By Fred Gardner

Dennis Peron died in January, peacefully, at the VA Hospi- tial in San Francisco. He was 71.

We had met earlier but really became friends in the sum- mer of 1977 when Dennis was laid up at St. Vincent's Hospital (now very expensive condos across from Duboce Park), where he underwent surgery. His right thigh had been splintered by an SFPD narcotics officer’s bullet dur- ing a raid on his Castro Street flat, known to some as “The Big Top.” He was facing serious prison time.

I took down his story when the room wasn’t full of friends and family members — all of whom Dennis chat- ted with and got to know a little.

In 1967 Dennis had received a draft notice from the Army and chose to join the Air Force, which meant a three- instead of a two-year hitch but guaranteed a non- combat specialty. He was trained as a radio operator and would be employed as a clerk.

Dennis had smoked marijuana back home in New York but didn’t use it steadily until he was in training in the Air Force. He chose to spend his 30-day leave before shipping out to Vietnam in San Francisco (after a quick trip to see the Big Top in New York).

Dennis recalled: “I rented a room at the Texas Star Hotel, right next to the bus station. From the first time I walked down Haight Street I realized my life would never be the same. I was so happy. Before I left I got into a communal scene, living with about 20 people in this beautiful old house. A lot of people were trying to talk me into deserting — a lot of people — just not the kind of person who runs away from anything.

“I wasn’t really anti-war until the Tet offensive began. I was stationed at Tan Sen Hut [Air Force Base] working as a clerk in the mail terminal. All the mail from the States would come through there and be shipped to all those bas- es. I made sergeant there. At night we’d go to this house in downtown Saigon that a bunch of us rented for $100 a month—10 GIs. We used to go there and smoke, that was our big thing. And we’d stay the night, no problem getting back on base.

“We were there playing Scrabble when all of a sudden, at midnight, all hell broke loose, shooting everywhere. Right down the street. Helicopter gunships all over the place, shooting from balconies. I shot in my pants. Couple of us had guns, none of us knew how to use them. They tried to teach me in basic training but I just couldn’t do it. I always just closed my eyes. I had to qualify four times. “They got me to combat in the Air Force. The only combat we saw was that night, the night of the Tet offensive. [Feb- ruary 1, 1968] The only reason we got back to base was because the helicopters flying overhead instructing Americans what to do. You had to run down the street. People were shooting at you. Bullets were flying by me, whole strings of them, a few feet away. Very scary! Duck- ing into alley to get away from the shooting. There were convoys to the base. They were getting shot at. We all go to a convoy. Couple of busses were being towed by tanks and tractors. Gunships guarding us.

“So I got radicalized during the Tet offensive. I got real anti-war and that’s when the bureaucracy started getting pissed at me. I was kinda refusing to cut my hair at the time, down-rapping the war all the time, trying to get my friends to down-rap the war. Before Tet we were kind of compla- cent about it. We were stoned, not too involved. But when that happened I said, ‘What the hell are we doing to these people? I saw our own gunships killing innocent people. I got so shaken that from then on I was really one of the major agitators at Tan Sen Hut.... In many ways I’d had that rightwing attitude that we were helping these people, that we were doing a good thing, never really realizing that it was a civil war.”

It was during Tet that Dennis came out as a gay man. One of his duties had been to stack the body bags that would be flown back to the U.S. He started wearing a black armband and let his hair grow. He was transferred to a base in Thai- land.

“Right on the border to Laos. The mission at the base was to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail. You could see the B52s bombing the trail, through the mountains, and you could feel it. You could feel it as much as seeing it. It would light up the sky. The Ho Chi Minh trail was about 30 miles away from us. I was a major’s clerk.”

Dennis was exposed to Agent Orange and always sus- pected it had damaged his lungs.

“I learned a lot of phrases and made a lot of friends. I had a beautiful time with the Thai people. I rented a house that had no door, no windows. I got around on a bicycle. I re- ally went native.

“Sometimes I would have to act as interpreter. My com- pany commander appreciated the community-relations job I was doing. ‘Right on, Sgt. Peron.’

“Many of my GI friends went native, too. I was trying to radicalize as many people as I could. I said, ‘Hey, come on, we can make these people our friends. These people can be our friends for life!’ I was trying to get as many GIs as possible away from that bar-prostitute scene that was really just set up for them.

“Before I left I went to a beautiful city in the northeast, Chang Mai. I rented a jeep and went up these mountain roads — another half inch and you’re off the mountain. You come into these little villages with the Meo tribes- people all dressed up in their beautiful colorful garb, with their long pipes, just like out of a movie. I saw fields of marihuana that looked as big as all San Francisco, and so high up you were like in the clouds. Fields of Thai weed, the best weed in the world.

“Two people were smoking. One, they figured I was a big buy- er or something. Who knows what they thought I was? And I did buy five or six pounds.”

He started mailing marijuana to friends in the Haight in tape cassette containers. He said he spent more on the “The Big Top,” The parlor of Dennis Peron’s Third-floor flat on Castro Street, had a comfortable ambiance, with house plants and lace curtains and teak bowls from Cast Plus.
What Dennis Told the Experts

In January, 1997 — a month after the drug czar accused Tod Mikuriya, MD, of practicing “Cheech and Chong medicine— the New England Journal of Medicine ran an editorial calling federal policy “misguided,” “hypocritical,” “out of step with the public,” and “insane.”

On the day the NEJM editorial ran, Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, announced that there would be a special conference to resolve “the public health dilemma” raised by the passage of Prop 215. “I don’t think anyone wants to settle issues like this by plebiscite,” said Varmus, calling instead for “a way to listen to experts on these topics.”

There followed a conference in February, organized by Alan Leshner of NIDA, at which medical specialists acknowledged the potential of cannabinoids, but concluded there was no credible evidence that marijuana was safe or effective in treating pain, neurological and movement disorders, etc., etc. The researchers called for “more and better studies.”

Suddenly the Drug Czar allocated $1.5 million for a study by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on the medical potential of cannabis and the cannabinoids. Tod Mikuriya commented: “Someone must have told McCaffrey. No more Cheech & Chong jokes. We’re going to run a stall in the name of science.”

In December 1997 the IOM investigators visited the west coast. They held a meeting at UC Irvine and got input from scientists and activists, then they made a side trip to the Bay Area to check out the cannabis buyers clubs. They arrived the day after an appellate court had ruled that Dennis Peron’s club was illegal. The headlines carried Attorney General Lungren’s vow to close down all the clubs.

The IOM team visited the Oakland Cannabis Buyers Cooperative, where Jeff Jones and staff described their operation in detail. Watson et al would arrive at the Market Street Club where a memorial service was being held. They were told to get some lunch and come back.

On the fourth floor Dennis Peron sat alone in the last row, head bowed, as friends, co-workers, and family members recalled Ken M., a person with AIDS who had worked at the club for four years. I wondered how many memorial services had Dennis attended.

“The friendliest guy,” Dennis was saying. “We always used to talk baseball... He was one of the best warriors for medicinal marijuana... When we marched on the DEA, it was Ken who made up those wonderful chants: ‘Racist, sexist, anti-gay — we don’t need the DEA!’”

When he finally spoke with the Institute of Medicine team in his office, Dennis said he had glanced at their questionnaire, but it was now buried under a pile of paper on his desk. Then, off the top, he gave them a breakdown of the club members’ medical conditions with figures remarkably close to what the researchers called for “more and better studies.”

Dennis turned back to the IOM team with a generalization: “People’s responses to marijuana use in treating any condition for which it provides relief. After Prop 215 passed, Mikuriya’s patient base grew from 280 conditions by ICD-9 code to 2800 conditions by ICD-10 code on page 5 of this issue.”

Mikuriya listed 280 conditions by ICD-9 code. In the Summer 2005 issue of "BeyondTHC.com" John Rees of the NLM for providing a copy.

The Ballad of Dennis Peron

I’m gonna tell you the story of Dennis Peron. Our neighborhood dealer, well liked and well known with something miraculous always on sale and now he’s facing more time in jail.

How many ways and how many times must we be the victims of victimless crimes?

COMING OUT of the service, finally free An idiotic war for medical use Got rid of those God-awful pounds How many ways? How many times Must we be the victims of victimless crimes?

Rip-offs arrived with guns and knives

Dennis and Cloud fought to survive ‘Cause they had a purpose and a whole lot of nerve and a whole lot — a whole lot — of “the people” to serve

They basted him all the time way back then when just holding a joint was a felony and a sin Before that miracle ounce came in Well would you believe he’s been busted again? (That’s right)

Castro off Liberty one night in July with Eyewitness News just creating by (Sure!) Ten cops got nothin’ better to do Than bust Dennis Peron and his pot-smokin’ crew

Better get into his cause ‘cause it’s yours

Where Eli Lilly can’t patent its worth

And how many ways and how many times And how many victims of victimless crimes We gonna get then away with?

New ending 1996

Now many a year has passed since that one and Dennis seen many a friend come and gone So All For Love in the heart of the state He decided a new kind of space to create A place you can to and hang out and buy Cannabis if you got a good reason why Like it settles your tummy, cleans up your sight helps you relax and have bon appetite

Just an herb that growth in God’s green earth Where Eli Lilly can’t patent its worth

Sign that petition, demand a truce

Listen up people wherever you’re at

And how many ways and how many times And how many victims of victimless crimes We gonna get then away with?

And hippies and housewives and hardhats came

Only some magic mushrooms and weed

They didn’t sell hard drugs no downers no speed only some magic mushrooms and weed

But then you may find that you ain’t all alone

New ending 1996

We gotta get rid of these dangerous laws Better get into his cause ‘cause it’s yours

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