

My King Midas Moment

by Daniel Lynch

Come time, and at a certain age our remembrances of life events get fossilized then stored away with other memories situated in that section of our brain where happy thoughts are kept. We tend to allow the good memories of people and places to refine our thoughts, allowing us to just remember those long-lost better days; a place in someone's heart that is there forever but sometimes not actually the way it happened. Often, memory lane is not always the wise choice to make when gazing into your past; it can get you lost and eventually wind up at a dead end, a location that you had not expected. More than likely the road we all must take compels people to locate kinship for a sad but true reason; an attempt to make sense of your life by reliving the past. You want to find that moment via that person who you had a connection with someone that might be able to take you back in time to a better place and so often a fool's errand.

I took a different road than the one that leads through a traditional college campus. Still, I do hold a bachelor's degree—earned piecemeal over the course of two decades, much like many in the military. It's not something I wear with pride, partly because I missed all the fanfare: no graduation party, no tearful hugs from my parents. The closest thing I had to a college reunion were ship reunions, organized by surviving members of Navy, vessels long since decommissioned. These gatherings are open to anyone ever stationed aboard the ship—family members included—

which often means the third wife is there, knowing no one and little of the life her husband led in uniform. Unless you've made plans to meet friends from your active days, it's unlikely you'll recognize many faces. Still, I went to one reunion nearby. It happened to be for the first ship I ever stepped aboard—the USS James Monroe, once stationed in Charleston, South Carolina. This reunion was held in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Monroe's birthplace, and the location of a museum dedicated to the sixth President. Having retired from the Navy, I had no clue what to expect. I brought along my long-suffering wife, hoping to introduce her to shipmates who, in my mind, would be thrilled to see me again. We followed a reunion sign and stepped thru the backdoor into the museum courtyard and were met by clusters of older men, sipping canned beer and catching up. I'm not one to poke fun at age, but I was definitely younger than most and still walked without effort. Many seemed to know one another—but I knew no one. Not a single soul. After about an hour of milling around, feeling out of place, we left out the front door.

Years after I left the Navy, I found myself back in Groton this time to finalize the sale of a townhouse that I lived at the second time I was stationed there, this time onboard the USS Batfish. Groton, Connecticut is where my submarine adventure started back in 1979 when I attended Basic Enlisted Submarine School. I retired in 2002 and had not set foot on this base in 15 years and so of course, I was interested in seeing this most memorable place once again. Once through the main gate I started noticing all the many changes that had occurred since I left. My wife and I parked our car in a big lot in front of the exchange that was being constructed around the time I left for my last duty assignment.

This base is split in two by a railroad line that is curiously in this modern age of security still in use. There is a high security lower base that's guarded where submarines in port are tied up along the Thames river and an upper base where all the other activities are located. Looking around I got a strange feeling that I had never left, was I in 1980 or was it 1995? I then realized that there might be some chance that I might still know someone seeing bases are like beehives to ex-military just like me. So curiously enough I found myself starting to look closely at faces as they appeared as if I was going to be easy to recognize somebody. I am not that good of remembering names, but a person's features such as the way they walk as well as their posture are my specialty. As we strolled around, I was like robocop scanning back and forth looking for clues from anyone who was in eyesight of me. If they were out of facial sight, I looked at their posture a trait that can say much about a person. We wandered past the CPO barracks where we stayed for 2 months while looking for something suitable off-base; there was nothing there for me. Next, we hiked up hospital hill passing the E-club where I spent way too much time instead of studying for class. Once past the base hospital and the barracks I once resided at, we headed back down a twisting staircase that takes you back into the main section of the base. Everyone I saw it was the same thing, his face to young, that one to old and another too far away to be sure.

At this time, I did not care much about the base new features at all having started to feel the disappointment of just missing what I now realized what I came here for. In the center of the base there is a mall called "Dealy Plaza" named for Samuel Dealy maybe the most iconic submariner of all time, a revered place to those of us who belonged, a busy place where back in the day if you patiently waited you were sure to run into someone from your crew. Once again, I had to remind myself of what year it was while wondering

where all these sub sailors were going. Then while contemplating the process of aging, I saw what I believe someone familiar having a face the age it should be. Stopping him politely I inquired politely about his history and if at one time we sailed together no he replied ‘I was never in the navy’ just here to meet my wife who by the way is the base security officer. So, after some small talk we soon parted then realizing the probable reason he mentioned his wife profession, I being still hopeful that this day would have meaning. Going into a large auditorium where my class graduation was held, I tried to remember anything about that moment in time. Then I saw a guy who looked familiar and belligerently I asked, “do I know you”? Taken back as well a bit surprised, he replied not sure, who are you? I replied I am so and so and on the base for the day and you look so familiar to me. Again, he and I had no past, and I silently chided myself for coming up empty once again as well as now looking unstable.

Our time was now growing short as we slowly made it back to the parking lot. I was feeling down now thinking that coming here was a waste of time. What was I was really trying to find, was I nothing more than a fool looking for something that is impossible to find. Then, once back at my car I looked up and noticed another contestant walking straight at me with a noticeable aura about him that was different then all the others; I had a strange sensation now that I was going to find what I had come here to for. The guy coming my way was a lieutenant and had a swagger that I recognized. Seconds later and at about fifteen feet away I was sure that he was Lt Guthe the Engineer when I was on the USS Dace. I remembered how intelligent and personable he was and maybe the best officer with whom I had ever served with. I was dumfounded as well as pleased that he choose to park right next to me, could this be predetermined I thought? When close enough he looked at me square in the

eyes and smiled and I thought he recognized me and how, for me, so meaningful, and I was for the moment delighted. He looked so young to me and then “bang” suddenly, as well as sadly, I realized it could not have been the same guy, a supernatural moment that that did not happen, it was only me playing a hoax on me. It was not some sort of a cosmic occurrence because today the year was 2007 and not 1987 and this man although familiar was somebody I had never met.

Instead of the usual pleasantries I was expecting he asked me to get out of his way so he could open his door. I backed up as ordered and moved aside still staring at him in disbelief at the uncanny likeness to the person that I had mistaken him for and still not fully comprehending what was happening. I must have not backed up enough for him and he gave me a nervous once over evil eye look as well as putting his car door between us just in case. Now I was searching for some way to engage him in conversation, not wanting him to leave so that I might find out who he was and now thinking that he could be related to the guy I thought he was. Running out of time I realized that the car he was now sitting in closely parked next to mine was an older station wagon. It was clear to me now that I had a holy duty to perform by decrying his choice of transportation. I owed this to all fast attack submariners past and present who would cry havoc in disbelief that I did nothing in this urgent moment. I said just before he put the car in reverse “lieutenant is this really your car” he nodded nervously. Then I replied, sir with due respect you are driving a car that is just unsat for a fast attack officer. My comment flummoxed the lieutenant and now he was speechless while wondering who I was. I gave him a moment to respond, giving me time to think fast while wondering what his response might be. To keep it going I told him that I was once but no longer a fast boater just like him, and, in my time, we drove cars that were dangerous;

back in my day there were images that had to be maintained and sadly we sometimes had to come ashore but that did not prevent us going slow. We live on the edge; we drink hard and drive fast cars and that is because we are “fast attack tough” and in my day you would have been not allowed on base driving this. I said while banging gently on his hood now directing my frustration from him to his car. This thing is a junk pile covered in rust with a baby seat in the back what are you thinking? You are a nuke engineer and why are you driving this pile of shit? Did you inherit it? My frustration with him now was real and most visible; had the world I once knew changed so much, was I mad at him or was I mad at time. Then came feeble my last vain berate “you are a steely eyed killer of the deep, you cannot just leave danger on the lower base.”

His car was now started and as he rolled down his window and said to me as he gazed over at my beat-up Toyota Prius was “I’d would like to stay and to hear more about you but then I would be late picking up my kids and then have to explain to the wife about being trapped by a demented parking lot idiot, you wouldn’t want that would you”? I realized he could take a punch and give a punch, and I had no retort. It might have been a wave or a sloppy salute as he slowly and cautiously drove off before I could tell him how disappointed I was that he was not the guy in my memory. I was flummoxed, not knowing where to go or what to think.

It felt too late now—like whatever I had come searching for had slipped through my fingers. As we drifted into the new exchange for one last look around, I was not expecting much. Exchanges on weekends are full of retired military, all of them like me—hoping, maybe, to run into someone they once knew. Then I spotted a man with a familiar gait, heading into the uniform shop. I followed. He

wore a white Chief Warrant Officer uniform, and sure enough, his beltline confirmed he had not missed many chow calls. But this time—I knew it was none other than Bob Macpherson. We had been part of the commissioning crew of the USS *San Francisco* back in '81. I walked right up to him and blurted, “I know you—weren’t you on the *San Francisco*?” He looked shocked, then affirmed that yes, he was. I introduced myself, but he showed no sign of recognition. Then I asked, “Bob, you can’t still be active duty—why the uniform?” He replied nervously that he was in town for a Navy event and had stopped in to pick up a few things. We made small talk. Bob, ever the self-promoter, quickly mentioned his involvement with the *San Francisco* website and urged me to get involved. He even wanted a picture of me “for the record.” But suddenly, my memory came flooding back. And with it, an old, bitter truth. I remembered exactly who Bob was—and why I had not missed him. I politely excused myself, my wife trailing behind with a sense that something had gone wrong. “What happened?” she asked. “You finally found someone you knew—why aren’t you ecstatic?” Walking in silence, I finally blurted out, “that guy was and still is the biggest jackass I’ve ever met.”

And in that moment, it hit me: how strangely prophetic this whole trip had been. I had come looking for the past, hoping to reconnect, to rediscover something lost. And the *one* person I found was someone I did not want to see. A warning, really—because when you go chasing memory, you had better be ready for what turns up. Nostalgia does not owe you anything.