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Kevin O'Hara: Cleaning windows

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By **Kevin O'Hara**

PITTSFIELD — In December, 1967, I reported for duty as a crash-rescue firefighter at Bergstrom AFB, Texas. After three months of intensive training, I was assigned to my crew chief, Sgt. Sweeney, who couldn't hide his disappointment when meeting me. I suppose he was hoping for a strapping Southern boy who followed NASCAR, not a thin Yankee lad who couldn't drive a stick-shift. For several weeks, he belittled me at every opportunity, and took delight in pulling childish pranks: short-sheeting my bunk, sending me out on fool's errands, and deliberately passing gas in our small Scat truck while on ramp patrol.

Despite being a "lifer" who'd been in the Air Force 23 years, Sgt. Sweeney was only an E-4, which meant he wasn't making great strides in the stripes department. Alcohol played a role, along with his inability to pass his 7.0 level exams. He was further cursed with a hideous disfigurement; his face covered with unsightly warts and fatty tumors. So ghastly was his visage that I avoided him on the chow line, fearing I'd end up sitting at his table. Actually, one would feel sorry for him if he wasn't such a blatant jackass.

One morning, Sweeney ordered me to clean the high windows in the lofty stalls where our fire trucks were parked. I cautiously ascended the swaying 30-foot extension ladder with Windex in one hand, and a cloth towel draped over my shoulder. On the concrete floor below, my crewmate Brewer footed the ladder correctly, while buddies Fulgrem and Pearson chewed the fat with Sweeney, who watched

my slow climb with rising irritation.

After I'd finished my knee-buckling task, I tossed the Windex down to Pearson, but simply dropped the cloth from my other hand. On its descent, however, the cloth unfurled like a parachute and covered Sweeney's face. Sweeney immediately hit the floor with a scream, his arms and legs flailing wildly, as he struggled to pull the cloth from his face. I helplessly watched his violent paroxysms from the upper rungs, as his spastic legs kept jabbing the ladder. If not for Fulgrem and Pearson being able to pin him down, and Brewer not holding his position, I'd have been a goner.

The commotion quickly brought others to the scene, who wrestled the still-writhing Sweeney away from the ladder, and carried him out to the front of the firehouse. There he continued to froth and brawl long after the cloth had been removed, before being rushed to the base hospital.

That night in the bunkhouse, our crew gathered around Sweeney's empty bed and mulled over the day's harried events. Since Sweeney had no history of seizures, we surmised that someone had tried to suffocate him as a kid, for we had no other explanation for his sudden flash of madness.

Following a week off on medical leave, Sgt. Sweeney returned to duty, and I braced myself for our scheduled watch on ramp patrol. I figured he'd hold me responsible for triggering his seizure, and there'd be hell to pay. But on this sunny morning, Sweeney neither railed me or stunk up our cab. He just whistled tunes by Burl Ives, as we checked the rows of F-4C Phantom fighters for fuel leaks.

After our second swoop, he abruptly parked our Scat truck and turned to me, saying, "Can't say I remember what happened to me the other day, but that I woke in a hospital bed with one walloping headache. Docs tell me I had a convulsion of sorts, but I ain't buying that. Nope, I believe the Good Lord has used that convulsion as a tool to cast out my demons. Demons who took up residence long ago."

He continued to chatter on, offering me a poignant snapshot of his early years. He'd been born in Tennessee, and afflicted with his rare skin disease at birth. Shunned by his natural parents, he was shuttled from one foster home to another, where he encountered all varieties of abuse. "If the Air Force didn't take me in at 17," he stated, "I'd be long dead."

Following his heartfelt testimony, he apologized for treating me badly from the outset, and promised that things would be better between us. I sat quietly beside him, numbed by his sudden transformation. Why, one might think Sgt. Sweeney had suddenly been born again, or maybe it was just me seeing him clearly for the first time.

When we pulled into the stationhouse, Sgt. Sweeney jumped from the cab with a grin, and asked if I'd join him for lunch. I answered yes without hesitation, finding his appearance no longer disagreeable.

Kevin O'Hara is a long-time Eagle contributor.

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