

## Running to Zero

By Jason Duke

“Hell is other people.”  
-Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

Ground zero: the starting line of the 2.3 mile route along the Arizona Canal and Arizona Canal Diversion Channel for rain overflow. Five-foot water depth, twenty-eight-foot bottom width, 1.2 inches concrete lined. Running along the canal in the early morning desert cold, weighed down with a loaded Colt AR-15 M4 in hand and a tactical vest stuffed with 10 magazines with 30 rounds per mag – this is the countdown of the first minute to the last hour of Gerald Tyler’s life.

The Arizona Canal is one of eight that section Phoenix in every direction like grid quadrants. The Arizona Canal Diversion Channel runs parallel to the north side of the canal, twenty-four feet deep, forty-foot bottom width, lined with 8 inches of concrete. The canal is older than shit. The 16.5 mile channel was built between 1983-95. In the late summer months of August and September, the monsoon season, some years the rains swell the canal and flood the nearby neighborhoods.

Gerald Tyler knows all of this.

He runs past joggers, bicyclists, speed-walkers, early morning strollers, hoods and vagrants, people getting from A to B. The wet dog, pulpy paper smell of the canal rises up in a miasma that makes him gag every fifty feet. Inside the channel, the runoff has died to a thin stream that’s deposited tree branches, leaves, dirt, plastic grocery bags, pieces of cardboard, a twisted bent-up shopping cart, and a dirty brown waterlogged mattress. The mattress probably belonged to a bum and Gerald looks around for the washed-up body.

The Arizona Canal Diversion Channel was built to stop the flooding. Some of these neighborhoods are in rich cities like Paradise Valley, where now an average home costs \$1.74+ million even after the housing bubble burst. He knows this is the real reason they built the channel but he doesn’t blame them because he would live there too if he could. The total cost of the channel was \$422 million and offers the affluent peace of mind in the 1% chance of a catastrophic flood event. In 1992, the State of Arizona Heritage Fund gave Paradise Valley \$42,829 to cover their section of the channel with natural landscaping.

Gerald Tyler is the Y Generation.

Gerald Tyler is an Echo Boomer.

Tell him to do something and he wants to know Y, Y, Y?

He’s never lost at anything.

There are last place trophies for everything.

He is a wealth of information.

Google and Wikipedia are his libraries.

The people he runs past give him a wide berth when they see the assault rifle in his hands – some of them stare slack-jawed and wide-eyed; some of them stop dead in their tracks like mimes holding a pose; some of them he points the rifle at and they cower

and beg him not to shoot, or they run away screaming; most of them acknowledge him and keep walking.

Sometimes he walks the path through the Paradise Valley section of the channel and it makes him want to live there more. Little signs describe the different plant species but he doesn't pay attention to them. He hates the people there and wants what they have. He would lock himself in his \$1.74+ million home, order out three times a day, undertip the delivery person.

According to website articles, blogs, online news, and IM, the channel is a breeding ground for West Nile virus mosquitoes. The bird carcass, limp and reeking of that putrid rotten roadkill smell at the edge of the canal is confirmation. He has a vast online social network, but he doesn't want to meet any of these people in person. He doesn't even like them very much, though he likes them more than the rich people of Paradise Valley. He would stay locked away in his \$1.74+ million home, order out all the time, and interact with his online social network. He jerks his load to internet porn when he's horny, which is all the time. He orders online shit he wants but doesn't really need, or gets further in debt playing internet poker – all of which he pays for from overdrawn accounts or overdue credit cards. He wishes he could be one with the internet; merge into a virtual reality indistinguishable from the real world. He wonders maybe he's in a virtual reality already, and as an ongoing joke that's only funny to him, goes up to complete strangers and says he'd choose the blue pill.

Fifty-five minutes and counting.

Gerald had a suck job one time with Glass Pros picking up glass windshields and delivering them to different car dealerships throughout the valley. He rode shotgun in a small bed truck fitted with two panels, one on each side, which the glass was secured to. He worked with Dan Morgan, who liked to drive and always drove the truck because he had been with Glass Pros about nine months longer than Gerald and had seniority. Dan was from the backwoods of Missouri, even looked the part, like Forrest Gump had fucked a white trailer-park trash Jerry Springer chick, one of the fat ones, and squeezed out Dan nine months later.

“This one time I was dared to swing naked upside down on the tire swing,” Dan had said. He was talking about the tire swing and the Elk River near Noel again, and the lesbian canoe fest that happened once a year but never the same time. They were driving in the truck with a full load of windshields to a Cadillac dealership, listening to Ministry's “Land of Rape and Honey.” Gerald wanted to know Y he swung naked on the tire swing? Dan had said this gorgeous chick dared him to do it, “and so I says ‘whudda I get if I do?’ and she says ‘me’ and so off comes the shorts and I swing out upside down over the river.”

Dan had said he also had a dog – a hound/beagle mutt mix named Homer. “Homer was with me at the river... so's I go back to her tent and I fuck the shit outta her, right? I wake up the next mornin' and call for Homer, and I'll be a son-of-a-bitch if he don't come outta a tent that had two chicks in it, happy as a clam.”

Gerald told him: “So the dog got more pussy than you.”

Dan started laughing, then had said, “Y'know, next time you lick a pussy, eat a bunch of ice... drives 'em crazy. Or eat some hot sauce,” he smiled, nodding his head.

One day Dan had told Gerald about internet poker, that he should try it, and how Dan had won \$700-plus so far, “You can win a lotta money in internet poker. Texas Hold ‘Em’s the best. You ever played?”

Gerald said yes, once in a great while. That night when Gerald got off work and went home, he added internet poker to his online social network. Five months later, Gerald was over \$11,000 in debt and he was getting phone calls, snail mail, email, IM that they were going to send somebody to break his legs if he didn’t pay up. Gerald started wondering who the owners of some of these internet poker sites really were. Everywhere he went, he was looking over his shoulder, jumping at shadows.

Seven months working together, Dan got on Gerald’s nerves more and more. Dan’s little anecdotes had gone from interesting to annoying as shit and Gerald would roll his eyes and groan whenever Dan would start in – not that it stopped Dan, who thought his stories were the greatest thing since the fuckable pussy that felt almost as good as the real deal. Gerald was helping Dan hoist a windshield onto the truck and he told Dan: “Hey, man, that internet poker shit you got me hooked on is bullshit. Now I’m like over eleven grand in the hole.”

Dan had said, “Hey asshole, no one put a gun to your head.”

Gerald kicked Dan square in the nuts, “Fuck you, cock sucker!” Dan crumpled to the ground screaming and crying, the windshield dropped and smashed against the ground, and Gerald was standing tall in front of the boss getting his ass chewed, until he told his boss to fuck off as well.

Forty-seven minutes to go.

You run to stay in shape.

You run to wake up and start the day.

Fitness is important to Gerald.

You run to think about all the things going on in your life.

You run hoping for clarity.

You run faster and harder every day.

You start in the Albertson’s Supermarket parking lot at 51st Avenue and Cactus Road, cross the street to the starting line of the 2.3 mile route between 51st Avenue and Cactus Road and 43rd Avenue and Peoria Avenue, fifteen minutes of stretching exercises, run behind walled homes tagged in graffiti, run up and down along dips in the sidewalk that serve as funnels to drain water into the channel, run to a bridge completely enclosed in chain link fence, turn right and cross the bridge over the channel, turn left and run along an asphalt road between the channel and canal, pass dead birds that died of West Nile sickness, smell their stink and the stink of the canal, run to the underpass at 43rd Avenue and Peoria Avenue, turn around.

Forty-four minutes left.

Generation X is a minority generation ignored, overlooked, inheritors of all the problems the preceding generations left for them to fix, the thirty and forty-somethings who are the worldshapers of the here and now, and will be brushed aside before their time into the gutters of history by Gerald Tyler and his kind.

The last job he had was doing bindery work at Grunge-Punk Printing, a print shop with a business concept similar to Hot Topics, only printing. His boss, Ronnie Dandy, was about fifteen years older than him, tatted out and covered in piercings; had a perfunctory self-destructive nihilistic attitude dished out through sarcasm and cynicism and prideless indifference toward the job, but had been working there for more than 10 years.

Above one of the copiers was a metal and glass emergency case with a Louisville Slugger inside and the words along the bottom metal: *In case of paper jam break glass.*

“Gerald, I need you to restock the copier machines with paper,” Ronnie would say, and Gerald wanted to know Y he had to restock the copiers when they still had some paper left in them?

“Gerald, make your cuts a little closer to the crop marks on those business cards...you got to eyeball that shit, man, and use your judgment,” Ronnie would say, and Gerald wanted to know Y he had to cut closer and what was wrong with the way he was cutting them now?

“Gerald, you need to learn to grab ten pages at a time,” Ronnie would say, and Gerald wanted to know Y he had to grab ten because he was still getting the job done by grabbing less?

The collating machine was archaic, basically a large beat-up dented metal box with two columns of five rows of open compartments to fit stacks of paper: press a foot pedal connected by cord to the collator, the machine pushes a sheet forward out of each compartment, grab the sheets, five in each hand, quickly offset in a stack before the next sheets are pushed out.

The collator was probably beat-up by all the people who used the machine and got pissed at it before Gerald came along.

“Look you little piece of shit, I’m sick and tired of you arguing with me. Just do what you’re fucking told,” Ronnie had said, snatching Gerald by the arm and spinning him around when he turned his back and tried to walk away. Gerald shot a punch at Ronnie and pictured his balled bony white-knuckled fist tearing flesh like Jazz Bone colored coated 8 pt C/2S Cover Paper valued at \$485 per 600 sheets, ripping muscle and sinew like Dark Red Bindakote 12 pt C/1S High Gloss valued at \$768 per 400 sheets, caving bone like an empty white cardboard paper carton. He wanted to drive his fist through Ronnie’s head, watch eyeballs pop from sockets, one then the other, pull his fist back out with the whole of Ronnie’s brain squeezed in his hand, cool like Japanese Anime.

He wanted to hit Ronnie so hard – lower jaw, prepare to split and separate from face in ten, nine, eight.

He wanted to paint the walls red the color of CML-Oil Base Plus VS704 PANTONE Warm Red ink – body, prepare to spray blood in five, four, three.

Gerald shot a punch into Ronnie’s cheek and he took it, then he grabbed Gerald and they grappled, knocking over shelves, crashing into copiers. The shop was empty at the time. Ronnie got Gerald in a headlock then threw him onto the ground.

“Get the fuck out of here! You’re fired, don’t come back,” Ronnie had said

Gerald told him: “Fuck off. Oh, and Dandy is a faggoty sounding name, faggot. Were you adopted and raised by two queers? Fag! Faggot! Fag-diggity! Fagolicious!”

Ronnie started laughing, and then Gerald started laughing too.

“C’mere,” Ronnie had said smiling, “I just want to smash your head into the copier one more time before you leave.”

Gerald told him: “You’re still a fag.”

Ronnie said, “You’re still fired.”

No hard feelings?

No hard feelings.

After Gerald walked out the door, he thought; *Whatever, Ronnie. You’re a fucking punk and I hate you, you fucking Gen X douche bag, piece of shit. Why did you have to be my boss? It’d still be working if it wasn’t for you.*

You run to make decisions.

You run to make choices.

You run to blame people for the consequences when things don’t work out right.

Gerald believes he is free to choose.

He reaches the turn-around point. He’s coughing and shaking because he’s sick with West Nile. His skin is pale albino-white, and he’s bone thin because he’s sick and can’t afford to see a doctor. The channel is a breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying West Nile virus, and he thanks the rich people of Paradise Valley for that. He’s wearing the same gray-hooded sweatsuit he wears every day and washes in his bathroom sink at night in the one-bedroom apartment he owes two months back rent on. He hasn’t worked for three months now and collects unemployment. He dropped out of college a year ago after five semesters, and Mommy and Daddy refuse to bail him out anymore, though they still send money every month, just not as much.

He went to the John C. Lincoln emergency room one time, but it was overcrowded with Mexicans and their sick kids, and the Hispanic nurse told him in Spanish-accented English to go home and get some rest, he just needed some rest, then she called a name in Spanish and a Mexican mother and her kid with the sniffles got up and were admitted into an examination room.

Gerald Tyler didn’t vote for Obama.

Gerald Tyler wants the same treatment as the Mexicans who bring their sick kids into the emergency room, but he’s not a racist.

Institutional racism is dead because a black man is president for the first time, and therefore Gerald is not a default racist anymore by virtue of being white.

Thirty more minutes.

At the turn-around point, Gerald sees the first three patrol cars racing through an alley behind some businesses along the north side of the channel. He hears a helicopter in the distance getting closer, looks to the sky filled with bleak dark gray clouds the color of his sweatsuit, and sees a police chopper buzzing toward him. He runs even faster back toward the bridge.

Arizona is far left liberal when it comes to firearms and explosives, and far right conservative about everything else. There are no state agency requirements for testing, minimum age, criminal background checks, other conditions, reports to state, or info reports, of TNT, dynamite, and other high explosives. Manufacture, import, distribution, sales, storage, purchase, and possession are not applicable to state agency requirements. Construction use applications are regulated by the State Fire Marshal’s Office. Mining

use permits are regulated through the local Phoenix branch for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Gerald knows this from the IME website, Institution of Makers of Explosives, but he's nervous about going to the State Fire Marshal's Office to apply for a construction use permit, and he won't risk going to the local ATF branch.

Current mining companies with active mineral production in Arizona are ASARCO LLC, BHP Copper Inc., Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc., Peabody Energy, Chemical Lime, and Drake Stone Products. Other mining companies include Carlota Copper Company, Augusta Resource Corporation and Resolution Copper Company. There are 402 active mines in Arizona, and a shitload of explosives at each of these mines. Safety measures for magazine storage of explosives depend on the class of the magazine. The basics are: bullet resistant; weather resistant; fire resistant; ventilated. The ground around the magazine must slope away for drainage and the land kept clear of brush, dried grass, leaves and other materials for at least a distance of 25 feet. There are masonry magazines, metal magazines, and wood magazines, each with their own unique construction specifications. Signs must be posted on the property that read *Explosives - Keep Off*. No security requirements exist for magazine storage. While Googling 'arizona explosives purchase requirements', Gerald finds a *New York Times* article, *Explosives Are Missing From Mine In Arizona*, and this is how he gets the idea to steal dynamite out of a magazine storage at a mining site.

The police chopper buzzes over him and a stern voice blares from a loudspeaker, "Drop your weapon," and he thinks, *How original*. He pulls out his first stick of dynamite, one of eight, lights the fuse, tosses it into the channel, then keeps running. A second helicopter appears, and a third – both of these are news choppers, and they buzz in place higher up above the police chopper. Gerald listens for the explosion. He sees the cameramen in the news choppers; one of them looks like he's waving to Gerald and smiling. The explosion never comes because the dynamite rolls into the stream. Gerald lights another stick and chucks it in. A few seconds later, the thunderclap roars out of the channel like a terrifying monster, with Gerald looking over his shoulder in time to see a cloud of dirt and chunks of cement erupt out of the channel up into the sky. The police chopper backs off into a higher altitude, Gerald lights his third stick, chucks it in, and boom.

He beats the patrol cars back to the bridge and runs across at the same time the cars screech into a cul-de-sac about 100 yards straight ahead of the bridge near Arroyo Elementary School. He turns left onto the sidewalk that dips up and down, as the cops clamor out of their cars and chase after him. The cops are fast, but not fast enough to catch him, and he runs back to the starting line, then crosses Cactus Road. Traffic swerves around him, honks, slams on the brakes, crashes into each other, flips up and over, rolls into crumpled wrecks, an eleven car pile-up, cool like Hong Kong Action Films.

Seven minutes remaining.

He runs into the Albertson's Supermarket parking lot. The people run and scream, hide and cower, take cover behind their cars. He's flashing the assault rifle at all of them, with a big shit-eating grin, the entire parking lot in chaos. Patrol cars, one, two, three, four, come pouring into the parking lot, screeching to a stop in a rudimentary

perimeter that effectively cordons the lot. He runs into the Albertson's and the pandemonium spills inside and grips all the people in panic and terror. Everyone screams and tramples and shoves past each other to save themselves. An old Chinese woman who could pass for Dragon Lady in a 70's kung-fu flick, she's pushed down to the cold hard linoleum floor, pleading and begging for help, but she's trampled and ignored. She looks to him and she's crying for him to please help her, for the love of God or Buddha or whatever the fuck, please help her, don't let her die like this.

The run's not over yet, he's running in place, dwelling on all the infectious toxic human waste that's led him to this point. He's thinking about all the people and all the hell they put him through. He sees her and wonders why he should help her. She's old and she's already lived her life, and she would only add to his hell too if she could. He still hasn't made a decision, though he's made a lot of choices and he still believes he's free to choose. He blames Dan Morgan, and Ronnie Dandy, and the rich people of Paradise Valley, and all the people he's never liked, so why shouldn't he blame her too?

There's only one minute left, he's down to his final moments - he's running in place, the cops are storming the automatic sliding metal and glass doors at the front of the Albertson's, and he realizes he needs to make a decision fast. He's free to choose, wondering if it's really Dan's fault, or Ronnie's fault, or anybody's fault but his own. As much as it pains him, as bad as that medicine tastes going down, running there in place, thinking about all the things in his life with clarity, he suddenly sprints toward her, flashing his weapon at all the people who change course like spooked cattle.

The cops shout at him, guns drawn and pointed at him: Smith & Wesson .38's and .357's; Taurus Millennium series PT145's; Glock 21 .45mm's; SIG Pro 2340 .40mm's. Everything is muffled, their mouths move, but he doesn't hear them, their faces contorted and angry. He waves the people away, shoos them with the rifle, until he's standing over her and she's looking up at him, afraid yet puzzled, wondering what he's going to do. He can feel the cops at his back and all their guns, and he's almost paralyzed by the tension and anticipation of the volley that's going to take him out. He offers his hand, she hesitates, and he says it's okay, he's sorry, as he sets the rifle down. She takes his hand and he helps her up to her feet, but she's old and scared and can't stand on her own so he steadies her. The cops rush in, grab him, tackle him to the floor. She falls back down, yelling at the cops to leave him alone in her broken Chinese-accented English, but they kick him and punch him and beat him with their billy clubs anyway. He looks to her and smiles, the cops cuff him and hoist him up, the countdown is to zero, and his old life is gone. One of the cops is reading Miranda Rights while trying to hold back disdain, he smiles, and as they haul him away, he says he's ready for the red pill now.

*Jason Duke is a Sergeant in the U.S. Army and served 15 months in Iraq as part of OIF 07-09. He was borderline before going to Iraq, but now he's totally fucked in the head. He mostly misses killing shit and blowing shit up. His stories have appeared in Plots With Guns, 3AM Magazine, Suspect Thoughts, Shred of Evidence, Outsider Ink, The Hiss Quarterly, Dungeon Magazine, The Murder Hole, A Cruel World, and now Thuglit. He can be reached at [dm\\_jasonduke@hotmail.com](mailto:dm_jasonduke@hotmail.com).*