

21st Storyworth: How Did You Celebrate Your 21st Birthday?

Truth is, I have no specific recollection that my 21st was anything special. Unlike so many people who feel the need to bust loose and get drunk because they finally can legally, my parents had never restricted my limited consumption of alcohol, which meant it was no big deal once I was “legally allowed”. In fact, the ONLY time I recall I was EVER close to drunk was during my freshman year two years earlier at Clarkson where I was in ROTC. I joined the Clarkson Rangers, a pseudo commando fraternity sponsored by the Army ROTC there, and was very active. Which included attending a party thrown by our Faculty Advisor, an unmarried Captain, whose idea of “punch”, which he called “Jungle Juice”, was a mix of fruit juices (not much) with a pint of Grenadine (think about the basis for that word ;-)) and a quart each of rum, vodka and gin, and chilled by ice kept in plastic bags so as not to dilute it in ANY way ;-)

It was sweet. Literally. And hit like a ton of bricks. Just to give perspective, I was still very wet behind the ears, and had considered making the military a career. In fact, that year I won the only bona fide military medal I ever owned as the Superior Cadet that year, because I was so into ROTC that I wound up 17 credits behind by the end of my freshman year because I'd been laying out in the weeds planning ambush scenarios with the Rangers instead of laying with members of the opposite sex planning other maneuvers entirely, although SOME might have thought those ambushes as well ;-)

By the time of my 21st birthday two years hence, I had met Lynne, who was attending Alfred University, which was the opposite side of the state entirely from Clarkson in Potsdam, and we were hitting it off pretty well. I had survived the credits deficit by attending summer school, because to do otherwise would have meant my ACTUALLY going to Vietnam, since my 105 draft number would have been an almost certainty that nobody would have thought MY ass would make a better planner for defeating problems rather than being a target for Viet Cong ammo. So, thankfully, I had instead had the good fortune to avoid that mess with my college deferment, and I had become far more cynical but informed about the reality vs my naivete as a frosh, and the Army had declined to offer a commission to me as they might otherwise have done based on my freshman status by my Junior year. Like Dawn, by the time Lynne met me I had a beard, a symbol of my revolt against the war which has remained to this day. And I met Lynne the summer before my 21st birthday.

So, although I do not specifically recall any such detail, it is likely I drove to Alfred in my turquoise '63 Chevy Wagon which had enabled me to meet Lynne in the first place for my birthday. She was living at AKO sorority house in Alfred NY, and by then we were well on the way to a relationship, so we likely would have spent the weekend together doing what any young couple would have. I am pretty sure we would have gone to a not too expensive restaurant for a nice meal, but with the trip taking six hours each way from Clarkson, we would not have had a lot of time of a weekend before we would have to part again. And my birthday would have only JUST preceded fall semester finals, so we would both have been unable to take our eyes off the prize.

With the nature of winter weather in CNY, and especially in the corridor we would have to transit between Clarkson and Alfred, which included I-81 and the downwind side of Lake Ontario at the Tug Hill Plateau, travel would have necessitated planning ahead to be sure we could safely get there and back of a weekend. Many the times were that we would have postponed because of whiteout conditions expected, which were likely anytime from October through April. We actually became engaged on April 1 following my 21st when Lynne wrecked her car on her way to visit me, a story I know I reported in a prior article, when I had said “April Fools” just before midnight, having proposed earlier that day after retrieving her on the road. Good thing she had a sense of humor, right? At least by then she knew me for having helped her through her Dad's passing ;-)

Joe Holzer 5/17/2021