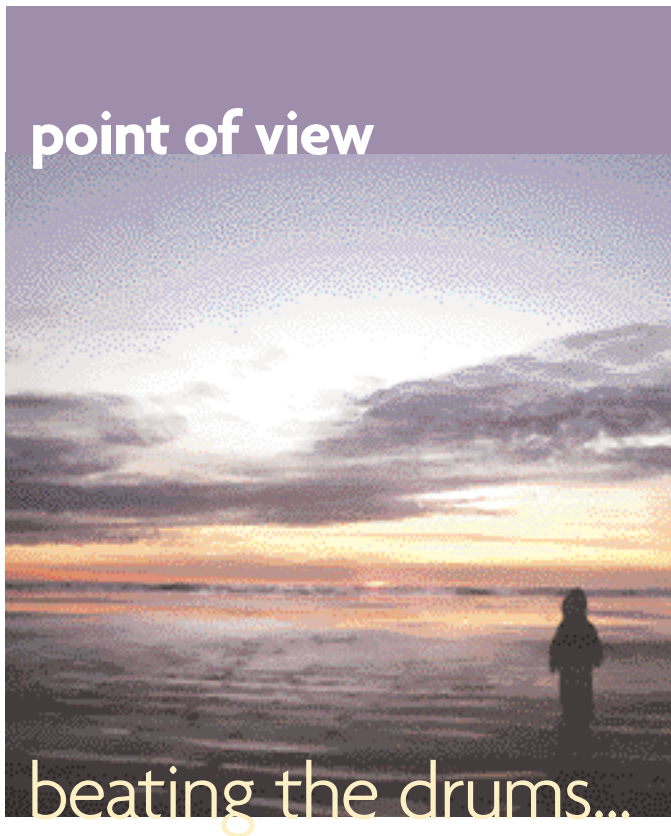


point of view



beating the drums...

by Bruce Giffin

It was late in the day in mid-January, that time when the face of Santa Barbara's mountains turn pink as the sun gets low in the sky. From Susie's kitchen, there were new windows with views in both directions out to the mountains and to the ocean. The sea was calm and the moon was rising above the ridgeline.

Susie and I stood by the newly installed kitchen island. The granite countertops were covered with a layer of protective paper. A glimmer of polished stone and stainless steel caught the late afternoon light from a slice in the paper we had made to lay out where the sink faucets would go. I put down our paperwork and turned to Susie.

"I've got bad news," I said.

There was a brief pause and then Susie simply added, "Rand's going."

"He called me today at noon; he got unexpected orders. He's being reassigned to another unit from Missouri...from there he's going to Kuwait where they'll be attached to a tank unit. He's leaving in 72 hours."

At that moment, the priorities of the care and craftsmanship that Rand, our lead carpenter, had given to Susie and Don's remodeling project seemed very sweet and poignant, almost like an age of lost innocence. The beating of the drums of war got a little bit louder. Lives were being put on the line, people we knew and cared about. The world was changing and some of that change had been brought close to home that afternoon.

We were about four weeks away from completion. We had started the meeting with our painter and electrician reviewing interior paint color selections and cabinet lighting. Rand's missing presence from the meeting filled the room.

The news was a surprise. Rand, a First Sergeant in our local Army Reserve unit, had been told previously by his commanders that he would not be deployed. Nearing 40, married with two young sons and a veteran of two 9-month tours in Bosnia and Kosovo, he accepted that he was not going.

A man of calm demeanor and precision, Rand grew up on a houseboat in the waterfront of Sausalito. As a young man, he worked as a boatwright and gained skill in the construction trades.

Along the way he also became interested in the soldiering profession.

Rand came to our company four years ago, and after six months we needed him to work on a difficult and uncompromising contemporary home that had been started by another contractor. The home had been under construction for nearly 18 months when we took it over, and it would be another 24 months before the owner moved in. The majority of the trade contractors were retained to complete the work, and the relationships on site were complex and intense. It turned out to be the most challenging home we had ever built, yet Rand rose to the task of conducting the work. Many got frustrated and lost their cool, yet not once did Rand lose his.

Many times at the end of a day, Rand and I would discuss world affairs. As the rhetoric heated up about Iraq, we talked about the possible implications for him, for our company, for the country and for the world. We wanted to believe he would not be called up.

"This news makes me so sad," Susie said. "Oh, I just feel for Rand's wife and his kids."

"You know better than most," I replied. Susie's deceased first husband had been a career Navy pilot and her two sons had followed in their father's footsteps.

"I'll call him and let him know how much we'll miss him," Susie said.

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it. He's left things in good shape here. There's a four-week look-ahead schedule that he's done, and I'm going to ask one of the other superintendents to help out in completing the work."

The sun slipped behind the western edge of the Mesa. Below us the city darkened in twilight while a pink glow filled the evening

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sky, bathing the tops of the mountains in soft light. Susie and I looked out to the ocean. It had turned the color of slate gray. Across the channel, Santa Cruz Island was a calm presence. Lights twinkled on one of the oil platforms off shore.

"Isn't it amazing," Susie said, "that we can have such beauty in the world right at our footsteps..."

"...and at the same time," I said, "be sending young men and women off to war."

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