The Frost Weeds
Vietnam: 1964–1965

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THE FROST WEEDS

VIETNAM: 1964–1965

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JAMES OLIVERI

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PREFACE

It hardly seems possible that so many years have elapsed since I returned home from Vietnam in the spring of 1965. The public attitude then toward veterans of that growing war was not yet hostile, as it was soon destined to become. People still tended to react with apathy rather than with anger toward our military. It was more a case of, "So you're back from Vietnam, huh? That's good. Say, did you see the Yankee game last night?" But that changed quickly, and not for the better.

Truthfully, no one ever spat on me or called me a "baby-killer" while I was in uniform, something many returning soldiers experienced later. In fact, the only "baby-killers" I ever saw were on the other side, and they were devastatingly ef-

ficient at it as I learned for myself. But when it comes to wars, some people can be quite irrational and deeply mean-spirited in their misguided opposition to those who must fight them.

Going off to the military is something of a tradition in my family. I was born while my father was in the Army Air Corps Band during WWII, based in Malden, Missouri. He served his entire enlistment without ever leaving the States. My father-in-law, Tom Ford, flew fifty missions as a B-17 tail gunner over Europe and North Africa. Uncle Ralph Bevilacqua, my mother's brother, was wounded at the "Battle of the Bulge." My son Jimmy Jr. was in the Army Military Police during "Operation Desert Storm." In fact, most of my male relatives served "Uncle Sam" at one time or another in various corners of the globe.

We weren't always good soldiers either. During World War I another of my uncles was slapped into a ball and chain for desertion from the Navy. We weren't necessarily expected to volunteer for combat, but the unspoken rule was that, if called, we had to show up.

As an adolescent I was fascinated by all things military. Memorial Day was one of my favorite holidays, as it still is. My friends and I had the usual complement of toy guns and lead soldiers. We played war games in our back yards. Our favorite movies were "Sergeant York," "They Died With Their Boots On," and "The Sands of Iwo Jima." War seemed glorious then. In retrospect, I realize that I still had much to learn.

War is many things, but glorious is not one of them. War is frightening, painful, exhausting, ugly, revolting, uncomfortable, depressing, and even boring. Yet I have to admit that it can also be exhilarating. I have never felt so intensely alive as I did during my experiences in battle. Nothing I've done since can compare to that.

I was about ten years old when I first saw "High Noon." Gary Cooper's portrayal of a less-than-perfect lawman who stood up for his beliefs when it would have been much easier and safer to just run away made a lasting impression on me. The fact that he did it for unappreciative and non-supportive townspeople merely served as an eerie parallel to what I would experience some ten years later. Of such things are tender young psyches sometimes molded.

So when the growing conflict in Southeast Asia drew me in during the mid-sixties, I grudgingly shouldered my share of the burden in keeping with the family custom. While I wasn't particularly anxious to march off to the sound of the guns, neither was I capable of avoiding it. Running off to Canada was not an option. Idealism like that can bring you much grief, as I was soon to learn.

In 1964, the Vietnam conflict was still a "comfortable" war. I like to think of it as the "campaign" period before massive numbers of American troops were unleashed on the Indo-Chinese mainland. I arrived in the Republic of Vietnam in the spring of 1964 as an apprehensive twenty-year-old Army private. There were just 16,000 Americans in-country at the time, the vanguard of a force that would soon grow to more than half a million men. I was not particularly enthusiastic about being one of them. That May, a one year tour of duty seemed like an eternity, with the end a lifetime away.

The Army immediately assigned me to an advisory team located in the I Corps tactical area, which comprised the provinces lying directly below the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam. I was based in the peaceful and beautiful city of Hue, but spent relatively little time there. My primary duty was to serve as a radio operator at the remote outposts along the Laotian border manned by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Most of them had little-

known and exotic names. But vicious conflict in the coming years would soon make Khe Sanh, Lang Vei, and the A Shau Valley practically household words.

I was fortunate to have missed most of the heaviest fighting. Much of my combat experience consisted of brief sniping engagements or small unit actions. However, I was part of the relief force sent to secure the shattered Special Forces camp at Nam Dong after an eerie night attack by 1,000 Viet Cong. It was at the battle for Nam Dong that Captain Roger Donlon won the first Medal of Honor awarded in Vietnam.

I also helped to build sandbag emplacements after North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked American destroyers at sea, precipitating the now-controversial Tonkin Gulf incident that led to a widened war. I was there when the first Allied aircraft flew low overhead on their way to bomb North Vietnam. And I saw the initial U.S. Marine combat units arrive, blissfully unaware of the fate awaiting them in the bloody days ahead.

Many have questioned the value of what we did in Vietnam. For me, there was never any doubt. I saw the relief etched on the faces of simple people who appreciated the security our presence provided. I delighted in the laughing children who followed the Americans everywhere, begging for money, food, and cigarettes. I watched groups of primitive Montagnards wait patiently in remote villages to be examined by teams of Green Beret medics. For most of them this was the first and only medical treatment they would ever receive. As a result, I've always taken special pride in my Vietnam service, even when it wasn't fashionable to do so.

But during the late 1960s, public opinion of the military plummeted to such a shameful level that returning soldiers were cautioned to travel in civilian clothes instead of uniforms rather than risk ugly confrontations with protesters. The generally-accepted image of the Vietnam vet back then

was one of a psychopathic drug addict. That bothers me to this day. I served for a year in one of the most prolific drug-producing areas on the planet, yet never once saw an American soldier using narcotics. Oh, I recognize that drug abuse became somewhat widespread later on as both the war and society deteriorated. Sadly, that left an indelible stain on the legacy of our fighting men in Southeast Asia. But all of them shouldn't have been painted with the same brush, and I still fiercely resent the commonly-accepted stereotype of the American Vietnam veteran as a drug abuser.

For twenty-five years after I left the Army, not one person outside my immediate circle of family and friends ever thanked me for having served in Vietnam. Then, appropriately enough on Memorial Day, 1990, I was shopping at the Roosevelt Field Mall on Long Island while wearing my "Proud Vietnam Veteran" cap. A young female clerk behind the counter glanced at the inscription on my hat and said rather shyly, "We're proud of you, too."

I was so taken aback that I choked up and left the store without even thanking that lovely girl. When I got home and told my wife Maureen what had happened, all the pent-up emotions came pouring out and I burst into tears. That was a legitimate watershed moment in my life. It also marked the approximate point when America's attitude toward our military began to undergo a dramatic improvement.

Several years ago, one of my clients who had been an avid protester during the Vietnam years approached me. "You know," he said, "I owe you an apology for the way I behaved back then."

I was touched. "You should never apologize for doing what you thought was right," I replied. We remain good friends to this day, which in my view is a wonderful tribute to the concept of human understanding. And my own hostility

toward war protesters is long gone now, with one or two notable exceptions.

Today, there's rarely a day when I wear my "Vietnam Veteran" hat in public that someone doesn't stop me to offer a warm "Thank you." Maureen always laughs when that happens because I never fail to become a bit emotional. But I don't mind. And it never gets old, I can assure you.

I'm so pleased to see how well our Afghanistan and Iraq veterans are now treated. Yes, I'll confess to occasionally experiencing a twinge of jealousy. But gratitude offered late is much better than none at all. Whenever I encounter active-duty members of the military, I always make it a point to thank them for their service. Sometimes I'll buy them coffee or cigarettes, or even pick up their lunch tabs. That's my way of showing appreciation for their sacrifices, which I understand only too well. The look of surprise and gratitude on their faces is the best reward I could ever hope to receive. God willing, we can all do something to ensure that our troops never again experience the scorn or outright hatred the Vietnam veterans endured for so many years.

As the expression goes, "Freedom isn't free." In fact, it can be very costly indeed. We Americans today enjoy a way of life and countless privileges that were paid for with the lives of our soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. So when you encounter a veteran, I urge you to offer a sincere word of thanks for his or her service. Or, as we Vietnam vets prefer to do, simply say, "Welcome home!"

Today, having reached my 70th birthday, I sometimes reflect on my days as a young soldier resigned to the distinct possibility of not reaching age twenty-two. Then I come to the realization that I've been given a welcome blessing of many more years in which to make a place for myself in the world, to marry my soulmate and to raise a family. I'm very grateful for that. Some of my comrades never had such an opportunity.

The Frost Weeds is meant to show the reader what the early period of the Vietnam War was like, when small groups of American servicemen and their South Vietnamese counterparts waged a relatively unknown and unappreciated conflict against Communist aggression. It is essentially a work of non-fiction, but since I wrote it from a perspective more than forty years after the fact, some of the details are only as accurate as memory serves. I took no notes nor kept a diary during my year in Vietnam. That in itself I now find astounding. I've always been a writer, and to think that I spent a year in a combat zone and kept no records of it is difficult for me to fathom. I've created names for those I could not recall. I've also included several incidents that happened to others. My intent is not to mislead, but rather to give the reader a broader view of the war as it was unfolding at that time. I hope you will enjoy this book as much as I did writing it, and will forgive me for whatever I might have gotten wrong.

Note: The title for this book comes from one of the call signs our radio team used in Vietnam. For the sake of uniformity and clarity, I've used it throughout the story, although in reality we changed call signs regularly, usually on a monthly basis.

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THE BEGINNING

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, Dad often lectured me about the importance of going to college. He never had any schooling beyond eleventh grade, and he felt that getting a good education would have spared him from many problems later in life. I never paid much attention to him, though. You know how teenagers are. At age eighteen I thought I knew everything, or at least more than my parents did. But as I was painfully to learn later, Dad was indeed right.

Actually, I ended up taking his advice – sort of. After high school, I enrolled at NYU, partly because I had won a Regents scholarship that would offset a good deal of the tuition expenses. Now don't get me wrong. I was never much of a student. In high school I did well in subjects that interested me, but barely passed the others. Homework was something to be avoided at all costs. I survived only due to my love for reading and an ability to write fairly well.

Things were different at NYU, though. I was neither prepared for nor committed to higher education. And since I wasn't actually about to crack a book, disaster loomed. The only subject I passed was Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), a course in which I excelled. So after one semester of cutting classes and ignoring assignments (but earning an invitation to the "Pershing Rifles," the ROTC honor society), I was ignominiously booted out.

My parents were crushed. There had never been a college graduate in our family, and I had been their best hope. Now

that was gone. Three months out of high school I was no longer attending college and going nowhere. I had no idea what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

A series of odd jobs followed, including a six month term as a laborer for my uncle's construction company. I really wasn't much good at that, a fact of which my uncle constantly reminded me. In the spring of 1963 a local bank hired me and I began taking financial courses at night. But a service obligation hung over my head like the "Sword of Damocles." Draft age at the time was about twenty-three. I didn't want to wait three years to be called, so I decided to volunteer my draft. I've always been kind of impatient that way.

In reality, this was a fairly good idea. Enlisting in the Army meant a three year obligation. But by volunteering to be drafted I would only have to serve two. I would be out a full year before I could otherwise expect to be called. Smart, huh? I thought so.

One afternoon during my lunch break, I drove to the local Selective Service office to submit my request. The middle-aged woman behind the desk eyed me with motherly concern. She asked several times if I had discussed this with my parents. I assured her that I had. She just shook her head sadly. That did wonders for my confidence.

The "Greetings" letter my friends and I had often kidded about appeared in the mailbox at the end of August. I was a bit perplexed to find that it actually read "Greeting." Strange how something as insignificant as a missing "s" sticks in your mind when it involves a momentous event in your life. I read the letter and my pulse quickened. Doubt gnawed at the back of my brain. Had I made the right decision? In any case, the die was cast.

I arrived at the United States Army Induction Center on Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan on September 30th. I

had taken the Long Island Railroad to Penn Station, and then hopped on the subway for the brief trip downtown. It was a cool, breezy morning… "hurricane weather" we called it back home.

I spent most of the day in a processing area with a large group of draftees. We got poked, prodded, questioned, and marched about in our shorts, shivering from both nervousness and the chilly temperature. At one point a medic drew a blood sample from my arm, then handed me the glass tube. I remember feeling a bit queasy carrying that hot vial. Doctors, psychiatrists, and sergeants tested, re-tested, and examined us at length. I had to laugh when one of them asked me if I liked girls. The way things worked out, maybe I should have said no. I was also surprised to learn that I was partially color-blind. But the doctor said it was a condition that was fairly common in young males. Something genetic. I guess that made me feel a little better.

Finally, late in the afternoon, the military conveyor belt deposited us all in a small auditorium. A trim sergeant in full dress green uniform stepped to a podium at the front of the room. There were three rows of multi-colored ribbons above his left jacket pocket. He silently scanned the group and then sneered. "All right, listen up!" he bellowed. "You scumbags have all somehow passed your physicals. An officer will be here in a couple of minutes to swear you in. Then you'll be leaving for Fort Dix."

I glanced around. So it was finally going to happen. I had been nursing a sort of half-hope that some abnormality would turn up, and they would send me home with an honorable excuse for not serving. Now that possibility seemed to have disappeared.

The sergeant's eyes flicked over our motley group. "Has anybody here ever been arrested?" A couple of hands shot up.

The non-com scowled.

"Is anyone here wanted by the police?" Another hand rose, somewhat tentatively. The sergeant's face darkened.

"Those of you who raised your hands, grab your gear and get the hell out of here! The Army doesn't want your kind."

Broad grins spread across the faces of the three young men. They scrambled to their feet and quickly left the room. I remember wondering if anyone was going to check their claims.

Sergeant "Scowl" watched them leave, and then turned back to us. "The rest of you men form a double line up here facing the rear of the room. When Lieutenant Blanchard comes in, I'll call you to attention. That means you bring your heels together, hands at your sides, stand straight with your eyes forward. No goddamn talking!"

We formed a scraggly line, looking for all the world like a gang of convicts. The sergeant shook his head in disgust, and then left the room. We stood silently for several minutes. No one felt much like talking. Our overseer soon returned carrying a brown clipboard. "Okay, you shitbirds… the lieutenant's on his way." He then busied himself with whatever was on the clipboard and ignored us.

Suddenly the door swung open. Sergeant "Scowl" roared "TEN-HUT!" We all snapped into what we thought was the position of attention. An officer strode quickly to the front of the room where the sergeant met him with a sharp salute. He was also clad in dress greens. I noticed that there was a black stripe running down each leg of his trousers. In my tired mind, he seemed to be wearing a green tuxedo. I had to stifle a chuckle.

Lieutenant Blanchard had silver bars on his shoulders and gold braid on his cap. The crossed rifles of the infantry adorned his lapels. "Sergeant, are the candidates ready for induction?"

"Yessir!"

Lieutenant Blanchard turned to face the uneasy draftees. "Men, I'm going to read you the induction pledge. Repeat after me. When we're finished, you'll be privates in the United States Army." He withdrew a small card from his pocket and glanced down at it. "I… use your name… promise to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America…"

Following the brief ceremony we received sandwiches, coffee and subway tokens. There were thirteen of us consigned to Fort Dix. The names represented a virtual cross-section of New York ethnicity: Dziedzic, Brown, Muscianisi, Ortiz, Quinn, Ohlmiller, Nielsen. Sergeant "Scowl" handed me a packet containing the records of the thirteen new privates. For some reason, I had been designated the group leader. It would be my responsibility to make sure all thirteen arrived safely at Fort Dix. I still can't imagine why they chose me for the job. I was probably the youngest in the group, and I wasn't much interested in taking on that responsibility. But my preferences didn't seem to matter to anyone.

The Army wasted no time with its new recruits. A quick train ride delivered us to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, where a charter waited to take us on the ninety-minute trip into New Jersey. I made a quick head-count before we boarded the bus. Thankfully they were all there. I have no idea what I would have done otherwise. The sun was already setting behind a bank of purple clouds as we pulled out. Some passengers read magazines or paperbacks. It was quiet on the darkened bus. I was tired and quickly dozed off, but it was a fitful sleep at best.

The bus droned steadily south. I recall being awakened by the sound of shifting gears when we turned off the Jersey Turnpike. Night had fallen by the time we passed through

the Pine Barrens and reached the outskirts of Fort Dix. The bus pulled up to a brightly lighted terminal in the reception center. Another sergeant climbed aboard to take charge of the recruits. I handed the records to him. He lined us up inside the terminal and called roll. Then he marched us off into the darkness. Some carried small overnight bags as they plodded along in our ragged formation. There appeared to be no common thread connecting us other than that this was our first exposure to the military.

We reached a low rectangular building with a set of double doors at either end. The sergeant, who had said virtually nothing as we marched along, halted our group and went inside. It was now near ten p.m., and there was a bit of a chill in the air. It seemed strange standing outside in the stillness of the night. I hadn't yet gotten my mind around the obvious. We were now operating under the Army's methods and no longer our civilian standards. After a few minutes, the sergeant returned and ordered us to file in four at a time. This was the equipment issue room. As we passed steadily through the building, each man received GI underwear, fatigues, boots, belts, hats, dress uniforms, shaving equipment, socks, shoes and a full assortment of other military gear. By the time I exited through the doors at the far end of the building, I had a duffel bag bulging with hastily stowed Army clothing. Some of it would even fit.

When the last recruit emerged through the doors, the sergeant marched us off into the night again. We crunched along a gravel pathway with our awkward bundles balanced precariously on our shoulders, blindly following our leader. He led us into a nearby reception barracks after first flicking on a light switch just inside the door. A line of bare light bulbs hanging from the ceiling flared harshly to life.

The building was a wooden relic from World War II. There were rows of twin metal bunks flanking either side of a central aisle. Each bunk held a rolled-up mattress and a coverless pillow. There were no sheets or blankets. The sergeant told us to get some sleep and someone would come along in the morning to take charge of us.

I dropped my duffel bag next to a vacant bunk, and unrolled the blue pinstriped mattress on the top rack. Then I untied my shoes and kicked them off. God, I was tired! It was already one in the morning, and it had been a long, trying day. As soon as everyone found a bunk, the sergeant shut the lights and left. My first day in the Army was over. Only 729 more to go! I was already homesick and suffering severe second thoughts about the choices I'd made. I drifted off into a restless sleep, still clad in my street clothes.

We stayed at the reception center for three days, during which we received extensive health and dental examinations. Most of us also spent some time doing KP at the huge mess hall. I was surprised to find that there were machines to peel the mountains of potatoes needed to feed the hundreds of new soldiers from all across the country. I was grateful for that.

There were batteries of tests to determine what military specialty each of us was qualified to fill. We shared the usual jokes about lawyers becoming truck drivers and teachers assigned to the mess hall. No one really believed those stories, but they created a seed of doubt. I thought I did pretty well on the Morse code test, but assumed nothing. That seed had sprouted and was growing roots.

I finally received my new assignment to Company N in the 3rd Training Regiment, along with the rest of my original group. A wheezing old bus carried us to our new home at the farthest reaches of Fort Dix. We stepped down onto the dusty company street in mid-afternoon and looked around.

Four badly weathered wooden barracks stood in a row to the left. At the near end of the line was a decrepit mess hall. Clouds of steam billowed from its chimney, and the clanking of metal trays echoed through the area. Directly across the road sat the company commander's domain, the squat, rectangular orderly room. Thick stands of pine trees stretched for what seemed like miles beyond the barracks. Apparently we were in the most desolate and antiquated area on the post. That in itself was a depressing thought. I felt a strong wave of anxiety sweep through me.

A sergeant emerged from the orderly room and took the roll. He sorted us alphabetically, and chased us into one building or another based upon our last names. Staggering under the weight of my bag, I ran up the rough plank steps into the third barracks.

The interior of the building was much like those in the reception center. Everything was old. I had expected that. On an impulse, I walked into the latrine. A huge cast iron washtub beside the door was half-filled with filthy water. Three ancient toilets lined the wall, one with a crudely lettered DO NOT USE sign on it. There were no partitions to provide some privacy. Grimy mirrors hung above four sinks on the opposite wall. Behind that, a rusty shower head produced a thin trickle of water when I twisted the faucet. I shook my head and wondered what the hell I had gotten into.

Our platoon non-com soon arrived with another group of recruits. Staff Sergeant Leonard Thornton was a trim black man who appeared to be in his late forties. Sergeant Thornton began assigning bunks. Like everything else in the Army, it was done alphabetically.

Most of the platoon was composed of a National Guard unit from Massachusetts fulfilling its six month active duty commitment. After advanced training they would go home

to another five years of weekend drilling. I could have done that too, but had decided against it, much to my regret at the moment.

Eight weeks of basic training followed. My one semester of ROTC in college had begun to prepare me for this, and I soon realized that I was a pretty good soldier. I hated the constant harassment from the drill sergeants, but excelled at marching, rifle drill and marksmanship. We ran daily through the sandy Pine Barrens carrying our rifles, packs and steel helmets. Our bodies quickly became lean and hard. On the rare occasions when we had some free time, my platoon mates and I liked to go to one of the post theaters to see the latest movies. The drill sergeants seemed to ease off a bit as we neared the end of training.

Around the seventh week, we received our advanced assignments. Sergeant Thornton came into the barracks one afternoon following chow. He had a platoon roster and went down the list, announcing the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) for each man. When he got to me he said, "Oh-liveri, you're an oh-five-one."

I scratched my head. "What's an oh-five-one, Sergeant Thornton?" The way he'd said it didn't sound too promising.

Thornton glanced up from his roster. "Intermediate speed radio operator." Noting my puzzled look, he added, "Morse code."

A broad smile creased my face. I KNEW I had done well on the code test at the reception center. Hot damn! This was a lot better than going to advanced infantry training (AIT) like most of the rest of our platoon. Instead I would be moving just across the post to attend the Intermediate Speed Radio Operators Course (ISROC) at Company B in the 5th Training Regiment. Good deal, I thought. I'll be able to go home just about every weekend.

Thornton quickly brought me back to reality. "Don't y'all be gettin' too happy now," he warned. "You ain't 'zactly gonna be linin' up for no poontang over there. Half them trainees don't make it through that course. Then the dumb shits wind up in AIT anyway. And if you do grad-jee-ate, you'll prob-ly get sent to Vee-et-Nam."

That was classic Thornton: subtlety and encouragement all rolled into one. I don't think I'd ever heard him say so many words at one time. But I was only half-listening. It wasn't until much later that I realized how right he was.

We graduated from basic on a cold, bright Friday morning in December. The platoon sergeants marched us in formation to the regimental theater, where the battalion commander, a major, addressed the company. I don't recall his exact words, but it was something to the effect that we had proved ourselves as soldiers, and now we must go on to do our duty as best we could. We thought we were really hot stuff.

After the ceremony, we made our last visit to the Company N mess hall for lunch. Following that, the recruits began to move out to their new assignments.

I was among the last troops still remaining in the company area. We stacked our gear outside the barracks and awaited the scheduled ride to our new assignments. Eventually a ¾ ton truck, its gears grinding, pulled up outside the orderly room. We threw our bags into the back of the uncovered vehicle and then climbed over the tailgate. I recognized several soldiers from the other platoons who were also heading for ISROC. When we were all on board, the truck driver rolled off for the ten-minute drive to B Company, located near the post hospital. Upon arrival, we unloaded our gear and immediately reported to the First Sergeant.

B Company was entirely contained within a modern 3-story brick building. This was a far cry from the somewhat primi-

tive conditions we had endured in basic training. 1st Lieutenant Peter Kontanis, a hard-nosed infantry officer known for his strict disciplinary tactics, commanded the company. A new group of trainees arrived every other week to begin the three-month course. I was to be part of Class 26, the final group of the year 1963. Kontanis was responsible for pushing us along to graduation and weeding out marginal or inept trainees. We soon learned that he did his job well.

After checking our orders, the white-haired First Sergeant escorted us to a platoon bay on the second floor. There were bunks for fifty men lining both sides of the room. Behind each was a double gray metal locker. Many of the bunks were still vacant, since the bulk of the class had yet to arrive.

"Get yourselves squared away," growled the First Sergeant. "Then report to the orderly room if you want a weekend pass."

No further urging was necessary. We quickly chose bunks and stowed our gear in the lockers. The First Sergeant had left us a roll of masking tape and a felt-tipped pen. We used that to make name tags, and plastered them to the foot of each bed. I stripped off my fatigues and changed into a Class A dress uniform. Within an hour I was aboard a bus headed up the Jersey Turnpike to New York. Morse code went on the back burner for a couple of days.

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