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The Night I Kissed Susan Hole

Truman S. Fuller wanted me to kiss Susan Hole. Susan Hole wanted me to kiss Susan Hole. As usual, I was confused by it all. On the scale of mysterious actions by women in my life, this episode rates fairly low, but still ... I cannot help but wonder why on earth Susan Hole and Truman S. Fuller would want such a thing. Let me recount the rather mundane events that lead up to this moment in my life in hopes that in the telling I may find insight at last, or perhaps generate an explanation that makes at least a modicum of sense.

For those who have inexplicitly been able to avoid listening or reading about my exciting naval career in my previous stories, I offer this brief summary.

It sucked.

OK. Perhaps that is too brief.

In June of 1966 I joined the Navy to see the world and let the world see me. I really had no clear cut plan with my life. I wanted to escape the flat, nothingness of a small town in Texas called Victoria. I had overly protective parents who were torn between locking me in the basement (if we had one) or urging me to dazzle the world with my brilliance so they could brag to the rest of the family at Christmas. The life I was living was worthless to me. The only good thing that had ever happened to me that I valued much was Connie, and now she was moving on, literally.

The Navy was my last chance to break this slow treadmill journey to a brick wall. This was to be my adventure, my coming of age moment. It was the smartest thing I have ever done, and likely the worst experience of all my lives if reincarnation exists. I learned more about myself and how the world pretends to work in those four years than 50 years of psychoanalysis could have ever achieved. I even got paid (not much) while doing it. I have also never felt more trapped and miserable with the unrelenting repetition of each boring day after each boring day.

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After my first bus trip and first plane trip, I arrived in San Diego for boot camp. Three months later they declared me a sailor, and assigned me to a ship. With my typical lack of luck, I was not assigned to a sleek and lethal warship like a cruiser or destroyer. No, they stuck me on a big, fat ship called the Mauna Kea AE22 that hauled ammunition from remote ammo dumps to the fighting ships at sea. The Navy, with its oh so subtle sense of humor, named ammunition ships mostly after explosive volcanoes. Funny stuff, huh? Most days an exploding volcano would have been a lot more fun.

After four months of assorted activities in the San Francisco Bay area (wow, look at the hippies), The Mauna Kea headed for the Vietnam War and a voyage of obscurity and boredom. I spent my entire time in the Navy on the Mauna Kea except for a couple of months on another ammunition ship called the Pyro returning across the Pacific to our beloved Mauna Kea. We basically made 3 cruises of approximately 10 months each to the Gulf Of Tonkin and vicinity, passing out ammunition like a lethal Santa on December 25. We got about 5 months back in the states between each cruise because the Navy was astute enough to figure out that all of us would be declared certifiably insane if they did not cut us a little bit of slack.

As recounted in one of my "Charlie gets dumped" stories, I managed to escape being a "deck ape" in Second Division when the radar officer looked me up and asked if I wanted to be a radar man. I forget his name, but we all called him Fat Jack behind his ample back. He considered himself a bad ass. We considered him a worthless jerk off who thought way too highly of his shiny gold braid. Like most blowhards, he was easy to deal with since his attention span was negligible.

As I learned my job as a radar man and began my climb to petty officer stardom, Fat Jack was replaced by the next whiz kid from Officers Candidate School. His name was Enswiler or Emswiler or something that sounded like a cheap German sausage. He was sort of a goofy, nerd who seemed mostly surprised that he had stumbled into the radar room (CIC, Combat Information Center) the rare times we saw him. He was a soft blob of a man who resembled a pile of cream cheese at room temperature more than anything else. He mostly left us alone unless some lifer

superior officer had given him grief about our attitudes or some misdeed.

Finally, the sausage with gold braid moved on and was replaced by, you guessed it, Truman S Fuller. We called him Tim behind his back and Mister Fuller to his face. Tim was an extremely decent fellow and by far the best officer I ever worked for. He was smart of course, and took his duties seriously, but never once became full of himself and acted like some sort of know it all Old Salt. He let us do our jobs and kept the Mickey Mouse military crap to a minimum. In return, we tried extremely hard to do a bang up job for him and the ship.

Junior officers like Tim were probably in the worst of all possible worlds of the Navy. They had to constantly deal with the lifer officers who were trying to claw their way up the promotion ladder to command heights, and lifer enlisted men who had all the knowledge, but mostly wanted to loaf their way from one drunken port to the next drunken port. The people junior officers could most closely relate to were us short timer enlisted men who were doing our two or four year stints and then getting the hell out of Dodge. Unfortunately, the military necessity for command structure precluded junior officers from becoming overly friendly with their underlings. I suspect Mister Fuller constantly struggled to balance his natural inclination to be our friend and that command distance his job required. We were the same age and had the same attitudes and interests as the friends he had left behind in college, but he could never allow himself to relax and truly become part of the group. He was quiet and a bit reserved, but had a wicked, dry sense of humor he would flash when the chance allowed. I really enjoyed making more subtle jokes that would amuse him rather than the cruder ones for the usual suspects.

When Mister Fuller was assigned to be our boss, I liked him immediately. He watched and listened while learning how things actually worked, and then naturally assumed control with little fuss or drama. I came to know him a bit better than the rest of the gang because of my duties when we were parked in port.

We had a locked file cabinet we called the Banana Locker for reasons I won't bother telling you. Inside it we kept COMTAC publications. These

were books classified Secret or Confidential that explained the Navy way to do various tasks or maneuvers. New people or officers could study these books and learn the approved manner or doing business, and then go learn how it was done in the real world later. My job was to keep these books up to date. Instead of replacing the entire book every time a change was made, I had to only remove the parts of the books that were changed and put in the new revised pages. Then I made a notation I had made the change in the front. It was amazing how many changes I made to the same pages month after month. The people researching and writing this stuff were prolific I must say.

The officers had their own set of much more exotic books and a secure room for their safe keeping in Officer's Country. Unfortunately, their books had not been updated for years. Mister Fuller was assigned the duty to get their publications up to snuff, and since I already had a secret clearance and knew how to do it, I was given the task. I could not remove any of the books from the room, so I had to sit alone day after day organizing stack upon stack of changes in chronological order and then make the changes one by one. It was dreadfully boring.

So here I was, a real life version of Winston Smith in a very small Ministry of Truth, revising the past at two packs a day. Mister Fuller would drop by now and then to see how I was doing and bring even more changes for my weary little hands to do. I cannot claim a friendship blossomed, but we did sit and chat often as time permitted. Friendly respect would be a good description of the relationship I suppose. If I had met him in college, I am sure I would have enjoyed hanging out with him.

I shall not hazard a guess what he thought about me. Everybody in the Navy is a professional people watcher. Whatever band of BS you think you are shoveling lasts about 2 minutes in the close day to day living of the Navy. There is also a tendency to imagine the worst about people. To a group of Midshipmen doing their summer cruise between their junior and senior years, I was called the Cheshire Cat. To a few people I would run into out on liberty in town, I was considered a deadbeat mooch, to my horror, because they thought I was dropping by to scam a free twenty cent beer. There was a guy named Steve who was the greatest buddy you

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could ever want until he got drunk and then he always wanted to kick my ass. I have no idea why. I definitely learned that Charlie was in the eye of the beholder, and gave up fretting about people's opinion of me once and for all.

My third and final cruise crawled by, and my relationship with Mister Fuller deepened into gentle teasing and guy type horsing around, within limits of course. We tried our best to include him in the silly games we dreamed up to pass the time, and he played along as much as he felt comfortable doing. One day he mentioned he had a girlfriend named Susan, and we attempted to quiz him and learn more about his love life. He did not offer us many details, as best I can recall, but seemed smitten by the girl. When we asked what her last name was, he made a mistake and got all defensive and we immediately knew we had stumbled upon something. We spent weeks trying to coax it out of him and he never gave an inch. Finally, we had to fudge the law a bit and resorted to a contact in the ship's post office to learn who he was writing letters to every day.

When I was told her name was Susan Hole, I thought it was a joke name to trick me at first. Susan Hole? The mind reels imagining the taunting she must have endured in junior high and high school. We all laughed about it a great deal and made some extremely crude jokes I have fortunately forgotten. The name was so off the charts funny, I decided to go a different route and not harass him a lot about her name. It amused me to say her name around him and see him tense a little waiting for a joke I never made. After all the drama of our search for the name, the more nuanced approach seemed the better option. Almost making a joke became the joke, well; at least it was for me, and that was all that mattered.

Since Tim wrote to the Hole so often, I assume he had to talk a great deal about his band of misfits to fill up the pages. I speak with vast experience when I say that it is extremely difficult to fill up pages day after day with I love you, I miss you over and over. Sadly, we were not an interesting and colorful batch of swabbies as generally portrayed in Navy movies. Hell, I was the Texan and I never played a harmonica or once bragged about how big things were in Texas. The Navy culture is actually very

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adept at weeding out the true misfits, so we were mostly a bland of brothers and mom didn't like any of us best. Whatever he did tell her about me obviously created some sort of impression that must have played a factor in the eventual kiss.

The red road to Susan Hole's lips began innocently enough. One day Mister Fuller let slip that Old Harv's girlfriend Kari, had gotten a nose job. Old Harv was not really old and I forget how he acquired that nickname. He was from the Seattle area and talked all the time about hydroplane racing. I misspoke once and said hydrofoil not hydroplane and he jumped all over it. The silly man. From then on we always used the term hydrofoil around him to his great annoyance. With the nose job item and the hydrofoil button, I had enough tools to launch a minor bit of harassment on Old Harv.

We had these large status boards in CIC. They were basically sheets of Plexiglas with lights in the bottom of the surrounding frame. You could write on them with grease pencil and display vital threat information to the officers during time of attack. I trust you understand that an ammunition ship under attack is not exactly defensible in any realistic sense so I had plenty of empty status board for my intended mischief.

I will not claim to be a poet but I had a knack for sticking words together that rhymed. On one status board I wrote:

Old Harv calls a foil a plane, what the heck are those?
I think we all must be insane, but only Kari nose.

Everybody was amused except Old Harv of course. The foil comment did annoy him but he was more disturbed that Mister Fuller had spilled the snot about Kari's nose. He fretted like an old aunt that she might find out we knew about her alteration. Sadly for Old Harv, I was his superior and he did not feel he could erase it. Rank does have its privileges. Mister Fuller liked my effort a great deal.

The cruise was winding down and once again we needed something for amusement. I felt it was low time to do something about the Susan Hole name once and for all. I looked at the couplet still glowing on the status

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board and I had my bright idea. It was time for Mister Fuller to get some tough poetry love.

I shall write the entire thing out as a unit here, but you should realize that what I actually did was randomly add a sentence or verse every day or so. Mister Fuller had to check every day to see if there was something new. So, on the status board I wrote:

Truman S. Fuller has one big goal.
That's to get his hands on Susan Hole.
What's in a name? A rose is a rose.
But Hole is as bad as Kari's nose.

Our fair CIC team knows all about Sue.
But not so Tim, he can't take our cue.
Back in the States Sue is having a ball,
While Tim being brave heeds his country's call.

There's one born ever minute PT Barnum used to say,
And our Mister Fuller was created that way.
A trusting soul, so upright and clean,
Not a bone in his body could be classified mean.

Sue you'd better watch out, we're Tim's friends.
Do your best to make amends.
A sweet gentle girl should be your role,
But save some for me, my dear Susan Hole.

Tim loved it. Apparently, he wrote it down and sent it to Miss Hole. A few weeks later, Mister Fuller came into CIC after a mail call and informed me that Susan Hole had written a poem in response to mine. He read it to me and it was fabulous. It was very clever and amusing and even flirty, much better than my exercise in rhyme. I have searched to see if I have a copy, but alas I do not. I wish I could have shared it with you.

That was pretty much the end of the Susan Hole teasing as we became obsessed with the cruise ending and returning at last to the USA. Even more importantly, the Navy was reducing its forces and I was to be

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discharged three months early so my time in uniform was approaching nil. I was thrilled.

Back in the states I purchased a brand new Pontiac LeMans and had wheels at last. A friend named Danny and I rented an apartment in Oakland and I stayed away from the ship as much as I possibly could those last few months of the Navy. Mister Fuller was getting orders off the ship to a new duty station in Corpus Christi. I feel sure that the fact Mister Fuller and I were both departing the group played a significant role in the how of the kiss but not the why. I was aware Susan Hole was in the Bay area with Mister Fuller, but I have no memory of seeing her before the night in question except maybe from a distance standing on the pier. It is also possible that kissing Susan Hole came up before hand in a kidding sort of manner, but memory fails me recalling a distinct incident I can cite.

Danny suggested we throw a party in our crummy little one bedroom apartment that cost us a whopping 185 dollars a month. We invited all our friends from the ship and anybody else we slightly knew who had wives or girlfriends to populate the night with some hopefully cute females. A few key junior officers were invited including Mister Fuller of course. I was not sure if he would come or not.

We baked a ham, bought tons of snacks, and Danny mixed up a killer punch with wine and assorted juices and booze swirled together that turned out surprisingly tasty. We added a few cases of beer and some cheap decorations and a flashing light and it was party time. A stereo purchased in Hong Kong set the psychedelic beat and the turn out was excellent.

Mister Fuller arrived with Susan Hole. She was beautiful of course. I would describe her in more detail if I could but I have to admit that I have zero memories of her appearance. I think she had brown hair and was slender and not very tall, but that is about all I can dredge up all these years later. I know she struck me as smart as a guest on CSPAN and very classy. By classy I mean that she was in control of herself and expected to be treated with respect. She had that self-confidence that makes men desperately want to do things to impress her. I certainly did

my best to be charming and wow her as best I could with the skimpy tools I had available.

Everybody was having fun including Mister Fuller and Susan Hole. Everybody danced and sang and drank and talked about great drunken concepts that would be lost in the sleep that came later. I wandered around being the good host and did my best to entertain anybody who looked like they needed entertaining. I am pretty sure I dance several times with various women, and perhaps even with Susan Hole. While Mister Fuller did not relax himself totally, he certainly was as close to the real Tim as I ever saw him. There were no nasty incidents or situations and by any measure, the party was a complete success.

Our tiny bedroom was the coat room that night. Sunny California can be beastly cold after dark, so there was a generous selection of coats piled upon the bed. Mister Fuller informed me that he and Susan were going to leave since she was getting tired, and things were starting to slow down a bit. I went with him into the bedroom to help dig through the coats and thank him for coming privately. The light was off in the bedroom, but it was bright enough to see clearly as the open door allowed a river of light and party sounds to infiltrate. I told him how great it was that they had come and I hoped they enjoyed themselves and the usual things hosts say to honored guests. He replied that they had a great time and thanked me too.

I turned from the bed and there stood Susan Hole framed in the doorway like we were in some 1950's film noir movie from Warner Brothers. I started thanking her for coming and saying how nice it was to finally meet her, and all the stuff civilized people say in this situation. She replied that it was interesting to meet me at last and probably additional nice things I have long forgotten.

That is when Truman S. Fuller said, "Charlie, I would like you to kiss Susan."

I froze faster than sleet in Greenland. Even if I had perhaps been told previously about this possibility, I certainly did not take it seriously at the time. I stood there waiting for the sudden laugh that would turn it

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into a joke, but no laugh came. It appeared to me that he was dead serious.

I started to make some excuse about Susan Hole having some say in this matter too, and he said, "Go ahead. She wants you to."

I turn and looked at her. "Yes I would," was all she said.

I had mere seconds to decide how to handle this situation. I decided that a peck on the cheek was not going to cut the mustard, so a mouth kiss was the minimum, but a big hug and lots of tongue action would definitely be way over the mark. I decided a modified Ellen last kiss was my best option.

I stepped forward and placed my left hand upon her right shoulder. I could smell those wonderful female smells from her that make men sit alone and stare at night skies on distant ships at sea. The noise from the party drowned out my labored breathing, or I hoped it did. I leaned over and kissed her warm, sweet lips softly but with as much intensity as I could transmit given the circumstances. I was startled to realize that Susan Hole was enjoying that kiss as much as I was ... maybe more. After a few moments (how can you judge time in such circumstances?) I broke contact, opened my eyes and slowly leaned back never taking my eyes off of her eyes. I do not know what it was I saw in her eyes, but there was a strong sensation that reminded me of looking in Connie's eyes in a car at the Corral so many years before.

Susan Hole softly said, "Thank you".

So did Truman S. Fuller.

I looked away at last.

I probably said "My pleasure" or something equally mundane. I may have even attempted a lame joke like "Some of Mister Fuller's orders are a heck of a lot better than others". I really was not sure what to say in these circumstances.

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After a bit more small talk, they left. When I saw Mister Fuller the next Monday on ship, he thanked me for inviting them to the party and repeated that she enjoyed meeting me and was very impressed. I was not sure what that meant but I smiled and thanked him. I did not tell anyone on the ship that I kissed Susan Hole.

I never saw Susan Hole again. I still have no idea why she wanted to kiss me.