

REUNION

Forty-one years and two days later two buddies whom I had served with in Company C and I left Denver to visit a third now living in the St. Louis area. Jim Dillie and Bill Burrows, their real names, were Colorado boys that I had befriended in the 97th.

Bill had lived less than a mile from my first home in Denver but we didn't know each other. The major north/south street in Denver was Broadway then as it is now. I lived two blocks to the east and he four to the west, but it could well have been a hundred miles. School districts, traffic on Broadway, and social groupings conspired to keep both of us on our side of the line.

My father managed the Colorado Industries for the Blind facility at Bannock St. and Speer Blvd., about half way between my house and Bill's. The one story factory building employed blind or legally blind men and women in the manufacturing of brooms, mops, doormats, and various other household items. Dad, who had about 5 to 10% vision in each eye, was hired by the state of Colorado to manage it. As the oldest son of the boss I was occasionally permitted to visit and run amuck through the plant. Sometimes I was even put to work.

During World War 2, the period when I was brought to work, the organization had a contract with the War Department for the manufacturing of brooms for the military. That made the operation a war industry, and with that status came a prized benefit, unlimited gas rations. The plant had a pickup truck for local deliveries but no full-time driver. To fill in and to get the materials delivered my father would take out the truck and that's where I came in. My dad was, as reported, practically blind so he needed a set of eyes. One of my earliest memories is standing beside my dad as he drove down Broadway telling him if the light up ahead was red or green. During those wild rides, or while being a pain in the ass at the plant, I have no memory of encountering Bill.

Bill and Jim, who was raised in Sterling out on the eastern plains, shared a common experience in high school – they dropped out. After rambling around both decided that their best hope to break the cycle and make it in the world involved joining the Army. So within months of each other, and just a couple of months ahead of me, they took the plunge.

Now we were in Jim's conversion van heading east on I-70. Much had happened during the intervening decades and we had a lot of catching up to do.



Bill Burrows (middle) and Jim Dillie (right) relaxing somewhere in France or maybe Germany.

Bill got his GED while in the army and parlayed it into a career in the brewing industry as a delivery driver. By the time he retired in 2003 he had logged hundred thousands of miles without an accident and had the satisfaction of knowing his deliveries had smoothed the way for the viewing of many a football game. He married, raised a son, and was enjoying a couple of grandkids. Not bad for a guy growing up in a small apartment above a coin operated laundromat located in one of the oldest and roughest parts of town.

We told Jim of the time that Bill drove his huge beer truck by my house. We were getting siding put up at the time and there was a work crew hanging on the house when he pulled up, tooted the air horn briefly, and then yelled out that my weekly beer delivery was here. The crew was clearly awed.

Jim's story was far more involved. He too had earned his GED while in the army and was able to land a federal job with the Government Printing Office at the Denver Federal Center. While there he was able to alert me to the opportunity for a job, and talked me up to the boss, a World War II veteran from the Corps of Engineers. Within a year after I was hired he decided to move on and we lost track of each other. For the next few years he worked in the oil patch at a number of labor jobs. In time he realized that he could and should do better.

Jim applied to the Colorado School of Mines and was laughed at, in a polite way of course. As the best mining and geological studies school in the nation they had the pick of the brightest high school graduates; they would never accept a candidate with a mere GED. Three years with the Army Corps of Engineers did not count against him but didn't seem to impress. So Jim, at age 28, went back to high school ... or more accurately entered high school for the first time. Over the next three years he completed a full high school curriculum plus earning a few college credits at a local community college. Next he reapplied to Mines and was accepted.

Mines is a tough school that requires a lot from its students. Jim was tough enough to emerge with a degree in Geological Engineering (Petroleum). For the next couple of decades his fortunes rose and fell with the health of the industry he chose. No more rough necking, now he drove the four-wheel drive truck, read the seismic printouts, and gambled his and his investor's money on drilling sites around the West. When the industry hit a wall in the 80's he retired with his profits and lived the relaxed life for a while. Now he was working as a mine inspector for the state of Colorado. All of it far removed from his beginning in the army.

From a common military experience our lives had gone in wildly different paths. Jim's was adventurous and risk-taking while mine was stable in the extreme. I opened the Civil Service test for Printing Plant Worker thanks to Jim's help and landed a job with the GPO. Over the next 37 years worked my way up from an apprentice platemaker to Contracting and Compliance Officer. From 1965 to 1974 I went to college at night and earned a Bachelor's in Business and a Master's degree in Public Administration at the University of Colorado in Denver. Best of all I met and married the perfect woman for me.

While taking an introduction to psychology class at CU I had to climb the stairs to the second floor classroom when one day I followed a girl with a very active and attractive behind. She looked equally good from the front so I made an effort to learn her name. In time we dated and damned if



Bob Letterman saying 'good by' to Jim Dillie as he rotates back to the States and civilian life.

it didn't lead to marriage. On September 3rd of 1966 we wed in the courtroom of Judge Ralas. From that fortunate beginning we had two children to love and nurture. Within a decade of leaving the army my fortunes were totally reversed; I was now a family man with all the accouterments of middle class life, a wife, a boy and baby girl, a house with large mortgage, and lots of credit card debt.

The three of us drifted into talk about coming home from the army and the adjustments we had to make. I told them of my first days as a free man. After catching the bus at Fort Hamilton I made my leisurely way back to Denver with stops to visit family back East along the way and the final leg a flight from Chicago's O'Hara into Stapleton Field. By the time we landed I was feeling the excitement of returning home. My head was constantly turning as I walked through the main terminal hoping to see someone - anyone - I knew. No luck. I caught a taxi, gave him the address, and devoured the sights of Denver as I returned home.

Walking up to the door of the house I had spent my high school years was unreal. It was so small and old. I didn't expect that. Nor did I expect my brother, Paul, who answered the door. He had been shorter than me when I had left and now he was four inches taller. Later he told me that he had vowed to punch me out when I got home for all the crap I had handed him growing up. His moment of weakness saved me.

I looked up a couple of the guys from high school and gave them a call. John Oder, who had been the nearest thing to a best friend I had back then, was now married to his high school sweetheart and had two children. I sort of invited myself over to his apartment and met his family. The kids were charming and shy, and played quietly while we talked. John and Pat, his wife, told of his promising career at Caterpillar tractor, which gave us common ground – heavy equipment.

The reunion started well but soon ran into trouble. They talked of career hopes and family matters while I told of sleeping in the rain, and of visiting Paris and Amsterdam. Within an hour it was clear to me that while we were still friends we had little of life's experiences in common to share, and I left.

So there was another price to pay for serving in the Army. I had to start my life all over again with only two friends and no job. I hung out with Jim and Bill, mostly Bill as he was also unemployed. He had been discharged a couple of months before me and we saw each other about every day. Our goofing off was supported by drawing unemployment, which was authorized because of our Army service.

Jim and Bill told their own stories of trying to find footing back in civilian life. For all of us it was disorienting to move from a tightly regimented life to seeming anarchy. In time we shrugged off the habits of the barracks, cleaned up our filthy language, and began behaving as though we were civilized.

Now, decades later, we were gray and entering the last quarter; it was time to look back.

Waiting for us in St. Louis was Bob Letterman. If we three were screw-ups while in the army then Bob was our spiritual leader. He too had dropped out of high school after knocking out the front teeth of the assistant principal – an accident he assured us. He was in the process of punching out a tormentor when he felt a hand on his shoulder; without looking he swung an elbow and felt the

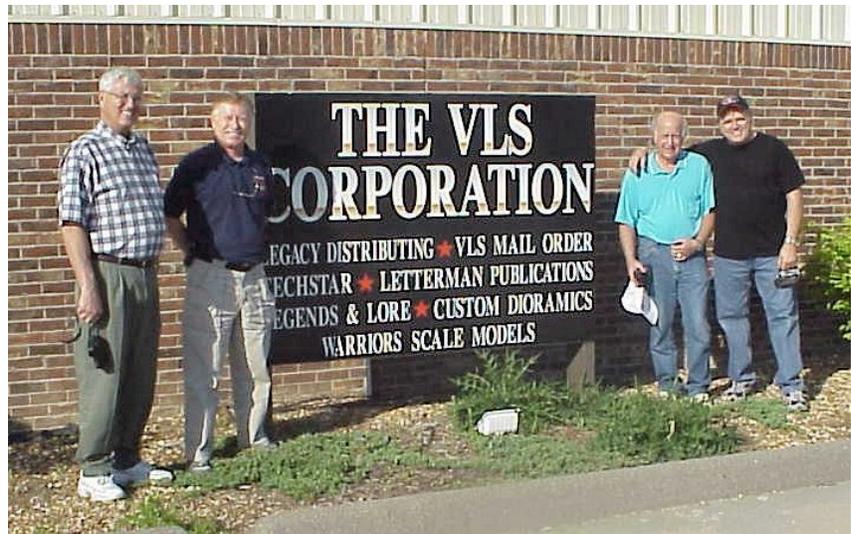
satisfying crunch of collapsing flesh and bone. The principal was not inclined to accept Bob's justification and sent him on his way.

As seems to happen frequently with kids who had brushes with the law growing up, Bob joined the police force after discharge, first in Springfield and then in St. Louis. At heart anti-establishment he gravitated to patrol work in the ghetto where his association with blacks growing up and in the army provided an edge. It helped that he experienced being shit upon regularly in the army; it gave him an insight into the mentality of the underclass.

Bob's career as a cop was helped along by a character defect that worked against him in the army; he's a very bright guy. He took the MENSA test, passed, and was invited to join. By then he was too busy being a cop, taking classes, getting married, and working on his hobby to take them up on the offer. As a street cop he had to use his head while others were losing theirs, in the army he was not expected to think for himself. But like in most things Bob went his own way and if the army didn't have a use for his brain then he did.

After a couple of decades of keeping the peace in a part of town not given over to quiet, Bob packed it in and looked for something else to challenge him. The answer turned out to be an offshoot from a hobby he still worked at that dated from before his military time – model building.

Our van arrived in Moscow Mills just outside of St. Louis about 11:00 a.m. and waiting for us was Bob in his new bright Red SUV. Seeing him made me feel like a kid again and the four of us did a lot of hand shaking and back patting. No hugging, as we were veterans of the pre-touchy feely army and didn't go in for that stuff. But there was no doubt that we all felt the urge.



The reunion group of (l to r) Bill Burrows, the author, Jim Dillie, and Bob Letterman standing outside of Bob's fiefdom.

Bob had arranged for our accommodations at a near new motel near his office and home, but we didn't check in right away. First stop was his home to meet his wife, Susan, and to see how he had feathered his nest. It was quickly obvious that Bob was doing very well indeed in work and marriage.

Bob's house was immaculate. Tasteful art filled every room along with the latest high definition wide-screen Television monitors. His house was wired better than an electric chair with cables hidden behind every wall. The basement was a movie fans wet dream with thousands of VHS tapes in bookshelf's along two walls. If living good is the best revenge then Bob was extracting full measure.

The big surprise was his business, not just the obvious level of success but also its very nature. In the 97th Bob was known for making finely detailed model ship, airplanes, and cars. Now he sells high-end kits for making meticulous models for dioramas. His business prospered because he had managed to establish a worldwide reputation in the tight world of fine modeling. Members of that world, from Hollywood set designers to devoted amateurs in nations around the globe, knew him and admired his work.

I reminded Bob of the time in the 97th when a member of his platoon came in drunk one night and took out some suppressed anger by stomping on a bunch of his models. Included in the carnage was a car model that Bob had fashioned, complete with a hot rod engine right down to black thread running from a distributor to each of 8 imagined spark plugs. The model was a favorite of mine and I was outraged. Bob seemed to take it a whole lot better than me. I now suspect that he somehow knew that the drunk would be forgotten - but not his act - while Bob would continue to develop as an artist.

We were anxious to get down to the business of the trip, reminiscing about our army days. First we raided Bob's fridge and discovered that he had, as promised, laid on a supply of quality beer. Next we picked out a friendly looking, leather-covered couch to sit on and did something we would never have done in the army, we grabbed a coaster for our beers. Finally we were ready.

Good reunion bullshitting is chaotic with two or three story lines going at any one time, sort of like a braided stream crossing and recrossing all the time. We talked a lot of the old gang, girls, drinking, fighting, goofing off, taking leave, hating the army, and sex. Many of the stories had all of elements in it. Sometimes it was fighting over a girl while on leave, getting drunk in the barracks and trying to hide the evidence, or about causing havoc in France with our crazy ways. The best stories were the most embarrassing to us now. Bill told of the time he, three other dump truck drivers, and one duce-and-a-half were driving too fast, bumper to bumper, along the two-lane road from Verdun to Etain, and suddenly came upon a French farmer driving his tractor. There are no shoulders along French roads so the only way to get around was to swing wide putting you square in the oncoming lane, and there were cars approaching. The dump trucks made it but the duce-and-a-half had to pull back in too soon and clipped the tractor, sending the farmer flying through the air and on to the plowed field. Everybody stopped and looked back at the farmer as he staggered to get up. Then without anyone saying anything they mounted up and drove away. We agreed that maybe the French had reason to hate us.

I recalled a time riding in the back of a duce-and-a-half with the canvas top off returning from a job site, and a civilian car passed us. I was sitting on the driver's side just idly looking at traffic and could see right into the car, and saw the woman passenger giving the driver a blowjob. The sight brought me back to life and I yelled at the other guys to take a look – but it was too late as the car had sped by and was gone. I spent the rest of the trip back to the barracks trying to convince everyone of what I had seen. And I had really seen it, honestly. Bob, Bill, and Jim nodded politely.

Bob's contribution was to fill in the details of his battles with our company commander. The fight was uneven right from the start as Bob played the army like Yo-Yo Ma plays the cello while army methods hamstrung the CO. Bob was dating a woman who worked at the hospital in Verdun and through her was able to get on orders for TDY to the army hospital in Landstoul, Germany, for a back examination. Like me he had mild scoliosis and was able to convince the Colonel examining him that he needed permanent light duty. Captain Harmon hit the roof and had Bob re-examined at

Verdun where he was declared fit for duty. With the clean report in hand Harmon called Bob into his office and tore up his limited-duty profile. He actually thought that he had won the war.

That night Bob called his girlfriend and had her cut new orders for Landstoul, acquired his train tickets, and left before the Harmon was aware anything was amiss. At the hospital Bob told his story to the Colonel who proceeded to erupt. No god damned newly minted doctor in Verdun was going to say that his diagnosis was wrong. With that he wrote up a new profile that said, in effect, that Bob didn't have to do a motherfucking thing that he didn't feel like doing. Next he wrote a blistering reprimand for the medical doctor in Verdun. Finally, he told Bob to inform him if any of those assholes tried to screw with him again. Bob vowed to do so. Back in the company Harman gave up and transferred Bob to Headquarters Company where he spent the balance of his tour in splendid relaxation.

Most stories were about what happened while on leave. Jim and Bob loved Frankfurt and, to listen to them, had shacked up with most of the girls in town. During one visit Bob credited Jim with telling him to stop staring at a girl across the room as it wasn't cool, and later returning to their room to find Jim in bed with her. Grudging admiration was the tone he used in telling of it.

With that story our attention turned to Jim, probably the best-liked guy in the company back then, for some long overdue teasing. Jim was the only one of us four who made the rank of E4 and, if that wasn't shameful enough, received the very "Good Conduct" metal. While the award is as empty as a 'can't we just be friends' from the girl you're dating, it does suggest a lack of military bearing. Only the sweetest, most gentle, unimaginative, nondrinking suck-up can get the award. We knew that Jim was none of that so we inquired into just how he had done it while in the 97th. He pointed out that he was rarely with the outfit during the week; frequently he was assigned to Rations Breakdown and Prisoner Chasing duty.

Ration Breakdown was a racket. One man for each unit was assigned for a month at a time at the depot in Verdun for the purpose of unloading incoming food rations from trains and truck, and apportioning it to all the organizations in the area. If 007 had a license to kill then the breakdown crew had one to steal. Now I would NEVER suggest that Jim was involved in such a thing but his footlocker always did seem to be very well provisioned. I was surprised to discover about the time I was scheduled to rotate out that the rations normally came with cans of M&M's, and I had never seen them during all my field duty. Makes you think.

Prisoner chasing was another long time assignment away from the company. That job required the soldier to guard a group of prisoners from the Verdun stockade while they performed menial duties, policing up the area and the like, around the base. Jim's job was to stand over them with a shotgun and look fierce so they won't take off. They even gave him a couple of shells but mostly for show; he would have to write long reports describing any time the weapon was fired. In the end he loaded the gun in front of the squad and then unloaded it when they weren't looking.

Jim had to admit that he was missing in action most of the time, but that his thoughts were always with us.

Our stories gave way to talking about the effect the army had on our lives. We were all ambivalent because the effects were profound and contradictory. We all needed the discipline the army instilled but hated the loss of freedom. We knew that the army had total control over our lives and

didn't like it. I told the guys of how surprised I had been to learn after discharge that the Army Regulations were not secret, that anyone could get copies of them and learn just what the army could and couldn't do to us. I always thought that they could do just about anything at anytime, and that I had no rights. I was wrong but not by much.

The best thing the army did was to take us away from home and let us run wild in a limited way. We learned how to deal with lots of different kinds of people, how to obey orders, how to drink and when to stop, and mostly how to endure. Three years when you're twenty is forever and we lived through it. We put up with being the lowest of the low, of losing privacy in all of our most intimate chores, and of being forbidden to walk away. Civilian life was a snap after all that.

Civilian life, be it at work, at home, or in our relationships, is based upon manipulation while in the army it was pure coercion. It was unpleasant and sorely tested the individual. The job of the enlisted man in the Army, besides being the first to walk through a minefield, is to bloat the organization. It's not skill or personal quality that matters but numbers. If the Army wakes up in the morning and discovers that they are short of infantry then the next thousand signing up are sent there. It's never personal because they never see you as a person.

As miserable as the Army is for the grunts, it's paradise for the officers, an exclusive club. The nearest parallel from history would be the plantation system of the antebellum South. Officers are the owners sitting on the veranda drinking mint juleps and admiring their acreage. They glory in how all their 'servants' love them, always taking off their hats, bowing their heads, and being servile in every way. The work of supervising fell to the overseers, the NCOs. They used to pick cotton themselves once but by being good and faithful they had been placed in charge.

To the hands in the field the owners were distant, strange people who craved displays of obedience and affection. You had to respect even the clothing they wore by bowing to anyone wearing the same plantation attire. They were powerful and jealously guard their prerogatives, and woe to the uppity hand who forgot that. And you knew never to desire a woman of that class – not that she would ever look at you.

While serving back in the CPA I vowed that someday I would unload my pent-up hostility on the Army if ever I had the chance. What you just read was my moment and it – felt - great!

Far too soon it was time to return home. We agreed that the reunion was a great moment in our lives and that we had to do it again soon. We also realized that the next time wouldn't be as good as this one. The important step of dredging up the past and passing judgment on it was accomplished and we could only add to the fringes next time. We had come to terms with the experience.

Taking Bob aside before we left I told him of the problem I had to deal with, the mild contempt I felt for those guys who hadn't served. It grew to major proportions in the case of politicians. I hold military veterans, not myself of course, in much higher regard than the rest of the population. After talking about it we laughed because of the absurdity of dissing people who were able to avoid what we couldn't. It didn't make sense but Bob understood.

Our van pulled out of the parking lot and I took one last look at the fine company Bob had created as we drove by. I wondered what life would have been like without the army but realized that that

was a waste of time. The army had intervened and put us on paths that let us achieve what we were capable of. It had made a man of me for sure. Perhaps I could thank them for that?

Nah!