

Strike One—July 1964

I was the third-born child (all boys) of Woodrow Thorwald and Stella Pearl (nee Hines) Gustafson. The town was a small town back then, in the middle of massive citrus orchards—Santa Paula, California. The city's population was about 10,000 when I was born on December 30, 1947; it's still a small town although it has grown to nearly 30,000 in 2020. The Union Oil Company (there are still a few Union 76 gas stations in business) was founded there in 1890; its main building is now home to the California Oil Museum.



Dad was a carpenter, and we lived in a house that he built on Sheppard Road on a narrow lot adjacent to Aunt Alma and Uncle Harold; Alma was Mom's eldest sister. Dad had been in and out of the U.S. Navy, first enlisting in 1933. He re-enlisted for World War II and Korea, (the picture here is the day he left for Korea) serving in several locations, although his DD-214 is quite scant about some of them. But my elder brother, a retired Navy Captain (O-6), and I have been able to put together a relatively complete listing of his duty stations to account for his four enlistments totaling 24 years of U.S. Naval service, including just a little over 20 years of Active Duty.

His last tour of duty was at the Naval Parachute Facility in El Centro, California. The town's name *El Centro* means *The Center*, and the town was in the center of the agricultural-rich Imperial Valley east of San Diego and just north of the border with Mexico. El Centro seemed like an odd place for a Navy base; certainly no ships would ever get there. NASA's Mercury program was underway, and the facility was used to develop and test parachutes for the safe return of astronauts from space.

For the family, Dad included, it was a good tour of duty. He was home every night; he could help us with homework, and as a family we built an addition on to the back of our house on Tangerine Drive. For me as a young teen, life was good. We had a house, friendly neighbors, food on the table, clean clothes, a nice church to go to, schools that were only about a mile away (and we walked until we were old enough to have a car).

Dad retired from the Navy in May 1962 (that's his official retirement photo) and immediately took a job as the Purchasing Agent for the County of Imperial. Life was good before; it was even better now. He and Mom were now a part of the social fabric of the area. They did a little more entertaining, and they went out more often. We kids were never part of any financial discussions, but, looking back, it makes sense that Mom and Dad were definitely better off financially.



Eldest brother Eric had graduated high school in 1961, and he was away at college in the NROTC program. Middle brother Dave was a year ahead of me in school, ready to graduate high school in 1964. I was the family "nerd," taking an eighth-period (after school) English class so I could take more subjects during the regular school day. I was a founding member of the PJ (Publications & Journalism) Club, a founding member of the Coin Club, and a

member of the Chess Club. My closest friends were in many of the same clubs and classes.

It's the summer break between my eleventh and twelfth grades at Central Union High School in El Centro—1964. The famous, or infamous, tagline from the city's Chamber of Commerce is "Where the Sun Spends the Winter." What's hidden from that message is that the sun definitely spends extra innings to the nth degree in the summer. It was not unusual for the temperature in the summer months to be in the triple digits for many weeks, if not months, in a row.

Eric was on his summer NROTC duty assignment in Corpus Christi, Texas, undergoing some basic flight training. Dave graduated from high school in June, and was getting ready to attend the local junior (or community) college, IVC—Imperial Valley College. I was heading into my senior year, beginning to think about where to go for college as I anticipated a Civil Engineering program.

Grandpa (Dad's dad who'd immigrated from the Swedish-heritage land of Finland's Åland Islands in the late 1800s) and Hedwig (Grandpa's second wife; he'd divorced Mormor, Dad's mom, some years earlier) drove out from their home in Vero Beach, Florida, to visit us in El Centro. As I've thought about it in recent years, I don't think I knew how long they were planning to stay. Mom and Dad didn't consult me, a sixteen-year old, on those matters.

July 19, 1964, was a typical Sunday. Grandpa and Hedwig had arrived a few days earlier, and we had all gone to church together. Going to church—Grace Lutheran Church—was something that we did every Sunday. What was a little different this Sunday was that Dad was going to take Grandpa fishing in the Salton Sea. Rather than settling down for a lazy day after lunch, Dad got the car, a 1962 Buick Electra, ready for the fishing trip. He and Grandpa were in the front seat, and my brother Dave and our friend Randy Gray (from our not-the-most-popular high school band) were in the back seat. The Buick had a big engine, 462 cubic inches, and a bench seat in front. I have never enjoyed fishing. But if I had gone with them that day, I would have been sitting in the front seat between Dad and Grandpa.

They had been gone about an hour or so when the phone rang. I was playing my guitar in the family room that we'd built on in the back of the house. Mom was taking a nap. I answered the phone—there were no answering machines or caller IDs back then—and I heard what I remember thinking at the time was a strange question. The voice on the phone said, "This is El Centro Community Hospital. Do you know who the doctor is for David Gustafson?" I told them, but I thought it was strange they had not asked Dad who my brother Dave's doctor was. Certainly, if Dave had been in an accident, Dad would have been able to tell them the name of our family doctor.



I do not know whether Mom knew at that point what had happened. She and I immediately drove to the hospital, where our minister, Pastor Paul Harting, met us. He said there had been an accident (a word I refuse to use—it was a car crash), and that there were three people dead. That was all we knew at the time. We soon learned that both Dad and Grandpa had been killed instantly when the drunk driver in the other car hit them head-on. The coroner's report estimated that both

vehicles were traveling at 65 miles an hour, the speed limit, at the time of impact. My brother Dave and our friend Randy survived although Dave was severely injured.

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In an instant, our “good life” was changed. Dad was dead; Grandpa was dead; Dave was severely injured; Mom was a widow at age 46. Five days later, just one day before Eric’s twenty-first birthday, Dad was laid to rest with full military honors at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery on Point Loma in San Diego, California. I do my best to visit his grave each time I am in the area. [Mom’s remains were also interred there after her passing in 2012.]

Dave passed away in 2011, but Eric and I have talked about that time. Why didn’t Hedwig go to the hospital with Mom and me? What ever happened to her? I know it’s been decades, but why are those things such a blur, or just non-existent in my brain?

Survival mode kicked in. Mom was used to being the head of the household as there were periods of time when Dad was away for months or years in the Navy, and she had to run the household. That wasn’t new. That was part of being a Navy wife during times of war. What was new was that Dad was no longer in the Navy; he had a civilian job. He should be home every morning and every evening. Mom shouldn’t have to be responsible for everything, finances included.

Dad’s county paycheck was gone, and so was his Navy retirement pay. The house was paid for as, I was to learn many years later, Mom and Dad had believed in paying cash for a house. But recall that the house was purchased in 1959, and El Centro definitely was not the Beverly Hills of the Southern California Desert. Even with a paid-off house, Mom had to go back to work. She’d been a retail clerk at our local J.C. Penney store, but that certainly didn’t pay much.

I don’t know where she got the idea, or the inspiration, as she headed to school to become an LVN, a Licensed Vocational Nurse.

Dave’s broken leg finally mended, and he learned of the deaths of his Dad and Grandpa—that information had been kept from him all the time he was in the hospital; his own physical recovery was top-of-mind. Having been in the devastating car crash and then learning of the deaths greatly impacted him. Eric and I don’t think he ever recovered from that experience.

September rolled around and I began my senior year at Central. Dave was attending IVC, and Mom was taking classes to become a nurse. She’d leave the house before Dave and I got up; I usually had to make sure he was awake and heading off to school. Sometimes I would get home from school before Mom, and other times she would be the first home. She’d make dinner (I wasn’t into cooking at that time), and sitting at the table was the only time of the weekday that the three of us were together. After that, I’d go to my room to do homework; Mom would do her studies at the dining room table, and Dave Well, he was never the best student, but he did receive his A.A. or A.S. degree from Imperial Valley College.

I poured myself into my studies, getting straight As for the first time, all while taking classes such as English IV, Calculus, Physics, Drama, Civics, Annual Staff Business Manager, and I don’t remember what else. I put the tragedy of losing my Dad when I was only 16 behind me. Maybe it was just a matter of hiding the memory, but I didn’t want it to be the dominating factor in my life.

Mom graduated from her LVN studies and became a nurse the County Hospital south of town. She immersed herself into her work, perhaps as a way of shielding herself from the grief of losing her husband and life companion. I never asked her about that; perhaps I should have.

I graduated from high school on June 10, 1965, just two days after Eric (a newly commissioned U.S. Navy Ensign) was married and then headed to Pensacola, Florida, for flight training. I'd been accepted for studies at the University of New Mexico where Eric and his now-wife had graduated, and I was offered a Contract scholarship (which really meant you'll get uniforms and books, but that's it) from the NROTC unit at UNM, with the understanding that they'd make sure I got a "Regular" NROTC scholarship after the first year there. So off I went to Albuquerque; I think I recall that the Greyhound Bus ride took something like 17 hours.

The memory of my Dad's death was blocked; I was moving forward. There was nothing I could do to change the facts, so there was no reason for me to dwell on it. I was going to college, and I was going to be a success.

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