

Success and Self-Discovery

An Entrepreneur's Memoir of Growth and Transformation

Preface

People have a lot of opinions when it comes to the characteristics that make a successful entrepreneur. Assumptions about the entrepreneur title are thrown around on social media outlets like LinkedIn, and every time I come across yet another one, this line comes to mind: “an entrepreneur is not an entrepreneur, is not an entrepreneur.” I borrowed that idea from S.I. Hayakawa, the semanticist and former Senator, who wrote many years ago, “A cow is not a cow, is not a cow.” In other words, even though they are all cows; not all cows are the same. The same logic applies to entrepreneurs. Not all entrepreneurs are the same, even though they are all entrepreneurs. There is the blue-collar entrepreneur and the white-collar entrepreneur.

The white-collar entrepreneur is the lucky one who was bright enough and fortunate enough to attend a top university like MIT or Stanford and found it fairly easy to attract funding and a team to build their startup company. You know, venture capitalists, IPOs, etc. In other words, using other people's money to fund the company and mitigate your risk. Then there's the guy or gal who gets laid-off or terminated and has to strike out on his or her own to make a living. One of my clients started that way. He lost his job as a machinist and found a customer who helped him purchase a machine which he placed in his garage. Today he has a large plant with nearly one hundred machines and dozens of employees and customers. He is a blue-collar entrepreneur.

A blue-collar entrepreneur is typically someone who grew up in a working-class family and always wanted to be his or her own boss, but has no idea how to start a business. When presented with an opportunity, the blue-collar entrepreneur dives head-on into the water, with limited resources. I am a blue-collar entrepreneur, and I earned the title when I lost my job. Unlike the aforementioned white-collar entrepreneur, however, who typically has a Plan B and other survival options in the event the business fails, the blue-collar entrepreneur is like a prize fighter. He or she enters the ring expecting to win. There is no Plan B because not succeeding is not an option. There are no backup resources. For me, starting and building my business was brutally tough at times and I wanted to quit more than once, but I am glad I stuck with it, fought those feelings, and got up each time that I got knocked down. Now I've been in business for over forty-six years.

This is a book about empowerment. About my personal growth while in business. I share my experiences, warts and all. I describe how I learned how to succeed in college, how to win sales contests at work, and how I started my own business with only \$300 at twenty-eight years old and turned it into a million-dollar company. In this book I include the good and bad decisions that I made and what my reasoning was in order to help you learn from them, and I provide actual detailed how-to sales and marketing tips and tricks. Most importantly, I candidly share my personal journey from the effect of growing up as the youngest child in a flawed family to quitting college during the Vietnam War, enlisting in the U.S. Air Force, and returning to school as a disabled veteran. Then a year after graduation, my wife and I moved to San Francisco and I describe in very specific terms how and what I learned about myself while there that prompted me to move back home to Boston and become an entrepreneur.

The entrepreneurial highway is riddled with potholes, twists, turns, and bumps. Once you start your business you will be amazed at how many of them will come your way. There will be issues and experiences that are impossible to predict and even more difficult to comprehend. For me, my early business success spawned depression and revealed family issues that had previously been repressed by my drive to succeed. An opportunity to travel overseas and represent Massachusetts for the International Rotary Foundation was an incredible experience and created unfathomable personal and business issues that changed me forever.

Despite the challenges and disappointments, being your own boss and controlling your own life is worth every twist, turn, bump, and detour along the road. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote, *“Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered with failure than to take the ranks with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”*

I hope my story inspires you to become an entrepreneur. I’ve tried to tell it in an entertaining and meaningful way, designed to help you grow awareness and avoid the pitfalls and painful circumstances that I’ve personally experienced as a blue-collar entrepreneur. On the flip side, I hope it will help you achieve your business and personal goals. Like a prize fighter, you may not win the fight, but you never want to enter the ring thinking that you’re going to lose. Even if you get knocked down, get up and change your stance; then do battle in the next round and the rounds after. Ultimately, you’ll hear the winning bell ring! Blue collar entrepreneurs are the independent-thinking, hard-working champs for the American Dream!

###

© Copyright 2023 Steven M. Stroum

Contents

1. Send Me Back to the War
2. Learning the Process of How to Win
3. If You Want Something, Go Ahead and Ask For It
4. Planting the Seeds of Change in San Francisco
5. A Sales Manager who Didn't Want Steak
6. A Taste of Entrepreneurship Gone Sour
7. Where Do I Go From Here With My Life
8. Embarking on an Entrepreneurial Journey
9. Learn on the Fly and Fake it Till You Make It
10. Growing Pains, Tumult, and Critical Decisions
11. Blurred Lines: Business and Personal
12. Honor in Korea and Betrayal Back Home
13. Twin Light Manor and the Changing Tides
14. Letting Go and Becoming My Own Person
15. We've Been Trying to Get Rid of You
16. Low Pricing Can Kill Your Business
17. Business Success and Life-Altering Personal Revelations
18. The Internet Changed Everything... and Nothing
19. Are You an S.O.B?
20. The Final Year That Never Happened
21. My Business is My Art and My Art is My Business
22. Entrepreneurs are the Real American Heroes

Disclaimer: The names of former employees and clients of The Venmark Corporation in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of those individuals; except for family members and a few others. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Dedication

Dedicated to Peggy and Ellen, the girls from Framingham.

Chapter One

Send me Back to the War

It was November 1966 and I was a freshman at Northeastern University with a student draft deferment. There were about 375,000 US troops in Vietnam at that time and the war was raging. But, so was the anti-war movement in the United States. In 1964 the movement began by left wing groups and college students. By mid-1966, because of the rise of American casualties and increased draft calls, middle-class families for whom military service was not on the agenda, started to take notice. More and more people were questioning authority. Also, Martin Luther King, Jr. was marching for civil rights while Atlanta and other cities experienced race riots for the first time. President Lyndon Johnson was in the White House and the seeds were being sown for the fury of 1968.

I was majoring in education and while I had some wonderful teachers and a group of nice classmates, I wasn't particularly motivated. My mother was a teacher and was a heavy influence on me at that time. Perhaps that's why I majored in education. Attending college was something that was expected but I didn't feel like I belonged there at the time. I quit college and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. My oldest brother was an Air Force veteran and my other brother was an Airman stationed in Thailand. At that time, the Dean of Freshman, Dean Call, assured me that I could return to Northeastern after my four years of military service. So, I left college while in good academic standing.

It was a youthful decision. I had set the gears into motion: my classmates were throwing a goodbye party for me and deep down in my gut, at the very pit of my stomach, I knew that I had made a huge mistake. I was conflicted. The impulsive decision was made and I had to act like it was the right thing for me. Pride is powerful, especially for a teenager and, again, I had already enlisted. I was committed and moving ahead. I am grateful that I enlisted in the Air Force, where it was unlikely that I would see action on the ground in Vietnam like I would have had I been drafted into the Army. Ironically, I received a draft notice the following week. News travels fast when you lose your 2-S student draft deferment!

I was scheduled to leave the following February for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, TX. Quitting college was a mistake and I knew it. The evening I told my father that I quit college and enlisted in the Air Force he couldn't control his anger. We were standing in the kitchen when he looked at me and said, "You're stupid, just like your brothers and you're a quitter!" Three sons and none chose to attend and graduate from college. The disappointment in his eyes was palpable and it felt like the lowest moment of my life.

When February, 1967 came and I left for basic training I promised myself that nobody would ever call me stupid or a quitter, ever again. A father's words play a critical role in the motivation of a son and rather than being angry at him I wanted to make him proud of me. Perhaps it was because I knew that "I was stupid." In basic training I became a squad leader, and it took me about two weeks to learn how to become a team player and not an autocratic fool like my father.

One night I was summoned to the drill sergeant's office. I stood at the door and announced myself, "Airman Stroum, Sir." His reply was, "enter." And then the lights went out and a musty green military blanket was thrown over my head. I could feel the roughness of the fabric scratching against my face when all of a sudden, boots that were tied together by their laces were swung indiscriminately and landing all over my body, arms, and head. Punches were thrown at me from all angles. All hell broke loose and the beating didn't stop until I bit someone's arm, tasted his blood and heard him scream.

The incident lasted less than five minutes, but I learned something that night about 'going along to get along' and the next four weeks of basic training were an easier adjustment for me. I never found out who was responsible for the ordeal, but the result was a sense of belonging which spurred me to be highly motivated to succeed. I was proud to be in the United States Air Force and even remember looking up at the American flag one day while marching in basic training and saying to myself, "I would be proud to die for my country."

My next assignment was technical school at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, CO where I would study to become a munitions specialist. To my surprise, the coursework was every bit as stringent as the college courses that I had taken, and it actually meant more because our promotions and income were

based on success. This was real life! What's more, a mistake with munitions can literally cost you an arm and a leg, if not your life and the lives of others.

Denver, CO in June is a marvelous place to be. The mountains are breathtaking and the weather can vary considerably. For example, I remember on June 17, 1967 it snowed almost a foot and a half and the next day it was nearly 80 degrees outside. We had to shovel the snow off of the drill pad (large marching area) afterwards, while it was in the eighties outside. Typical Air Force training: you had to get used to performing unpleasant tasks for the team. In retrospect, I really understand the importance and value of that training on the development of self-discipline.

Marching was actually fun. We'd take pride in the symmetry of nearly one hundred Airmen acting as one and getting it right. When everyone was in-step, marching was neat. You could hear it and see it. They lined us up in rows of four, by height. The formation was referred to as a Flight. At just shy of six feet tall I always ended up in the middle of the flight toward the back.

A couple of weeks before the aforementioned snowy day, I experienced a very dark day. I was the only Jewish person in our flight and only one or two guys knew it. George Aubee from Cranston, RI knew and he was a friend of mine. It wasn't something you advertised in those days for fear of potential problems with bigotry. And there was no shortage of bigots in the military.

It was early June of 1967 and I was marching along in formation when I heard the airman directly behind me chant, "Hut, Two, Three, Four, Kill One Jew, Kill Some More; Hut, Two, Three, Four, Kill One Jew Kill Some More." I felt the blood rush to my cheeks and the hair stand up on the back of my neck, blocking off any positive thought process or logic and triggering furious anger. In response, I turned around and grabbed the guy by his shirt with my left hand and while twisting his shirt, ripped off a button as I clenched my fist and cocked my right arm to throw a punch directly at his jaw. He was much bigger than me, but I didn't care. I wanted to smash every pimple on the ugly sonofabitch's face! My friend George grabbed my arm and stopped the punch.

He saved me from getting into a lot of trouble and then whisked me aside to cool off before we resumed marching. I remembered in basic training when our flight was marched to an area by the drill

sergeant to watch two airmen with pick axes breaking up a poured concrete foundation in the hot Texas sun. They had hidden in our barracks attic and skipped a general meeting. Their grueling punishment made an impression on all of us to stay in line and follow instructions or face severe consequences.

Fortunately, nobody in authority caught on to what was happening on the drill pad that day. That big ugly sonofabitch who said “kill Jews” during the Israeli Six Day War was a bigoted fool who I nearly went to the brig over. I didn’t want to get into trouble and that was the end of the incident. Pride can be a powerful motivator and take you over in the face of blatant bigotry.

That experience in Denver was the first of two hurtful antisemitic experiences that would influence my life. I have never felt like a victim, but I have certainly made choices that guided me towards entrepreneurship and independence. Later experiences would confirm that building my own business would be the best way to get a fair shake in our prejudiced society. Jews didn’t choose to work outside of large, mostly Protestant, corporations by accident. There was nothing new about antisemitism in the United States during the sixties. In fact, during the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant issued an order of expulsion against Jews from the portions of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi which were under his control. The order, however, was quickly rescinded by President Abraham Lincoln.

While at Lowry AFB in Denver, I befriended the sergeant who was responsible for the new base assignments after graduation from tech school. Most of us were going to jungle training school in Pensacola, FL in preparation for duty in Vietnam. I mentioned to the sergeant that my brother was stationed in Thailand and that I’d really like to be considered for any assignments in that location. As it turned out, there was one at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP), Thailand. The base was located at the Northeast tip of Thailand on the Mekong River adjacent to Laos, about 30 miles from Vietnam. I lobbied and got the assignment. I was the only airman in my flight not headed to Vietnam. Obviously, I was thrilled to have pulled that off.

The flight to Bangkok, Thailand from Travis AFB in San Francisco took about twenty-six hours. We wore the same clothes and ate breakfast for every meal. We were packed onto a C141 Aircraft, seated backwards with no windows. The flight was beyond boring and at one point I walked up to the back of the aircraft to have a cup of coffee and a smoke. While chatting with another airman there I

discovered that he was stationed at my brother's base in South Thailand and he knew him. What were the odds of that happening?

When we got to Bangkok we were transferred to a smaller C130 transport plane and headed northeast up to NKP. That aircraft was noisy, vibrated constantly, and the ride was rather bumpy. It was about 11:00 p.m August 9, 1967 when we arrived at the base and what I remember most about walking out of the plane was how clear and pitch black the night skies were. There was no ambient light. It was darker than I had ever seen before and the stars were bright and vivid. It was almost as though you could reach out and grab a constellation for yourself. The air was fresh and clean too.

When I got off the tarmac and was signing in at the desk inside the small terminal, the welcoming airman, Jack McManus, assigned me to his hooch which would be my home for the next year. He felt chemistry with me and he was right. There were four roommates in the hooch and we all came from different backgrounds, but got along really well.

A hooch is a wooden structure with screened sides that are elevated about four feet off the ground with a plank walkway around it. The elevation helped keep the scorpions, snakes, and other varmints and insects from paying us a visit; especially during the torrential rains of monsoon season which was between July and October. The rains during the summer only lasted for a few hours a day. But, by mid-September and October they were much more persistent.

My metal locker was right next to the screen door to the hooch and I always kept a light bulb on inside of the locker so that the heat it generated would dry my clothes and prevent them from getting musty. Being on the bottom bunk I had to make sure to bang my boots upside down every morning to check for scorpions and other bugs.

When I first arrived at the munitions area which we called the bomb dump, I was assigned to a storage crew. There we received munitions from incoming cargo planes, logged them into our system and stored them in a small metal hut or an open field. The work schedule in the "bomb dump" was 12 hours per day for six days on and one day off. Over the next several weeks I would then move to the buildup crew where we assembled munitions and got them ready for the transport crew who took them

to the flight line where the load crew put them onto the aircraft. Our crews had local Thai civilians who helped us and the cultural differences made for some funny memories.

Knowing that munitions were harmless without a detonator attached, we would throw small missiles around and the Thais would scatter! It was mean, but we were young G.I.s. In return, the Thais would take a plastic baggie of live locust bugs from their back pocket and eat them; still alive and buzzing as they swallowed. They knew that it freaked us out and we had fun goofing on each other. Sometimes they would put a bug on a heavy wire and roast it with a torch before eating it.

We flew about 40 bombing missions a day on small planes from NKP. The pilots bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail which was the main supply route from North Vietnam to the South and only 35 air miles away from us. When they returned from a mission, pilots would take out a template with the cutout of a truck and then use red spray paint to record their “kill” on the side of the plane. Quite impersonal!

Finally, I got the opportunity to move to an inside job in the munitions control area where there were several large plexiglass sections where we used grease pencils to make notations about each function; following a particular munitions load from storage, through buildup, to transport, and finally loaded onto the planes. All of the dates, times, and who authorized the activities were noted. That is what we did before computerized Microsoft Excel[®] spreadsheets were invented!

There were four of us working in munitions control and we had to make certain that the area was manned around the clock. Again, we worked 12 hours per day for six days a week to make that happen. Then one day I proposed a new work schedule to the NCOIC (non-commissioned officer in charge). I said, “Sarge, I know you want the munitions control area covered 24/7, but do you care how we divide up the hours?” He said, no, why do you ask?” I told him that the four of us would each like to work 12 hours on and 24 hours off and he agreed to the idea. During that conversation the Sarge said to me, “Stroum, you’re a Jew aren’t you? I replied, “yes” and he continued, “then why aren’t you an officer? “I said, “Because I screwed up and enlisted in the Air Force just like you, Sarge,” and we both laughed. We had a good rapport.

Being in the Air Force was like having a civilian job. We'd get up in the morning and clean up at the bath area which was down the covered walkway from our hooch. No marching in formations anymore. The walk did get tough, however, during monsoon season with the intense wind-blown rain storms. The rain came at you vertically and horizontally, swallowing you up. You couldn't avoid getting soaked. Then you'd walk to breakfast in the dining hall where there were pretty Thai waitresses and round lazy Susan turn-tables on each table with condiments and sugar. It wasn't bad at all. You'd walk through the line for breakfast yourself, fill your tray, and the girls would then bring your coffee refills, toast or whatever else you wanted afterwards.

Many of our after-work hours were spent drinking. We'd go over to the Airman's club where a beer was a dime and mixed drinks were 15 cents. On the weekends there was live music. The Thai band members couldn't speak a word of English, but sang Beatles and Rolling Stones songs flawlessly in front of the big crowds. Sometimes local prostitutes were there and danced on the tabletops, advertising their wares. They were all inspected by an Air Force nurse as a way to control venereal diseases and had a VD control number which they proudly wore on a badge. "Me clean, me clean," was heard frequently. Their numbers were also displayed on a chalk board at the club entrance.

As it turned out, I was at NKP for my nineteenth birthday on November 20, 1967 and I went to the base post office and collected my mail after work. Fortunately, there were several birthday cards which I stuffed into my fatigue shirt pocket before heading to the Airman's club. Receiving mail from friends and family was emotional nourishment when you were halfway around the world dealing with extreme heat, humidity, and monsoons.

I sat at the bar, ordered a beer, lit a cigarette, and began reading my birthday cards. Naturally, I got a little weepy as I chain-smoked and reread each card several times. Then a fellow airman who I'd never met before sat down next to me and noticed the stack of cards in front of me. He said, "Hey, is it your birthday? I said, "yes," and then he said, "Let me buy you a beer." Well, that scenario repeated itself at the midnight shift change and I got the same question from another guy. By then I was pretty drunk and continued drinking with my new friend until 6:00 a.m.. The last drinking partner I had was kind enough to walk me back to my hooch and when I opened the screen door and it banged up against my metal locker as I slipped and fell, it made a loud noise and woke up my roommates who actually

started applauding. They were good natured and knew that I needed to eat something after drinking for 12 hours straight and escorted me, or should I say, carried me to breakfast. Quite a memorable nineteenth birthday! A story I've shared frequently since then.

Meanwhile, I had an awful skin rash for about a month or two and it was getting much worse. Bright red raised, scaly dots were all over my body; especially my torso, thighs, and butt where there was no sun exposure. The hot humid days helped make things worse and the itching was awful. So, about a week after my birthday, I was air-evacuated on another C130 transport plane South to Korat AFB in Thailand for medical treatment. It was a little larger base, just Northeast of Bangkok by about 125 miles, with more medical personnel. My skin condition baffled them and instead of simply returning to NKP, I was air-evacuated to Clark AFB in the Philippines. The same thing happened at Clark and then I was off to Tachikawa Air Base hospital in Japan. All these moves without much more than a small gym bag with two uniforms, a change of underwear, and a shaving kit.

Tachikawa, or "Tachi," as it is known, was a conduit where all of the injured from Vietnam passed through. The hospital at Tachi was filled with injured American servicemen from Vietnam and it was my home for two weeks. The base at Tachikawa was established in 1945 and was turned over to the Japanese in 1969. However, during the Vietnam era it was very busy because it had a 6,500 foot long airstrip which could accommodate large C141 aircraft full of injured soldiers, marines, sailors, and airman.

Believe me, I felt blessed by only having a skin condition and being ambulatory. Most of my comrades there had been pretty shot up and severely injured. It wasn't rare to hear painful moans at night while these poor men tried to fall asleep. While there, I had a rather large skin biopsy and the doctors concluded that I had lichen planus which was a skin rash triggered by the immune system. Not contagious, but very itchy and bothersome; caused by a virus and stress. The sweltering moist heat of Thailand didn't help my rash either. This intense moisture in the air was evident when water would literally fall off planes during takeoff, and it could be seen in the permanent dampness of the wooden sides of our hooch.

My next stop from Tachikawa, Japan was Chelsea Naval Hospital near Boston, MA. One of the first three hospitals commissioned to treat Naval personnel, it was established in 1836 and ultimately decommissioned in 1974. It was about 30 miles from my folks' home in Newton, just west of Boston. The flight was another huge C141 transport and we landed briefly to refuel at Elmendorf Air Base in Anchorage, Alaska where it was about ten below zero. Since I was never initially scheduled to leave Southeast Asia, I didn't have a dress blue uniform or a coat, so I was freezing.

I arrived at the Chelsea Naval Hospital a day before Christmas 1967 and because of the holiday season they immediately let me make arrangements to go home. So, I called my buddy Larry to pick me up. He asked where and I looked out the window and saw the Prudential Center building, a Boston landmark. "Pick me up at the North side door," I said and I took a taxi there.

The anti-war movement in Boston, with all of the colleges and universities, was boiling over. There I was, standing outside wearing military fatigues with a black baseball cap which had white lettering that read "456th Munitions Maintenance Squadron Nakhon Phanom, Thailand." I felt like a pariah and was actually spat upon. I was very angry, but quickly let it go and actually felt sorry for the people doing it. I hadn't been home for a year and the anti-war movement wasn't part of my reality. I felt hurt and confused. Why were my sacrifices not appreciated? A year later, though, I'd be marching on the Boston Common chanting "hut, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war!"

After the holidays, early in January, 1968 I reported to the Chelsea Naval hospital for treatment. I had to soak in a bathtub for one hour every day. My skin was inflamed and broken out, and while the doctors prescribed a medication, they offered no explanation of its side effects or purpose. Military doctors have a tendency to prescribe without providing details. They just gave me a large bottle of medicine called Serax which I didn't realize was a very strong anti-depressant. I took it as instructed until one night when I drank a little too much and fell asleep while driving my new 1968 Volkswagen bug home from a party. I did wake up, though, after hitting the left side of a 1961 Oldsmobile. A week later I flushed the remaining Serax pills down the toilet.

The "therapy" tub at Chelsea Naval Hospital was in the back of an ordinary bathroom, under a broken window, and the mops that were used for cleaning the floors in hospital wards were stored there;

filthy, wet and smelly, likely infiltrated with bacteria. So, every day before I could take my therapeutic soak I had to thoroughly wash the tub. The broken window also let the cold January air inside. It was crazy! It made no sense to me at all and I made that point to the dermatologist who was treating me.

Fortunately my family's home was fairly close to the hospital and I was able to arrange to live at home and take my baths there. It wasn't straightforward though. Seemingly nothing in the military was. After soaking in the tub on that the first day, I reported to the ward nurse who coldly said, "Okay airman, grab a mop and swab the decks." She was an old gray haired woman with a stern look. I asked her what she meant by swab the decks and she said, "Mop the floors." I replied, "Major, I cannot do that because I have a skin condition and will perspire which will make it worse. In fact, the Air Force air-evacuated me for treatment here from the war zone in Southeast Asia." She wanted to hear no part of my explanation. "Then go to the brig immediately!" she said.

As someone who had never been in serious trouble before, thought of going to a military jail was quite frightening. When I reported to the brig, the sailor in charge said to me, "Did Major Crawford, the nurse from the ward send you down here?" "Yes," I replied. He laughed and said, "She's a fucking whacko! Do you have a military driver's license?" I said, "yes." Then he told me that I'd be assigned to his team and shuttle people back and forth to the Fargo Building in South Boston and other places."

It turned out to be a great assignment which lasted a couple of weeks until I was sent to Andrews AFB Hospital in Washington, DC for another diagnosis and additional treatment. I was assigned to a ward there with a nice group of guys. The guy in the bed across from me was named Blue. He was a funny dude; a black guy with a stomach disease who had to take a white, chalky medicine several times daily and would joke about the white stains on his dark brown skin from spilled doses during the night.

My first order of business was a thorough physical examination and another skin biopsy. A doctor went around every square inch of my body which was covered with bright red scaly lesions and circled one that was right in the middle of my ass with a ballpoint pen. I said, "Doc, I have lesions all over my body, can you please select one that isn't going to interfere with my sitting down?" So, he found one on my shoulder that didn't interfere with my daily activities and healed fairly quickly.

Within a few days the lab results concluded that I had psoriasis. Specifically, guttate psoriasis which is different from the more common plaque-type patches. Guttate psoriasis involved red, scaly drop-like lesions that appeared virtually everywhere on my body. I was literally covered from head-to-toe. In fact, it was so severe that they photographed sections of my body to use for teaching purposes.

Treatment began soon afterwards. My regimen consisted of UV light treatment and coal tar baths. Yes, the same black tar that you find on freshly paved roads. Finally, I had to cover myself with black coal-tar cream from head to toe. Very smelly, unpleasant, and difficult to wash off. In the meantime, since there was a war going on and I was hospitalized as a result, Red Cross volunteers would visit regularly. When I didn't feel like talking, I'd make sure the black and yellow coal-tar soaked and stained sheets were exposed, and the dismayed volunteers would be gone in minutes. They were totally grossed out and it worked every time!

After several weeks of treatments, it was early March 1968 and I became aware that the Air Force allowed you to be honorably discharged if you couldn't serve in the war zone. Because my psoriasis was so severe, the primary dermatologist treating me wanted to have me assigned to Andrews Air Force Base so that he could continue my treatment for a year. I really didn't want to be in limbo for a year because of a medical condition, and I was certain that I wanted to go back to college.

This was my grandstand play to try and make up for quitting college in the middle of the Vietnam War. I said, "Doc, I'm a munitions specialist and there is not a job for me here at Andrews, *please send me back to the war*. If I can't go back to NKP in Thailand then I want to be discharged from the Air Force." It worked! In fact, I wrote up the official medical discharge paperwork with the doctor and hand carried it to the hospital administrators and other doctors involved with the decision to get their signatures. I would be receiving an honorable medical discharge with a service connected disability.

While awaiting my final discharge date, I wrote a letter to the Dean of Freshman at Northeastern University to reapply for admission to classes the following September. To my dismay, I received a letter a week later from Dean Kennedy stating that their academic standards had changed since I had left Northeastern and that I no longer qualified for admission to the university even though I was in good academic standing when I left. Needless to say, I was furious. Frankly, I don't recall whether I wrote

back to Dean Kennedy or called his office, but I requested and was granted an appointment with him when I returned to Boston.

I received a Medical Discharge with a 10% service connected disability on March 25, 1968 and flew home to Boston where my dad picked me up at Logan Airport. I had hoped for a 20% disability because then I'd qualify for free tuition, books, and expenses for five years of college. Someone who I was casually talking with about the situation suggested that I contact the Jewish War Veterans and have them appeal the 10% judgment and try for the life-changing 20%. I figured what the hell: there's nothing to lose. Fortunately, they ended up getting me a 30% disability rating. Just as I had learned back at tech school by asking for an assignment in Thailand, being assertive in life was important.

Now all I had to do was deal with Dean Kennedy again. When I went to meet with him, I was in a grey business suit, white shirt, and striped tie, exuding the confidence of a professional, nineteen-year-old veteran. When I entered his office, I noticed that there were many pictures of children on a credenza behind him. After thanking him for taking the time to meet with me I said, "Are those your children?" He said, "Yes, I have nine children." I complimented him on his beautiful family and then said, "You know, I just spent four months in five different hospitals as a result of my service in the Vietnam War to protect your beautiful nine children and all I'm simply asking of you is that Northeastern University keep its word to me since I had left in good academic standing less than two years ago. I was assured at that time by Dean Call that I could return to Northeastern after my military service was over." His facial expression showed that he understood me clearly and I said, "Thank you very much for your time and consideration, I really appreciate it. Have a great day."

Two weeks later my acceptance letter arrived in the mail from Dean Kennedy welcoming me as a Northeastern University freshman of the class of 1973. In the Air Force I learned that being assertive can pay huge dividends. It got me stationed in Thailand instead of Vietnam and back to Northeastern with full books, tuition, and expenses paid for. Being assertive is a critical element of entrepreneurship.

###