

CHAPTER 15 –THE SHORTTIMER

The chart known as the “Shorttimer Calendar”, as well as its attendant negative and sometimes borderline insubordinate demeanor, actually ranks among the Army's most cherished and venerated traditional objects, and is considered a “must” for any Infantry grunt overseas. I believe the Smithsonian sports a shorttimer calendar made of stone or bronze which was found in an archeological dig.

The controlling premise is that the soldier has a fixed date of return to the United States (the “World”), and finds the shorttimer calendar to be a definite psychological crutch which absolutely quantifies an end date to his personal torture.

Even a tour in a presumably pleasant place, known as a “plum”, can easily fall into the category of a prune - - such as a six-month winter stint on the firing ranges of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The balm of a shorttimer calendar might be sought out at a varying time after arrival.

What is it? The soldier merely traces, or purchases, the outline of an object which he would find pleasurable to view on a daily basis - - such as a depiction of a nude woman, or a '55 Thunderbird. He segments the drawing in the fashion of the old “Paint-by-the-Numbers” stock canvases, except the numbering inside each segment is different and consecutive, ranging from “1” (the last day of duty) through the total number of days remaining on his tour. In Vietnam, that would be 365 in a non-leap year. The lowest numbers, of course, should be placed into the most beloved parts of the object, such as the sexual parts of a woman, or the tailfins of the classic Thunderbird. Because everyone concentrates on the lower numbers.

The procedure, of course, is to color in one numbered segment, starting with the highest, each day, preferably at first light, so as to at least start that sorry day with something positive, and to monitor definite progress.

It's a soothing gimmick making for concrete and sure steps toward an end to the misery caused by intolerable boredom, drudgery, danger, cultural shock, heat exhaustion, frostbite, C-Rations, physical abuse, or any combination thereof.

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An important and ancillary benefit is the opportunity to pull out the shorttimer calendar (when it is fairly near completion) and lord it over all those having a relatively small portion of their own calendars filled in. The soldier takes immense pleasure from shoving his well-worn paper trophy into their jealous faces, while prancing like a Rhode Island rooster.

When the Shorttimer hits the lower numbers, he is known as “Short”, having a short time left. He often cannot contain himself and blurts out the word “Short” whenever his favorable situation comes into his head, preferably not during setting up a nighttime ambush. He often does so in the manner of one suffering from Tourette's syndrome, not involuntary but semi-voluntary.

The braggadocio includes, but is not limited to, accompanying exclamatory statements such as “I'm so short I sleep in a matchbox!” or “I'm so short I need a stepladder to reach the urinal!”

A particularly gratifying temporal phase would be when one reaches the number “9”, making him an officially recognized “Single Digit Midget.”

One of the most clever shorttimer calendars I saw **before Vietnam** was sported by a grunt at Fort Benning, Georgia, who had drawn one called the “Three-Time Loser” - - a depiction of a very pregnant woman standing beside her Edsel with a “Nixon” bumper sticker. (Nixon had lost his first presidential election around that time.)

I believe the shorttimer calendar, as stated above, is not just an American institution, like the drive-in theater or Butchwax, but common to the pharaohs' troops, as evidenced by some yet undeciphered hieroglyphics in the Valley of the Kings.

The salient point is that once the shorttimer calendar is almost completed, its owner actually comes to believe that he has some sort of a God-given right to not only cop an attitude, but that he is entitled to favoritism each and every time a dirty or dangerous task is at hand.

“But Sergeant, I'm **short!**” is the usual refrain.

The amazing thing about this phenomenon is that it usually works, probably owing to the man- in-charge's own deep-rooted expectation that once he becomes short, he too will be justified in requesting similar privileges.

Of course, the basis of this entire juxtaposition is that men are assigned to units with a “DEROS” irrespective the unit's time in country. (DEROS – Date of Expected Return from Overseas). An individual who just arrives in country is not afforded the same respect as one about to go home. Why should a guy with only a month remaining on his shorttimer calendar be required to walk point or be sent down a spooky tunnel? Send the new guy who hasn't paid his dues, and moreover, because that guy's shorttimer calendar is practically friggin'**empty**.

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The sad thing is that once a guy gets home, he usually abandons his Shorttimer Calendar, which was generally suitable for framing.