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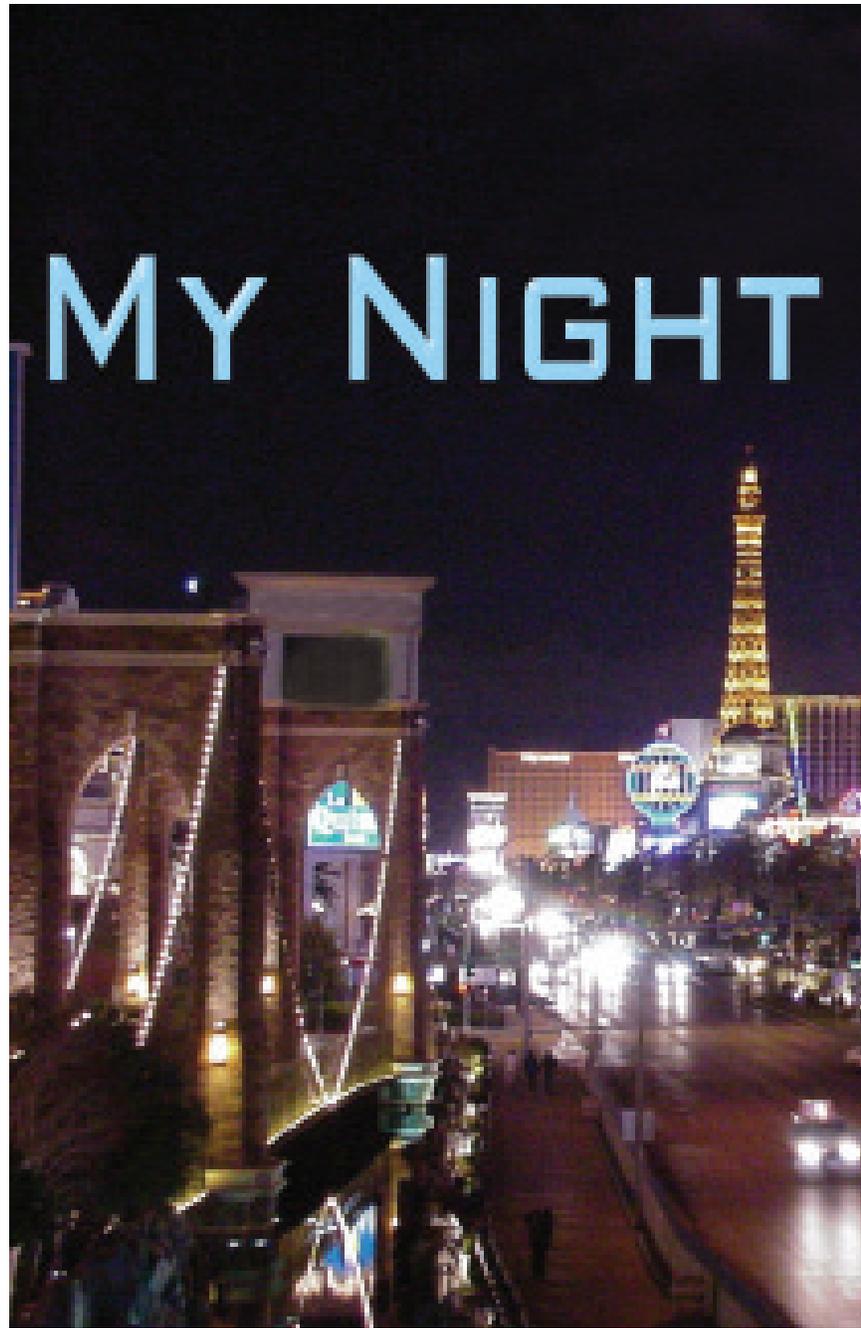
After a long underway period, every one in our LAMPS detachment was eager to hit the town on liberty. First, though, we had to take on stores and listen to a port brief. By 1500, those matters were out of the way, and it was time to blow off some steam.

My two buddies and I started our visit in Panama City by having lunch and a couple of beers. Afterward, we decided to watch a college-football championship game and, of course, drink a few more beers. After all, it was football. When the game ended, we went to a bar across the street where we met a few more ship-mates. A little before midnight, we all decided to go back to the ship.

That plan changed quickly, however, because we saw a casino's lights and couldn't stop ourselves from being drawn to them like moths to a flame. For another hour, we gambled and drank before heading back to our ship.

Problems started once we got outside. I began to argue with one of my buddies while we stood near several cabs parked in front of the casino. Because I was intoxicated and couldn't think clearly, I kept arguing while my buddies questioned the various cab drivers about the fare back to our ship. A few moments later, my buddies climbed into one of the cabs, and, when I realized they were ready to leave, I started to open the door. The driver, however, sped away before I could get in.

Things started going downhill in a hurry. I was a drunk in an unfamiliar city and didn't know what to do. I simply climbed into the next cab in line—a big mistake because I was the only passenger. I asked the driver to follow my buddies in



the cab ahead of us. He said OK, but I soon realized something was wrong.

I asked the driver to let me out, but he refused. Then, I tried to get out when we stopped at a red light, but the door was locked, with no latch on the inside. At this point, the driver asked me for all my money and my watch. I gave him \$70, which he said wasn't enough, so he took me to an ATM and insisted that I give him more. After I had wasted five

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minutes punching in the wrong pin numbers, the driver grabbed me by the shirt and threw me back in the cab.

About 0200, we stopped at a red light, and, realizing the driver had forgotten to lock the doors, I seized my opportunity to escape. I jumped out and started running, with no idea where I was or where I was going. I ran over hills, through ditches, down alleys, and across streets until I stumbled upon a white police

truck coming my way. I waved it down and tried to tell the police what had happened, but none of them spoke English. They decided to take me to a police station; we arrived there about 0300.

Soon, I was taken to a different police station, where I spent another hour trying to make them understand what I was saying. It was 0415—two hours and 15 minutes past the expiration of liberty—before the police officer in charge of this station called a cab for me. When I got back, I had to explain to my division officer why I was late. I also eventually had to tell the CO why I didn't follow his liberty policies and, as a result, put myself in harm's way.

I learned many lessons from this episode, starting with the fact I was very lucky to have come away only \$70 poorer and with a slight bruise on my face from where the driver backhanded me. Getting drunk anytime is dangerous; in a foreign port, it can be deadly. Alcohol deprives you of your best defense: your ability to think and to make sound decisions.

If it weren't for my intoxicated state, I never would have gotten separated from my liberty buddies and set myself up as an obvious target. When I found myself alone, I made a bad decision by getting into a cab. I should have contacted shore patrol or sought help from the local police. That slogan, "Think before you drink," has taken on new meaning for me.

Liberty policies are designed to ensure your safety. I jeopardized mine by drinking too much. As a result, I took an unnecessary risk that caused my friends, my supervisors, and my command a great deal of inconvenience, worry and embarrassment. ■