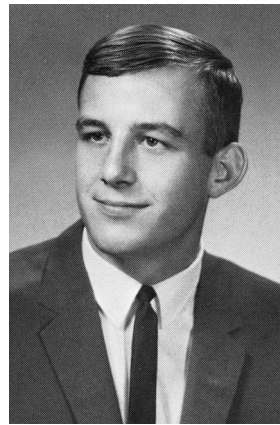


Mike Scherf  
April 5, 1949 -  
June 3, 1969



Norm Peery  
May 25, 1949 -  
April 17, 1970

## Chapter 23

### Moving On

### Spring, 1967

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Boys, a time will come when you must leave your childhood behind, become a man, and face the real world and all of its problems. For me, like so many of my generation, it was when I turned 18, registered for the draft and left home for college. Here's what happened.

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I turned 18 on December 25, 1966, so like every good American boy I registered for the draft. I did so on the first day after Christmas break, I reported to the assistant principal's office, just as I was beginning my final semester of high school. The Vietnam War was escalating, and Golden High graduates a year older than me were being drafted. With the signing of the draft registration form, things changed for me. I started paying attention to the news where, night after night, Walter Cronkite reported on the war. Every night the screen was filled with footage of battles in jungles on the other side of the world as U.S. soldiers fought to keep Communism in check. Other shots focused on flag-draped coffins containing the bodies of dead servicemen coming home in in the bellies of aircraft; most of them were only a few years older than me. Signing up for the draft was putting skin in the game.

Many politicians and some of my classmates began to question the war. What were U.S. boys dying for? I wondered about Communist aggression and if Vietnam collapsed, would the rest of Southeast Asia follow? Did we really care? While I was undecided, I did not actively protest the war. Twenty miles north of Golden, at the University of Colorado, many students did protest.

In late spring, I was accepted at Colorado State University. With college acceptance confirmed, the assistant dean explained student deferments. Anyone could avoid the draft if they were enrolled in college and maintained good grades. I applied for a student deferment and shortly thereafter, I received a letter from my draft board granting me a one-year, renewable deferment, as long as I stayed in school with passing grades. With a deferment in hand, I began to wonder about my classmates who weren't college-bound. How would they fare and how fair was this system?

Graduation was held in late May on a warm Saturday night in the school auditorium. I walked down the aisle, across the stage, accepted the diploma with my left hand, and shook the principal's hand with my right. I switched the tassel from one side of the mortarboard to the other and with that, I was a high school graduate. I hung the tassel from the rearview mirror in my car as I drove away.

At 7:30 a.m. the Monday after Saturday graduation, with a lunch pail in hand, steel-toed boots on my feet and a hard hat on my head, I walked through the gates of Coors brewery. Mom had arranged a summer construction job at Coors through a friend at the local labor union. As I entered the plant, I heard a familiar voice, “Hey Chop! How ya doin?” It was my cousin Fritz, who worked as a painter on the construction crew. “Let me show you how things work here,” he suggested, throwing an arm around my shoulder. But that’s another story.

At the end of that summer, Chuck, Dude, Larry, and I all went off to Colorado State University. Joe went to Colorado College and Bobby went to Claremont Mudd in California, both on scholarships. Monte enlisted in the Army.

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By Christmas break my freshman year at CSU, I knew I had chosen the wrong college. I decided that I wanted to major in architecture and CSU didn’t offer that major. I transferred to the University of Colorado, the only university in the state to offer a degree in architecture. Even though CU was only 20 miles from Golden, my life was beginning to move beyond the close ties and small town life I had always known.

As the war escalated many of my classmates who didn’t attend college ended up drafted or enlisting including Mike and Norm. If you were able-bodied and not in college, chances are you were in the military during those times. While they were fighting, my deferment was extended at CU.

On December 1, 1969, understanding that the draft system was unfair, the Selective Service Administration conducted a lottery in which every day of the year was drawn from a drum while the numbers 1 through 365 were drawn from another drum simultaneously. My birthday, December 25, was assigned number 84. It was commonly known that anyone with a number lower than 116 was highly likely to be drafted.

I immediately petitioned my draft board for an extension to my student deferment, since the bachelor of architecture program was being terminated at CU. I was in the last class to receive a bachelor of architecture, a five-year professional degree, and I had three years to go. If I had been drafted in 1969, and if I had been lucky enough to return to school after my military service, the bachelor of architecture program would have been over. I would have been forced to pursue a bachelor of environmental design and a master’s degree in architecture, taking more time and money.

## Boys, Here's What Happened

My draft board acquiesced and extended my deferment — one year at a time, for the next three years.

The 1969 draft lottery only increased resentment of the Vietnam War and the draft. Even with the lottery, young, well-educated, healthy men with low draft numbers like me found ways to extend student deferments, or to avoid military duty altogether. As the anti-war movement grew, some burned their draft cards and refused to serve, resulting in prison time. Many American men fled the country and moved to Canada to avoid the draft. I spent that tumultuous time at CU finishing my degree. I came to disagree with the war, but I was not ready to burn my draft card or flee to Canada.

Four classmates died in just over two years while I enjoyed the benefit of a student deferment. Tom Williams was the first to die on March 6, 1968, less than a year after graduation and while I was at Colorado State arranging a transfer to the University of Colorado.

Mike Scherf was the second to die. He was shot in the head while attempting to rescue a helicopter crew that was downed and under heavy fire on June 3, 1969. I was working at Coors on summer break from the University of Colorado when I heard the news.

John Wright died shortly after that on October 28, 1969. I was back in school at CU studying architecture when I learned of his death.

Norm Peery was the fourth of my classmates to die in Vietnam on April 17, 1970, while I was building models of buildings that would never be built.

December 15, 1972, was the last day of my college classes. I was to present my final design solution to faculty and advisors. With a passing grade, I would complete all the requirements for the bachelor of architecture degree. My presentation was in the afternoon. On the way to the car, I stopped at the mailbox. As I sorted through the bills and flyers, I came to a telegram. “Greetings from the President...” it began, and went on to tell me that I was to report in 60 days for a pre-induction physical to determine if I was physically capable of serving in the military. If physically qualified, I could expect to report for active duty in another 30 days.

I gave the presentation and passed, but that telegram took something out of me. My heart just wasn't in it. I had other things on my mind. Afterwards, my professor asked if something was wrong. I showed him the telegram. He just shook his head. Two weeks later, I got my final grades including an A for my design presentation.

I spent the next few weeks trying to get into military reserve units, but everything was filled. I finally decided I would enlist and try to get into the Air Force or Navy's Officer Candidate Schools. That would mean serving longer, but I thought it would be better than being in the Army infantry like Mike and Norm. Then on January 28, 1973, just days before I was to show up for the pre-induction physical, I found another telegram in the mailbox. "Greetings from the President," it began again, and then went on, "Please disregard all previous notices." President Nixon had ended the draft on January 27, 1973.

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Thirty years after my college graduation, I was on a work assignment in Washington D.C. I had the evening to myself and decided to visit the Vietnam War Memorial. It was dark, hot, and humid. As I approached the Memorial, I came upon The Three Servicemen statue depicting three soldiers — Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American. They are in the jungle and dressed for the oppressive heat. One wears a sleeveless jacket, and the sleeves on the other two are rolled up. Their collars are open, and a towel hangs from one neck and a cartridge belt from another. Condensation drips from the soldiers and they appear to be sweating. I was sure they were staring at me, silently questioning. There wasn't a sound around me; it was eerie. I looked at the faces of those three bronze soldiers for a long time, and then moved to the wall of names, completely unnerved.

It took some time, but I found two names, Mike and Norm etched deeply into the black granite. I didn't find Tom or John. It was after midnight when I found a bench and sat down exhausted from the search and the emotions that evening had brought. I put my head in my hands and wept. Mike and Norm were good friends. We were classmates from first grade on and teammates on basketball and football teams from fourth grade on. Those guys hadn't ratted me out for drinking with them when they were suspended from athletics. They died so that boys in college with passing grades did not have to serve; boys like me. It wasn't fair or right. They will always be heroes in my eyes. The weight of the guilt I felt in 1969, and feel to this day is so heavy.