we're building it. You can visit the website at veterans911.com I can clearly envision this toll-free hotline service, and I know that if this service were built, veterans, friends, and family members of veterans and others would use it. I just don't think that the government can build something like this right now—I don't think it has the know-how or the where with all.

Now in certain parts of the country something like this is being tried right now. I know New Jersey is way out in front of the rest of country in using a hotline, but I'm talking about a huge, nationally based Veterans 911 that would service the whole country, not just one state or a region.

You wouldn't need to be a veteran to want to help.

I also think that the combat support group that I attended twenty years ago was critical for me in learning about ways to deal with PTSD.

Harold Russell said, "You feel sorry for the man with no shoes, until you meet the man with no feet," and that would be the core concept. John Wilder facilitated this combat support process for me and others, but he was smart enough to get out of the way when the real healing happened, veteran to veteran.

I think that hotline callers could be told benefit information and then offered a way to join an ongoing support group in a virtual conference room in real cyber space. This support group meeting would be something that each of the new veterans would feel comfortable with and I am sure wives of veterans would have their own group and moms their own group, too.

So, I guess, once a veterans advocate, always a veterans advocate.

I will leave you with some contact data that you will also find on my website.

Lastly, I want to thank my wife for allowing me the uninterrupted time to write this book, and to my kids, each who has given me gray hair, but who also have given me love and admiration and a reason to keep doing what I do.

Thanks to my mom and a special thanks to Granma Lee Lee and Rocky, for your support of my bride.

Thanks to my sisters who each had a hand in who I am;

And to my God, who judges me everyday on what I am and what I do, I ask for your grace and help in this next phase of my life.