

PILOTS
AND
NORMAL PEOPLE
BY WALT SHIEL

Short stories from a different attitude



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PILOTS AND NORMAL PEOPLE
BY WALT SHIEL

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*Honorable Mention
AIM Magazine's 1993
Annual Short Story Contest*

Remember

Pete eased down out of his old Ford van. Only the slight tightening at the corners of his eyes gave evidence to any pain as his foot contacted the ground. The 60-year-old injury had become a part of him a long time ago. He pushed the door closed and headed across the parking lot.

He walked with the rolling gait of a sailor just home from a long cruise. Pete had only been on a boat once, a cramped, nauseating trip from Florida across the Gulf, through the Panama

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Canal, and out across the Pacific on a World War II troop carrier. He'd been all of seventeen, scared, worried, and starry-eyed with visions of winning the whole damn war single-handed.

For three years the fear of death clung to him like the jungle mosquitoes. Survival became his overriding worry. The first artillery concussions vaporized his visions of glory.

In 1942 he had hated no one, but by 1945 he'd acquired a deep-seated, gnawing hatred for an entire nation and its people. He wasn't proud of his private hate, his personal war that never quite ended, but it was as much a part of him as the shrapnel in his leg.

Pete paused and scanned the parking lot as he always did, counting the Japanese and the American cars. Too damn many of the one, too damn few of the other.

Couldn't people see that the war men had bled and died in continued with only the battlefield changed? Didn't they understand? Didn't they care?

He pushed through the swinging doors of his favorite hardware store, found the drill bits he needed and hefted a nicely balanced 22-ounce hammer. He carefully checked the labels. The drill bits were okay, but the hammer was stamped "Assembled in Mexico."

He put it back. Too bad. It was a nice hammer.

He scooped a pound or so of nails into a sack, took them and the drill bits to the checkout stand.

"Hi, Pete," Arnie said cheerfully. "Find everything you need?"

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"This'll do it for today," Pete replied.

Arnie, about Pete's age and a World War II Navy vet, slid the shrink-wrapped drill bits across the scanner. He got a red light. "Sometimes these things are more trouble than they're worth."

Pete squinted at the identification plate on the side of the unit. "What do you expect, Arnie? Damn thing's made in Taiwan."

Arnie tried again and was rewarded with a beep, a green light, and the chattering of the cash register. "Yeah, I know, but do you have any idea how tough it is to find American electronics stuff?"

"It's worth the extra effort." Pete handed Arnie the bag of nails.

"Don't start with me today, you old fart. It's been a bad morning so far." Arnie peered into the sack and placed it on the electronic scale. "Ten penny?"

Pete nodded.

Arnie punched in the per-pound price on the register. "So how's the workshop coming?"

"I'm almost done. Then I can start on that redwood coffee table I've been promising Toni."

"The Honey-Do List is always endless." Arnie checked the total on the register. "Comes to eighteen dollars and twenty-six cents."

Pete fished his wallet from his back pocket.

"How's Toni doing with her painting?"

"Okay." Pete handed him a \$20 bill. "It'd be better if it weren't for those rip-offs that screw the honest artists out of a buck."

Arnie counted out the change from the twenty. "What are you talking about?"

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“You know. Those starving artist things they advertise for a few days at some local motel or other. Real oil paintings for twenty or thirty bucks.”

Arnie shrugged and handed his customer his change. “I guess that’s why they call them starving artists.”

“No, you don’t understand. Those damn things are done on what amounts to an assembly line in some Asian country or other. Bunch of women copy the original paintings, get paid next to nothing, and some outfit ships them back to the States where people buy them cheap and stick them in their living rooms thinking what a great deal they got and how great it is to have real art rather than cheap prints.” Pete pocketed the change and picked up his bagged goods.

Arnie shook his head and frowned. “You’re just a crotchety old man who enjoys bitching. If you weren’t one of my best customers, I wouldn’t even let you in here.”

Pete smiled. “You swabbies are all alike. The only things you care about are drinking and chasing women.”

Arnie laughed and waved him away. “Get out of here. My doctor made me give up booze, and Maggie won’t let me chase women.”

“Just as well.” Pete opened the door to leave. “You wouldn’t remember what to do with one if you caught her.”

“See you later.”

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Pete waved and left, happier now. He enjoyed his twice-weekly trips to Arnie's store. They'd been distant friends for over twelve years.

He had one more errand to run. Toni needed some glue for a Halloween costume she was making as a surprise for their granddaughter. He found the glue in the chain drugstore at the far end of the shopping center. Walking to the checkout, he almost bumped into a stooped old man.

"So sorry," the man said, his accent heavy, his eyes downcast.

"My fault," Pete mumbled, staggering back and bumping into a stack of Styrofoam picnic coolers.

The old man was about his own age, limping along with the help of a cane. A younger woman who seemed to be his daughter held his other arm. She said something to the old man in Japanese and they kept walking.

The man's age and limp were like a distorted mirror image of himself. They could be veterans of the same war. The two of them could have fought in the same jungle, might even have tried to kill each other. Yet here he was, shopping in the same American drug store.

Memories washed over Pete in a tidal wave of emotion.

Nighttime in some Pacific jungle. Pete was standing guard as scared and nervous as usual. There's a rustling in the bushes, less than ten feet away. A Japanese officer pops up out of the dark, alone. Pete spins around, shaken and disbelieving -- their perimeter was supposed to be secure -- and raises the heavy Browning

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Automatic Rifle and empties an entire clip of ammo. Most of the rounds hit the Japanese lieutenant, ripping and tearing at his body, spraying blood and visceral fluids, jerking and throwing the man's thin body. Out of ammo, Pete stands, shaking, gasping, finger mashed tightly down on the trigger. The whole platoon descends on him, calms him, pries him loose from the gun.

That had been his first kill, but not his last. It never got easier, just more detached from his emotions. He learned to think of the dead men as somehow less than human.

Pete watched the old Japanese and his young escort walk away. They continued talking softly in a flood of foreign sounds that day-by-day became more commonplace wherever he went in Southern California.

And the usually buried memories surfaced again.

Pete huddled on a small Pacific island, now purged of the Japanese invaders and safe in Allied hands, with thousands of other Americans. Waiting. Knowing that soon, too soon, they were to be ferried again on those god-awful troop carriers, this time to be dumped on the shores of Japan itself. Rumors rage through the troops -- defenses might be worse than the D Day beaches, every citizen of the island nation would probably join in the fight. Casualties might be in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million or more. Unreasoning fear gnaws at Pete's insides day after day.

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Then relief: Hiroshima. The Bomb. Nagasaki, another Bomb. The word spreads rapidly that they won't have to invade. Surrender was certain, defeat of the Japanese Empire inevitable.

Pete struggled to force the memories back into the dark cache where he tried to keep them safely buried. He fought to control his panting breaths.

"Sir, are you all right?" A young woman's voice.

He turned around. An Asian woman, smiling pleasantly. All he could do was nod. He hurried out to his van as fast as his twisted leg would allow. He read his bumper sticker for the hundredth time -- "Remember Pearl Harbor" -- then got in the van and drove away.

He knew he would never forget.

He turned onto the main road out of town, heading for the sanctuary of his ten acres. A Honda cut in front of him, driven by nice-looking young man in a business suit. Pete's hand covered the horn pad but stopped.

Knowledge burned like bad whiskey in his gut, knowledge that the Japanese men, old men now like himself, had not asked for that war any more than he had. That knowledge might never erase his memories, never erase the horrors of war, never erase the deaths he'd seen and the deaths he'd caused 46 years and more ago, but he'd never forget. And he knew he could never forgive the fools on both sides who started that war, or let it start, and who had sent good men to their deaths.

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His country might forget and her politicians might forgive, but Pete could not, no matter how much he might want to. World War II had changed him forever. The bitterness might not always be on the surface, but it was always with him. He had no choice then and he had no choice now. Hwe would always remember.

Hell, somebody had to, didn't they?

He drove past the town's biggest discount store. He tried to ignore the sale ad for Hitachi TVs and hoped his old US-made Magnavox would keep working until the day he died.

But not one day longer.

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