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CINEMA NOTES

I SAW SHAFT SEVEN TIMES

By Ronald W. Meister

The recent re-make of the epic film *Shaft* calls to mind some of the strange things lawyers are required to do to comply with their professional obligations.

During the Vietnam War, the United States Navy decided that it would be good for morale if every sailor on active duty had a "legal check-up." No doubt as a result of my meritorious record as a JAG lieutenant in Boston, I was awarded the plum assignment of providing this service at the Naval Facility on Nantucket Island—in February. At that time of year, the base had a complement of ninety shivering sailors, most of them under twenty years old. I flew to the island to begin the principal work of "Legal Check-Up Week," writing their wills.

It was a source of not inconsiderable anxiety, among young sailors who could be sent on dangerous missions on short notice, that a legal officer had appeared suddenly to write wills for all of them. I attempted to explain that Legal Check-Up Week was merely another part of Navy routine, like watching movies about venereal disease and beating up civilians, and avidly set to the task of estate planning. Most of the interviews went something like this:

"I'm here to help you with your estate plan."

"What's that, sir?"

"It's about what's going to happen to your property when you die."

"AM I GOING TO DIE?"

"Well, yes, eventually, but I don't have any classified information about when. Why don't you tell me about what you own."

"Own a bicycle, sir."

"Good. Have you given any thought to who should inherit your bicycle when you die?"

"WHY DO YOU KEEP SAYING I'M GOING TO DIE?"

"Okay, sailor. Here's a note to your C.O. that you don't need a will just yet. Would you please send the next man in?"

And so it went, for seven days. Most of my other services during Legal Check-Up Week were equally ineffective, except for the day I was asked to advise the Commanding Officer of his legal options in apprehending two Army deserters who were believed to have escaped to Nantucket. I facetiously asked if he could blockade the island. Taking this as a legal proposal for an actual naval operation, the C.O. mobilized his forces and smoked out the deserters. I got a letter of commendation.

Aside from the manhunt, the real entertainment at the base, which was too small to have an Officers' Club, was the nightly movie. Every Sunday, a plane arrived from the mainland with seven movies for the upcoming week. With seven movies for as many days, you might expect that the Navy's logistical coordinators could figure out an appropriate allocation per evening, but you would be wrong. Every night, they showed all seven movies—in the same order. If you wanted to see movie number four, you had to stay up until 3:00 A.M.

The week I was there, the base was featuring the Richard Roundtree Film Festival, which included *Shaft*, *Shaft's Big Score*, *Shaft Rides Again*, *Bride of Shaft*, *Shaft and Louise*, and two others I could never manage to stay awake to see. I went every night. There is nothing else to do in Nantucket in February except write wills.

Years later, having moved on professionally from not writing wills for eighteen-year-olds, I found myself picking a jury in [New York] Supreme Court in White Plains. One of the veniremen identified himself as Herbert Roundtree. I asked if he was any relation to Richard, and he said he was his father. I couldn't help myself. I blurted out, "I saw *Shaft* seven times."

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