

"Dear Arne" from April

Before I joined the Army I was a junior in Ballard High School. April's the girl I was going with; she attended Lincoln High about three miles way. I'm not sure how we met, but we were infatuated with one another and spent every minute we could with each other. Not known by many, we would spend more hours together than we should have. That would make a few stories by itself. As I said, we were teenagers infatuated with one another.

I disliked school more than anything else in my life at the time. I would avoid classes. Sometimes, I would avoid school altogether, so I dropped out of school midway through my junior year. I could see this was going to get me in trouble with the law. I found some unsavory friends who also disliked school and we partied. Therefore, I made the decision to leave home; after all, my father left his home in Norway when he was eighteen to come to the United States. I was seventeen and decided to join the U.S. Army. If I thought school was bad, boy was I in for a shock.

For a seventeen year old who looked young for my age, I paid for it and grew up quickly. I survived basic training, went home to April, and enjoyed life for a few weeks before heading out to my duty station about 50 miles east of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. Located in the corn fields of Wisconsin, I became a radar technician on a missile base. I was able to get leave during Christmas that year to visit April. By then, she and her family had moved to Corpus Christi, Texas. It was great staying with her and her family and I knew she was the one I would marry someday.

After a week, I left the warm comforts of southern Texas and returned to the -40 degree snow-filled fields near New Richman, Wisconsin. I was a radar operator tracking aircraft but most of the time it seemed all I did was pull K.P. and guard duty. K.P. was much the same everywhere in the Army, but on a missile base guard duty there are several types. The two types to which I was assigned: one was the operation control line which linked to somewhere in Colorado when sometime in the middle of the night I would get a call and a coded message. My job was to look up the proper response and then give them my name. The other type of guard duty was at the gate; I had a metal chair to sit on in a small building that measured four feet by four feet. In the winter you needed to use the heater to stay warm for the four hour shift. All gates are locked at the missile base; my

duty was to let people in and out of the gate or call someone to the gate in order to escort the person to their where they needed to be.

Once again, I became bored with the routine and decided to make a change in my life. In the Army it's not easy unless you're willing to give up something. Just to show you how eager I wanted to make a change, I chose to go to an airplane mechanic school and extend my time in the service by about eighteen months. What was I thinking? I joined the service to get out of school and I extended my time in the service to get away from the boring routine of military life. Was I confused?

While attending school at Fort Eustis, Virginia, I bought April an engagement and wedding ring set. I gave the engagement ring to her when I stopped in Corpus on my way to Fort Ord, California. While I was there, I found out she had been dating. I had to understand she was in her senior year of high school. I couldn't hold that against her, but thought things would change once I was free from the service and she was through college. We were still in love.

I arrived at Fort Ord and found out they had a surplus of airplane mechanics of about 70 of us, so I was placed in an electronic shop for a few months where I repaired telephones and other communication devices. This shop became over staffed with repair people and I was given another opportunity to work somewhere else I chose the base fire department. I once again became bored. I was an airplane mechanic and I wanted to do that type of work. I soon wrote my senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington State and, boy, did that get results; soon all 70 of us misfits were on orders to Vietnam to work in our chosen fields.

I had been in the Army a little under two years and I had several jobs none of which I was happy with: a radar operator, a school-trained air plane mechanic, a person who could repair telephones and other electronics, a fireman, and now I was about to make another change one, I would not be able to change.

I was stationed at a very large base in Vietnam near the village of Phu Loi where I fixed airplanes. One day, I was selected to become a bunker guard on the fence line of the

base for 30 days. That is when I heard about a patrol being formed to defend the area outside the fence, I thought, "That's what I wanted to do," and so volunteered.

All through that time, I continued to write April and looked forward to the day I would return to her. We exchanged letters several times a week; sometimes she would bake me cookies I was counting the days. One day I was coming back from the mess hall when the person who picked up the mail yelled at me to come get a package. It was from April. I quickly got to my bunk and opened it. It was smaller than most, but I soon had it open. I did not understand the full meaning of what I had in my hands until I read the letter enclosed. We had grown up and apart and I was living a long ago dream. She was setting me free; she was getting married soon and she returned my ring.

Going on a night ambush was not what I wanted to do in the next few hours, but I learned to accept many tough times in Vietnam and this was one of them.

April and I wrote letters again after I left the army and I even went to Texas to visit her after she had been married for a number of years. We both had changed, and now she had children. Once e-mail became popular, we wrote often. I knew she was diabetic but did not know how severe until she wrote me one day to tell me she was going to have surgery on her leg and may lose it. I woke in the middle of the night to write her and to wish her well. She was up, too, and wrote me back to tell me go to bed and get some sleep. That was the last I heard from her. I found out by checking records of death that she died during surgery.

About eight years later, I was sent to Austin, Texas for a project. I was to be there five months and my office was about two miles from where she lived. I knew Bob, her husband, so one Saturday I called him and I asked if I could come over. He was very polite and told me to drop by any time. Later that day, I did. We talked for a few hours and then he asked if I wanted to visit her grave. I agreed and I followed him to the cemetery. We talked for a few minutes and then he said I will leave you now so you can say good-by and he left.

Quite a guy.