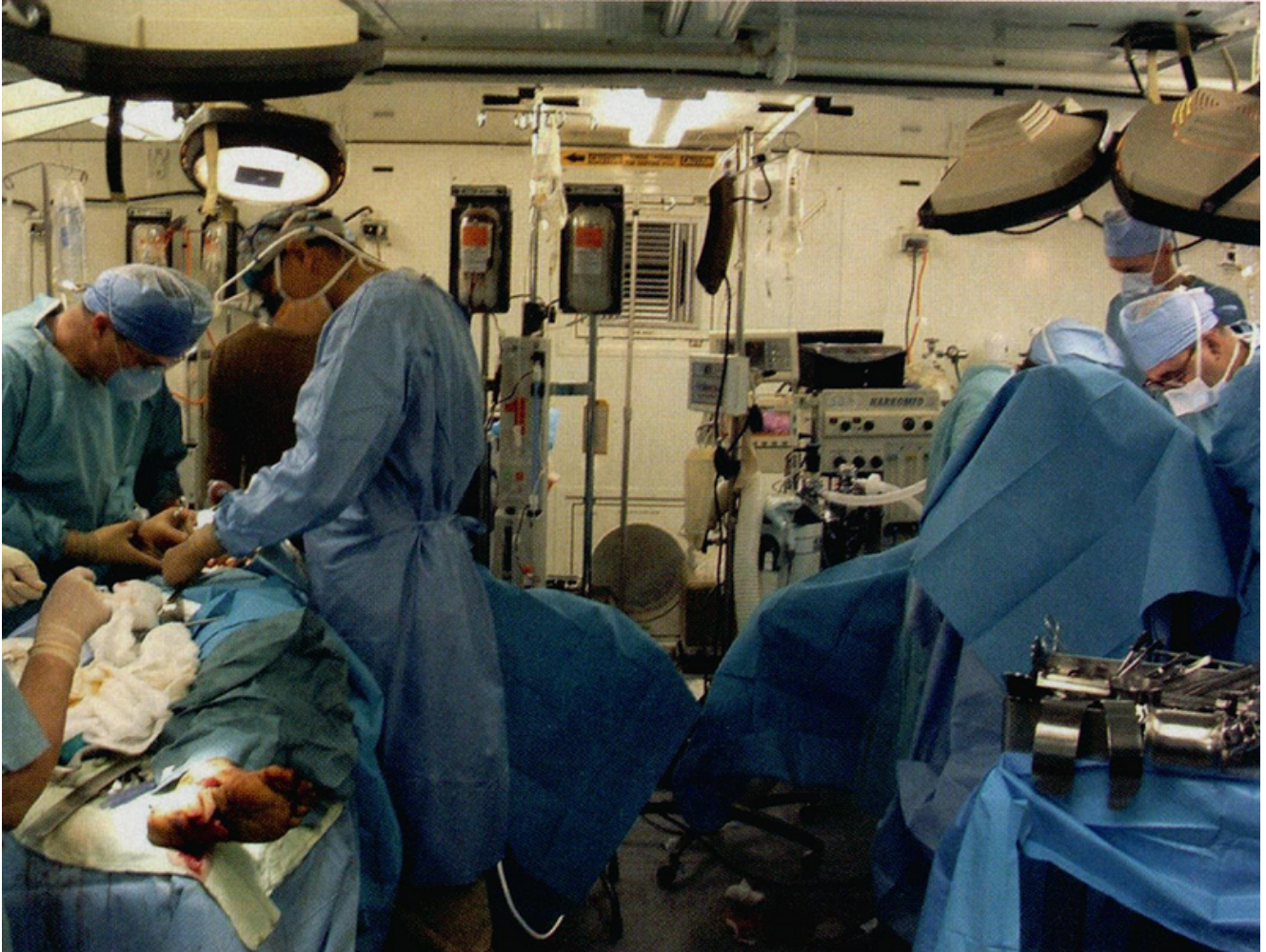


Desert Shield

by [Peter Glassman](#) (May 2023)



Surgeons operating in the portable operating container of the 212th MASH in Iraq

I was in the operating room (OR) at Massena Memorial Hospital in Massena, NY located at the Canadian border, when the circulating nurse gave me a note. "It's from your wife. After you finish this patient please call her. It's important, but not urgent."

My wife Barbara knew that as an anesthesiologist any distraction while I had a patient under anesthesia was unacceptable. As Chief of Anesthesia I enforced this principal

on my staff. Barbara was to call the OR only if something domestic needed my attention. Usually it involved one of my three teenagers. I left my patient in the recovery room after she awakened from the anesthetic and I had her post-operative pain under control.

“Hi, it’s me. What’s so important this morning? Did all three kids make it to school?” My sons, and even my daughter had cut school once and were caught by the local police for truancy. Massena was a small town and everyone knew everyone, even their children.

“Have you been listening to the news this morning?” Barbara was serious.

“Don’t tell me one of the kids attracted the media? Did it make the papers? Anyone in trouble?”

“No, for God’s sakes, the President activated the military. It’s Iran. Saddam Husain, invaded and annexed Kuwait. President Bush and the Department of the Army even sent you a personal letter and a promotion.”

“What!” My heart was now beating faster than my patient’s in the recovery room. “Read me the letter ... slowly.”

“Okay, but first notice it starts with Lieutenant Colonel Peter Glassman not Major Peter Glassman.”

I gasped, “Oh, My God! That’s not good. They must want me bad for this Kuwait thing.”

She read the letter from the Department of the Army stamp-signed by the President. “Look dear, it’s not all that bad. It’s for something called Desert Shield. It means you’ll be doing reserve duty here. Any action in Kuwait should be contained by the time a war breaks out. Anyway, you have to go to Las Vegas for some desert training exercise.”

I received my certification of training in an Arizona desert close to Las Vegas. The training was from Israeli Anesthesiologists. The operating rooms were in air-conditioned inflatable MASH units. I'll never forget what the Israeli Colonel told us about giving anesthesia in hot climates.

"Gentlemen, as you all know, the inhalation agents for anesthesia are administered safely at temperatures between 68 and 74 degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature is too low, the patient doesn't go to sleep, and if it's too high they are overdosed and may never wake up." The Colonel demonstrated the portable anesthesia machines invented and used in Israel for their battlefields. "The vaporizers on these units are designed to compensate for intense heat in case the air-conditioning of the MASH units fails and you're forced to work in ambient desert temperatures."

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The training I received credentialed me to train other US Anesthesiologists and Nurse Anesthetics in military hospitals. My first assignment was at Fitzsimmons Army General Hospital in Aurora, Colorado. Uniform regulations dictated wearing the tan-desert camouflage BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) for all attendees, even me as the lead instructor. We used the Fitzsimmons gymnasium where the Israeli anesthesia machines were set up. I was to supervise the workability and safety of all units. However, the hospital Executive Officer summoned me to his office the day before I would give the course.

"Lieutenant Colonel Glassman, I acknowledge your Army Reserve status and your deployment here as part of preparation for Desert Shield. Once all aspects of combat units, including the medical corps, are ready, Desert Shield will become a tactical operation as Desert Storm—off we go to the Middle East." The Full Colonel stood up and rubbed his chin as his eyes scanned my appearance. "Clean uniforms and attention to proper regulation and grooming is the order of the day here at

Fitzsimmons.”

I stared at him and responded, “Of course, Sir, but why is it necessary to remind me of this?”

He put his hand on my shoulder and lowered his voice, “Because, Dr. Glassman, while you are here and the entire country is on alert status, you must impart the stature of the US Army with its regulations and your rank.” He removed his hand and smiled, “In other words, Peter, you need a haircut.”

We both laughed. “No problem, Sir, I’m heading to the Post Exchange barber shop this afternoon.”



The Aurora area weather was bright and sunny. The temperature was mild for a fall day in this mile-high Denver City area. Aurora was also host to Buckley Air force Base with its huge Post-Exchange. The mega-store was along the lines of a K-Mart without groceries. Food products were to be had in the Commissary close by.

I took a picture of the surrounding snow-capped mountains before I entered the Exchange. The Post Exchange itself was shaped like a T with smaller shops accessed immediately upon entry. The barber shop was four storefronts to the left with its rotating striped red-white-blue pole beckoning to me. I entered the shop to a large waiting room of Army and Air Force uniformed men. Just before the seating area was a paper-ticket dispenser beneath a neon sign flashing for the next numbered military patron. An available barber called it out. I took a ticket. My number was 51.

I scanned the eight salon chairs and noted that all the barbers were Asian women dressed in black pant suits. Most of the men waiting their turn at the chairs had a hair pattern of a once close-cropped crew cut. My hair was long with sideburns a la Elvis Presley. I took in the rank of the

anticipatory clients. There was an Air Force Captain and two Army Lieutenants as Officers. I was the ranking candidate as Lieutenant Colonel. However, military rank did not give any special privileges in here. To all inhabitants of the Post-Exchange Barber Shop, my identity became—number 51.

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Within fifteen minutes number 50 was called. I was next. I looked at the barber chairs to anticipate which one might be the available hair-cutter for me. Most of the lady barbers were middle age but one young woman caught my eye. However, a fiftyish trim barber shouted my number with an oriental accent, "Nummer Fiffy-One."

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I walked to the barber chair and no one seemed to care that I was US Army, Air Force, or even a Lieutenant Colonel. My barber smiled with pearly teeth and motioned me to sit.

"Sir, I am Lily and will give you good haircuh, Yes, Sir." She removed my glasses.

She smelled of lilacs. I smiled back, "Well, thank you, I'm a reservist and just need a haircut to pass inspection."

She put a hand on each of my temples as we both looked forward to the mirror. "Sir, yes Sir, .

Addressing me in all those "Sirs" made me feel like this was not a new situation for Barber Lily, and I relaxed.

I pulled my arms from under the Air Force blue apron she had draped me with and touched my hair. "I would like just a little off the top and the sides. And this is important..." I paused to make sure I had her attention. "...my sideburns are three inches long. Please, do not trim them shorter than two inches. I think that's within Army regulations."

“Sir, yes Sir.” She smiled again nodding an eager affirmative and reapplied the blue apron, sealing it at my neck.

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I closed my eyes as she applied the whirring hair clippers to my forehead hairline. The buzzing little mower felt warm as it touched my skin. Suddenly she moved the device over the front, top, and all the way to my neckline. My heart started to beat fast and before I could say a word she used the same motion and clipped the right sides and sideburn.

I swallowed hard and tried not to be heard by anyone except her, “Lily, I asked for just a trim and to leave two inches of the sideburns. What have you done?”

“Sir, all soldiers can ask, ‘wha kine haircuh?’”

I looked at her face and my hair in the mirror. “But now you have to cut the rest of my hair like that.”

“Oh, Sir, yes Sir, this is Air Force Post Exchange and rule is that soldier can ask ‘wha kine haircuh’, but can get only one kine haircuh.”

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Desert Shield turned into Desert Storm and I was sent to my unit back in Massena to await further orders. Deployment to Kuwait would next be from Fort Devens in Massachusetts. Barbara picked me up at the small Massena airport. I kept my hat on to hide my new “scalped” appearance. My visor prevented us from a proper hug and kiss greeting.

Once home, my daughter Tracy gave me no choice, “What’s the matter Dad, two months away from us and no show of affection?”

I removed my hat. The silence that followed immediately changed to laughter. Barbara gave me a hug. “I guess I can safely tell you now, I never liked those rock-star sideburns.”

My son Michael who had hair like the Beatles was the first to comment on my Lieutenant Colonel promotion. "Couldn't you tell them you wanted to keep your hairstyle, dad—I mean being a Colonel and all?"

I put my arm around his shoulders, "Michael, one thing out of many things I've learned in life is that some choices are never really choices—especially in the military."

Barbara shouted, "And another is obeying your wife—no choices there."

Our eyes focused on Barbara. My son David, the oldest at seventeen, broke the silence. "Mom, Dad, I'm never getting married."

Michael and Tracy brushed the top of my crew-cut hair with their hands and gave me a hug. Of the many things I experienced in the Army Reserve, this made my military coiffure worth my imagined haircut anxiety.



The Gulf War ended just as my MASH unit was scheduled to disembark from Fort Devens. I was welcomed back at the hospital with a celebration in the cafeteria along with others who had been called up to serve. Even though I received extensive training for the Kuwait Mission, whenever I think back to those days, my memory of that haircut, and the family bonding I had, is still one of my most treasured experiences.

[Table of Contents](#)

Peter Glassman is a retired physician living in Texas, who devotes his time to writing novels and memoir-based fiction. He is the author of 14 novels including the medical

thrillers *Cotter*; *The Helios Rain* and *Who Will Weep for Me*. Some of his short stories were written for presentation at the San Antonio Writers Group Meetup. You can read more about him and his books [here](#).

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