



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Coming Home to a One-Fingered Salute**

## Coming Home to a One-finger Salute<sup>1 2</sup>

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I have been watching three days of Memorial Day ceremonies this week. These events reminded me of the first week of my arrival from what sailors called WESTPAC (the Western Pacific), an area encompassing water and territory from Indonesia to Korea and Japan. I had spent over two years serving as a U.S. Navy officer in WESTPAC during the years of 1963 – 1965. As the Vietnam “conflict” heated up, most of my time was spent off the shores of Vietnam or on its beaches.

I participated in amphibious raids and Marine landings during these times. For the latter part of my WESTPAC tour, I was a logistics officer, with the responsibility of coordinating men and supplies going back and forth between ships and land. My job put me on the beaches as part of an assault force. Although I was armed, I was not part of the initial assault group. I was part of the contingent that made sure the raids and landings were not impeded by congestion, or the lack of supplies.

I was relieved to receive orders to report to Washington, D.C. for a job in the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). I was tired of the Far East, as we called that part of Asia. I had had enough of ships, beaches, and Vietnam. I was looking forward to my return to America. I was a happy man when the military transport landed on American soil.

In spite of my elation about being home, my first week in the States did not go well. I was confronted and then assaulted by antiwar activists, by U.S. citizens who disliked people wearing military uniforms.

This attack may make sense to you, especially if you are against war in general and the Vietnam War specifically. It astounded me in 1966 and it continues to astound me to this day. It is one thing to question America’s choices of where or when the country fights. It is another to attack those who are in uniform doing the fighting.

Why? Because those who put on uniforms become pawns in the chessboard of war’s strife. We must answer to and believe in the wisdom of the gentry occupying the back row of the chessboard who design our costumes and put us into battle. As pawns on the front line, we must trust those who sit on the row behind us, often out of harm’s way. We can only hope they know the right moves on the chessboard that determine our fates.

### **A Navy Uniform is Disgraced**

Flying on military transport, I was dressed in Navy service dress blues. I was met at the airport by my college fraternity brother and his wife. Jim and Tina were tonics to my spirits, as was the tonic of America, not to mention gin and tonics. Jim, a product of the Navy, who was born in Shanghai, China, told me he wanted to reintroduce me to America. Therefore, an immediate stop was in order at his favorite bar near the LA airport and Manhattan Beach.

I had read the receptions the Vietnam War veterans encountered on their return from this war were unlike any war we have known in this country. Even in unsuccessful campaigns, I had not read of the civilian populace mistreating veterans or showing animosity toward the men and women who were in uniform at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *A Swimmer’s Odyssey: From the Plains to the Pacific* (Hayden, ID, IEI Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Photo on cover from <http://photobucket.com/images/fuck%20you>.

On the night of my arrival in Los Angeles, I encountered several people who were openly hostile to me. Only then, did I realize how deeply divided our nation had become over the Vietnam War. I was surprised by the pervasiveness and passion of the anti-war climate—and it was just getting started.

A sad aspect of this dissent was not the protest against the war. Regardless of my beliefs about Vietnam, I supported and respected anyone who took a principled stand against this or any war. As I mentioned, my problem was the hate shown toward people in uniform. After having served almost three years in Asia, much of it in and around Vietnam, I came to be repelled by the animosity shown toward me during those first days in the U.S. My indignation and ire were on display that evening at Jim's favorite pub.

### **Peanuts for Peace**

The place was awash with happy, drinking civilians. I had not enjoyed an American bar for a long time and was glad for a change of venue. It was a fine feeling—finally home, sitting in an American pub with two of my best friends. The three of us settled onto stools at the bar and began to catch up on old times. We were happy to be with one another again, with a pleasant evening in store for us.

Shortly, I noticed peanuts flying past me or hitting my back. Their origin was from a table behind us, just a few feet away from our stools. Jim and Tina also noticed the peanut barrage, but they ignored it. I asked, "Did you notice someone is tossing peanuts at us?"

Tina responded, "Just ignore them. They're throwing peanuts because of your uniform."

I had read about protesters in the *Stars and Stripes* and in letters from home—so I knew about them. Still, their emergence into my life took me aback. I had not given a thought about wearing my uniform into a bar in America. It had become part of my body, a part of my identity. I could not comprehend that my wearing a U.S. Navy uniform would provoke insults within the borders of my own country. I had encountered insults while overseas—in Thailand and the Philippines. But those insults were a different matter. I would not let their slur go unanswered. I walked to their table and asked, "Why are you throwing peanuts at me?"

One of the peanut throwers responded, "You're not welcome here."

"Why?"

"You're a coward."

What would you have done? You've just had peanuts tossed at you because you are wearing a U.S. Navy uniform. You've just been called a coward. I was nearly beside myself, but I held it in, "My friends tell me you don't like my uniform. What does my uniform have to do with my being a coward?"

The response from one of the men spoke volumes for what I came to learn about the radical anti-war protesters, "You're cowards because you hide behind airplanes and tanks, and kill unarmed civilians."<sup>3</sup>

"So, your solution is to throw peanuts at a stranger in a bar? Someone you don't know? Someone whose opinions about the war you don't know?"

Glancing at his beer, then up to me, the spokesman responded, "Just get out of here." It was as if I had no right to be in the bar because I was wearing a U.S. military uniform.

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<sup>3</sup> Agent Orange was becoming known at that time. The Agent Orange program was indeed inhumane, even to U.S. personnel. It was disgraceful. Ironically, each month, I receive a VA disability check for exposure and a "heart" condition from exposure to Agent Orange.

A bartender had come out from the bar and was walking toward the table. He had seen events unfold and was postured toward breaking up a fight.

I asked the peanut thrower, "What's your name?"

He responded, "It's immaterial."

"Mr. Immaterial, for all you know I could be a Chaplin. Unfortunately for you, I am not," as I picked up a handful of peanuts from their table.

Opening my hand to them, "Here are more peanuts. Take another turn at throwing them at me."

I pointed to the spokesman, "To make it fair, one at a time. You first." He did not respond.

None of the protesters moved. All kept their heads down. I wanted to ask them *Who are the cowards in this room?*, but I (probably wisely), let it ride. Jim had come from the bar. He and the bartender were standing next to me. Jim said, "Let's go. It's not worth it." The bartender said, "Let it go, sir. ...Back to the bar please, drinks are on me."

I tossed the peanuts I still had in my hand onto their table and walked away. Tina was at the exit door of the bar holding my hat. We left without any more incidents.

I was shaking with anger. Not anger for myself, but anger for their insults. After getting into the car, we headed for my friends' apartment, Tina started laughing and sang, "Sticks and bones may break my bones, but peanuts will never hurt me!"

She helped us put the episode into the background. Jim, the son of a Navy Captain said, "As they say in the Navy, well done! But I'm glad we're out of there."

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I have thought about those few minutes in that bar many times. I continue to have second thoughts about my reaction. It is far removed now; water under the bridge. But for the next few years, America's military personnel were often treated this way. I guess I was lucky to have been transferred to Washington, D.C. where people in uniform outnumbered people in civilian clothes, and those in civilian clothes often worked for the Department of Defense.

Nearing my friends' home, we passed another bar named Jack's on the Beach. We talked of stopping at this place, but Jim said, "We're tired. Take our car to Jack's. We promise. There will be happy times awaiting you in the lounge."

I learned later that Jack's was a popular hangout for singles. Fine with me—I was ready for a taste of euphoria, be it a drink or female company. Jim continued, "Maybe you should change clothes. Jack's a pretty classy place, but you never know, you might run into more anti-war freaks."

"Nope. I'm staying as I am."

"OK, have fun." With this farewell, my friends went to their apartment, and I escorted my misery and myself to a local beach bar. There, I found a friendly crowd. One lovely woman said to me, "Welcome home, sailor!" The evening had a happy ending.

## Years Later

That night was long ago. I stayed in the Navy for a while, and I will tell you a few more stories of those times later. For now, we fast forward to present times. I am now an old man, sitting on an airplane that has just landed at the Los Angeles airport from a flight from Seattle. The steward comes on the PA, "Folks, we ask you to remain in your seats to allow our war heroes to depart first."

We did as told. Before long, several uniformed men and women walked down the aisle toward the exit. As they left, they were applauded by the hands of the sitting passengers, including mine.