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## WHERE YOUTH & LAUGHTER GO

Shortly after midnight on June 2, 1968, Bobby Kennedy was shot at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles by Sirhan Sirhan, a 24-year-old Jordanian citizen of Palestinian descent.

Halfway around the world, half a million troops in Vietnam slowly got the word that Kennedy had been shot. But no one knew what condition he was in. Was it serious or not? One of the shocked individuals was 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Mike Riley who was going home after serving 13 months in Vietnam. He had been fighting a war that America was quickly revolting against.

Mike was at the Da Nang Combat Base airport and was waiting with 200 other Marines to board the plane. As soon as the new Marines coming into the country exited the plane, they would board and then it would be goodbye Vietnam. There was a chain-link fence separating the new arrivals from the seasoned combat veterans. And there was probably a good reason for this. As soon as the new men passed the veterans it started. The new men were scared although they tried not to show it. The salty Marines let them have it verbally. "Better to get killed on your first day than your last. Hey buddy give me your wife's phone number. I'll take good care of her while you're gone."

And on and on it went until the last man had passed by. Riley didn't like all this savage chatter now and he didn't like it then when he had first arrived in Vietnam. He felt sorry for the new arrivals because after the Tet Offensive, the country had turned against this war with a vengeance and these men knew what was even worse was that the American casualties had skyrocketed in 1968 and the year wasn't even half over.

Riley felt a great sense of relief as the plane took off. He did not want to die in this country and after 13 months in Vietnam he still could not figure out why America was here. We had poisoned the county with Agent Orange, planted land mines all over the place and bombed the hell out of South Vietnam and had nothing to show for it. We weren't winning and everyone on this plane knew it.

Halfway to the States, the pilot announced that Bobby Kennedy had died. Although these men were overjoyed at going home, there wasn't another word said on the plane.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and now Kennedy, Riley wondered what had happened to his country.

The Marines landed at Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco. From here the Marines boarded several buses for the one-hour trip to San Francisco airport. When they arrived, there appeared to be a large demonstration going on.

A Marine colonel boarded Riley's bus and said, "There are about 200 protestors here and they are making life miserable for the servicemen returning from Vietnam. There are a lot of police out there and their job is to hold back the protestors. You will get off the bus and walk between the police. If anyone lays a hand on these protestors, you will be court martialed. All right, let's go." Everyone on the bus stood up and a crusty old gunnery sergeant said to Riley, "Lieutenant, if one of those maggots touches me, I'll break his goddamn neck." All the Marines filed off the bus and walked in line across the street to the terminal and the chaos. The protestors were yelling "murders, baby killers" and other nasty things. The police were holding back this dirty, drugged, long haired mob and yelling "hurry up, move it."

The lead Marine slowed down to a crawl. These were violent men who had fought for their country and they had killed. They were furious at this welcome home reception. The protestors were lucky that the Marines didn't turn on them because if they had, it would have been ugly. The Marines entered the terminal which was off limits to the protestors. They were going home and flying to all areas of the country.

Two hours later, Riley boarded a plane and flew to Philadelphia. As he traveled across the country, his anger grew. He hated these protestors because they were going after the wrong people and he despised the politicians who had sent him and others to Vietnam. Five and one-half hours later, he arrived in Philadelphia.

He was met by his parents in a joyful reunion for all. It was a one-and-a-half-hour drive to his home in Lancaster, PA. Mike Riley was so excited to be going home. After four weeks of leave he had only eight more weeks in the Marine Corps. Because of this, he was to report to the Marine Corps Supply Activity in Philadelphia where he would serve out his time.

He left Lancaster two days before he was due to report in. He had to find an apartment because the Marine Corps Supply Activity was not a base with thousands of acres of land and plenty of housing. It was a large office building that took up the entire block on South Broad Street.

On his second day in Philadelphia, he found a small efficiency apartment that was partially furnished. The landlord normally rented out the apartment for \$150/month and you had to sign a lease for one year. When Riley told him that he was being discharged from the Marine Corps in eight weeks, the landlord agreed to do it if the rent was \$175. Riley said, "Fine."

The next morning, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Mike Riley arrived at the Marine Corps Supply Activity early. There was no parking lot and you had to park on the street. He entered the building and asked where the personnel officer was and he was directed down the hall. He walked into an office and said, "I'm Lieutenant Riley and I'm reporting in."

The sergeant replied, "Give me your orders sir."

Riley handed them to the sergeant who walked into an office behind his desk. A few minutes later he came out of the office and said, "Major Jones will see you now."

The lieutenant entered his office and said, "Lieutenant Riley reporting as ordered sir."

The major said, "Stand at ease lieutenant. I see you're only with us for eight weeks. This is a little unusual. Most people are here at least a year. You are to report to Lieutenant Colonel Ball. He's up on the third floor. When you get off the elevator take a right. He's halfway down the hall. You'll find him. He heads up the purchasing department. That's all lieutenant."

Riley left the office and took the elevator to the third floor. When he got off the elevator and walked down the hall he came to a door that said purchasing department and walked in to what seemed like a large classroom with about 20 sergeants sitting behind desks working. No one seemed to notice him. He said to one of the men, "Sergeant, where is Lt. Colonel Ball?"

The sergeant said, "Sir, straight ahead in the office."

Riley looked at the end of the room and there was a glass fronted office and an officer sitting in there and so he walked to the end of the room and knocked on the glass. The officer waved him in and walked over to the lieutenant, shook his hand and said, "I'm Lt. Colonel Ball. I've been expecting you. Have a seat."

Riley replied, "Thank you sir."

Colonel Ball started in, "I know you're here for only eight weeks but we can sure use you. The Marine Corps Supply Activity supplies all Marine units all over the world. Construction on this building began in 1904 and they finished in 1908. We supplied all the Marines from World War I from this building. During World War II more than 6,000 employees worked here making uniforms, tentage and other equipment. Since World War II, this station has supported Marines in Korea and now Vietnam.

"You're going to head up the expediting section. Your supply chief is Gunny Burt. He's good at his job. I know you're not a supply officer by training, so the gunny will show you the way."

Colonel Ball stood up and said, "Mike, lets meet your supply chief."

They left the office and sitting at a desk, facing the other sergeants was a stocky gunnery sergeant sitting ram-rod straight. When the colonel came over he stood up and the colonel said, "Mike, this is Gunny Burt. He'll be your supply chief and Gunny, this is Lieutenant Riley who's taking over this section. Gunny, explain to the lieutenant what goes on here."

The colonel went back to the office and the gunny explained what the expediting section did and then he introduced Riley to all the Marines in his section. There were eight gunnery sergeants and twelve staff sergeants. The job of this section was to expedite orders and almost all orders were for supplies for Vietnam. Riley's job, as the supply officer for this section, was to approve and then sign off on all these orders. When Riley was in Vietnam, the joke was "If you wanted to lose something, put it in the Marine Corps supply system."

Riley and almost all Marines had complained about never being properly supplied. They were always running out of boots, clothing, wet suits, even toilet paper. Now the shoe was on the other foot. He had to get the supplies to Vietnam in a timely fashion.

That night when Riley went back to his apartment, he thought about Lieutenant Colonel Ball and how nice he seemed. When Riley first arrived in Vietnam he was assigned to a rifle battalion up along the DMZ. When he reported in to the battalion commander, he sat at his desk writing something and just ignored Riley. Finally, he looked up and said, "Lieutenant, can you read a map?" And when Riley said, "Yes, sir," the battalion commander replied, "That's a damn good thing because if you can't, you'll be dead in a week."

The battalion commander was what the Marines called a "hard charger" and Riley did not care much for him.

After five weeks in Philadelphia, he was told to report to the personnel officer. He didn't know it but he was going to receive the shock of his life. He walked into the personnel officer's office and said, "Lieutenant Riley reporting as ordered, sir."

The major had a file on his desk. He opened it and said, "Lieutenant Riley, you have escort duty. You will escort the remains of 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Thomas Donovan to his home in Salem, Massachusetts tomorrow morning at 0800. A Marine Corps car will take you and three other Marines to Dover Air Force Base. From there you will escort his body to his home. A hearse will drive you to the Philadelphia airport and from there you will fly to Boston. You will then be met by the funeral director who will drive you to Salem."

Riley was stunned. No one had ever told him about this additional duty. He didn't know what to say or what he had to do. He was in shock.

Finally, he said, "Sir, what do I do?"

"You will do whatever Lieutenant Donovan's parents ask you to do and then at the grave site an honor guard will fold the flag, which covers the casket, and hand it to you. You will then take it over to the parents, get on one knee, hand them the flag and then say the words which are in this file."

With that, the major handed Riley the file which contained his orders. Then the major said, Lieutenant Riley, one more thing. When you get to Dover, they will tell you whether it is an open casket or a closed casket. If it's an open casket, no problem. If it's a closed casket, you will make sure that the parents don't open the casket. As I'm sure you know, some wounds are so horrible that the parents or the wife would not like to see their son or husband like that."

"Sir, what if they insist that the casket is opened?"

“Lieutenant, as I told you, it’s your job to ensure that this doesn’t happen. All Marines who are killed and live east of the Mississippi River are flown into Dover Air Base. This duty station provides the escorts. We try to make the escorts the same rank as the deceased. If we can’t, we provide a higher rank but never a lower rank. Those Marines from west of the Mississippi are escorted home from Camp Pendleton in California. Every Marine killed in Vietnam is escorted home. You will travel in your service green uniform but wear your dress blues at the visitation and the funeral. Any questions lieutenant?”

“No sir.”

Riley left and went back to his section. When Colonel Ball saw him, he waved him into his office.

“Everything all right Mike?”

“I guess so sir. I have escort duty. I was just totally surprised. No one ever told me about this. This has to be the toughest duty in the Marine Corps.”

“Take a seat.”

When Riley sat down the colonel said, “No Mike it’s not. Do you know what a casualty notification officer is?”

“I guess he notifies the parents or wife that their son or husband has been killed.”

“That’s correct. In World War II, they sent a telegram. In this war, the next of kin is personally notified. A friend of mine had this duty for six months. That’s all he could take. He told me about his first notification. He drove up to the house in a green Marine Corps car. He was accompanied by a 1<sup>st</sup> sergeant. They walked up to the front door and rang the bell. The wife opens the door and says, “Come on in”. She was clueless. Right at this time the husband who was in the kitchen walks toward the front door and says, “Who’s there?” She turns around to look at her husband, who sees the Marines and he yells, “Oh no!” Then it hit her. She screams, throws her hands in the air and faints. My friend catches her before she hits the floor.”

“Mike, these people didn’t know the casualty notification officer was coming but they know you are coming. They’ve had a few days to prepare for this. I know you’ll do a good job. You’re taking home one of our own. He’s a Marine.”

Riley stood up and said, "Thank you, sir."

The next morning at 0800 Riley climbed into the front seat of a Marine Corps car. He was the senior Marine. In the back seat were a warrant officer, a staff sergeant and a corporal. He thought to himself, "Does this trip to Dover happen every day?"

As the car took off, Riley turned around and said, "Where is everyone going and who are you escorting?"

Riley spoke first, "I'm escorting 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Donovan to Salem, Massachusetts."

The warrant officer then spoke, "I'm escorting Warrant Officer Hunt. Going to Washington D.C. I assume the funeral is at Arlington."

"Is his first name Bill?" asked Riley.

"Yes it is. How did you know?"

"He was the logistics officer for the battalion. He was a good Marine."

The sergeant and the corporal both said who they were escorting and where they were going but Riley didn't hear them. He was overwhelmed by a great sadness. Bill Hunt had been a good friend.

An hour later, the car pulled up to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. When the car arrived, he and the other escorts were met by a sergeant and taken into a large building where they were directed to a room. While everyone took a seat, the sergeant remained standing and explained what happened at the base.

"When the remains arrive, we wash the body of all blood and then we put on the dress uniform of that man's service. We have a warehouse full of all service dress uniforms of all sizes. Then we attach the appropriate combat ribbons that the deceased has been awarded. With the Marines we also put on their shooting badges. In some cases the deceased has been so badly wounded that the casket must remain closed. When your name is called, someone will brief you."

The sergeant left the room.

Fifteen minutes later another sergeant entered the room and said, "Lt. Riley, follow me please."

Riley followed the sergeant out into the lobby and then into another room. They both sat down. The sergeant said, "Sir, here are your orders. This can be an open casket. There should be no discussion on your part on how he was killed. You are only an escort officer."

Then the sergeant handed Riley a small green felt pouch. "These are the personal effects of Lt. Donovan. You will give this to his parents. Please take a look and then sign for them."

Riley opened the pouch and took out dog tags, a St. Christopher medal, a ring and then a watch. He placed them back in the pouch and then signed for them.

"Sir, enclosed with your orders is a round trip Eastern Airlines voucher from Philadelphia to Boston. The return trip is open depending on how much time you spend in Salem. You'll have to book the return trip yourself. Any questions?"

"No sergeant."

"Good luck sir!"

"Thank you, sergeant."

Riley walked outside with his orders and his clothes and placed them in the waiting hearse which was driven by an Air Force enlisted man.

The Marine lieutenant climbed in the front seat and said, "We have Lt. Donovan?"

"Yes, sir."

The hearse took off and Riley said, "Do you make this trip often?"

"Yes sir. Once a day and often twice a day."

An hour later, the hearse entered the Philadelphia airport, went through a gate and pulled up to the waiting plane. The casket was loaded and Riley went in the terminal. Forty-five minutes later he boarded the plane.

After landing in Boston, Riley walked down the steps and out onto the tarmac. As he stood there, a hearse and a police car drove up. Both drivers approached Riley and the first man said, "Are you Lt. Riley?"

"Yes sir," he replied.

"I'm John O'Hara. I'm the funereal director. And this is Chief Williams who heads up the Salem Police Force."

Handshakes were exchanged and O'Hara said, "The chief is going to escort us to Salem."

They arrived at the funeral home at 1:00 pm. After the casket was unloaded and taken inside, O'Hara said, "I've got some sandwiches for us. Mr. and Mrs. Donovan want to meet you. The visitation starts at 5:00 pm. I've made some reservations at a nearby motel. After we eat we can drop your gear off at the motel and then we'll stop by the Donovan's."

"John, do you know them?" asked Riley.

"Mike, yes I do. Salem is a small town and I've known the family for a long time. Tom was their only son and they a twelve-year-old daughter."

After a quick sandwich, O'Hara drove Mike to the motel where he dropped off his clothes and then they drove over to the Donovan's house. It was a brick ranch house. Mr. Donovan met them at the door. After introductions were made, everyone sat down in the living room. Mr. Donovan spoke first, "Thank you for bringing Tom home."

"It is my honor sir," replied Riley. "I'm just so sorry for your loss. I want you to know that on Tom's journey home he was treated with dignity, honor and respect."

"There is one more thing I want you to know. Marines all over the country mourn with you today: at Quantico, Parris Island, and San Diego. You are not alone in your sorrow. They are thinking of you and praying for you."

Mike stood up and reached into his pocket and took out the small green bag which had Tom's personal effects. He first handed Mr. Donovan Tom's dog tags which he slowly looked at. He gave them to his wife. She took her index finger and slowly moved it over her son's name. Next Mike gave the St. Christopher medal to Mrs. Donovan and she said, "We gave this to Tom the day he left for Vietnam."

Next he handed the watch to Mr. Donovan who said, “We gave this to Tom when he graduated from college.”

Lastly, the college ring was handed to Mr. Donovan. He said, “Thank you for bringing home all Tom’s personal things.”

Mr. Donovan stood up and said, “Lieutenant, can I talk to you alone?”

“Yes sir and please call me Mike.”

Riley followed Mr. Donovan into his bedroom and he was told to sit on the bed.

Mr. Donovan remained standing and said, “I knew something like this could happen. I was a pilot in the Army Air Corps in World War II. I got shot down over France and was missing in action for 30 days. I later found out my parents thought I was dead. The French Resistance rescued me and hid me and later took me across the Pyrenees into Spain.”

“I was proud of Tom for joining the Marines. This is something he wanted to do. He wanted to serve his country. Tom was a platoon commander with A Company 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines. He was only in Vietnam three months before...”

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Then he opened his closet door – you could see the pencil marks on the right side.

“We moved into this house when Tom was three and every year on his birthday we would record his growth. When he was a senior in high school, he topped out at 5’8”.”

Mike thought that in a way most of Tom’s life had been penciled out on that closet door, but he said nothing. He knew it had to be painful every time Mr. Donovan opened that closet door. Then he slowly closed it.

“Mike, will you be at the visitation?”

“Yes sir.”

They left the bedroom and entered the living room. The funeral director said, “We better get going. Mike has to put on his blues and I want to get ready for the visitation. I’ll see you at 4:30.”

They left the Donovan’s house and drove to the motel where Mike Riley put on his dress blue uniform. When they arrived at the funeral home, John O’Hara’s people had opened the casket and placed it at the end of the viewing room. Riley walked over to the casket. Tom Donovan looked like a parade ground Marine: his shoes had a brilliant shine, the trousers had a razor sharp crease and his dress blue coat was flawless. Above his left pocket were his combat ribbons and shooting badges. The people at Dover had done an extraordinary job. Then Mike looked at Tom’s face and he thought that this could have been him lying there. He had so many close calls. Why had he been spared and so many others hadn’t?

A few minutes later, the Donovan’s arrived. They said hello to Mike and they walked up to the casket. They both had their arms around their daughter and they were all crying. The overwhelming sorrow of this moment almost crushed Riley but he held it all in. Finally, Mr. Donovan said to Riley, “I’ve never seen Tom in his blues. He looks good.”

Riley replied, “Yes, he does sir. He sure does.”

The Donovans kneeled down in front of the casket and each one said their silent prayer. After a few minutes, the funeral director came up and said, “Excuse me but people are starting to arrive.”

As they stood up Mike Riley started to move to the back of the room when Mr. Donovan said, “Mike would stand up here with us?”

“Yes sir. It would be an honor.”

For the next two and a half hours, everyone that came by, Mr. Donovan would say, “This is Lieutenant Riley. He brought Tom home.”

When the visitation was over, some of Tom’s friends asked Riley if he would like to join them for a hamburger and a beer. He said, “Sure.”

The funeral director looked at Riley and said, “I will pick you up tomorrow at 9:00 am and funeral is at 10:00 am. After the grave side service, we will go back to the Donovans for a short time and then I will take you to the airport. So have your bag packed.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Riley left with some of Tom’s friends and drove up to a one-story bar restaurant a five-minute drive from the funeral home. They were in three cars and they parked in front of the bar. Twelve people got out of the cars. Someone held the door open for Mike and he walked in first. Sitting at the bar were two young men dressed in working clothes who turned around when the bar door opened and one of the men said, “Look at the hot shot Marine in his dress blues.”

Riley realized these men had been over-served and he clenched his fists and if these idiots wanted trouble he was up for it. But it didn’t happen because one of Tom’s friends gently pushed him aside. The others surrounded the two drunks. One of them said, “This Marine just brought our best friend home. He was killed in Vietnam. Pay your bill and get the hell out of here.”

The two men jumped up, threw money on the bar and left.

They pulled three tables together, sat down and ordered hamburgers and several pitchers of beer. For the next hour, they talked about Tom Donovan. Mike said nothing. He just listened. He learned that Tom had played defensive back on the high school football team. He was small but he was tough. He wasn’t big enough to play college football. But he was smart – he earned a four-year scholarship to Dartmouth.

Mike could tell by the way they talked that they had lost their best friend.

After an hour had passed, Mike said, “It’s getting late. I better get back to the motel. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Someone drove Mike back to the motel. For Mike Riley, it was a long, restless night thinking about all that would happen tomorrow.

In the morning, he ate an early breakfast. As he walked outside, he looked up into a summer sky that was crystal clear. This gave him a feeling of optimism. He thought to himself, “I guess I’d rather be buried on a beautiful day like this than a miserable rainy day”.

Back in his room, he packed his clothes and reread the words he would have to say at the grave site. At 9:00 am, John O’Hara picked up Mike and they drove to the funeral home. Fifteen minutes later, the Donovans arrived and said a tearful “good

morning” as they approached the casket. Riley stood back unsure of what to say or what to do. Finally, Mr. Donovan turned around and said, “Mike, we’d like you to sit with us in church.”

“Yes sir,” he replied.

John O’Hara stepped up and said, “We’d better get going. Please say your goodbyes.”

The Donovans each put a letter in the casket and walked outside to their car. John O’Hara closed the casket and it was taken outside to the hearse.

When they arrived at the church, John O’Hara and the pallbearers pushed the casket to the front of the church. The Donovans and Riley followed. The casket was covered by the American flag and it appeared that every pew was filled.

It was a beautiful mass with much singing and after the gospel, the parish priest said some wonderful words about Tom Donovan. He obviously knew him.

After the funeral mass was over, it was a ten-minute drive to the cemetery.

When they arrived at the grave site, there were three chairs for the Donovan family. They sat down and waited for all the cars to unload. The flag draped coffin had been placed by the grave site. When all the people had gathered around the family, the parish priest said a few prayers. Then the priest nodded at seven Marines standing in the back. They fired three rounds each: a twenty-one-gun salute.

Two Marines stepped forward and slowly folded the flag into a perfect triangle and handed it to Riley. Now it was his turn and he could feel the pressure. He wanted to do this right. He walked over to the Donovans, got down on one knee and said, “On behalf of the President of the United States, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your son’s faithful service to country and corps.”

Mike handed the flag to Mrs. Donovan and then he stood up. She passed the flag to Mr. Donovan and she stood up and put her arms around Riley. He could feel the tears streaming down her face and he almost lost it.

She said, “Thank you Mike. Thank you so much.”

Riley was so choked up he couldn't speak. All he could do was shake his head. He was overwhelmed by grief.

Mr. Donovan came over and put his hands on his wife's shoulders and said, "Let's go home."

The three Donovans walked over to the casket and put their hands on the casket and said their last goodbyes. Then they got in their car and drove back to their house.

Riley and O'Hara followed the Donovan's to their home.

When they walked through the front door, the house was overflowing with food, drink and friends. The Donovans greeted everyone and there was a terrible sadness that hung over them. Riley was glad the funeral was over; it had been dreadfully hard on them and he wondered how long would the period of mourning last. He thought probably forever.

An hour later, O'Hara said to Riley, "We better get going; you've got a plane to catch."

Riley shook his head. "I have to say goodbye to the Donovans."

He worked his way through the crowd and when they saw him approach they knew he had to go. Mrs. Donovan spoke first. "We can't thank you enough for bringing Tom home." She hugged Riley.

Mr. Donovan shook his hand and said, "Thank you for all you did these last few days."

"It was a great honor to bring Tom home. I wish I had known him."

As he turned to leave, he thought, I can't imagine how the Donovans will ever get over this.

Riley flew to Philadelphia and got back to his apartment at 7:30 and he was so exhausted he did not eat dinner. He climbed in bed and fell asleep.

The next morning as he was sitting at his desk, Colonel Ball told him to come into his office. As he did, the colonel told him to take a seat and he asked, "Mike, how did escort duty go?"

Riley looked at the colonel and said, "Sir, I've been to a few funerals but nothing like this. These past few days just drained me. It's hard to explain but somehow I feel like I just lost my best friend and I never even met him. I felt so bad for the family because it was there only son. Sir, how many more funerals are we going to have before this war is over?"

"God only knows."

Riley left the colonel's office and went back to work.

Two weeks later Colonel Ball told him to report to the personnel officer.

Mike Riley walked down the steps to the first floor and when he reported in, the personnel officer told him, "General Ryan wants to see you in his office at 0800 tomorrow morning. And don't be late."

Riley replied, "Yes sir."

The next morning at ten minutes to eight, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Mike Riley was waiting to see the general. He was not going to be late. After three years in the Marine Corps, he had never met a general and he wondered what this was all about.

At exactly eight o'clock, a captain came up to Riley and said that the general would see him. He stood up, took a deep breath and walked into the general's office saying, "Lieutenant Riley reporting as ordered, sir."

The general was seated behind a rather large desk and his hands were folded over a manila file. The general said, "Lieutenant, stand at ease."

Then the general looked up at Riley and said, "Did you escort the remains of Lieutenant Thomas Donovan?"

"Yes sir."

The general opened the file and said, "Lieutenant, I have here a highly commendable letter from Mr. Edward J. Donovan regarding your outstanding performance as escort for the remains of his son 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Thomas Donovan. You have my personal appreciation and thanks."

"Let me read the letter:

Sir,

I would like to take this opportunity to write you concerning 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Michael Riley.

Mrs. Donovan and I can pay him no finer compliment than to wish he were our own son.

At a time when deep personal loss could have embittered, it was our good fortune that Michael Riley came to us.

He discharged the difficult duty assigned to him with dignity, compassion, and I believe, affection.

If possible I would appreciate his parent's address so I may write them.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Donovan”

Riley was shocked. How could a man who had lost so much, take the time to write such a letter?

The general closed the file and handed it to Riley. Then he stood up and extended his hand. Riley took it and shook it and then the general said, “Well done, Lieutenant.”

He replied, “Thank you, sir.”

He then turned around and left the office. He felt like he had just been awarded the Medal of Honor.

As he walked up the stairs to the third floor, he told himself that he did not want this duty again. Although it was a great honor, it had taken too much out of him.

Ten days later his tour in the Marine Corps ended. That morning, he had walked into the Marine Corps Supply Activity for the last time. He said goodbye to Colonel Ball, his supply chief and all his men. They all wished him well.

1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Mike Riley left the building and climbed in his car and started it but didn't move. He thought about his men who had been killed in Vietnam and those men who had been wounded and he wondered if anyone who had served in Vietnam had left it unscarred. He knew he hadn't. Then he remembered the words of the great, British, World War I poet, Siegfried Sassoon who had written:

You smug-face crowds with kindling eye,  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,

Sneak home and pray you'll never know,  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

He continued to stare out the window at nothing in particular. Then he put his car in gear, pulled out into the street and headed for home.