

I am going to tell you things I've never told anyone before, not even your mother or grandmother. I don't know what you will do with this information, I don't even know what I hope you will do with it. Maybe I'm not even telling you this for your sake but for my own. Maybe at long last I've decided I can't shuffle off this mortal coil without telling someone what happened to me in 1963. And yes, in 1863 as well. We'll get to that bit of strangeness in due time. I'm not James Joyce or William Faulkner, I can only do this in chronological order. You surely won't believe some of the things I tell you. I know I wouldn't. But that's okay. You will see the truth in my story whether you believe some of the events or not. That said, I have never lied to you, nor am I about to begin.

It all started in October of '62 in Oxford, Mississippi. James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran, was trying to get into Ole Miss and it seemed like the entire white population of the state was out to prevent it. Various courts, up to and including the Supreme Court, which back then actually took the American ideal to heart, had found in favor of Meredith's claim that Ole Miss, a public university paid for by all the taxpayers of Mississippi, including the black ones, had denied Meredith admission for no other reason than his race, putting the state on the wrong side of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Which mattered not a whit to white Mississippi or its governor Ross Barnett who swore that no school in Mississippi would ever be integrated on his watch.

I was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, at the time. Corporal AJ Stark III, 101st Airborne Division, aka, the Screaming Eagles. The Army was kind of the family business. My father, Amos Jasper Stark II, was killed in December, 1944, in George Patton's relief of Bastogne. My grandfather, Amos Jasper Stark I, was killed in July,

1918, at Chateau-Thierry. My great great grandfather was Confederate hero Henry Stark, aka, Henry the Elephant. Growing up, it was just assumed I'd be a lifer.

The military was just about the most integrated segment of America at that time. One of the first things we were told at boot camp, by a drill sergeant who was clearly Southern, was that if a black sergeant or officer tells you to jump, you better fucking jump. Don't even ask how high. Jump as high as you can and then some. When the shit hits the fan you'll learn quick enough that you don't care about the skin color of the guy who has your six.

"Okay," I thought. "I can do that. Those are the rules."

Then it turned out my bunkmate was black. I'd been taught, and mind you, I don't mean at home, I mean in school, in the very textbooks, that "God had created blacks and whites apart and He wanted us to live apart." And now here I was cheek by jowl with a Negro. Booker T Stark, like Harry S Truman, had no middle name, just a middle initial with no period. Our common last name is how we ended up bunkmates. When we discovered we were also both from Meridian it got a tad uncomfortable. Were we related? Had some ancestor of mine, Henry the Elephant maybe, impregnated, and yes, possibly raped, an ancestor of his? At first, we said very little to one another, but the system is designed to make you work together and what with having our name in common and being about the same size it seemed we went through every step of training shoulder to shoulder. This was all through Basic and Advanced Training as well as Jump School.

Those same textbooks had said the Negroes were, and I quote, "lazy, duplicitous, thieving savages." Those textbooks were full of shit. Bookie was anything but. Long story

short, despite an uneasy moment here and there, I had next to no trouble adapting to integration, in fact, found it kind of liberating. Who thought integration could be liberating for a white guy? I now felt like I didn't have to treat black people in some special way, in some way I wasn't completely comfortable with. I always felt weird when a black person stepped off the sidewalk for me, and it was especially weird when the black person was older than me or a woman or both. Even when they were my age it felt weird. I mean, who the hell was I?

So Bookie and I became friends. Neither of us ever mentioned our ancestors, but he knew who I was. It was hard not to. Everyone in Meridian knew the Starks and their Army tradition. After a couple years, though, I started to cool on the Army. That's a story for another time perhaps. For now, suffice to say I'd learned how to think from Socrates and wanted nothing more than to get out of the Army and go to college. Bookie was always a better soldier than me anyway, better shot, better at hand-to-hand, better paratrooper, hell, even better at passing inspections. So, by 1962, Sergeant Booker T Stark was my squad leader.

And, boy, did he know chapter and verse of the Meredith saga.

"If Meredith pushes it," he told me, "and he has so far, and if Barnett resists, and you know he will, Kennedy will have to send troops. Just like Ike."

Little Rock was some five years back, and Ole Miss was shaping up to be even worse. Bookie said Meredith was forcing Kennedy's hand, playing him like a fish on the line. He was compelling Kennedy to enforce the rulings of the courts, like it or not, and given the potential loss of support from Southern Democrats, Kennedy did not like it.

“He’ll stall”, Bookie told me. “He’ll hope the local cops are enough, or the Smokey Bears, but you know how that’ll go. You’ve seen the Mississippi State Police. So he’ll send marshals, and then call out the Guard. But in the end, he won’t have any choice and he’ll send troops. And it’ll be us, same as last time.”

I was less than thrilled with this idea. Sure, I wanted Meredith to get into Ole Miss. Sure, I wanted Kennedy to do whatever it took to make that happen. And sure, send troops if that’s what it took. But did it have to be me? In fact, once I thought about it, couldn’t you make a case that any white troops from Mississippi should be held back? Did the brass ever think of things like that? Did they wonder whether white soldiers from the South would obey orders, would put down the riot and not join it, would help a Negro get into a Southern university? I know I wondered. Turns out, someone up the food chain did think of things like that, but inside out.

Because when it transpired that Bookie had been spot on and we were being sent to Mississippi we all saddled up, we all got into the C-130 transports, we all flew to Millington Naval Air Station near Memphis, and then we all trucked down to Oxford, Mississippi, to rendezvous with other units at the airport. But then all the black troops were told to fall out and form a separate (but equal?) detachment. They were to be left behind while only the white troops went into town to quell the riot.

Seems that person up the food chain who thought of such things figured it was a bad idea to inflame further the white racist mob, a mob that was already rioting, already not merely throwing rocks and lit cigarettes at US Marshals and their own local National Guard, but also shooting at them. I figured it was some dumbass general. I figured wrong.

Mayhem ensued. My squad, for example, no longer had a squad leader. Squads were combined, fire teams reformed, guys from one platoon filched from another, now leaving that one shorthanded, black corporals and sergeants replaced by whatever white NCOs could be scrounged up. It was a bloody mess. You didn't know what group you were in, you didn't know the guy next to you. We followed orders though, and I found myself, due to nothing more than seniority, temporary leader of a squad most of whom I couldn't name.

When we finally managed to load ourselves back onto the trucks and head into town we immediately ran into a roadblock—the Mississippi Highway Patrol. They were actually trying to keep us out of the city, trying to keep us from stopping the riot. The Major yelled for them to get out of the way and a bunch of them gave him the finger. One yelled, “Fucking Yankees!”

The major hopped out of the jeep, said something to his driver and the jeep started to turn around. The Major came up to my window. I happened to be riding shotgun in the first six-by.

“Once my jeep's out of the way,” he said. “You clear a path through those black and whites.”

I had an eight ton deuce-and-a-half. They had a few flimsy Fords. The jeep had pulled off to the side and the Major stood watching, hands on hips. I nodded to the driver who grinned and gunned it. The six-by slammed into the cars and pushed a couple aside. We carried a third along with us for a bit before we flung that one aside as well. Even above the screeching metal you could hear the cops screaming bloody murder. I looked out at a few running alongside cussing.

“Call me Moses,” I shouted.

We had a devil of a time reaching downtown though, ran into mob after mob. One of our drivers got a fire extinguisher blasted in his face. A couple of the trucks had their canvas tops set on fire by Molotov cocktails. Some of those assholes had broken into the Ole Miss Chemistry building and were throwing acid at us. My windshield was shattered when a six-inch railroad spike hit it. I saw it coming. A few jokers had stretched a car inner tube between two trees and slingshotted it. When we disembarked, we found four bullets in the radiator. Looked like thirty-eights. I was beginning to wonder if Amos Jasper Stark III was going to buy it right here in Mississippi.

We advanced toward the city center. At one point we passed an intersection and could see some jackasses throwing things a block up on the right. A sergeant took my squad to investigate. Scrawny yahoos, white T-shirts, packs of Camels in the rolled up sleeves, Elvis Presley greased up hairdos, throwing stones and bottles at two women lying huddled in the middle of the street. Fortunately, you wouldn't mistake any of these chumps for Don Drysdale. The ground around the two women was littered with stones and broken bottles and shards of glass. One of the women wore a floral design dress, the other a light blue dress with white polka dots. You could see from their sensible shoes these women were not young. I assumed they were black. Just as we got there a Coke bottle hit the polka dot woman on her hip. You could see her flinch but she made not a sound. The bottle bounced a good foot in the air before clattering to the ground. Sarge was redfaced.

“Which one of you cowards threw that bottle?” he yelled.

A couple of them laughed.

“Fix bayonets!” Sarge growled.

A number of us were Southerners but not a one hesitated. We whipped our bayonets from their sheathes, slid them down the groove on the underside of our rifle barrels, locked them in place with a very satisfying kachunk, and then stood at port arms.

The shitbirds stopped laughing.

“On guard!” Sarge yelled.

We tilted our rifles forward.

“You fuckers best start running,” Sarge said, real low like.

They started to back away.

“Charge!” Sarge yelled, and with a shout we ran at them.

They made like rabbits with us in close pursuit.

“Okay,” Sarge called. “Let ‘em go.”

When we got the two women onto their feet I saw that only one was black. The one in the polka dot dress was white. There was a streak of blood from her gray hairline down the left side of her face to her chin. Sarge asked if she was okay, which she clearly wasn't, but she just looked at us kind of dazed. She patted the top of her head.

“My hat,” she said.

I looked around on the ground but by the time I saw it some Private, who I think was named Donnelly, was picking it up and handing it to her. She took it but didn't try to put it on. She just stood there holding it.

The black woman said, “She tried to help me. Those boys were calling me names and spitting on me. She told them they should be ashamed, what would their mothers

think. That's when they started throwing stones. The first one hit her in the head. She needs a doctor."

"Yeah," Sarge said. "Do you know where we can find one, Missus ah...?"

"Jefferson," she said. "Althea Jefferson, and there's a doctor a couple blocks that way."

Sarge detailed a fire team who listened to Mrs. Jefferson's directions, then left with the white lady.

The rest of us escorted Mrs. Jefferson home.

She had been on her way to work in the Ole Miss cafeteria when the dirt bags waylaid her. Sarge asked Mrs. Jefferson why she hadn't stayed home and she said, why, it's a work day and she had never missed a day of work.

Coincidentally we ended up in the same area as the rest of the platoon. Orders were to guard the black neighborhood. The place looked deserted and Sarge asked Mrs. Jefferson if it was always like that and she said oh no. A lot of folks had left town and gone up into the hills. The ones that stayed were hiding in their basements.

Sure enough, no sooner was Mrs. Jefferson safely home than here comes a mob of knuckleheads looking for blacks. Found us instead. We collared a few and the rest disappeared. One of our nearly toothless "POWs" told me it wasn't about race, it was about the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi. Sure it was. Turned out to be a Klansman from Louisiana.

Later that day, a lieutenant from the 82nd showed up and had my squad report to the Lyceum which was on campus. They wanted us to relieve some Guardsmen. It was here that the riot had started. The air still smelled acrid from the tear gas the marshals

had been forced to use. The place was littered with dead birds and squirrels. Everywhere you looked there were burnt out, overturned vehicles and debris. I saw a school bus lying on its side and a smashed up tractor. Inside, the halls were lined with wounded marshals. Those guys had taken a helluva beating. One of them had been shot in the neck and nearly bled out. A French reporter was shot and killed out behind the Lyceum and a local mechanic had also been killed by gunfire. I found out later that the first National Guard officer on the scene was William Faulkner's nephew "Chooky", who lived, as his uncle had, right there in Oxford. He got whacked with a chunk of cinder block, broke his arm in three places.

The irony of it was Meredith had never even been in the Lyceum. He'd been asleep at a nearby dorm with just a couple marshals guarding his room. No one ever said mobs were smart.



Once we'd run off all the out-of-town jokers things quieted down, but the higher ups still didn't trust that Meredith was safe. So a protection detail was ordered. MPs would go everywhere Meredith went. The guy in charge of the detail, later called, for reasons I never understood, the Peanut Patrol, was a second looney name of Gallagher. He and all his detachment were from the northeast, New York, New Jersey, Philly, and he claimed he couldn't understand the locals. When he asked for someone who could "speak southern", I got picked, being from Mississippi. At first, I'd just sit in the jeep with him as we trailed around behind Meredith and his guardian marshal. Meredith would go into class and we'd wait outside and bullshit. Gallagher had tales to tell. Up at Millington he, a *reserve* second looney for crissakes, had somehow been tasked with leading a huge convoy in the middle of the night down to Oxford. Gallagher had not the slightest how to get from point A to point B so going out the gate at Millington he kidnapped the Navy Shore Patrolman on duty there who at least knew which way was south. When the sailor's knowledge ran dry they pulled into a gas station to get a map. Imagine the attendant in the middle of the night seeing this seemingly endless caravan of Army jeeps and trucks pulling in and this sailor hops out of the lead jeep and wants a road map. The squid navigated them as far as Holly Springs, Mississippi, before they finally let him go. Gallagher had no idea how, or if, he ever got back to Millington.

Once the convoy reached the Oxford airport Gallagher had to find a way into town and the way he found was through some woman's driveway, an episode I never quite understood. But apparently there was this woman in a nightgown in the wee hours watching a convoy of jeeps and six-bys going up her driveway. But then, what? What

was at the end of the driveway? Wasn't there a garage or a carport? Apparently not, since going up this driveway somehow led them into town.

They too had run into the less than helpful Mississippi Highway Patrol. Seems every soldier on any of these details can tell you of run-ins with troopers where they usually just stood by laughing while hooligans rioted, but sometimes went so far as to impede intervention. Gallagher saw one group of MPs form a wedge to barge through a line of troopers. He said as the lead soldier approached the troopers one told him "you better not stick me with that", meaning his bayonet. So the MP stuck him, and the troopers scattered. Gallagher's driver said they saw another MP deck, in his words, "some sorry ass skinny redneck" with a horizontal butt stroke. In other words, he whacked him in the chops with the butt of his M1 rifle. That will definitely clarify your intentions.

We had a run-in once when I was in the jeep. We were parked waiting for Meredith and across the street there was this goober who was clearly out for trouble. We watched him stoop down and pick up a rock. Our driver was a big scary former linebacker. Gallagher told him to get rid of the redneck. So he slowly walks up to the guy and just stands there looking down at him. After a few seconds the guy dropped his rock and slunk off.

I'd say you wouldn't believe the abuse we all got, especially Meredith, but I'm sure you can easily imagine it. And I'm not talking now about just the rednecks. The students chimed in too, and, what surprised me most of all, the coeds. The sweetest, most demure, dainty little southern belle would happily inform you that your wife or sister was back home fucking niggers and having nigger babies. I said we were all

surprised, but Meredith wasn't. Probably no black in Mississippi would be. It was like he didn't even hear it.

I was only on Peanut Patrol about a week before I went undercover. We had Meredith in sight pretty much always except when he was in class, and there'd been a couple incidents. At one of Meredith's classes some news photographer who had taken the seat right behind him jumped up, snapped his photo, then ran off chased by marshals. Meredith's first appearance in the cafeteria caused a food fight. And so, one day Gallagher takes me to the armory downtown, where all the brass are. Next thing I know I'm in a room with a general and *he* wasn't even the top dog. A civilian who turned out to be Assistant Attorney General of the United States Nicholas Katzenbach, later of Watergate fame, did all the talking.

Heard I was from Mississippi, heard I wasn't racist, heard I'd had a few by-mail college courses. Here's the deal, he said. He wanted an army guy who could pass for an Ole Miss student. He wanted to know everything that went on in Mr. Meredith's classes. All I had to do was sit in the back and keep my eyes and ears open. The profs would not expect me to answer questions or take tests or do homework. I would not interact with Meredith, I would act as though he wasn't there. If anyone asked, I lived with an uncle off campus. "Little farm north of here." Cushy gig. I ate in the cafeteria while my Army buddies were feasting on field rations. I often saw Mrs. Jefferson there, but she never recognized me.

After about a week of this, it was decided to expand my assignment. When Meredith was in his dorm room I was to wander around, do student things, shoot some pool, maybe bowl, whatever. Be a student. Mix in. Ear to the ground. Then, after a full

day snooping, I'd head back to my uncle's farm a bit north of town. In other words, I'd return to camp, where Bookie would regale me with his adventures emptying ash trays at the airport, or picking up litter, or cleaning up the stadium after a football game - unarmed and sans helmet. If he could have gotten out of the Army at that point he would have.

Of course, I never had anything to report. Meredith ignored his classmates and they ignored him. It was a mutual avoidance society. They ignored me too. I'm sure they knew exactly what I was. It could be that my very presence was preventing the sort of shenanigans I was supposed to report on. I loved it. I was getting a taste of my post Army plans.

Gradually that October Cuba started taking over the headlines. We found out that the Russians were installing missiles there! Just 90 miles away! Those nefarious commies. Who would do such a thing? Besides us, I mean. Two years previous we had installed missiles in Turkey which was zero miles from the Soviet Union. But hey, we're America, right? We're the good guys. If we point a really big gun at your head it's because you're the bad guys. Now that there was a really big gun pointing back at us, we had to decide if what was good for the goose was also good for the gander, and apparently we didn't think it was. So pretty soon World War III was about to begin. The 101st was ordered back to Fort Campbell to pack up to head to Cuba, but then suddenly we won! Khrushchev removed his missiles from Cuba just as, coincidentally, JFK removed ours from Turkey. Hooray for us!

I did not return to Kentucky with the rest of the division. I'd been left behind in Oxford. The school term was nearly over, as was my enlistment, so the powers that be

decided I'd finish my time with the Peanut Patrol. My last few months I was essentially a civilian and never again wore a uniform. I went to class like any other Ole Miss student, made my reports, hung out downtown. Then it was summer break, Meredith left town and I went back to Meridian and moved in with my stepfather. My enlistment didn't actually expire until I was in Meridian.

Before Bookie got out, however, he learned that the order to separate the black troops had not been an Army order, but a presidential one. It hadn't been some bonehead general, it had been JFK and RFK. In fact, the Army had at first ignored the order. The black troops weren't even supposed to leave Fort Campbell, but some general had torn up the order and deep-sixed it. So, while I was getting out, Bookie was deciding to stay in.

As for James Meredith, to this day I don't know what to make of him. Here's a guy decides on his own, with no prodding or support from any civil rights group, to integrate the University of Mississippi. Just a typical second class citizen who wakes up one morning with a plan to force the President of the United States to force the white folks of Mississippi to do the right thing. How does a guy get out of bed one day and think, "Looks like it's up to me to make history"? Meredith was no dummy, but neither was he a genius. So what does it take? Delusions of grandeur, you might say, but were they delusions? He did it. His plan worked. I admired him then, I admire him still, though my admiration has been tainted. How does this civil rights hero later join the staff of Jesse Helms? How does he later endorse David Duke, for god's sake, for governor of Louisiana? Is he crazy? Was he crazy then? Is that what heroes are—crazy?

Medgar Evers said of Meredith: “He’s got more guts than any man I know, but he’s the hardest-headed son-of-a-gun I ever met. The more you disagreed with him the more he became convinced that he—and he alone—was right.” Well, he certainly had guts. A lot of the abuse he took wasn’t just name calling. Some of it was life threatening. I remember one pretty coed yelling, “Why doesn’t somebody kill him?” If ever there was a miracle it was that no one did.

White folks would ask him, to his face or in print, if it was worth getting two people killed. As if he was the one who killed them. But I never, then or later, heard anyone ask the white knuckle draggers who created the situation that begat the killings, none of whom were ever convicted by the way, not even the ones we nabbed red handed, that same question. *They* caused those deaths, *they* tore up that campus, *they* damn near killed a few US marshals and some of their own guardsmen, and *they* flaunted to the entire world their American hypocrisy, just to keep one black guy out of Ole Miss. And how did that work out? Just like the Civil War, just like all these retrograde actions aimed at resisting progress or even turning back the clock, they lost. They caused a lot of trouble, made a big fuss, got people killed, and then lost. They made James Meredith a hero and now, outside the Lyceum, on the spot where those white “patriots” took their stand for the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi, there’s a real nice statue of the guy, a statue that silently proclaims, this is the guy who showed the world who we really were.

