A Tour of Duty

John Hillman*
HIGHWAY A1A follows the Atlantic Ocean down the Florida coast. Coming over from Tallahassee, travelers pass through Flagler Beach and top a small rise outside of town and there before them lies a vast world of water and upon their ears echoes the ageless roar of incoming waves. They turn right on A1A and pull off along the highway, overlooking a gray sky and an endless stretch of white sand ruffled by sheets of green water gliding toward them, pushing before it rolls of kelp-colored foam. Sea gulls, their ephemeral cry tossed about by the wind and spray, fly overhead, dipping and rising, gently alert. The travelers get out of their cars for a moment and look across the waves and think that now they are close to that world beyond the sea and that if they looked hard enough they could see some foreign coastline out there. But no, all they can make out beyond the mist is the shadowy, gray shapes of the shrimp fleet hovering just beyond the reach of clear vision. They turn; the whipping Atlantic wind is cold this time of year, even in Florida, and the fine, cold spray of mist drives them back to their cars and they continue down the coast toward Daytona Beach, always with eyes searching the sea.

Lieutenant Paul Candler drove leisurely down Highway A1A. He had no destination in mind and thus was in no particular hurry to get there. His jacket was unbuttoned and a flight cap lay on the seat beside him. His eyes shifted out to sea, followed the white, sandy beach to nowhere, glanced down the road and inland, missing nothing, taking in the whole of his world, the sea, the land, the sky. Miles of road lay behind him, rolling steadily past, becoming a part of the past and forgotten.

He had had thirty days of rest, thirty days to recondition himself. Twenty-five of them were gone already and now he
was skirting nearer and nearer to Eglin Air Force Base, where he was to report at midnight of the day beginning the new year. He'd been sent home for a rest after a year of war; a year of blowing up railroads and barges, of destroying warehouses and factories, oil depots and ammo dumps. A year is a long time to be watching, waiting for the little puffs of gray smoke and flame that suddenly appear outside your plastic canopy, rocking you with unseen blasts. A year is a long time to be killing people, even for a very worthy cause, a long time to see bodies sink to the ground, torn open by the fiery streams of steel aimed by your hand, a long time to realize that those bodies once had as much life in them as yours, that they may have been as afraid and as unwilling as you were. Then you begin to get sick of the destruction, the pain, the fire and bursts of guns and explosions of shells and eruptions of the earth below.

The only thing that had kept Paul going this long year was the fact that his tour of duty was drawing to a close. Only the knowledge that for him at least there was an end to this daily holocaust, this daily flight into a sky where he became an unwilling gambler for his life, when his stomach ate away at his insides and his muscles jerked uncontrollably. Then, toward the end, he was so afraid that it might happen, that he might get hit this close to the end that he lay in bed and prayed himself to sleep at night.

Then it was over, but it wasn't. The pilot shortage had forced drastic measures to be taken, and men were to be used over. Paul had taken it with shocked calm. All he could think of was “No, oh God, no.”

He spent the first twenty-six days with his wife. But he wasn't the same. Something was either lacking or that something unseen but felt had accompanied his return. She couldn't at all understand how he felt because he couldn't tell her. She could recognize his restlessness, however, and so consoled him whenever she felt the need by saying, “Well, I'm sure you can work it out.”

So his time at home had been spent quietly, just as if he'd never been gone and as though he weren't ever to leave again. But Paul couldn't stand much of this, and began to hear “Well, I'm sure you can work it out,” more and more. But he couldn't work it out. He was no longer sure of anything. He was no longer sure what he wanted and he had hoped
that at least now she could help him to find all this again, that she at least would remember and have kept their dreams and the future they had planned together. But no. As usual he was left to work it out, and she would accept whatever decision he came to and would perform by it and be happy and go to bed with him and love him and sleep and get up and fix breakfast and . . . .

Toward the end of his leave he'd become more and more restless and even occasionally would walk about the living room, finally pausing before the large windows which looked out over the gently rolling hills of Connecticut. He stared out, one foot propped up on a low, stone window seat softened by many bright-colored pillows. Outside, bare trees rose stark against a dark sky and should have made the warmth of the living room comforting but didn't.

He was deep in thought when Ellen called from the kitchen that dinner was ready, but he couldn't hear, nor the second cry, and she came for him and admonished him gently.

"Didn't you hear me call you?"

He came to sudden life.

"Do you know what we ought to do when I get out this time? Let's take off for a while. Maybe a whole month. Wouldn't that be great?"

But no. Dinner was getting cold. Ellen said that would be nice if they could do it and pulled him out to the kitchen and wondered all the while they were eating if there was anything she could do before he left.

"No, nothing."

He had left purposefully right after Christmas, explaining that he had to be back early to help organize a new squadron. She'd complied with a disappointed but accepting "Oh," and had sent him off with love. He'd been driving steadily since. The closer he had come to Florida the greater had been his feeling of dread, but now, driving along the ocean, he felt almost calm and serene watching the violently rolling waves and hearing the roaring surf. The nearness of Eglin no longer disturbed him as it had. Now all he could feel was time slipping past with the road speeding by beneath him. He could feel January first coming and thought of how it would be if he could just stop time, but knew this was impossible and also that he couldn't live forever with the
agony of knowing that January first was out there, waiting. He forgot everything of the past except one year and the horror of it came back and the gray skies became smoke-filled, the ocean roar became the thunder of big guns. How could he stand another year, he thought. Was this what he must look forward to?

He reached Daytona at noon and stopped and ate lunch in a restaurant called the Royal Palm. The sky was blue now, with puffs of white clouds lingering overhead and covering the horizon. The air was warm and the trees green and leafy. He felt tired but refreshed as he walked from the restaurant and almost content and he stopped for a moment and reflected on just being there. Then he noticed his car and nothing had changed. He might have hoped to come out and find a different car, a different direction to take, but again no, and he climbed in and pushed on. Through the Broadwalk, down past elegant and exciting motels, the Diplomat, the Thunderbird, the Royal Inn. Turn right and cross the Halifax River, driving slowly, careful of the old men and boys fishing from the bridge. Through Daytona proper, he drove inland, past the famous Daytona Speedway, past the dog racing kennels, and out of town, aimed for Orlando. In two and a half hours he was passing through the heart of Florida and on the way to Tampa and the Gulf.

The first indication of Tampa is the huge Tampa International Airport and beyond this the highway widens to six lanes and travelers speed on and through the city hardly slowing down. Rock Point is ten miles long and spans Tampa Bay. The sky is clear and the bay is calm and blue-green in the late afternoon sun. People are fishing intermittently along the Point and boats dot the bay, poles arching gracefully over the water, men sitting idly, watching the poles, the traffic flowing past unnoticed. A gentle breeze waves the palms and the travelers reach the spit of land across the bay and head for Clearwater, then down toward Largo and Pinellas. At Pinellas they cross Boca Ciega Bay and they're on Long Key, as far west as they can go. Beyond lies the Gulf of Mexico.

Paul drove down Long Key to Madiera Beach. This side of Florida is not nearly as elegant nor as showy as the Atlantic side. This side is a retreat, a place for quiet and peace. Here the water is a calm, deep, blue-green, sparkling, flaming as
the sun dips into the Gulf and disappears, leaving only hues of gray and green and brown, and the steady lapping of waves around pier posts. Here Paul decided to stay.

He found a comfortable room in the Sailfish, a small but clean motel overlooking the Gulf. An amiable, uncurious old man checked him in quickly and showed him to his room. In a moment he had unpacked his bag and was showering, washing the miles and fatigue from his body, wishing at the same time that he could wash away the gnawing uneasiness that was eating away at him. He emerged from the shower, dried, and put on his pajamas, turned the TV on, and stretched out on the large double bed with the evening newspaper, the ST. PETERSBURG TIMES. The war still filled the headlines so he skimmed through the paper quickly, all interest gone. He watched TV for a while, then went to bed and slept soundly and late.

At eleven-thirty the next morning he drove down to a restaurant for breakfast, then returned and climbed into a pair of swim trunks. He spent the rest of the day walking the beach, wading through the icy waters of the gulf, examining the shells and bits of coral that washed ashore, the dried skeletons of sea-horses, the fearsome-looking horseshoe crabs, the delicate sand-dollars. The sun was hanging low in the sky, just above the water, when he found himself standing looking out to sea, one foot propped up on an old, wrinkled pier piling. He hadn't realized he'd walked so far but the motel was nearly a third of a mile down the beach and he'd left behind even the few other vacationers who were out this late. Behind him he noticed a row of shacks lining the beach, set back about fifty yards from the water. Out of one came a little, blond, tousle-haired girl, six or seven years old. She was skipping up and down the beach, a small pup frisking beside her on a leash.

“Is that your dog?” Paul asked.

“Yes, sir.” She said it so wonderfully polite and childlike.

“What's its name?” he asked again.

She answered in a little southern girl’s small voice and drawled, “Taaammy,” then turned on and ran along the beach, hair flying, jacket flapping, her tennies kicking up little sprays of sand.

He couldn't get the child out of his mind after that. Three days he stayed and although he never saw her again he
thought of the incident often while musing up and down the beach. Time passed rapidly, even with so little to do, but Paul lived a lifetime in those three days, had seen the sun rise and set each day, given up by the darkened land in the morning, accepted by a flaming sea in the evening, and all had seemed as it should be. But on the fourth day he rose with a dread that stayed with him throughout the day. He walked the beach as usual but it was as if all that was left anywhere was this beach and himself. There were no people, no gulls, nothing but the little sea-horses, fragile and brittle, and the giant horseshoe crabs glaring from behind imperturbable stoney masks, unfeeling, unknowing, concerned only with a very simple life while it lasted and carrying on much the same as they had two million years ago when the first one was washed upon the beach to dry in the sun.

Midnight became a haunting fear, bearable now, only because it was some seven hours and three hundred miles away. His whole life swept before him and suddenly the dreams of the future came back to him and he saw buildings rise and flourish because he'd wanted to be a builder, a creator of life. Eleven o'clock that night he was still in his room at the Sailfish. He lay sprawled on the bed, comfortable, calm. He was thinking ironically of love and death. How true to life, both of these, and yet how utterly unpredictable, he mused. We are born and raised with each of these and yet they remain two mysteries that we haven't been able to solve. We are nurtured in love and shielded from death as children; as men we nurture death and make a mockery of love.

A desk lamp was on across the room and Paul was aiming a service revolver at it, steadily. He thought now it was too late to go back. In an hour he would have overstayed his leave. He thought of the little girl on the beach. He thought of his wife. He thought that after all it didn't seem to be hard to do this as he brought the gun up before him. But in that final moment between pulling the trigger and darkness, he wished he'd left some kind of note for Ellen.