

Lessons

by Phillip W. Weiss

Once upon a time there was a young man named Ralph Chanin. Ralph was a splendid fellow, intelligent, kindhearted, generous and responsible. He was employed as a social worker for a large hospital in Los Angeles, California. One day, Ralph received a letter from the United States Army. The letter was an offer for a job as a senior social worker for the US Army in Germany. Ralph was excited. He had applied for this position over a year ago and finally the Army had responded. He called the number on the letter and informed that he accepted the offer. He could hardly wait to pack and get to Germany. At work, he informed his supervisors about this job offer. Everyone at work wished him all the best. He resigned his position, packed his bags, vacated his apartment and went to the airport to board his flight to Germany. The US Army office in Los Angeles had provided him a one-way ticket to Hamburg, Germany. From Hamburg, the Army would transport him to Bremerhaven, where the Army hospital he would be working at was located. To help Ralph better cope with this move the Army provided him with a pamphlet entitled, Working for the US Army Overseas. Ralph was provided with no other materials, but he was okay with that. To him, working for the US Army in Germany was a once in a lifetime opportunity to see Europe and serve his country. At the airport, Ralph boarded the plane, and twelve hours

later was in Hamburg, Germany. At the airport he was met by an army sergeant who asked Ralph his name and directed Ralph to board an army bus parked nearby for transport to Bremerhaven. Ralph had expected a somewhat warmer reception but his mood was still good. Soon the bus left the airport. On the bus was one other passenger, a young army captain. Two hours later the bus arrived at the army hospital. Ralph departed the bus and reported to the front desk of a hotel-like building that was located outside of the entrance to the hospital. There Ralph was assigned a room. Ralph shared the bathroom with another room. After Ralph settled in, he heard a knock on the door. A young woman, a civilian, introduced herself as Shannon who would be Ralph's coworker at the clinic to which Ralph was assigned. Shannon told Ralph to call her if he needed anything and left. The next day Ralph reported to his new workplace. He was surprised and chagrined to learn that he did not have an office and that the clinic itself was neither staffed nor functioning. The clinic was given a dingy room in the part of the hospital that was under construction. Thus, this was how Ralph began his tenure as a social worker for the US Army – no office, icy reception, living in drab accommodations, away from home, no social support, and assigned to a clinic that was virtually nonexistent yet expected to be fully functional. Ralph considered quitting right then and there, but opted to stay because, frankly, he did not want to return to the states without a job after he had left a perfectly good job in LA. Little did Ralph know nor could he know that his arrival would mark the high point of his experience as an employee of the US Army in Bremerhaven.

Although eventually the clinic would be provided with more appropriate workspace and would acquire additional staff, relations between the hospital's command and the clinic steadily worsened. Ralph learned that the hospital had been ordered to accommodate the new clinic and to do so out of the local hospital budget. This fact alone soured the hospital command's perception of the clinic and became an ongoing source of friction. At one point, the hospital's command even ordered a formal audit of the clinic to find evidence of misappropriation of funds. Although Ralph had prior military service, he never expected to experience anything like this. The hospital's command carried this grudge against the clinic that lasted the entire time Ralph was there. To the hospital, the clinic, which was staffed entirely by civilian employees, was a waste of the hospital's money and served no useful purpose except as a place for civilians to goldbrick while collecting a paycheck for doing nothing. Despite the hostile work environment, Ralph stayed, adjusted as best he could, and diligently worked to develop his job. However, it was an uphill battle that he could not win. The hospital rarely referred cases to the clinic which was created to provide medical services for military dependents, mostly children, with serious medical and psychological conditions. Ironically, Ralph himself would become a patient at the army hospital for three days. During his hospitalization Ralph received good care, and he was discharged in stable condition. Yet that respite did nothing to improve relations between Ralph and the hospital's command, who had gone out of their way to denigrate and impugn Ralph, who had become the principal target

of the hospital's wrath. Today, decades later, the army hospital is gone, the army base to which the hospital was attached is gone, the hospital's commander is gone and all the controversy that engulfed Ralph for years now is barely a footnote in the annals of history. Yet, the passage of time has not erased from Ralph's conscience the memories of unpleasant events that taught him two lessons, first, that the civil service grievance process is a sham, and second, not to depend on the passage of time to heal all wounds, which may close but will always leave a scar.