

A Journey on
**Borrowed
Time**

Robert Russell Allen



*A Journey on
Borrowed Time*

By
Robert Russell Allen



Strategic Book Group

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Introduction

This is a story that I would invite you to concentrate on the similarities you find rather than trying to identify with the specifics that may easily differ from your life experience. If you honestly try to identify with me, you are bound to embark on a life-changing journey. The specifics of my life are not as relevant as the generalities and the feelings associated with those events. If you remain open to hear what my story really tells, then you are ready to begin the journey that will prompt you to think you are reading a fantasy, when in fact it is a true story. I would also ask you not to consider the term *alcoholism* as you begin, because that word and concept were unknown to me as I began my life experience. It did not play into my thinking, nor did it affect my actions in any way for decades to follow. Perhaps you, or someone close and important to you, will benefit from my experience and come away with some insights not easily learned along normal life pathways. This is a true story of endurance, survival, and success with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. A journey that begins in innocence, staggers forward through six decades, and ends up teetering on the brink of death not once, but many times. Let me take you back in time, starting in my early teen years when we did not know what is common knowledge to our teens today. For me this was the mid-1950s, and I was being raised by my parents, who were a loving and stable couple, and a sister who was two years older than me. It was an age of innocence—an era in which most family matters were considered personal and confidential.

There was no crime in my small community. The politics were of a nation united by patriotism and harmony among most Americans. Matters of sexuality and close personal relations were not discussed because of the embarrassment it caused among gentle people. I had learned a few things about sexuality from my friends in the neighborhood and at school, but I didn't really know what to believe. Since I often rode my bike, played with my dog, or adventured into the

nearby woods to act like a cowboy or pretend I was hunting, I had little reason to ask the questions that would have taught me more about life. I was more comfortable alone than being with any number of people. The young girls were okay, just a bit of a mystery to me, and I had no idea what to think about my feelings. At this point in my life, I was much the same as my peers blindly putting one foot in front of the other, simply wondering what might be ahead. It wasn't long before I began to recognize the turning points in my life that usually came with some pain. My parents didn't mention that life was not going to go smoothly because life is life, something we all learn as time goes by.

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CHAPTER 1

My Biggest Turning Point

“Autoclave Twelve, Autoclave Twelve! This is Dust Off Five, Dust Off Five, over!”

The static and the voice of the medical evacuation helicopter pilot were of equal volume on the radio, but there was no mistaking the tension in the pilot’s voice.

“Autoclave Twelve, do you copy?”

The medical technicians of the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi, Vietnam, rushed to the radio to reassure the pilot they were ready to hear him. “Dust Off Five, Dust Off Five! This is Autoclave Twelve. Go!”

“Autoclave, I’m about three miles out and closing fast on your location! Over!”

“Dust Off Five, what have you got? Over.”

“Autoclave, I’ve got a VSI (very seriously injured) on board that needs you bad!” The pilot’s voice never hesitated. The sound of the static from the radio and the helicopter blades cutting through the humid air could not disguise the urgency of his call. “I’m going to need some extra help when I land!”

“Dust Off Five, I’m sending some extra men and a doc for you to our pad. The landing zone is clear for your VSI! Over.”

“Autoclave, my guys are having trouble holding this one down on the litter because of his pain. His legs are bad! Over.”

“Dust Off Five, we’ll be there for you buddy; just put her down on our pad! Over.”

“Autoclave, I’m less than two minutes out!”

This was the third of February, 1967, and would prove to be a day remembered by many whose lives came crashing together at this emergency clinic during the Vietnam War. Some of their family members would not learn about this event for several days; some would not learn for many years. One man died, one man withdrew into his own mind, and one man's post-traumatic stress from this event would fuel his alcoholism for decades to come. I was the last and the lesser injured of those three. Others would carry their memories all the remaining days of their lives. No one escaped that day without scares! No one.

“Autoclave Twelve, this is Dust Off Five. He's all yours, pal, good luck!”

Nothing in my basic training had prepared me to suddenly jump into the mix of combat casualties and pretend not to see the horror all around. I believe my mind paused and held some of the information from entering. Overload. Disbelief. Fear.

Everything kept moving even though I had mentally stopped. The pictures kept changing, and the noises continued to batter me. I had to keep moving, keep helping where I could.

In elementary school, I had written notes and talked to the young ladies in my classes and considered several of them friends. I remember liking them better than the boys because they were more predictable, and I was rarely comfortable with the usual roughhousing that occurred while playing with the boys. I was slender and had not toughened up in my early years. I enjoyed few sports. When junior high school rolled around, I started to play football and finally began to grow as a young man. During this time, my interest in having a girlfriend was also blossoming, but my shyness held me back from actively trying to advance a friendship. Because I was fifteen years old, my interest was growing, but I didn't

have the courage to press forward. Confidence eluded me; I was still the kid from the hilltop cottage who kept to himself.

During the ninth grade, I needed a minor medical procedure on my foot, and while in the hospital, my room was visited by student nurses giggling and trying to get my attention, making me blush. In the end it was all talk. Nothing happened except that I buried my feelings and moved backward on the social ladder. When I was sixteen and in my first year at the high school, the queen of the junior prom began showing an interest in me. Her name was Sandy. I remember being flattered, and I welcomed her subtle advances. I began seeing her at the Friday night dances. My sister had taught me the jitterbug, and I was comfortable stepping out in that direction with Sandy at the dances, but that always led to the slow dances near the end of the evening. She allowed me to hold her close, and my feelings were aroused. She was seventeen, and I must say, full-figured. We would kiss and say goodnight as our parents were waiting to pick us up after the dances.

I went home week after week wanting to stay with her somehow, but knowing that was just impossible. I wanted to kiss her more every time, and I think she wanted the same. It would be many months before we were able to arrange a date that allowed us to be alone to cuddle and pet. Our common innocence created a block to our experiments, and our frustration levels rocketed. I believe this is when I fell in love with love. Lacking experience, there was no way for me to know how to take the next step, and there was no way for me to know what to do about it at the time.

My schoolwork was average, except for the math classes I loved. My goals were unknown, except I wanted badly to grow up fast and experience whatever the man in me wanted. I knew where I wanted to go, but I just didn't know how to get there.

I was too young to go out on my own, but when I turned seventeen, I found out with my parents' written permission I could join the army. I gathered all the information and began

working on my parents long before my birthday. I came up with an answer for everything, including continuing my education in-service, getting trained in the general area I preferred, and being able to support myself.

After all, the pay was almost \$100 each month with all living expenses paid. I would be able to grow up and learn all I should know. Real life awaited me now.

To further set the stage, let me mention that I began life in a small city of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and my family moved shortly after to the northern suburb of Lanesborough where my father and mother had bought their first home from my paternal grandparents. It was a hilltop cottage at the end of a half-mile street bordering a large area of woods and next door to my grandparents' newly built home. It was a great, yet quiet, place to begin exploring life. My memories begin when I was about five years old living with my parents and my only sister Judy. She was our parents' little helper with me being the new little guy in the family, and it would take a few years for me to wiggle out from under the older sister issues, that after all, were minor issues. Judy had appointed herself as an extra parent, and I felt out-ruled and out-maneuvered. I did not respond well to constant supervision from anyone, let alone my sister.

My grandparents were encouraging and kind. They were old-fashioned to a fault, but warm and loving to me. Both were early risers like I was, and I would visit and have breakfast with them often. My grandfather played the violin and my grandmother was expert on the piano and organ. Neither one of them could sing but no one had told them, so they always sang along. It was kind of funny, but they really did not have a clue. The important thing was that they made me feel special and they were the best of next-door neighbors for many years.

We moved back to Pittsfield into a newly built three-bedroom ranch more suitable for our family when I was fifteen years old, another turning point I would not recognize for many years. My father was an energetic and friendly

supervisor at the local GE company, and he proved his family values were outstanding. Having completed only high school level studies and a short tour in the navy in Guam, he took advantage of the business courses offered by his company to advance himself. By the end of his career, cut short by heart problems, we found he was well liked by his employees and co-workers numbering in the hundreds. He had reached the top of his field in that company and retired as the manager of production control for the Ordnance Department. They produced the MPQ4, a mortar locator device for the services that would identify where hostile fire was coming from in combat. He enjoyed the outdoors, fishing of various types, hunting small game, and watching horse races at a nearby track. He would often take me along on the hunting and fishing adventures, which delighted me. He was financially responsible all of his life, even with the added burden of extraordinary medical expenses for my mother, a trait that would elude me for most of my life. My mother was also a high school graduate. She had worked as a restaurant server and as a secretary before she learned she had multiple sclerosis. She gradually became physically disabled, starting when I was around eight years old.

Judy and I would help her with day-to-day chores around the house and with her personal needs. My father learned some physical therapy to aid in her treatment plan and to help her cope with this exhausting disease while also managing the rest of her personal needs. He assumed the shopping and cooking duties while still finding time to study for his work advancements. I am proud of them both and still hear glowing comments about them thirty years after their passing.

Judy and I grew closer when I was about thirteen years old, when we shared information about school and friends. We had accepted our mother as she was. I believe we benefited from these special circumstances and the life lessons learned in our youth, rather than having the feeling we had been shortchanged in some way. Our mother was bright,

loving, and humorous. We got along famously while helping her cope with her illness, inabilities, and the pain associated with multiple sclerosis. Her physical limits would increase gradually over twenty-five years until her death at the age of 53. Family members remember my mother's sense of humor even today.

To continue, on the morning of April 17, 1961, my seventeenth birthday, I reported to the office of the local army recruiter with my parents' letter of approval. He drove me to Springfield, Massachusetts's army headquarters, where I finished my paperwork and joined a few other volunteers in taking the oath. I signed up for a three-year hitch with training guaranteed in the administration area of which finance would be a part, if I were lucky enough to get what I actually wanted. We were directed to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for basic combat training.

Two months later, I was reassigned to Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis, Indiana, for a five week course for postal clerks, also a part of administration, but tedious to a fault. During the first month of this basic period, my life was restricted and in lock step with a company of trainees who were stripped of any impression that they knew anything, or could properly do anything, without doing it in unison, *the army way*. We grew into good physical shape against all odds while learning the basic combat skills intended to save our collective ass in combat.

Camouflage, rifles, bayonets, first aid, and hand grenades occupied all of our waking hours, plus physical training, running long distances loaded down with equipment, and marching until we were ready to fall over.

During the fifth week of basic training, we were rewarded with a day pass on the weekend to go to town and look around. The drinking age was eighteen unless you were wearing a uniform in New Jersey or Indiana, but whatever the case, I did not have to prove my age. My whole life was about to change as I discovered the next true love of my life, alcohol. I immediately noticed the aches and pains of

training subsided and my social concerns were gone. I was taller, older, stronger, wiser, bolder, and ready to tackle anything or anyone. I liked the taste of beer and other drinks, but it didn't matter much because I was in search of the effects, not the taste. I wanted all the promises that alcohol offered to me through its enticement. I thought I had finally arrived in life and I was complete. What more could a shy kid ask for? Euphoria warmed my insides and calmed my fears. My life was going to be good, and all these feelings justified my decisions until this day.

The magnetism of the effects of alcohol on my being would then slowly and surely begin to take over my life and my life decisions. This, I would later learn, was an explanation of the expression, "The man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink, and the drink takes the man." My parents and my grandfather all drank and smoked daily and had never displayed any life problems that I knew about. I thought these behaviors were natural, and now feeling it for me, I understood their habits. I did not recognize that the quantities and frequencies of my indulgences would deliver far different results in my lifetime.

I would learn that after exactly four months in the service I would be sent to La Rochelle, France, to work in the Army Post Office. Most of my peers had drawn assignments in either Korea or Germany, where there was more unrest, so I was happy to be going to France, after learning how to cope with everything important in my life by drinking.

The trip by troopship to France was eight days long, crowded, and boring. There was no drinking allowed on board, and I was not aware of any hidden supply. The pounding waves in the Atlantic Ocean in the fall of 1961 would toss and turn the ship on its course to the port in Bremerhaven, Germany. Once on land, we boarded trains headed for our individual destinations in the countries we were assigned to. The sights and sounds of France were mellow and inviting, while I began to adjust to the different architecture and the narrow street designs with sidewalks everywhere for the

many people who chose walking and biking over cars. The American army trucks were wide and took up most of the road as we continued from the train station to our new base. The mission of this base was to support the military build-up in Germany by shipping the supplies needed by the advance army contingents to be ready if hostilities began in the Berlin Build-Up.

My mission was to find the Enlisted Men's Club and quickly drink enough beer to settle the turmoil in my mind and in my gut. The warmth and soothing feelings of the alcohol settled me down and made me feel good inside my own skin again. This wasn't going to be that bad after all. I had \$100 a month to spend on 25-cent beer, personal items, and, of course, gambling. It took me a little over a week to find out I would have to stop drinking for most of the month because I was running out of money. So I had to become a little more creative financially. I used gambling, borrowing, and taking money from my post office drawer, always thinking I could easily repay any of my losses. I was constantly scheming between those three to cover my debts while providing myself with enough money to drink the way I wanted to drink, and when I wanted to drink. There was a much older specialist named Stonewall Jackson that I worked with in the post office that understood where I was coming from. He therefore continued to lend me money into the hundreds as the months rolled on. By the way, hundreds of dollars in 1961 and '62 were equal to thousands in cash value today.

My need to engage in all of my bad habits was inescapable. I was addicted to all without understanding what addiction was. I had become my own person by the way I *wanted* to live each day without regard to future consequences. Until this time, I had never had to pay any substantial penalties. I felt invincible.

I was also easily distracted by the many young ladies I saw both on base and when I would get the chance to go to town. The age of innocence in France was long gone. The way they looked at sexuality and relationships were decades ahead of

the United States. As a seventeen-year-old “boy” plucked from the states and dropped into France, I was wildly anxious to explore my own sexuality. Problem was, I brought all of my other addictions along with me as I began to grow into a “man” carousing the landscape of this exciting land. My day-to-day decisions were greatly influenced by alcohol. My strength and youth gave me the energy to overdo everything.

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