

ROLF ALBERT YNGVE

Three Tips For Those Returning from Deployments: a memoir

First tip: don't die. Of course, in our profession, the battlefield has its accidents and errors, blunders and bad luck. Your timing can be off. You can get caught up with the wrong crowd. There are things that happen. Sometimes fate. We know this. But, blunder or bad luck aside, there are some people, always, who think dying might be preferable to return.

My point; not so. There are always better alternatives.

Returning from deployment, once, I told my pal (let's call him Dwarf) I was so depressed about my wife leaving me that I was thinking of shooting myself. As luck would have it, the tool I was thinking of using was in hand. We were shooting skeet, Dwarf having picked this up as his new pastime after leaving the Naval Academy for real life at sea. Dwarf had an unconventional gene in him, one focused on offsets. He was so short, he had to offset that issue standing on a box to see properly over a destroyer's bridge wing. He was smaller than everyone else, so he benched pressed three hundred pounds. I always thought skeet offset golf for him in some way. He was a great wing shot, not so good a golfer. He had that sort of pragmatic sense of balance.

In naval practice, though, there is no normal offset for what I'd said. By any honest assessment, what I'd done was suicide ideation. Having ideated suicide

to him, Dwarf, by regulation and practice was supposed to tell my captain. The captain, then, would have me taken off the ship, examined and detached for some assignment where my potential suicide would result in no-skin-off-his-nose. (Suicides, especially suicides of junior officers, could be career-breakers for a captain. Good leadership can't be assumed if there are suicides in your command.) Worse, this guy *was* a good captain, not the sort to throw chipping hammers at you. He'd ship me off because he was worried.

But Dwarf didn't say a thing to anyone. We were lieutenants. The world was our enemy. We were, by definition, competent. But by instinct and fact, competence eluded us regularly. Department heads, we were the senior management team on a destroyer before most of us were thirty years old. Even good captains had to yell at us.

About chipping hammers: at sea one afternoon I'd been taking a couple of chipping hammers up to my guys when a captain, a grouchy captain, yanked me into his stateroom for a discussion of my shortcomings. A chipping hammer looks like an ordinary hammer except both sides of the head are sharpened up a bit to chip heavy paint off steel. I was concentrating on my shortcomings as I left his stateroom, forget the hammers on his coffee table. I guess he decided to bring them up to the bridge for me after I relieved the watch.

That hammer went right by my ear—on and over the side as I was leaning out on the bridge wing. I heard it go by. But I didn't know what it was, that whispering sound. I turned to see the bridge team quiet and staring, the captain heading below. I said "What?" Nobody said a word. Somebody told me later what happened. I like to think he wasn't throwing it at me. I like to think he was just so upset he was throwing it over the side. The Bosun's Mate of the Watch wasn't so sure. Even so, I tried not to dwell on it. I never said the captain was all that blameful throwing the chipping hammer.

So in the end, for better or worse, we had us, the other lieutenants. All of us intended targets of chipping hammers, all of us dwarves using offsets like boxes to see over the bridge wings while we tried to press three hundred pounds.

I knew Dwarf wouldn't say anything to anybody else about my suicide ideation. But holding that shotgun, shooting clay targets instead of golf balls like we wanted, he thought it over and told me, if I was really serious, I ought to shoot her.

It had never occurred to me.

See, he says, if you shoot yourself, nothing happens. You just go. Whatever happens after, well, it doesn't count for us. All we get is the stupid, teary-weary, dumb-ass letter you're going to write. But you'll be just gone and they'll have to find some way to fill your spot on the watch bill. You think she'll care?

I gave it some thought. She might, I said.

So you're going to do it to make her feel bad? So she'll pay attention? That's why you want to shoot yourself?

His logic was beginning to get to me.

Shoot her. He said, then what happens—you go to jail. She'll be dead. Something might happen afterward. But you won't have to worry about her. You want to shoot yourself to make her feel bad? You're missing the point.

Pull! Said Dwarf and dusted doubles.

Besides, Dwarf said, if you shoot her, you won't have to write any of those sappy letters.

The crack about letters cut. He was right. I'd already written the letter, albeit a bit different category. I'd always liked those letters from the combat dead, the ones that start, "Dear Mom and Dad, in case something happens...." The letters no one sees unless some blunder, bad luck or fate gets in the way.

Hoping to measure up to them, I wrote such letters. I bought good stationary, cream colored from a good store. Copied them over by hand. Measured every word. I mimicked that special courage and grace only the dead can bear, hoping if some blunder or bad luck occurred, someone might read them and care. I'd written them to my wife, put them in my locker, thinking she would read them if I tried out the shotgun on my forehead. I didn't have to write a stupid, teary-weary, dumb-ass letter. They were already finished, ready, waiting to go.

Shoot her. I said.

Right. He said. Or don't shoot her. But don't shoot yourself, man. That's beyond dumb. Besides, either way you're going to put the other guys in port and starboard duty and after a couple days of four on four off, even I'd hate your ass. Here. Shoot a clay pigeon instead.

To be truthful, I wasn't ever really tempted to shoot my wife. She had always been likable. Who wants to shoot the object of your desire, the *love* you imagined during every free moment of the nearly three years away? And—I could see her point when she told me she didn't think children were in the offing, and she couldn't promise she'd ever want to live with me again. I was just a lieutenant. I wasn't supposed to be likable. She stayed in DC. I went to Charleston alone to a new ship, another

deployment. I never really thought of shooting her. She never deserved anything like that.

That other option, though. That was close.

Of course, shooting my wife would have violated the second most important tip; stay out of jail. This sounds easy, once the absurdity and futility of shooting your wife or yourself becomes apparent. But some things draw you toward jail when you least expect it.

A vehicle, for instance. A vehicle, any vehicle purchased right after return from deployment entices jail. A car like the one I bought almost begs jail.

It was the car she never would have let me have, a decade old, 1975 drop-top Eldorado, pale yellow, built in the days of cheap plastic trim loosely arranged over eighteen feet of American road vehicle. Every other time the electric-drive, circus-tent top lowered, it busted out the glass some genius designed for the rear window. Plastic held over the hole with staples worked fine until it rained then duct tape over the staples held out the water, but lessened the sartorial impact.

But it was a great car for drinking gin. I hauled two cases of Tanqueray back from overseas, tax-free. To make it a better experience, I invested in some of the other male, divorce-ritual elements; I got a straw fedora and some pals outside the Navy whose span of acceptable behavior matched mine: Doctor Bob and his nurse friend Sue.

They have a medical school in Charleston. Doctor Bob was in the fast lane to what I assume must have become a very cynical medical practice. He lived loosely with Sue in the same complex where I'd found a one bedroom cheap enough to live in alone. I liked to be around unmarried couples in those days, those who shared my vision of an Eldorado's trunk full of Tanqueray in a cooler, with ice, glasses, tonic, and limes, all chilled just in case anyone needed a lift. For the cockpit, I got binnacle cup holders from a boat store so our cocktails could stay upright.

Dr. Bob had a deep admiration for the car and a southern man's persuasive energy for outrageous and futile gestures. Sue was our willing accomplice. The Eldorado was unquestionably magnificent and praiseworthy with us three aboard, lounging past the luxurious, antebellum town homes bordering Battery and Broad streets, pieces dropping off as the plastic let go, our glasses clinking with ice and refinement.

"But Lieutenant..." we'd taken to believing formal terms of address were the only appropriate norms of address while drinking like we drank, "Imagine the majesty of this paragon of American engineering and design, coming up over the green

on the third hole, down onto that fairway. Imagine the furrow it would make, fishtailing its way down the fairway, roaring under the moon and the stars.”

Bob was a golfer. I assumed in Dr. Bob’s impulse about the car came from this often expressed grudge against the Country Club of Charleston, the same rancor he held both for the club’s fees, entrance policy and the soggy, dead slow nature of a ball’s roll across their greens. But looking back on it, I don’t think this was the true source of his desire to use that vehicle on a fairway. I think deep in his heart, he wished to picture forevermore that Eldorado airborne, churning dirt and grass. It suited his poetic nature. Or at least the poetic sensibility unleashed by lots of gin.

One night under the moon and the stars, I found myself on country club drive after a lengthy Sunday afternoon at the apartment complex pool looking at Dr Bob’s nurse friend Sue and adding less and less tonic to my beverage. Sue worked her shifts, paid the rent, a cliché nurse investing her time on a medical student, hoping to cash in later, was the way I saw it and Bob described it. She was delectable, far more than Bob deserved or could ever bargain for, I was certain.

Only, she loved him.

Dr. Bob spent all afternoon that Sunday playing water volleyball with girls his own age. Sue watched from her chair, sometimes getting into the water to cool off, getting out and letting herself air dry. We had a nice chat. She wasn’t drinking as much as Bob or me. She was calm, relaxed. I don’t know what we talked about, some veneer over the fact I’d been thinking of trying to get her to go to bed with me. Everything about the graceful way she let her hand drape over the arm on the lounge chair begged me to reach over, take it in mine, lead her up to my apartment, relax in the cool back room, indulge. Her sun glasses and blond hair, cut to the bottom of her ears, her lazy toes curling and uncurling in that chair, Bob so obviously hitting on the three girls who’d coaxed him into the pool. What would Bob know about anything we might do while he played water volleyball that drunk? Besides, she was more my type than she was the type for medical-student-aged Bob—she was that knowing, starting toward fading glory age, where the laugh lines look like character as opposed to sad-sack slipping into late years. I thought we might have something in common. I’d been away, deployed, I was eager to share.

At first I thought I’d never be able to get Sue away from the pool; she’d never let Bob alone with the girls playing water volleyball. When he finally got too drunk to play anymore, flopped down on the chair next to her, fell asleep or passed out bubbling snot, she took *his* hand, made him stand up, and walked him slowly toward their apartment.

No one can look pretty taking their drunk boyfriend up to her apartment in her bikini. Bob was leaning too hard, swaying. I went over, took his other arm, and Sue didn't say anything. We walked him up to their rooms, tossed him in their bed. "Face down," Sue said, "In case he pukes," and I figured at that point she was going to leave him for awhile. I figured she was going to indulge.

She said thanks. She took me by my hand. It was electric, she didn't look at me just led me to the door. I thought this was it, this was going to be a great moment as we would walk across to my apartment to explore. She stopped at the door, looked up into my eyes and said, "Look. Don't get this wrong, Bob drinks too much around you. You've got to leave us alone."

I said I was sorry.

Sue said, "He's not like you. He's too young. He'll get over it, but you make him drink all the time and he's not studying."

I said sure, I'd leave. I said sorry again.

Sunday nights late in Charleston in those days, no one traveled around. The cops didn't even get out on the road with everything shut up. The Eldorado muttered out following its nose to Country Club Drive where a wide swing put her facing the third green. I could see every pristine element, imagine every jolt. Just a short dip down, then up, then over and in, not even a drainage ditch between us and glory, the fairway soft already from the sprinklers still whisking away, the sod just waiting to slip up under the 5200 pounds of front-wheel traction, knocking the exhaust loose, jamming up into a rut, stalling then lying prostrate, hissing steam. I imagined jail.

It didn't seem like a bad idea. In jail, it would be simple, all the options ended. For a Naval Officer, it ends your career, so no worries about promotion, no worries about dumping your pals into port and starboard. In jail, I wouldn't have to deploy again. In jail there is no chance of meeting another Sue. In jail you don't shoot yourself or your wife or anyone else.

The car must have taken me home. The next day, after I'd staggered through work, I cruised by the scene and the fairway was fine, the green untouched. The only way I could have gotten home was..., the car must have known the way to the barn.

Sue was right. I wasn't good for Bob, or her—or me. Jail seemed appropriate, even warranted, given the fact I couldn't remember leaving the scene of the accident I'd almost perpetrated. Hadn't Dwarf put it right? If you can't shoot yourself, then there's at least jail. And you don't even have to shoot anyone else to go to jail. Just take an Eldorado for a field trip. At least you'd get out of the next deployment. At

least you'd get some sleep, avoid accidents, blunders and battlefields. At least you could escape. I was primed and I figured it only a matter of time.

The Friday after I'd turned the Eldorado away from destiny, an alligator the size of a small craft wandered in between the two destroyer piers. Lethargic, monstrously draped in green moss and primeval in its complete ignorance of our existence, the gator quickly attracted crowds of sailors along each ship's lifelines, leaning out, pointing, just chewing the fat about this big, ancient alligator too blind to do anything except butt up against one destroyer's hull, swim across, butt up against another.

For some reason, probably boredom, some officer decided it wasn't a good idea to let the alligator stay between the destroyers. We speculated about it later. The consensus was some senior officer envisioned a sailor falling into the water (highly unlikely since everyone had pretty much quit working on a Friday afternoon in Charleston) and further envisioned the alligator, against all alligator instincts, swimming over for a snack. We'd all known captains like that. Frankly, some of us became captains like that—keepers of the worst case scenario.

More likely, though, it was an impulse like mine: rescue. The alligator didn't have a clue how much trouble he was in. He couldn't see a thing above water level, and all these ships around him had walled him to doom. He would undulate his great tail back and forth, back and forth, until he gave up and died of frustration or starvation or something. Most likely it was that dumbest of all sailor impulses, and the best. The impulse to do good caused someone to launch a motor whale boat.

With these boats, the operative word was whale, owing to its stately velocity through water, its lack of maneuverability and its incomprehensible weight. There aren't many around anymore; good sense kicked in sometime in the last twenty years. But even in those days, most disbelieved they could actually float. Sometimes they didn't. Often the davits failed to work properly, lowering one end before the other. They filled up with water because the boat plugs didn't get put in right. The cables in the davits got bird caged and you'd see a ship at the pier with a motor whaleboat hanging bow down off a davit as if it wanted to dive under the water. Somehow though, they got it in the water. Somehow, it actually started.

Now we could imagine real jeopardy. Four sailors in a partially seaworthy boat were given the task of prodding a fifteen foot alligator back out to the river. They maneuvered over, angling in from the side with a boat hook dangled out the bow to push the gator's butt end toward land, his nose to the river.

Some duty captain, half asleep in the Battle Group Commander's office where he could see the water between the piers must have gotten up from his desk to have a look at all the fun. He wandered out, went back in, came out with a bullhorn. He used it to say, *Put that goddam boat back in the davits, have your captain call the staff duty officer.*

No it wasn't my captain, those weren't my guys, so I could actually take some delight that this chipping hammer wasn't going by my ear.

In all this, the gator paid no attention. He was big enough, blind enough and well padded enough to keep on swimming back and forth, ignoring the boat, ignoring the prod. He bumped gently up and down the destroyers' hulls.

They recovered the boat. No one got hurt. Liberty went down and those not on duty or getting their asses chewed went home. The sun set and by morning, the gator was gone. He'd never even known he was trapped. He'd been around for awhile, everybody was worried about him, then he was gone and nobody gave the gator a thought after we finished our beer on Friday night, cruised our Eldorados home to sleep it off.

On Monday, I tried to talk about the gator at lunch but no one was really interested. It was Masters time in Augusta. They were talking about bunker shots, Sandy Lyle, golf stuff. My only connection to golf had been Bob's dreams of Eldorado's in flight, but I talked about golf anyway because the captain talked golf. Who knows what kind of fool I could be?

All week, I kept expecting to see that gator float up again to entertain us, maybe make it a Friday afternoon tradition. But he never did. Now, the Naval Base has been closed for years. People don't even remember it existed with destroyer piers, much less a twenty foot (yes, it grows with time) alligator trapped by the ships.

It pretty quickly occurred to me the gator had never really been trapped at all. He was just doing what gators do. He thought he was supposed to swim—back and forth, bump into destroyers then he was gone.

That was it. You can bump around long enough, or even just one afternoon and pretty soon the Dr. Bobs and Sues of the world will forget you. To disappear, you don't have to go to jail. Time will take care of it.

Here's the third tip: once death and jail have been avoided—when you deploy, be careful what you leave behind.

Deploying without a spouse is elegantly simple. There's no one behind you spending your money, there's no one getting pissed off because you didn't write. In those days, the Navy cut back your allowances when you were single. When the

ship left port or when you flew into a forward-deployed area, they stopped the basic allowance for housing since you had no use for a house living on the ship or in a combat zone. The result—you couldn't afford to keep an apartment; everything went into storage. If you couldn't sell your car, you left it in storage somewhere, rubber joints cracking, seals loosening and leaking so you sell the car at any cost. Letting it wait in those days, was to lose it. Like spouses.

The car? With three hundred bucks cash on a Sunday afternoon from a guy who told me not to worry about a notary, the Eldorado era ended.

As for the rest of it, I put books and a few pieces of beat up furniture somewhere in what the government calls long-term storage. They pack up your stuff, send it to some purgatory for eventual reclamation. Play it right, and you leave cleansed of any residual worry, no home, no bills, no past that means anything worth considering. You think it's just the clean unknown, unfettered as a horizon at sea.

But if you're not careful, the cleanliness of the horizon is an illusion. Things wash up behind you.

For instance, I once sent an advance shipment to a ship, things beyond the uniforms and clothing I could carry. I shipped a green suit I'd bought in Europe on a deployment in a fit of envy over German clothing. (Go figure.) It looked like dark green pajamas with lapels and for some reason, I'd become Europhiled enough to think it elegant, and numb enough to think it would attract the sort of women who I might like.

I shipped some dress uniforms, extra things for parade and sea, papers and books. The box didn't arrive before we shoved off in a hurry to get to the Gulf for Desert Shield, then Desert Storm.

Like the car, the ex-wife, the books, the dingy furniture, I quit worrying about that shipment as it thumped its way around the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The box made it the Philippines first, too late—a week behind us after we stopped for fuel and booze. It was too late or lost when it made its way to the vast, outdoor stretch of goods, measured in football fields of length and width, stacked the exact height of a double-wide, lingering in Jebal Ali with undelivered mail. I flew over this vast pile, once, leaning out of our Navy Seahawk, our H-60 as we traversed football fields of pallets open to the air, crammed with boxes, mailbags, cans. It looked like a vast plane wreck, square miles scattered with forgotten letters and cookies. I thought of my green suit in there. Couldn't imagine why I'd thought it important enough to ship. We were looking for the flak jackets and atropine we ordered at the last minute. The atropine made it in time, just in case Sadaam unleashed his tons

of nerve gas on us. I heard the flak jackets showed up sometime before the ship decommissioned. I never saw them.

The green suit shipment, though, kept after me. It followed me too late again on the way home, dug out from the mail plane wreck to first make Kuwait, then get to the Philippines just in time for the volcano Mount Pinatubo to let go, nicely collaborating with the Philippine government to extract the United States military presence from their nation. I imagine my shipment was buried somewhere. Stored again.

Two years later, I found myself on shore duty and the advance shipment showed up in San Diego with its bill of lading, marked with all the stops, and the clothes inside carrying United Arab Emirates sand, the odor of burned Kuwaiti oil, a dusting of Mount Pinatubo ash and my embarrassment at having actually worn the two piece, pajama suit to my 20th High School reunion four years before, decorated with a floral tie and a British woman I'd thought an appropriate accessory.

It was nice getting the uniforms back, even if they had to be let out. But the green suit brought back mental snapshots of that reunion's extraordinary alcoholic excess. I remember looking at the brass railing of some guy's refurbished, antique boat. I was out there with an ex-girlfriend, the kind of ex-girlfriend you dream about on deployments for decades..., *her!* The 20th reunion ought to be called the divorcee reunion, we were so plentiful. On that guy's boat, with this now most elegant woman, my self-medication had me so shit-faced I don't remember how I got there or how I got back. Needless to say, I returned deservedly alone.

Four years after the fact, the advance shipment washed up. I opened the box, realized that even though I was now somewhere past forty years old, guardian angels all gone, no prospect of a family in sight, I realized that at least I was sober, not in jail, still alive. So I figured I'd escaped the worst of it.

My dad, then, gets word of another box from storage where I'd forgotten to pay the rent.

The way this works, when you have something in storage, and you don't pay the rent, somebody buys whatever you left behind from the storage company, then sells whatever they can. Some people, I found out, make a living at it. The guy who bought my box, sold my stuff, skis, beat up furniture, old lamps, dishes. Then, for some reason, he looked through all the boxes of papers and bills, stories I'd written, childhood clippings my mother gave me once, junk, all junk. And he found a letter.

That's why he called my dad. He found his phone number in one of the pieces of mail, thought I might have gone missing on deployment. Dad said I ought to go get my stuff. I called the man.

He lived out in the east county portion of San Diego where the citizens and architecture are both best described as weathered. He had a well set up house alone at the end of a gravel drive cutting up through scrub to a view over an arroyo. This was long before the California housing bubble, back when the people who lived in East County did so because they wanted distance between them and their neighbors, a fence in between. They wanted to be able to pour their own concrete porch and not have some inspector tell them it wasn't level enough. They wanted to run a rag picker's business out of their garage.

He had a couple of dogs, ordinary, stray looking dogs, friendly and curious and I found him working on an RV he told me he got after it was repossessed. Wiry and tanned, my age, he had on the sort of clothes you always call "worn but clean." There were some toys out on the gravel yard. No frills, but everything in its place, everything neat. He'd made it all himself.

I asked him how much he wanted for my stuff. He said, "I got plenty out of your stuff, don't need any more. I was sorry I had to sell it after I read that letter. Go ahead and take your papers. Here's this." He handed it to me, a letter I remembered right away because it had a cream resume envelope bought in a good store.

I barely remembered writing it. It was that classic letter you read. Exactly the kind of letter parents publish after their son or daughter is killed on some combat deployment, the kind some noble journalist collects in a book to sell. I shredded it later so I can't quote it. But I'm sure it started out something like this, like all these letters I wrote:

"If you get this letter, something will have happened and I just wanted to let you know, I was happy in my profession and proud to have served etc., etc."

I'd written it practicing to be dead. Now a stranger with a second-hand ball cap on a hardscrabble porch in the east San Diego County heat, handed it to me because I'd left it carelessly behind.

The guy said, "I thought you'd died, thought your family might have wanted it. You know, I'm glad to be able to give it to you. I'm a vet, too. Glad you're okay." He held out his hand and I took it. He said, "How was it over there?"

I said it was better than I expected, not as good as I'd hoped. I said it because that's what he expected. I was supposed to say something like that coming back from deployment. He nodded the way he was supposed to nod.

And how is that, the way he was supposed to nod? As if he understood. As if it was okay. As if he was really letting me off the hook, fake that I was.

That night, I went through those papers and got rid of nearly all of them. Bills, tax forms I'd never filed, letters I never sent, taxes never paid and all the stuff I thought I should keep at one time. I could remember why I wanted to keep things, but it didn't seem to make any difference anymore. And all of it came back, worse than any green suit. All those years when we'd been happy, all the years away, all the unending, wishing, waiting sorrow for the end of one deployment or another, the movement on and on.

I borrowed a shredder, fed it. It was a Saturday night and I hadn't thought much about my wife, about Sue, Dr. Bob or even Dwarf for a long time. Before I shredded my stupid, teary-weary, dumb-ass letter, I read it all again. How could I write that sort of letter, hoping it would get printed someday? How could I hope for one of those battlefield moments, some accident of fate, error, bad timing or bad luck intervening thinking somehow it would make sense out of the life I was trying to carry forward? How could I hope, through accident and artifice, I would somehow find myself wiped clean and, in the end, worthy of actually having a wife or even dignity?

Now, me living, not killed, not shot by myself or anyone else, not in jail, I had this letter, for what?

Here's the point; sometimes we ask for it, any end rather than the day-to-day continuation where big cars called Eldorado and Doctors Bob and even our spouses only suffer in our hands. Sometimes we wish for anything other than nurse friends Sue or even wives telling us to move along, because we're no good for their dreams. We don't have to remember it though, how we felt. We can move on, just like they said and leave nothing behind to remind anyone. It's not true you have to remember the truth.

The Naval Station in Charleston is long closed. I don't suppose anyone has any idea what happened to Dr. Bob or Sue or the alligator. Maybe the soul of that pale yellow Eldorado still lounges over my shoulder, steering me past greens that tempt their own demolition. Maybe there are Dwarves still showing me how to apply offsets, press three hundred pounds. I could never say I had any direction. Maybe it's nothing more than just bumping along blind down the hulls of all those ships, all those stations, those encampments baking in suns, or under the dust and volcanoes. But I slipped out into the river, somehow. There was no plan and I never thought about these three tips at the time. Certainly they are not perfect. There are others, anyone can think them up. But these aren't bad to keep in mind for a start: Don't die. Stay out of jail. Be careful what you leave behind.

Do that—and it won't matter the way you were; you can fix it. Do that—and you can find a way to be forgiven, and a way to forget. Do that—and there is still a chance you'll find the love you let go.

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