

# Tale of A Train Ride South

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Dave and I love train travel, and if the distance requires a sleeping car, all the better. When my friend-from-birth, Edie, invited us to meet her and her husband, also Dave, in Charleston, we were excited at the prospect of our first extended trip since Covid. Given the 820 miles from here to there, we anticipated a sleep-over, and while the 6:00 a.m. departure time on our tickets made clear that would not be happening, my mind's eye continued to conjure the coast slipping by the window of a cozy couchette.

No matter. Thirteen waking hours on Amtrak would grant time to read books that had hovered too long in the queue by my bed. The Boston Sunday Globe would fill a few hours, and the Crossword puzzle would entertain my husband still more. Trader Joe provided bread, cheese, fruit, and granola bars should the café car's offerings lack appeal, and I tucked a bottle of Nineteen Crimes wine in my canvas tote bag along with a stack of cups should we make any friends by cocktail hour.

Well, the books and the Globe remained in my bag, for conversation was our pastime as it happened, and we did have reason to share the Nineteen Crimes when dusk shadowed the vista beyond the tracks.

Dave is curious. About everything. He always has questions and always gives them voice. While our kids roll their eyes when he chats up cashiers and Uber drivers, his curiosity

has often proved the key to learning of lives different from ours, and so it was on our ride to Charleston.

“Did you fly one of those Tomcats?” Dave asked the gentleman seated across the aisle from us. The man was about our age, African American, and masked as we all were. He glanced at the embroidered patch with the Air Force insignia on his bomber-style jacket and tugged the sleeve to give Dave a better look.

“Military Police,” he answered. “I spent two years in Thailand. Learned the language. Traveled a lot.”

Dave’s father and two uncles served in World War II, and the VFW is one of his favorite charities; we traveled in Thailand with our daughter in 2011; and Tony, the vet, was currently working with the homeless and mentally ill in New York. He was friendly and open to conversation: Thirteen hours would not be enough to cover Dave’s questions.

As we chatted across the aisle about the specifics of Tony’s service and the military in general, those seated nearby chimed in. A wiry army vet had the seat in front of Tony, and a young man in fatigues one seat back was fresh out of Marine boot camp.

“Agh. You must be so glad to have that behind you,” I said to the young Marine. “But do you feel empowered having made it through?”

He had lowered his mask to sip from a water bottle, and it was clear from his smile that he was scrolling through months of memories before answering. “I loved it even when I hated it. I knew it was for my own good, to prepare me for anything so I can defend my country if need be.”

At mention of boot camp, the other vets groaned. “Those drill sergeants just scream in your face, don’t they?” said Tony.

“Oh yeah, they do. Saying, ‘You’re nuthin’! You’re stupid!’ They spit in your face they’re yelling so hard,” said the Marine. Yet surprisingly, his expression was one of fond reminiscence.

“They’re spitting on purpose! Tearing you down to build you up. Just like someone did to them in training. Am I right?” said Tony, craning around the seat in front of him to include the army vet.

The three men were nodding as they shared tales of early morning inspections and grueling drills, chuckling at what they’d endured, agreeing to its necessity in making them better soldiers and better men.

“Would you be interested in being a drill sergeant yourself, do you think?” Dave asked the Marine.

“Yeah. Yeah, I would. Pass it forward.”

The importance of the issues and our effort to speak over the thrumming of the rails forced us to raise our voices, and when a topic overheard compelled them, passengers from seats further down the car joined in. As talk about military discipline led to a discussion of discipline in parenting, a man with dreadlocks down to his waist drew near. “Hope you don’t mind me listening in. The problem here is babies having babies. They don’t know how to be parents! They’re kids themselves!” The woman seated behind Dave agreed. “Mm-hm. That’s the problem.”

At one point, I leaned over Dave’s back to ask the Marine what led him to enlist. “To be honest,” he said, “I wasn’t on the best path. Didn’t have a great role model in my dad. Had no idea what I was going to do with my life. If you’d told me a few months back that I’d be a Marine now, I’d’ve said you were crazy.” He shook his head as if not believing it himself... and radiated pride.

“I know four Marines,” I said. “Two of my uncles and two friends. It’s always mystified me that the Marines are portrayed as the toughest of the armed forces, and yet, these guys are the kindest, nicest men I know.”

Again, the young man’s smile was proud. “Yes,” he said. “We are gentlemen too.”

For Dave and me, fortunate dwellers in the privileged bubble of Fairfield County, everything about these encounters was a gift, an opportunity to speak openly with people of diverse backgrounds and experience. By the time we reached Charleston, we had shared our wine and found, as we always do, that it doesn’t take more than smiles and curiosity to unlock someone’s story. Truly, there are good people everywhere.

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