

Once upon a time ■ ■ ■ (because all the best stories begin that way)

by Chuck Greene
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... in Phu Loi, South Viet Nam, in the spring of 1971, I sat at work in the patch van, heart of the Signal Corp base communications system, listening to an 8-track recording of the Suntones' latest release, *Watch What Happens*, and dreaming of the day I'd get "short" enough to go home. At age 21, there's a terrible impatience for the next chapter of one's life, and that was heightened not only by the tape Bill Fletcher had sent, but also by his accompanying letter about the upcoming international convention in New Orleans. Neither of us had ever been to an international—heck, we'd only been Society members for about a year.

But, I knew I wouldn't get to go to New Orleans. Even guys with severe family problems, guys with severe drug problems, guys who had special leverage with the brass—*nobody* was getting stateside leave. So, strictly as a joke and to relieve personal tension, I swiveled to face the teletype, stuck in a leave request form, and began to pound out a most phantasmagorical and exemplary exposition of prose and wit, extolling the mental health benefits accruing naturally to four-part warblers, and further espousing, in tersichordian P. T. Barnum-ese, the scintillating singing, vocal acrobatics and titillating showmanship that would take place in New Orleans as tonsorial tunespinners from the four rounded corners of the globe migrated ... you get the idea.

I remembered to adverbially split every infinitive and included a sterling list of conveyance alternatives, such as three men in a tub, rickshaw, donkey, the Titanic, etc.

Well, *that sucker came back approved!*

Wherewithal the problem

Elation quickly dissipated, however. I had already spent most of May's \$165 paycheck on stereo gear, shipped home to Raleigh, N.C., so I only had about \$25, plus the June paycheck, to count on before leave began. I figured a \$20 convention registration, \$410 round-trip air fare, \$6.25 nightly dorm lodging at Tulane, \$10 cab fare from the airport, and \$10 per day for food would require a minimum budget of about \$550. But when a miracle happens, such as approved leave, one must have faith that addi-

tional miracles will occur to support the first one.

So, I took the last of my pocket money, purchased a registration and requested Tulane lodging (with no deposit). Still, when the June paycheck came, there were only four days left before my leave began, and my budget remained \$385 short.

Then, I (a lowly Spec-4) was invited to participate in a moderate-stakes poker game that was normally reserved for non-coms. The first night, I pocketed \$273 of the other guys' money and quickly bought a plane ticket—on the QT because I had been ordered to play again the following night to



Chuck Greene, author of this story, is pictured above enjoying the 1992 convention in New Orleans.

give them a chance to get their money back. The second night I took in \$140, then broke slightly better than even over the next two nights, thumbed a ride to Saigon, flew to New Orleans and took a cab to the Roosevelt (headquarters) Hotel—arriving about 3 a.m. on the Monday—*yes!*

Taken in tow

Too early to check in at Tulane, awake for nearly 60 hours on pure adrenalin, I thought, who *are* these people in the lobby of this grand old hotel at 3 a.m.?

"Hey, soldier, where ya from?"

"Nam."

Laughter. "No, really, you came down from Ft. Polk?"

"I just flew in from Phu Loi, South Viet Nam—really. I'm here because there's a barbershop quartet convention in this hotel later this week."

Emotion and incredulity washed across the faces of Doug and Judy St. John and the rest of the dozen or so folks lined up early to purchase best seat tickets for the following year's international in Atlanta. From that moment on, I never wanted for anything the whole week.

They put me in one of their rooms right there at the headquarters—it's a true culture shock to go from a "hooch" to marble floors, oriental rugs, fringed canopy bedding, polished brass, hand-carved ivory and mother-of-pearl fixtures. Upon my awakening, almost 30 hours later on Tuesday morning, they bought me all the breakfast I could eat and drove me to Tulane. They even chipped in and bought me an Atlanta registration as a gift. They insisted I sit with them, fourth row, center section, in what would have been seats for the **Roaring '20s**. I got to sit there through all sessions because, for the first time, the '20s made the finals.

I sat between Ann Gooch, who was later to become Sweet Adelines International president and a renowned coach and director, and Jean Pyles, later to become a Sweet Adelines International Queen of Harmony (along with Judy St. John), and to direct Gem City to a record number of Sweet Adelines International chorus championships. The personal kindnesses shown by barbershoppers that week still bring tears to my eyes. I was not allowed to buy a hot dog, much less a dinner!

Paul Conway brought "civvies" from my mom. At one of the sessions, then Executive Director Barrie Best had me stand and be recognized as the person who had come the farthest to attend the convention. It was the swan song convention for the **Four Renegades** and, following the massed sing, they backed up to a wall enclosing Jackson Square and sang a half-dozen numbers for just a small group of us.

Ron Riegler, Roaring '20s bari, patiently spent an entire hour teaching me the "Last

Night Was The End Of The World" tag. I woodshedded in the lobby with a hippie named Tom—we made quite a contrasting pair, he in T-shirt, beads, jeans, and elbow-length hair, and I in Class As with a crew cut—but this harmony binds many desparate souls. Oh, Tom's last name—*Gentry!*

Gentlemen's Agreement won the contest, but I never got close enough to them to say hello or even to hear them sing, other than their contest sets. Finally, Sunday morning came, and with it, a collage of warm, wonderful memories—mixed with some intense realities. I would go home for two days to see my family, but then it was back to 'Nam for another five months.

Little did I know this fairy tale wasn't over.

... the rest of the story

Three days later, sitting quietly in the Los Angeles airport, I was still four-part-harmony saturated. Since the convention, every time a semi went by or a lawnmower whirred or a jet plane roared, I had imagined chords within the white sound. Now they were there again and *louder*. I thought, gee, that's distinct enough to certify me crazy. Wait a minute! There was a quartet singing in the airport somewhere! So I jumped up and followed the sound ... holy smokes! It was the Gentlemen's Agreement!

Would you believe ... *we were on the same flight?*

Would you believe ... *their destination was Viet Nam?*

They were embarked on a USO tour that had been set up months before. Was I dreaming? *No!*

It's all true. They took me under their wing, guided me through a couple of polecat songs, let me perform a song with them during layovers in Manila and Guam, taught me some easier tags, and Al Rehkop, Drayton Justus, Glenn Van Tassel and Bob Whitledge have been my good friends through all the years since.

It's 1992 now, and another convention has met in New Orleans. It would never be possible to thank and hug all those who touched my life during that July of 1971, but those who of you who read this *now* know that I love and remember you.

Please, don't anyone think this story too fantastic ever to happen again—it will happen because we barbershoppers pass on what we receive. And, besides that, tales like this never end ... they go on happily ever after.

**This story has been told many, many times
by Chuck...at afterglows, in meetings,
over dinners....**

***It was one of the most
formative moments
in his life.***

Pass it on...

**The link to this issue (and article)
can be found at:
<http://www.barbershop.org/resources/the-harmonizer.html>
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