

Tom Houlihan, Acting Psychologist, He Changed Lives
06-29-2015 by Harry Zirkelbach

Tom Houlihan like so many Catholic boys In the 1920-30 years had toyed with the thought of becoming a Catholic Priest. He may never have known when that decision reversed. In school as he aged, he toyed with every conceivable occupation. So many in fact, he was considered qualified for zilch by friends, for everything by himself.

He was still adrift when the Manhattan Draft Board drew his number from the pot; he was drafted, sent to the Army in 1942; that Army swarmed with warm bodies. Their primitive tests showed a brilliant mind, directionless. Placement was left to recruits his age, still learning what was expected of them. Interviews were brief, little time for consideration; an army waited behind the man being interviewed.

Tom was quick to understand this from the first nomadic questions. He took control of the placement assignment As in a recent daydream Tom had been to Medical School, he proceeded to speak of the pressing need for Medical care for the millions of peasants being inducted into the Armed Services.

The interviewer snatched at these files, found Tom didn't qualify for Doctor or Nurse training - in fact the Army only wanted to draft Doctors and Nurses. But there was a demand for Nurses aides, and that an MOS 55 Clerk General was assigned for Tom's initial training, with the notation that MOS 263, Psycho Social Worker, could lead to that training.

That hurdle overcome, it was easy for Tom to get assigned to Schools placing him in Brooke Army Hospital, working in the surprisingly large Psycho Wards.

In no time at all Tom was conversant with the plight of the hundreds of Active Duty personnel being treated. And saw few were fit for return to Duty.

Soon, Tom was friend to everyone in his Ward. He liked them; they enjoyed his friendliness; he gained their confidence.

Soon he was helping them escape by writing, family, lovers, what ever. When answered. Tom edited replies; no need to upset friends. Only kind words.

His superiors, the Doctors approved, encouraged. It would be months before these same Medics began to call Tom as their guest, in analysis, to determine if Tom was also insane, or at least deranged.

Patients asked why request were ignored: for Officer's training; easy advancement promised at enlistment not forthcoming; missives to authorities saying they were imprisoned; request for large sums of cash. Tom helped with new letters, mailed them, with his P.O. return address. When necessary letters were not mailed; Tom simply wrote the reply. Began correspondence.

Most interesting, from a wonderful delusional, were a series of letters to President Roosevelt; suggestions for prosecuting the War. Tom treasured these. Ideas were preposterous, sincere. Tom found letterheads, "From the President" prepared replies of support, interest, assurance, encouragement; stressed the need for secrecy in their correspondence. The "enemy" could never seen this paper stamped BURN ON RECEIPT.

One such response had the Chief of psychiatrist intrigued. This was too intelligent to involve two psychos. In that interview with all his associates, they agreed, Tom should continue his activities, quietly, review patients progress with them, and "for Christ's sake, no more letters to Roosevelt".

That took out some of the fun.