

Killing for Peace

Garry Farrington

Introduction

It's funny what sticks with you from childhood. Some of my clearest memories are of my father in the spare-bedroom of our house, typing feverishly. These endless hours of feverish typing resulted in a small novella, which helped my father communicate some of what had been eating at him for so long. I always knew it as "Dad's book about Vietnam." A few copies were spiral bound and distributed to friends and other Vietnam Vets in sort of a DIY manner.

Many years later after it was little more than a memory to me, I had a chance to read it. I was in high school at the time and it struck me in an odd way - after all this was my father, retelling quite plainly and vividly his experiences as a young man at war. It was bizarre - the voice was not the man I knew as my father, it was more like Holden Caulfield than anything else. In spite of how strange it seemed to me, it altered the dynamic of our relationship quite a bit. I had a new understanding of him.

A few years ago my parents moved from California to Hawaii. In doing so, they effectively put the entirety of their lives in to a storage unit not too far from where I live these days. Some of my old stuff that never came along with me landed in that storage unit as well. Occasionally I'd have reason to visit the storage unit - to grab something inconsequential. A few weeks ago I dropped by to check how much space was left in the storage unit and to see what condition some of my horse-equipment was in. As I was shifting things about and digging through boxes, I stumbled across an old, battered manila envelope. In it was the only remaining copy of my father's manuscript. I brought it home. I figured it was time to archive it in a more permanent fashion, and I wanted to share it with a few friends who have had similar experiences, albeit in Iraq, not Vietnam.

While I affectionately call it "Holden Caulfield Goes To War," the actual name of it is "Killing for Peace." With my dad's blessing, I'd also like to share some of it with you. Some of the language is a bit unpleasant (abundant usage of the word *gook* ahoy)- keep in mind it's written in the vernacular of the times and Vietnam GI culture.

One

The sound of an unfamiliar alarm clock jangled me awake. My pickled brain swam toward consciousness as I tried to focus on the face of the clock next to the bed. 5:15?? Suddenly I knew--today was the day I'd been dreading for so long--the day I was leaving for Vietnam.

I dragged myself into the bathroom to shower and shave. I didn't like what I saw in the mirror--living proof that two hours sleep on top of a big night of boozing makes for an ugly next morning. However, when you're twenty-three and going off to war, you don't really give a damn about the next morning. Just one last drunk and a lot of feeling sorry for yourself for having to go to Vietnam. My old roommate from college, Ty, sat with me while I got shitfaced at the bar and leered at the stewardesses across the room. The girls were busy celebrating their new wings, and couldn't be bothered with the two bozos at the bar.

Ty and I had stayed until closing of course; couldn't chance missing out on something on my last night of freedom. I had stopped just short of puking all over myself to really cap the night off. By 3:00 am, there was nothing else to do but try to get some sleep at Ty's parents' house.

Ty's parents had been like a second mom and dad to me all through college. Now they continued in that role as they gave me a hug and a kiss and a pat on the back as I headed out the door towards the car. I was still half whacked as I said my good-byes. Fortunately I had shined my shoes and done my brass before my attempt at the boozier's hall of fame. I felt terrible, but resembled a soldier. The bits of toilet paper on my face and neck did little to enhance the image however, and I made a mental note to take them off just as soon as the bleeding stopped. With very little dignity, I struggled in to my car to drive myself off to war.

Rolling up the Bayshore Freeway with a size twelve head, I lapsed in and out of rational thought. On the radio, Country Joe was belting out "Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box." I liked the songs, but it was a little too close to home this morning. Ty was slumped in the passenger seat. He was hurting just as bad as I was. Never one to let a pal get crocked alone, Ty had matched me drink for drink until our once jovial bartender had turned surly on us at closing time. Now Ty was sharing my misery as we headed for Travis Air Force Base and my flight overseas.

I groaned as I remembered the babbling telephone call I had made to my old girlfriend around midnight. I think it's in the jerk's handbook that you are supposed to call an old girlfriend and apologize for all the shitty things you did to her over the years. It's kind of an absolution thing. You also profess undying love and promise to make things right if she'll just wait for you. I had followed the script to the letter. She had shown genuine warmth and compassion over the phone, even if she was a little

bewildered by the call. Riding along the freeway I was embarrassed for having bothered her, but I felt good about what I'd said--at least what I could remember. Maybe she would wait for me to get back, and maybe she wouldn't. At least I'd made the effort to clean up the ledger against me.

My mind continued to wander. It was difficult to cope with all the morning commuters in my hung-over state. All of these people going to their safe little jobs in San Francisco. How I envied them. I wondered if any of them would trade places with me. I'd have taken any job they wanted to trade--sight unseen.

"You alright? Want me to drive?" croaked Ty.

"No, I'm okay, just feel a little rough around the edges."

The irony of driving myself off to war in my own damn car in commuter traffic was pissing me off. I banged a lower gear and weaved from lane to lane. These slowpokes were making me late for my plane. I hadn't planned on a traffic jam.

"Hey, you want to keep going up the coast to Canada?" I asked.

Ty shrugged, "Sure, I'll go."

He probably would have too. But we both knew that I wouldn't. The fear of future consequences, and embarrassing my family kept me from radical steps like hauling ass for Canada. All in all, I was a very traditional kid, a little naive and still respectful of things like duty and honor. I was a second lieutenant in the army, and along with the privileges of rank went a certain responsibility. I certainly wasn't wild about the war, in fact I didn't know shit about it. I needed to go find out for myself. Even if I was scared to death, there was never any question about getting out of it. Although if something out of my control kept me from going, that was a different matter. I contemplated a semi-serious wreck on the way to Travis. Nothing major, of course, just a broken leg or two, and then I'd be out of the war with honor intact. After all, I was on my way to the plane.

I rejected a staged wreck as too iffy a proposition. The outcome was too unpredictable, and Ty probably wouldn't have appreciated getting smashed up just to save my cowardly butt.

Another image flashed through my pickled skull. Two weeks prior, in Survival School in Panama I had watched the guy next to me fall out of his rope while we were rappelling down a cliff. His feet had gotten too high on the rock face, and he simply unwrapped out of the rope. He flew past me to the rocks 50 feet below and hit with a sickening thud. It didn't kill him, but it did break his back. I remember hanging there in my rope looking down at his inert form, thinking "You lucky bastard. You ain't going to the Nam after all."

Swerving to avoid a fender bender, I snapped back to the present. My time was running out. There weren't any cliffs to fall off of, and a car wreck was out of the question. It was looking more and more like I was getting on that plane.

We eased up to the gate at Travis and the military police man on duty popped me a crisp salute as we motored through. He saluted, but there was a trace of a smirk that said, "There goes another dumb-ass lieutenant off to war to get his ass shot off." Did he really think that? Maybe it was me that thought it for him.

I stopped right in front of the terminal and turned off the car. A few passersby glanced admiringly at my Corvette. It was a beautiful green '65 convertible--the only thing in the whole world I owned. If they'd known that I was about to give it away, they'd have shit. I grabbed my gear and handed the keys to Ty. "Keep it for me until I get back. If I don't make it back, then just keep it. The papers are in the

glove compartment."

We shook hands solemnly. An awkward silence followed. Then Ty mumbled, "Keep your head down." I nodded that I would. We were both embarrassed by the moment. There was nothing else to say. I turned and walked into the terminal.

Two

A military charter flight has all the charm of a long cramped bus ride. There were 186 of us packed in to a long aluminum tube masquerading as a TWA 707. The plane leap-frogged its way across the Pacific, stopping for fuel in Hawaii and Okinawa. Each time it stopped we were herded off the plane to stretch our legs and stand around for a while. The mood was solemn. This was not a vacation trip with talk of the fun ahead or even attempts to make new friends. Mostly everyone kept to themselves and waited to get back into their torture chamber of a seat.

The agonizing hours in that uncomfortable seat reminded me of riding the bus back to school when I was in college. My home was in the Seattle area but I went to college in California - at San Jose State. The bus ride would begin to get me somewhere in Oregon, and I'd get off and hitchhike the rest of the way. If the weather was ugly, I'd stay on for the whole trip. It was twenty two torturous hours on the bus, the same as a ride in a 707 to Vietnam.

Every so often on the plane, I got my body into a position that allowed me to lapse into unconsciousness for a brief period. During that tortured near-sleep, I had the strangest dreams. They were more like hallucinations. The dreams scared the hell out of me and I pitched back to consciousness, sweating like a pig, still on that damn plane. I never remembered the dreams.

I fantasized about the Civil War story of the man without a country. Sentenced to stay at sea for the remainder of his life, never to set foot on United States soil again, he was transferred from ship to ship until his eventual death. I wondered about transferring from plane to plane, flying back and forth across the Pacific for one whole year--the length of a combat tour in Vietnam. I gave up the idea as being too uncomfortable, even if it would guarantee my safety.

I remembered stories of guys in the Fourth Division who went over by ship. It took them over a month to get to Vietnam. I'd have gone for that. Anything to forestall the inevitable. There I was trapped on a plane for twenty two seemingly endless hours alone with a warped imagination; but now that time too had rushed by as the plane descended to land in Vietnam.

I kept my face stuck to the small window next to my seat. I didn't want anyone to see the terror that was written all over my face. Vietnam unfolded below us as we came down out of the clouds. It seemed quite peaceful from several thousand feet above, a patchwork of green and brown squares. Deceptive tranquility, I thought, as stories of planes getting shot at on their approach to the runway started to nag at the back of my brain. I wondered if we would get shot up, or if we'd make it in unscathed.

I snuck a quick look around the plane. Most of the new guys like me had dummied up, and their

faces reflected the same sickening dread that mine did. By contrast, the few old-timers coming back for a second or third tour looked relaxed and continued to banter back and forth with each other. What did they know that I didn't? Obviously quite a bit!

We hit the end of the runway safely, and roared down the length of it slowing to what seemed like freeway speed, as the pilots whipped us around and taxied back toward a structure that looked vaguely like a terminal. My muscles were twitching. I was ready to jump at the first sign of trouble, but where? I was still trapped on the plane. I was confused. Why weren't they passing out weapons? The plane lurched to a stop. Out the window I could see the structure. It was a terminal! There were dozens of Americans milling around on the tarmac in front of it. Most of them had their shirts off. They all had great tans. Once our engines were shut down, they casually walked over to the plane and began servicing it just like a ground crew back home. This was too civilized. Where was the war? I was really confused and desperately wanted off our flying coffin.

The pilot's voice crackled over the plane's intercom. He told us to stay in our seats and await our welcoming party. I sat and sweat. At last the front door cracked open, and as it did the cabin filled with a blast of heat and an unidentifiable, sickening stench. A stench so potent that it closed up my nostrils and made me gag. I was forced to breathe through my mouth to fight the smell, the smell of a 100 degree sewer. The old-timers laughed and traded knowing glances. Obviously the odor was no stranger to them.

Into the plane's cabin strode a spit-shined lieutenant. He wore heavily starched, perfectly creased fatigues and shiny jungle boots, a gleaming white helmet liner with a shiny silver bar perched on top of his head. He surveyed our group of new arrivals. Most looked as bad as I did.

After twenty two hours on the plane my uniform looked like an unmade bed. I featured wrinkles on my wrinkles, and my lieutenant's bars had tarnish all over them. My shoes barely remembered what a shine looked like; I was a mess.

"Welcome to Vietnam." Lieutenant Spit-shine boomed out at us. Jesus Christ, I thought, Mister Chamber of Commerce! I just wanted off the plane. He gave us some snappy patter about the job to be done and then told us to form up in a column of fours outside the airplane. At last we were getting off. I could run for cover if the shit hit the fan.

As I walked toward the primitive looking terminal, I was conscious of a familiar sound. I couldn't quite place it at first, but then I realized what it was. It sounded like a ball game was going on somewhere close by, complete with cheering, yelling, foot stomping and clapping. I was still very rummy from the trip, and the noise baffled me. Why would they be playing ball here? The noise level grew in intensity. Our group rounded a corner, entered the terminal and I located the source of the noise. There were two hundred G.I.s in the terminal jumping up and down and hollering like crazy. I couldn't figure it out. Were they that glad to see us? Were we the troops who were going to make the difference? Could we finish off the war? We filed past the wildly cheering horde and then it hit me like a hot iron; they weren't cheering for us. They were looking right past us! It was the plane they were cheering for--our plane--now their plane, the plane that was taking them home. We were the poor dumb shits who were taking their places, and our ride here was their "Freedom Bird" home.

I had never felt so low in my life. They were going home--I had a year to go. I vowed to stay alive and show up for my Freedom Bird when my turn came next year. I had no idea what I was getting into. I

just knew that I had to survive.

I looked around the terminal to see what I could make of the situation. We had arrived at Bien Hoa. The terminal resembled one of the old open-air terminals on the outer islands in Hawaii, circa 1950. There was a rattly little baggage claim area, a couple of ticket counters, and even a snack bar. The overpowering stench still hung in the air. I was dying to know what it was, and more importantly, how to escape it.

There were hordes of tiny little people, obviously Vietnamese. I didn't find them particularly attractive, and stateside stories of sneaky little Viet Cong terrorists tugged at my mind. I scanned the crowd for the fanatic who might throw a grenade or rake us with automatic weapons fire. Was I going overboard, or was everyone else as scared as I was? I had no way of knowing and wasn't about to ask. I located the old-timers and moved to stay close to them. If anyone had a clue what was going on it had to be them. I was proud of myself for taking the first step in controlling my own fate.

I was still looking for someone to pass out weapons and ammo when Lt. Spit-shine yelled for everybody to grab their gear and get on the busses out front. Busses? This was starting to seem like a very weird war, and I'd only been in it for thirty minutes. Busses here were alright, just like back home-- olive drab GMC coaches that had chicken wire over the windows. At last! Evidence that there was a war somewhere. However, most of the chicken wire had been ripped away from the windows leaving gaping holes for the locals to toss grenades through. My paranoia struck deeper-- out of one death trap and into another!

Our convoy of busses led by a gun jeep wound its way through a landscape of ugly squalor; decrepit houses, garbage and filth strewn about, and people everywhere, just squatting in the rubble. The narrow streets were lined with small booths stocked with American cigarettes, soft drinks and shaving supplies. One giant black market staffed by hundreds of withered looking Vietnamese. Few cars roamed the streets, but masses of pedestrians vied with bicycles and motorbikes for space as they all darted in and out of our path. I kept waiting for "the grenade" to sail through my window, but it never did.

Finally we rolled through the gates of what looked like a reasonably well defended military post. There was barbed wire and sturdy fencing all around the perimeter, and armed G.I.s on guard duty. I sat back in my seat, relieved, for the first time since I had boarded the bus at the airport. The other seven officers and I got off the bus at the 90th Replacement Center. The enlisted men continued on the busses to the 18th.

Checking in at the orderly room I noticed a few familiar faces outside. Some of my classmates from Survival School in Panama were milling around waiting for me to process in.

"Hey Garry, what happened to you? We thought you chickened out when you didn't make the flight. You were supposed to come over with us." My tormenter was Lt. Benny Guy, one of my favorite people and someone I was glad to see. Benny and the boys ribbed me a couple more times and then I started in on them.

"While you clowns were loading up on that piece of shit plane you rode over on, I was stuck in commuter traffic. By the time I gave my car away out front, they'd given my seat away. I had to wait for three hours for the next plane with an all-world hangover." I laughed as I told the story, glad to be among friends.

"You gave away your corvette?" Benny asked incredulously.

"I'll get it back in a year. Besides, my buddy that I gave it to will take better care of it than I ever did," I explained. "All in all, things worked out just fine. You dipshits flew over on Flying Tigers with cold box lunches, and I came over on TWA, first class treatment all the way--movies, great food, good looking stewardesses, the works." I was lying like a son of a bitch, and we all knew it, but I was on a roll, and the boys ate it up.

"By the way, does anybody know what that god-awful smell is?" I asked, relieved to find guys who were as new as I was. Much laughter and some cackling from the boys.

"That's shit, man, burning shit!" drawled Benny. I stared at him in disbelief. Who would want to burn shit? "What they do is pull out these cut down 55 gallon drums from under the latrines, mix in some diesel fuel, stir it up and then they light that sucker up," lectured Benny.

"Who the hell would want to do that?" I asked, still not sure about the explanation.

"Nobody WANTS to do it asshole, " roared Benny. "It's mostly the fuck-ups that have to do it, supervised by medics." More raucous laughter came.

"Glad I ain't a medic." I intoned.

"Officers don't do that kind of crap. It's great to know that there is something than a second lieutenant, even if it is a shitburner," finished Benny.

None of us in the group had any delusions about our status. We knew that as the most junior officers in the military, second lieutenants were the butts of a good many jokes in the army, from superiors and subordinates alike. All of us had gone through Officer Candidate School to get our commissions. We realized that we were cannon fodder, and probably wouldn't have been needed if so damn many lieutenants weren't getting killed in the war. We weren't the old 90-day wonders of World War II, but we were pretty close to it. Our officers training had lasted a little over six months. I had graduated first in my class. The guy I had beaten out for number one in the class was a lifer with over seven years in the army. I had been in the army less than seven months when I reported to O.C.S. I was unquestionably a civilian at heart, but very proud of the fact that I had been the best in my class. I snapped out of my daydream and asked another question.

"How long are we going to be stuck here at the replacement center?"

"They say it takes three days for orders to come down. We draw equipment and wait for the war to find us, play cards and drink beer," offered one of the guys. I was beginning to be glad I'd missed the earlier plane. Sending the boys ahead had worked out just fine. They had all the answers.

"Come on, we've got a bunk for you in the barracks. We'll drop your gear and catch happy hour at the Officers Club," said Benny.

Officer's Clubs and happy hours seemed weird in a place like this, but since my guides had been in country four hours longer than I had, I followed their lead and headed for the barracks.

It seemed strange to be sitting in a bar on the other side of the world, sipping twenty-five cent cocktails at four in the afternoon with a bunch of guys I'd been in Panama with five days earlier. Time and distance were meaningless, and I felt like I'd been awake for a week. Alcohol dulled the fear that had consumed me for the last twenty six hours. Hadn't Ty, Steve and I just been at the Frigate in Burlingame watching the stewardesses? The miserable trip over was just a blur, the real world was light-years away and I wondered why I was in Vietnam.

Three

I awoke with a start, and a clear head, for the first time in days. Sitting up in my bunk I gazed out at the rows of bunks and listened to the chorus of snores from my barracks-mates. This was my third day. I was due for orders. My name should turn up on the bulletin board going somewhere.

As I shaved and got cleaned up for the day, I speculated on where I might be going. My combat branch of service was Armor, which meant that when I went to war, I was supposed to have a fifty-two ton tank wrapped around me. There weren't a lot of tanks in this war. My chances of leading a tank platoon were small. However, there were a lot of mechanized units with a armored personnel carriers and other tracked vehicles in their arsenal. Maybe I'd get command of some kind of mechanized cavalry unit. Anything was okay as long as I had some steel around me for protection.

I didn't care what I got as long as I wasn't a grunt. I had spent my last year as a training officer for new recruits in an infantry company at Fort Ord, and I KNEW I didn't want to be a grunt. Infantry platoon leaders were rumored to have a limited lifespan in the field. I would rather take my chances in a tank, thank you very much.

At noon the assignments came down. We all crowded around the bulletin board to see where we were assigned. The guys who didn't have combat M.O.S. (military occupational specialty) drew places like Saigon, Cam Rahn Bay and Long Bin, places that were relatively safe as far as I could tell. Those of us in the infantry, armor, and artillery looked for our names with a mixture of excitement and dread.

I didn't care where I went, as long as I had a chunk of steel for protection. Halfway down the sheet I found my name. Next to my name was the notation, "assigned to First Air Cavalry Division." Several of my drinking buddies had drawn the Air Cav too, but they were all infantry officers or helicopter pilots, not tankers, like me. Benny Guy was standing next to me laughing his ass off.

"We're all going to the First Cav, Garry. You're going to be a grunt just like the rest of us," he chortled. The First Air Cav was the proto-type Air Mobile Infantry Division, and they hadn't seen a tank lately. They jumped out of helicopters and fought as grunts on the ground. Blood and guts. Infantry all the way. I was one miserable son of a bitch.

Those of us assigned to the First Cav caught a plane up country to Division Headquarters at An Khe. I arrived with about 100 other newcomers, mostly enlisted men and a few sergeants. Struggling down the back ramp of the plane loaded down with a duffel bag full of shit, we were the newest of the new. Standing by the side of the airstrip we were ridiculed by just about everyone who passed by.

"You fuckin' cherries!" An anonymous voice would lash out at us as a truck rolled by. Obviously, rank didn't cut much ice with these people. Officer or enlisted man, we were all fucking cherries, and

they wanted us to know it.

“Short, sixty two days and a wake-up!” shot a voice from another truck that rolled by. That guy wanted us to know that he’d be home in two months, while we’d still have ten months to go. Being a cherry sucked! I wanted desperately to be in old faded fatigues, rather than the stiff new issues I had in my duffle bag and on my back. I couldn’t stand being a cherry, but it’s what I was, standing there for all to see.

An Infantry major welcomed all of us new officers to the First Air Cavalry Division, “The fightinest division in the whole damn war” Boy was I thrilled to hear that. Things were going from bad to worse. He walked briskly around the room as he made his welcome speech. Ramrod straight, burr-head haircut, and polished to the max, he was the picture of the career officer. Stopping in front of me, he eyed my uniform. “I see you’re wearing armor brass, Lieutenant. We don’t have a single tank in this division. You’ll get a rifle platoon.” A patronizing grin split his face as he delivered the news. The others were breaking up at my discomfort. There it was... a death sentence. I was going to be a goddamn rifle platoon leader and get my ass shot off for sure.

Later that afternoon I sat drinking beer and playing cards with some of the other new arrivals. My pal, Benny Guy, was right there to hold my hand and give me a new perspective on rifle platoon leaders. Also in our group was a young kid named Tim, who had to be the youngest helicopter pilot in the army. He was only nineteen, and looked about fifteen. A freckle-faced kid with sandy hair and clear blue eyes – I doubted if he even had to shave yet. The kid was a pretty fair poker player for nineteen. You couldn’t play him like he looked or he’d beat your brains out.

Benny continued to force feed me his personal course on infantry tactics as the rest of the group took my money. Benny Guy was a good ol’ boy from the South, and pleased as punch to be in the “Fightinest Division in the whole damn war.” Born and raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, he was impressed with my knowledge of his home town even though I’d never been there. My college fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon was founded there before the Civil War and as a pledge I’d had to learn all about Tuscaloosa. As far as Benny was concerned, I was an honorary son of the South and we cemented our friendship drinking warm beer, playing cards and talking infantry.

Ordinarily, we would have spent another week at Division Headquarters getting acclimated and learning how things were done in the First Air Cav. However, the Division was moving to a new location and nobody had any time to train the cherries. We drew our weapons from supply, and went to the rifle range to get adjusted to them on our own. Since I knew a little about machine guns, 105 millimeter main tank guns and grease guns, and absolutely nothing about M-16 rifles, I enlisted Benny Guy to teach me all he knew in one hour. I had no idea how to strip down an M-16, but even I knew that if you didn’t keep your weapon clean you were in deep shit.

The next morning we all headed off to our new units. The 1000 man Battalion I drew was the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry. From there I would be assigned to a 120man rifle company out in the field. Benny was assigned to a different Battalion and it was time to part company. I was sorry to lose my “mentor.” He and I had become good friends in the short time we’d known each other. We vowed to get together sometime down the road, R&R perhaps, or back home in the real world. Benny wanted me to come to Tuscaloosa and meet his wife and family. He couldn’t wait to give me a tour of the town I knew so much about, but had never seen.

Two other replacement officers and I rode a chopper further north to our new Battalion, the 1st of the 8th. Arriving at Battalion HQ, we saluted and introduced ourselves to the Lieutenant Colonel Graham, the Battalion Commander. He welcomed us to the unit and said we'd be going out to our line companies in the morning. Each of us was assigned to a different company. My company, A Company was out on a hilltop called LZ No Name. I didn't like the sound of it.

One of the other Lieutenants who had just arrived immediately started telling the colonel how he had been trained in intelligence and that he sure hoped there was a staff job for him at Battalion HQ. It did my heart good to see that there was someone else who was just as scared as I was, and wasn't embarrassed about pissing all over himself trying to get out of the field. Doug finished his appeal for a rear job and the colonel stated flatly, "Before you do anything else, you'll spend your time leading a rifle platoon." I kept a straight face, but inside I was grinning like hell. Kiss-ass Doug was still wearing a wimpy little moustache like we had all grown during our training in Panama. I had reported clean shaven. First impressions are very important in the service, and I was satisfied that I had held my own, while poor old Doug had started out on the wrong foot with the Battalion Commander. I stowed my gear in the shed that A Company used for a supply room and got mentally ready to go to the field.

Four

Alpha Company, my new home, was set up on a dirty little hilltop surrounded by scrub jungle. Our barren hilltop was called LZ No Name because it was such a shithole that it wasn't worth naming.

No Name was far north in I Corps, the northernmost of the strategic regions that Vietnam was divided into. North of us was the Demilitarized Zone, and from there it was North Vietnam. Being a cherry, I didn't know if that was good or bad. I did know, however, that it usually takes replacement ten days to two weeks to process into country, get some division training, and finally filter down to their fighting unit. It had taken me four and a half days to get from the Airport at Bien Hoa to my rifle company on LZ No Name. I was still pissing stateside piss, as the old-timers liked to point out to cherries.

Sweating like a pig from the heat and humidity, I reported to my Company Commander. He was a worn out rumpled looking Captain. He didn't look too pleased to have a tread head for his new platoon leader. I met the other platoon leaders – all old hands- and the First Sergeant who was relatively new like me. He was an old soldier like me who had the Combat Infantry Badge with a star on it to prove he had fought in the Korean War in the early 50's. I couldn't figure out what a guy in his forties would be doing out in the field with a bunch of nineteen and twenty year olds. Top Webb, the First Sergeant, was very fair skinned and was already burnt and peeling from the vicious sun that was a daily constant. He sported a face full of zinc oxide to keep from losing his skin all the way down to the bone. The young troopers had poked a lot of fun at the First Shirt and his "clown face" before they got used to him. Once we saw him in action, he was our "top Sergeant" commanding the respect of every man in the company.

I was given command of the fourth platoon to get my feet wet. The fourth platoon was more like a squad than a platoon. It consisted of eleven men instead of the normal thirty five you would find in a rifle platoon in the field. First, second and third platoons were the line platoons, and had the normal compliment of men. They rotated point duties when the company operated in the field. Fourth platoon with its eleven men never walked point, acting instead as the security section for the Company Commander, the First Sergeant, their radio operators (RTO's) and the artillery forward observers known collectively as the Headquarters element. I scrambled to learn as much as I could as fast as I could about the makeup and responsibilities of everyone in the rifle company. My teacher was no longer good ol' Benny Guy, but my new platoon Sergeant, a tough little Portagee named Iles. I told him to assume I knew nothing and to give me a crash course on everything I needed to know. He was happy to help me find my way and we quickly developed a good working relationship. He was a good teacher and I was a

willing pupil.

My eleven man platoon had one 81mm Mortar as our weapon. Each man carried something to support the mortar, whether it was three rounds of ammo, the base plate tripod or the tube itself. This was in addition to each man's standard m-16 rifle and a few hundred rounds of ammunition.

Our platoon was a strange collection of kids. I don't think any of them had reached their 21st birthday. At first glance, they looked like a bunch of dirty faced Boy Scouts with weapons – except for one major difference. Behind the youth and dirt there were their eyes. Hollow vacant eyes, set deep in the sockets, giving each face a gaunt animal quality. Little joy burned in those eyes. The fire of teenage exuberance had been replaced with an older, weary look. Would I get those eyes? I wondered.

My RTO was from Indiana. His name was Jack Bennett, but everyone called him Jack Benny. Jack had gone to Ball State University for a while and was one of the few in the platoon who had more than a high school diploma. He filled me in on the rest of the guys in the Fourth. We had a combination of kids who had been around for a few months and chose the "safer" duty in the Fourth platoon and a couple who just couldn't hack it in a line platoon. Since the Fourth never pulled point duty, there was a small degree of safety that went with the platoon.

Most of the guys were from the Midwest like Jack and the majority of them had seen little action over the last few months. Some of them had been in the operation to relieve the Marines at Khe Sahn some months ago. The way they told it the Marines didn't want any Army boys saving their asses, and they were none too pleased when the First Cav showed up. It was obvious to me that there was a rivalry between the Cav and the Marines.

Some of the guys had fought in the bloody fire fights in the A Shu Valley. Their war stories all ended in the familiar refrain "You should have been here back then when things were tough." The general consensus was that I had arrived at just the right time—there wasn't shit going on and the company was just killing time on old No Name. There were only light patrols around the firebase and nobody had shot a gook in quite a while.

This was all fine with me. I needed time to get my act together and learn everything I could about being a rifle platoon leader before things turned ugly again.

Five

I didn't get the time. The next morning we got orders to pull out. LZ No Name was being turned over to the Marines. Our whole Division was heading a few hundred miles south to the III Corps out by the Cambodian border. There just wasn't enough action up north anymore, so the powers that be thought that we'd have a better time down by the border fighting the North Vietnamese Army as they came up to the end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Things were going to heat up fast.

I had to laugh when the marines came on to the fire base. Their equipment was vintage World War II stuff. We postured for them, and they postured for us. Everyone tried to look hard like a battle scarred vet. For me that was difficult, I still looked very much like a cherry. Like a bunch of Old West gunfighters, the two sides sized each other up. Considering everyone's youth we looked more like a couple of inner city street gangs beefing over the local turf; Cav troopers eyed marines, and marines eyed troopers. No one exchanged pleasantries. No one talked. Little by little they took over our positions. Our choppers pulled out as more marines came in. On the highest point of that ugly hill, there was a huge painted First Cav Patch – a yellow shield, with a black diagonal line through it, and a black horses head in the upper right hand corner. That shield let the world know who held that firebase. As our last choppers lifted off the pad, the marines swarmed all over that shield and tore it down.

We heard that the few remaining gooks in the area went up to old No Name after we had left and kicked the marines' ass. I don't know if the story was true or not, but as our company sat in the white hot at Quan Tri waiting to fly south, the story got told over and over again. Each time it was retold, the marines lost more and more men—all for ripping down that Cav Patch on the hill.

We were also told that the president had halted the bombing of North Vietnam, and that Henry Kissinger was making nice talk with the North Vietnamese in Paris. Peace would break out soon. We weren't any too sure about that, particularly since they couldn't decide on what the shape of the table was supposed to be where they were going to talk peace.

We sat in the blazing sun by the airstrip for a day and a half waiting our turn to fly south. Once or twice a day a jeep brought us something to drink. The last time it came, I had gotten a can of Shasta Chocolate cola—a real treat at 120 degrees. We needed ice.

Ian, the first platoon leader and I decided an ice hunt was in order. Ian had a jaded air about him and seemed like a closet hippie. I found him refreshingly different from most army officers and enjoyed his company. I didn't want to be like him. I just got a kick out of being around him.

The marine tents that ringed the airfield had to conceal some ice somewhere, and Ian and I were

determined to find it. After a few unsuccessful probes, we stumbled into a medical tent and struck the mother lode. We walked in on a going away party for a marine/navy doctor. Since doctors work with wounded and dead people they always have lots of ice to cool the bodies. We were made welcome by the guest of honor himself, a bolding jovial marine Captain who offered us our choice of cold beer, soft drinks or the cocktail of our choice.

One drink deserved another as Ian and I took our time before heading back to the white hot sands of the runway. Finally, packing a load of ice in a body bag, we made our way back to our men with half a load on, and considerable good will toward the marines.

The first person we ran into at the company area was our company commander. He was one pissed off captain. He chewed our asses thoroughly as the ice we were carrying melted in the scorching sun. My name was now mud with the C.O. Getting out of the dog house wasn't going to be easy. So much for first impressions.

At dusk we waddled aboard the C-130 transports carrying all our worldly possessions on our backs. The old-timers had large rucksacks on aluminum frames. I was still humping a "cherry-pack," the same weasely little pack and strap set up everyone wears stateside in training. You couldn't carry shit in the damn thing and it kept whacking you in the ass when you walked. I wondered how long I was going to be a cherry, and when I was going to get a rucksack like the big boys.

Battalion HQ set up in Tay Ninh. Our mission was to build a firebase in a desolate area north of the Black Virgin Mountain. Other battalions were also building firebases in the area, and the network of firebases was supposed to deny access to the area to the NVA. We used an old French fortress from the 50's as our staging area for the initial assault into the area. Nobody had operated there for quite some time and the only thing west of us was Cambodia—sanctuary for the NVA before they came into South Vietnam. The terrain was double and triple canopy jungle which blotted out the sky when you were on the ground. This was markedly different from the hills and scrub brush up north.

There was a noticeable feeling of unrest throughout the company the night before we made our first combat assault to secure the clearing in the jungle where our new firebase would be built.

Roughly half the company had been on a CA before. Many of the troops were just as cherry as me when it came to combat, even though they had been in Vietnam for a while longer.

Our company was first in the new LZ. We were the first troops on the ground, charged with holding out until more and more troops could be helicoptered in. As fourth platoon leader, I went in with the second lift. Third platoon had the first lift and had to hold out until the choppers dropped the rest of us in on top of them. If the LZ was green, meaning no enemy contact, everybody breathed a lot easier. If the first lift radioed back "LZ Red," the gooks were there waiting and people were getting killed. We were committed to pouring troops in on top of the fight until we secured the area. Nobody wanted to jump into a red LZ.

Sgt. Iles, Jack Benny and I watched the six choppers lift Third Platoon off the pad. False bravado and many thumbs up from the kids riding the Hueys out into the jungle. Miles away in the drop zone the artillery barrage was raking the clearing. We were too far away to hear it, but we knew it had started. The lift ships vanished in the distance and those of us in the second lift moved into pick up position. Nothing to do but wait for the choppers to return to pick us up, nothing to do but monitor the radios and listen for the call that would determine what we would be doing in thirty minutes. LZ Red or LZ

Green. Would we have to jump into an all out fire fight, or would we ride out to a quiet jungle clearing and build a few bunkers?

Our ears strained to sort the sea of air traffic coming in on the Battalion Net. Duke Six, the Battalion Commander, was coordinating the artillery fire, gun ships, air strikes, and assault troops from his chopper above the LZ. We kept quiet and listened. I was wearing pilot's sunglasses. They masked the fear in my eyes.

We could tell by the radio traffic that the barrage was lifting and Third platoon was spiraling down to the LZ. We were all strained toward the radio speaker to listen for the call from Herb, third platoon leader.

"LZ Green! LZ Green!" Herb's voice crackled through the static!

The word was like magic. All around the pickup area the men's faces reflected relief as the word was passed around. Green meant I was going to make it through my first C.A. in a supporting role without getting my ass shot off. I still had time to learn.

Building a fire base in the middle of nowhere is a complex project consuming masses of men and material. An empty patch of ground transforms into a small fortress as men and equipment are poured on it. The initial 30 troops on the ground defend a circular perimeter while more and more men and supplies are helicoptered in. As fast as possible heavy equipment goes to work digging trenches and pushing up a dirt "berm" all the way around the perimeter. Subsequent arrivals build bunkers all along the berm line using sandbags, timbers and sweat. Huge Chinook helicopters bring in artillery pieces, and the guns are set up to provide the defensive punch that a fire base needs. The headquarters element of the battalion throws up its medical tent, mess tents, and other necessary services. Command and control digs into the ground in a heavily reinforced bunker. The goal is to get as much done as possible to make the firebase secure before nightfall.

Literally hundreds of tasks have to be accomplished; latrines dug, berm built up, barbed wire strung outside the berm, trip flares planted, brush cut and fields of fire laid out, mines deployed, etc. before the firebase can support the 1200 or more men in its rifle companies and support units.

Our new firebase was christened LZ Mustang after the mustang head that was our Battalion Crest. Below the mustang on the head of the insignia were the words "Honor and Courage." That was the motto of the 1st Battalion 8th Cavalry of the First Air Cavalry Division.

The gooks left us alone while we hurried to put the finishing touches on LZ Mustang. After a couple of days, it was a formidable defensive position. Our company stayed on the firebase to complete the bunkers and defend it, while B, C, D, and E companies moved out into the surrounding jungle to "search and destroy" in our new area of operations. Each of the companies patrolled out to a different point of the compass to see what awaited us out in the unknown. The 105mm battery was firing constantly to support the line companies in the jungle. They were running into a lot of gooks. It was a hot area. Our turn would come soon as one of the other companies rotated onto the firebase to take our place in the bunkers.

Six

Ian and Herb told me that our Captain was due to rotate home, and we should be getting a new C.O. any day. All the troops wondered what the new Company Commander would be like.

The new Bad Barron Six (Our C.O.'s call sign), came in on a resupply chopper late one afternoon. I did a severe double take when I saw him. He looked like a young John Wayne, at least his uniform did. He was decorated with jump wings, ranger tab, pathfinder torch, C.I.S. and a Special Forces patch from a previous tour in Vietnam. Obviously he was some kind of war-lover who was back to pick up on some of the medals he had missed the first time around. He supported a West Point Ring on his hand and was the vision of a "Regular Army" Captain. Visions of humping twenty klicks a day and going for the big body count danced through my brain. We were in deep shit!

I milled around the command post with Ian and Herb trying my best to look like an old-timer for the new boss. I was still a flaming pink color rather than the dirty tan of those who had been in country for more than a month, so I knew I still had cherry written all over me. We shook hands all around—very little saluting goes on in the field as it draws attention to you. We lieutenants excused ourselves so the Captains could talk privately. Undoubtedly Ian and I were being branded as irresponsible drunks for our ice-run up north.

"Christ on a crutch, did you see all that shit on his uniform?" I blurted out.

"How the fuck could you miss it. We're screwed for sure," said Ian.

No doubt that Herb and Ian were as thunderstruck by the aura of our new Six as I was. Suddenly our old familiar C.O., for all his faults looked pretty good.

The hot news around the LZ was that we were going on a C.A. the next morning. We were finally getting off the firebase. D company was coming in to stand down and get patched up. Apparently they'd had it pretty rough since going out that first day, and now it was our turn.

Once again, as fourth platoon leader I was in the second lift with my eleven men. Our company was being dropped into the jungle to hunt and be hunted. The gooks in the new area seemed to be a lot more serious than the rag tag bunch up north - at least that was the rumor from D company. There was a serious problem on the pad just as the choppers were coming in for the first lift. Two-Six (the second platoon leader) said he couldn't go on the C.A. He had broken his glasses and wanted to stay behind because he couldn't see very well. Very strange occurrence—strange because his platoon was the lead element in today's C.A. Two-Six heroically volunteered to stay behind and monitor the lift on the radios. That was the last we ever saw of him. He was transferred the next day to the ruff and puffs. That was

very bad duty, with a bunch of untrustworthy Vietnamese, as an advisor. I hope he found some new glasses by the time he got there, the ruff and puffs (regional forces and popular forces), was not something you would volunteer for. We heard that half their people were Viet Cong sympathizers.

Old Two-Six had not been the most popular officer in the company by a long shot. He once hung his ass in a stream to take a dump when his men were filling their canteens ten yards downstream. I decided to never shit in a stream, just to be safe.

We lucked out again and hit another green LZ. I wondered how much longer my luck would hold. First platoon took point and led us into the jungle off the LZ. It was extremely slow going, single file as the point men had to hack at the jungle with machetes to cut a trail. My platoon stayed in defensive position as second platoon with their platoon sergeant in command, followed the first platoon into the thick jungle that surrounded our LZ.

My platoon was just up and moving toward the underbrush when the point men caught enemy fire. It was the first time I ever heard the distinct popping of an AK-47. I would never forget it. The gooks had waited until we moved into their jungle to hit us, long after our protective cover of gunships had left us.

I dove behind a bush and wished for a tank. A sickening feeling grabbed at the pit of my stomach. I was caught in the open hiding behind a bush as enemy fire lit up the area. It was my first experience and I didn't like it at all.

Ian's machine gunners kicked in and our fire power overwhelmed theirs. I had no idea what was going on and stayed low behind my bush to avoid stray bullets.

The guys up front were yelling for medics. Two kids from first platoon were hit bad. The medics dragged them right by me as they pulled them back to the LZ for a Medevac. They looked like ragdolls as they bounced along the ground—ragdolls with blood all over them.

The gooks broke off the contact and melted back into the jungle. They accomplished their purpose. We were bloodied, and hadn't moved more than 200 meters into the jungle. I, personally, moved about 30 meters in three hours—just to my bush and back.

We regrouped on the LZ and dug in for the night on the spot where we had landed so many hours earlier. There was little talk. Each of us was haunted by his own personal memories of the day's fire fight. I couldn't sleep. It was obvious the gooks knew right where we were. Visions of hundreds of Crazy NVA overrunning our position kept me awake all night. I'm sure some of the other cherries shared my dread. Our transformation to nervous tense grunts with sunken eyes had begun.

At 0700 we saddled up to retrace yesterday's steps. There was a noticeable change in the company's attitude. Yesterday, the guys had laughed and joked a little as we moved out. Today, no one talked. We knew we were going to run into the gooks again. It was just a matter of how soon. We were wound up tight!

I moved into the jungle and made my way past yesterday's point of contact. Spent shell casings and blood marked the area. It gave me chills. I remembered the paralyzing fear I had felt when I first heard the AK-47 pop, and the relief when the firing stopped.

We pushed on into the jungle, One hour blended into the next. Still no contact with the enemy. At times it was so thick; we had to crawl on our hands and knees as if we were in a tunnel. It was very slow going. Just after noon, third platoon in the lead reported moving into a network of well used trails. Jack

Benny and I listened to our radio as Herb (Three-Six) reported huge bunkers carved into the ground. Under the protective cover of the thick triple canopy jungle, they were finding mess halls, sleeping quarters, meeting halls, all dug into the ground surrounded by a network of trails. It was the NVA version of one of our firebases. Where ours were always built out in the open we had stumbled across theirs buried so deep out in the jungle that you had to crawl on your hands and knees to get to it.

We all moved forward as quietly as possible. We covered less than 200 meters each hour. The tension was oppressive as the unbearable heat and humidity. Herb radioed that he'd found some thick commo wire at a trail junction. Our Vietnamese scout went forward and tapped into the wire with a listening device. He overheard gooks on the wire talking about getting out as fast as possible. "The Americans were getting very close."

You are damn right we were close. We were just yards away, and we were set to kick some gook butt as soon as we caught up with the little bastards. We needed to get even for yesterday and the whole company got ready to kick some ass. They were running from us, weren't they? We'd catch them, the little cowards. We'd catch them and kill every one of the bastards. My blood was up just like every other kid in the outfit. The gooks were afraid of us. They were running from us. We'd catch them and make them pay. I was sweating like a mad man.

Herb's point squad followed the commo wire right down the trail trying to catch the retreating NVA bastards. The rest of third platoon was almost running to catch up with them.

I was stumbling and crawling through the thick shit when the gooks opened up. Third platoon had gone deep into a horrendous ambush and the rest of us were right behind. There were gooks everywhere; in the trees, in the bunkers, in the trenches. They were shooting from three sides and most of third platoon was in the killing zone. They were pinned down and the rest of us had to get them out. In our haste to catch the "retreating" enemy, we had blundered into a perfectly laid ambush. There was no chance to get out without taking heavy casualties.

Sgt. Iles and I crawled yard by yard along the trail toward the point of contact. Mass confusion reigned. People were screaming and yelling for help from all sides.

"In the trees, in the trees! The fuckers are in the trees!"

"Medic, medic, get a Doc up here, we got people dying!"

"Look out for the trees!"

A flood of sound over the clatter of weapons; guys screaming for help as they died. Utter chaos, the world gone mad. Panic ripped at my guts. I fought off an overpowering urge to lay down and cover my head with my hands. Enemy fire snapped through the foliage above us.

Sgt. Iles and I crawled to a small opening in the dense brush. There was a circle of light above our heads where we could see the sky. IF we were lucky we could lob some mortar rounds up through that circle and straight down on top of the gooks less than 75 meters in front of us.

"Hey Top, we're going to hang some rounds. Let us know how they look coming down!" I yelled at the First Sergeant. Top Webb was hunkered down behind a tree stump about fifty meters in front of us. He had just taken a round in the shoulder, but still managed a wave of acknowledgement. Bullets continued to whine and snap over our heads as we struggled in the dirt to get the mortar up. We couldn't do it by the book. We didn't have all the parts, but one by one the guys in our platoon crawled up to our position and dropped off whatever they had. We threw down the base plate and jammed the tube down on top of it. Henry Appopadaca, a big strapping Greek kid, held the tube in place. We didn't

have the tripod or sight. Sgt. Iles and I stripped all the charges off the mortar rounds to keep them from going too far. Henry held the tube straight up in the air and we dropped a round down the tube. With no charges to propel it, the projectile floated out of the tube like a big fat turd. For all we knew it could be coming back down on top of us. Sighting was strictly guesswork. The mortar round crashed through the jungle canopy 100 meters in front of us, just behind one of the gook's trench lines.

"Drop it 25 meters and give it all you've got!" Top Webb bellowed into his radio. We could hear him without the radio, plain as day.

Henry wore heavy gloves to keep from burning his hands as the tube heated up. He wasn't going to last too long, though. Sgt. Iles and I dropped as many rounds as we could as fast as we could and tore the shit out of that trench line. The rest of our platoon sprayed the surrounding trees with their M-16's to keep the gooks from getting a good shot at us.

The mortar fire kept the gooks' heads down long enough for the medics to drag out most of the wounded. Once again, they came right past me. It was sickening. A kid named Mayberry went by me, bleeding from his many wounds. His vacant eyes had a dull morphine glaze, but he kept mumbling, "I'm okay, I'm okay." He looked dead, but he was still talking.

A medevac chopper hovered above the trees another 100 meters to our rear. They lowered a sling down through a hole in the trees and lifted out the wounded as best they could. Mayberry was almost to the chopper when the sling snapped. He dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes; dead on the spot. I never even knew Mayberry, just his name, but his death was the first one I witnessed up close, and it stayed with me always.

Most of the other seriously wounded got out okay, but the company was still locked into the fire fight and taking casualties.

Before too much longer, we were going to lose the sun. Dusk comes early in the jungle. I crouched behind a tree trying to hit some of the gooks in the trees. "Chainsaw," a stumpy little kid who was great at cutting down trees with a chainsaw, was blasting away at the trees with his M-79 grenade launcher. You could follow the flight of the 40mm grenades as they spit out of the launcher and sailed into the trees around us. Chainsaw caught one gook right in the chest from about 50 meters. I don't know if the gook saw it coming, but if he did, he must have shit his pants before it blew his head off. My M-16 jammed after about 50 rounds, but I got it cleaned up and firing again before any gook could drop me.

You lose track of time in a fire fight, and I had no idea how long we had been at it. It seemed like only minutes, but it had to have been a couple of hours since first contact. Cobra gunships were overhead pounding the shit out of the gook positions. The order to disengage was given, and the C.O. called for heavy fire concentrations right on top of our positions commencing in two minutes. It was assholes and elbows as we all crashed back through the jungle. We knew that if we could make it back 100 meters, the wall of shit the fly boys were going to bring down on the gooks would roast them on the spot and keep them from coming after us, but we had to make sure that we were far enough back from the target area.

We watched from a ringside seat as the Air Force jets decimated the area. At dusk we pulled back to the original LZ where we had landed two days and many lifetimes earlier. We were drained. No idle conversation, just vacant stares.

Our company suffered eight dead, fifteen wounded, and two missing. Almost one fourth of the

company was out of action. Our new C.O. had almost had his first day of command, and I had been in my first fire fight. If this was the infantry, I couldn't see any way that I was going to stay alive for a year.

Captain Lutz called the officers together for a status report. I could see the pain etched in his face. He had just brought his new company through a tough battle, and he hadn't even had time to learn anybody's name. I suddenly understood why we all had numbered call signs. Each call sign went with a different responsibility, and a commander could run his outfit effectively without knowing names and faces as long as he knew the call signs. Every man that served with Captain Lutz grew to think he was the best they ever knew, but on his first day of pain I felt very sorry for him and the loneliness of command.

At daybreak we headed back into the jungle. We found our two missing men lying together at the edge of the trench line. Hundreds of spent shell casings surrounded their bodies. They had both been shot between the eyes at close range. We wrapped their bodies in ponchos and waited for a chopper to take them out.

Yesterday this had been thick jungle. After the flyboys had gotten done with it, it was a burnt out clearing. Dozens of bent and twisted weapons littered the area. The NVA had pulled out their own dead during the night, leaving only our two dead buddies to mark the scene. The lack of a body count added to our frustration. We desperately needed something to prove to us that our friends hadn't died for nothing. We sat in the hot sun waiting for food, water and ammunition. Each man was alone with his thoughts. Our last two dead lay in the middle of our perimeter waiting to be lifted out. Yesterday they were friends and buddies, but today they were stinking, decomposing bodies. Swarms of flies picked at their rotting flesh. Bitterness took hold of all of us as we waited long into the afternoon before a chopper could be dispatched to pick them up. I wondered how I would look wrapped in a poncho, and how long my body would rot before someone took the time to take me home. Behind my sunglasses, tears rolled down my cheeks. I turned away and stared at a tree.

Seven

Two days passed, and morale was still at rock bottom. We were still pissed off about our dead buddies and embarrassed for having been suckered into an ambush. Battalion sent out a dog team to walk point for us—a day late and a few lives short. The dog was supposed to detect any ambushes before we walked into them.

Our dog was a big, mean, German shepherd. He couldn't be touched by anybody but his handler. He was definitely one of those dogs that if the handler got shot, you had to snuff the dog too. He was bad.

We set up our defensive perimeter for the night just before dusk. There was still about half an hour before we lost the light completely. Time for boony-troopers to take a crap. Taking an entrenching tool a few yards outside the perimeter, you'd dig a little hole in the ground, squat down and let nature take its course. Most of us were constipated all the time, and only took a dump every three or four days. But when you felt it coming on, there was no holding back. The alternative to constipation was diarrhea, which was ten times worse. A bad case of the runs had immobilized the company for two days on a mountain top up north. Tainted food was the culprit. Constipation was definitely the better way to go. At least you could still move around.

I was leaning back against a tree having a smoke as the evening shit detail began to sort itself out. I was still a couple of days away from feeling the urge, so I just sat and smoked a rancid Chesterfield from a box of ten year old C-rations. Proper crapping etiquette demands that one go far enough outside the perimeter so as to not endanger others who might step in your shit in the dark. We all like a little privacy too, so the crappers all found themselves a quiet little stump or bush, just outside our positions.

I watched Denny, our artillery forward observer, go behind a large leafy clump of bamboo on the edge of the perimeter. Ten seconds later, Denny let out a scream, and came bursting through that clump of bamboo with his pants around his ankles. His ass was hanging out, and rather than stop to pull up his pants he was doing a furious duck walk. Right behind him was that big ugly dog! From the shredded look of Denny's fatigues, the dog had already chomped him a couple of times. I have never seen anyone move that fast, bare-assed, in the crouched position. Straight through the middle of our perimeter he waddled, cussing the whole way.

"Shoot that dog. Shoot the son of a bitch." Denny yelled.

Nobody moved. We couldn't. We were laughing too hard. Denny kept yelling for help and finally collapsed in a bare-assed heap in the dirt when he couldn't waddle anymore; resigned to feeling the fangs of his tormenter on his bare flesh. What he didn't know was that the dog had reached the end of

its chain a good thirty yards behind him. It was no longer right on his heels, just straining at its chain to get at Denny's ass.

The gloom that had hung over us since the ambush was broken by Denny's dog act, and we began to return to normal. From that time on, however, we always "located the dog" before dropping our pants.

I was beginning to sort out what was expected of a rifle platoon leader. Each day in the jungle heat was extremely grueling. I remembered back to Survival School in Panama, and the line the Panamanian instructors had used over and over: "Ghentlemens, the Hjungle can bee your Fren, or the Hjungle can keel you. The Hjungle doesn't care."

They were right. I didn't give a rat's ass about being friends with the jungle, but I sure didn't want it to kill me. Respect for the jungle, common sense, and extreme caution were going to be necessary if I was going to survive. The heat, dense foliage, humidity, bugs, the physical strain of humping fifty pounds of rucksack, a weapon and 400 rounds of ammunition day after day wore you down, and could make you less cautious—then you were ripe for the taking. I couldn't let that happen.

Captain Lutz asked me if I was ready to take over the second platoon. Sgt. Ice, the platoon sergeant, had been running the second platoon since we had left the old Two-Six on LZ Mustang with his broken glasses. I was just getting comfortable with the mortar platoon, but my future was with a line platoon. "Yes sir, I'll take it," I said, and the transition was almost complete. I was a grunt—a rifle platoon leader with a very short life expectancy.

Sgt. Ice was happy to see me take over the platoon. He was armor like me, and we both got a good chuckle out of two "treadheads" leading an infantry platoon. We were supposed to have fifty tons of steel wrapped around us, and here we were walking around on foot in the jungle.

Naturally, we had point duty on my first day. We were still operating in very thick jungle. Third platoon was flanked out about 150 meters to our right moving on a parallel course. We moved slowly to the west, hacking and slashing our way through the brush with machetes. We had a firm policy against walking on any more trails, so we always had to cut our own way. Three-six and I kept in touch by radio and attempted to keep moving on the same compass heading. Periodically we'd stop and listen for the sound of their machetes to make sure we were keeping close to each other.

As platoon leader, I was seventh in line behind my point men and one of the machine gun teams in the platoon. In one day I had moved from the relative security of the fourth platoon up to the very front of the column. I was very tense and nervous.

We broke out of the brush at the intersection of two trails. The same shit was starting all over again, only this time I was out front. There was a small lean-too hooch along the side the trail that had the ashes of the cooking fire in it. I fanned my men out, and checked the hooch with Ed Lumbert, the squad leader.

"Ashes aren't hot, but they're real fresh," whispered Sgt. Lumbert.

"So are these goddamn fish cans. This place sticks like gooks." I added. It was time to locate the flank element for a little safety in numbers.

"Three-Six, this is Two-Six, over."

"Three-Six here, go ahead," came Herb's voice through my handset.

"Herb, we're at a trail junction with real fresh signs of gooks. I haven't heard you guys chopping for a while, and I want to make sure you're close by in case it gets ugly."

"Yeah, I know the one you mean. We passed by there ten minutes ago. We haven't had to chop our way as much. It's not that thick anymore. We took the left fork. Follow it up to us and we'll get reorganized. We'll wait for you." Herb signed off.

Feeling much better, I passed the word back that we were going to catch up with the third platoon. Sgt. Lumbert and I stayed with the point men as we moved out to catch up with the third platoon.

Something was not right. I fumbled for an answer while we moved quickly down the trail. Something was definitely wrong. I just couldn't get it. What is it? What is it? Suddenly I knew!

Thirty G.I.'s had walked down this trail no more than ten minutes ago. If third platoon had used the trail, where were the signs? Where were the cigarette butts, the chewing gum wrappers, the discarded C-ration cans? Where were the signs of the all-American grunt who litters his way through the jungle like some modern Hansel and Gretel? There were no signs. The answer washed over me—wrong trail, wrong fucking trail!

I stopped. "Get off the..."

The staccato pop of an AK-47 cut me off in mid sentence. The heavier throb of a machine gun kicked in, and dozens of jungle birds screeched their alarm.

I was stuck in mid-air diving for cover behind a tree. It seemed as though I was in some damn slow motion blood and guts movie. When the fuck was I going to make it to that tree? I wasn't hit yet. I might make it, if I could just get out of the air! Oh God, please no booby traps! Shoot me, but please don't maim me, please God! I landed like a sack of shit next to the tree. Move, move, do something! My mind was screaming at me.

"Get that machine gun up here! Spread out, move your men up on line," I barked instructions to the squad leaders. I needed firepower online in a hurry.

My new RTO, Bill Maynes, was burrowing in at my feet. I could hear Captain Lutz on the handset calling for a report.

"What's going on up there, what's going on?"

"Tell him to call Marvin Gaye," I said. Bill gave me a dumb look. If he was a Motown fan he'd have understood my feeble attempt at humor. I was stuck in the middle of whatever it was we were in, and I didn't know what was going on. How could I explain to the C.O.?

"Skip it, Bill. Just tell him to get some people up here fast," I said.

"Six, we're in some deep shit up here. Two-Six says get some people up here fast," was Bill's transmission back to Bad Barron Six. Certainly nothing vague about his message. It said it all.

Little by little, the men in my platoon crawled up to where we were stuck. The squad leaders fanned their men out to the left and right and our volume of fire picked up. I felt better. We made it through the first few minutes, and nobody was dead yet. My heart pounded rapidly, and my breathing was shallow and quick, making it hard to get any air. I struggled for control, and began to move my men forward.

We leapfrogged our way, yard by yard, through the brush with the two M-60 machine guns laying down covering fire. The gooks appeared to be pulling back and their firing dropped off noticeably. Breaking through a last line of heavy undergrowth, we finally saw what we had walked in on. Another massive bunker complex! Defensive trench lines all around it, permanent buildings, livestock for food,

complete with a well in the middle; all neatly tucked away under the protective canopy of the lush jungle.

We were lucky. Only a few gooks were in the complex. The rest must have been out on an operation just like us. Those that were home were running like hell out the back way. We worked our way slowly past the trench line. I was determined not to get suckered in like we had before.

Inside the complex we had a little more room to move, and I could see well enough to direct an assault. We whooped it up like a bunch of John Waynes, throwing grenades into bunkers, blasting away at anything that moved, and little by little clearing our way through the complex. We were getting carried away with the thrill of the bloodlust. I was actually enjoying it. Most of the gooks had hauled ass, and the only fire that we were still taking was coming from a bunker in the center of the complex by the well. My gun teams were blasting the shit out of the bunker and I crawled out from behind the well. I crawled toward the bunker. I was determined to frag that gook, and then jump in on top of him. He was my gook. I wanted a piece of him!

Puffs of dirt kicked up around me as I crawled toward the bunker. I felt something tug at my right boot, and suddenly I was being dragged backwards.

"Come back here, Two-Six. Can't you see that gook is shooting at you?" Top Webb had a hold on my foot and was dragging me back towards the well. The spell was broken. I scrambled back behind the well.

"Thanks Top, I guess I was getting a little carried away. Hey, where'd you come from anyway?" I grinned at him.

For the first time since the fighting started, I took a look behind me. We had fought our way through the whole damn complex. I had lost all track of time. I had no idea how long it had taken for us to come this far. I had been totally wrapped up in it.

The firing from the bunker stopped abruptly as three frags flew in the doorway, and blew the shit out of it. Ed Lumbert's squad applied the finishing touches to the bunker, and nobody had to jump in on top of any live gook. Top Webb and I resumed our conversation.

"When your RTO hollered for help I hauled ass up the trail. Finally caught up with you here just as you were crawling out there to get your ass shot off."

"Yeah, well, thanks a lot, Top, I appreciate it."

"No sweat, your boys did a good job here." The First sergeant clapped me on the back. I was elated, almost euphoric! I leaned back against the well and smoked one of my ten-year-old Chesterfields. It tasted fantastic. My hands shook and I laughed out loud. The massive adrenaline jolt to my system was still on high. I couldn't calm down. We had done well. I was alive! My men were all alive! No casualties. Nothing else really mattered. Somehow we had made it.

The rest of the company caught up with us and my platoon rested while 1st and 4th platoons searched the complex. I sat and talked to Captain Lutz while we watched third platoon straggle in from the right flank.

"Hey, nice call on that trail junction, asshole." I couldn't resist ragging on Herb. He was very apologetic and we all had a good laugh about the mix-up.

We had blundered into our second NVA base camp in less than a week. Lucky for us there was only a skeleton crew minding the store, or the outcome might have been a little different. Most of the enemy

had run for it.

All that squawking back at the beginning had been the geese, chickens and various other animals that the gooks used for an early warning system. Very primitive, but effective. We killed all the animals except for a small myna bird. We kept him for a mascot and named him "Bad Barron."

The euphoria of coming through a fire fight is exhilarating. Daredevils say that nearness to death heightens the sensation of life. Your body rushes when you're close to death. The adrenaline that is dumped into your system keeps your heart going a mile a minute and a deranged leer appears on your face. Taking time out for a cigarette when it's all over seems like the greatest pleasure you've ever had. Sitting there drenched in the stink of your own sweat, the rush doesn't last for long, but for a few moments, you're on top of the world.

There I was--a rifle platoon leader, proud of my men and the job we had done together. They were proud of me too. I wasn't a cherry any longer. The trust and confidence necessary for us to work together had a beginning. Our fire fight meant nothing to the war as a whole, but to us it was everything. It meant we had fought and won. We were still alive and could dream of surviving until we could go home.

Eight

The company had been whittled down from 120 men to less than 80 in the two weeks we had been in the jungle. Other than the major fire fights, it was mostly day to day monotony. Hump the bush all day, dig in at night. Up at first light to do it again. Cross some shitty little streams, take out some snipers, dig in and move out again. Day after day in the heat, the same routine. Search and destroy. We preferred to search and avoid.

I began to feel like an infantry officer. Only a month with the company but there were others who had more time to do than me. My stateside beer belly had melted off, and i was a 170 pounder at six feet in height instead of the pudgy 195 pounder I had arrived as. The moustache I had began growing on LZ No Name had come in fully, and I was no longer as sensitive to the sun.

Each time we hit the shit and lost some men, the rest of us picked over their equipment. I had traded in my cherry pack for a nice solid rucksack and frame after our first big fire fight. I moved the face of my watch to the inside of my wrist to cut down the glare from the luminous dial at night. I was beginning to look like I belonged. I felt like I belonged.

With our limited successes came a degree of cockiness. That cockiness translated into a general laxness, some of it due to the fact that we had been in the jungle for 17 days. We were dog tired. We still wore the same clothes we had worn on the first day we left LZ Mustang. Our jungle fatigues were tattered and torn from the filth and the "wait a minute vines" that constantly hooked you with their barbs as you tried to navigate through the dense growth. If the gooks couldn't see us or hear us coming through the jungle, I'm sure they could smell us just as we could smell their stench. Of course we hadn't bathed for the entire time we'd been out and we only managed a shave from canteen water every three or four days. My uniform shirt was stained white from the salts and minerals that oozed from my body during days of humping the bush. Each night when I took it off to let it air dry, it was soaked with sweat. each morning, when I put it back on, it was stiff as a board like it had been starched. We couldn't wear underwear. They'd have rotted right off of our bodies in a few days. Some of the guys came down with severe cases of jungle rot from the filth. It could be just as devastating as some wounds. We tried hard to keep as clean as possible, paying close attention to our feet. If you couldn't walk, you couldn't last long in the jungle.

Each night our defensive positions grew weaker and weaker. When we had first come out and hit the shit, our nighttime foxholes had been shoulder deep trenches. Now after more than seventeen days in the bush, they had shrunk to waist deep trenchettes. Guys laid around after dark smoking and listening to transistor radios not giving a shit for noise and light discipline. The news on the radio was

that they were talking serious peace in Paris, and the bombing halt was cooling down the war. We wanted to believe it, but nobody told the gooks we were fighting about it.

Top Webb was fit to be tied. He was every inch the professional soldier, and a bunch of lax kids out in the jungle being careless drove him wild. Day twenty in the field arrive and we were a listless mob wanting desperately to get back to the firebase for some rest.

I was scrawling a quick letter to Ty after we had set up for the night. It was dusk and I had only a few more minutes of light to write my letter. Off to the north we heard the rattle and pop of enemy fire. On my map that was D company's location. Those poor bastards were always getting it stuck to them. We had avoided the gooks for the last four days but if they knew where D company was, then they surely had spotted too. I hurried to finish my letter. Fire erupted from all sides of our perimeter. I scribbled 'we're hit' and jammed the letter in my pocket.

The gooks had us surrounded, but did not press their advantage. It was clear they just wanted to harass us while they really stuck it to D company. Over the sound of incoming enemy fire in the gathering darkness you could hear the steady whacking and scraping of entrenching tools struggling to make our inadequate holes deeper. In the dark it sounded like a ditch digger's training session. Top Webb yelled over the radio net, time and time again for everyone to knock off the digging. The sound was giving away our positions. I don't think he expected anyone to quit it--it was just his way of getting in a few "digs" of his own.

We all knew we were going to catch hell when the sun came up, so we dug like demons to improve our defenses. At first light, we braced for an attack, but it never came. The gooks had vanished in the night, content to hit us, harass us, and run.

We couldn't avoid the enemy any longer. For the next several days, we fought them morning noon and night. Instead of lightening up on the way to peace, the gooks stepped up their activity. Crack NVA units were coming through Cambodia into Vietnam. To get where they wanted to go, they had to go right through the First Cav.

Morale took a nose dive. Hump all day through the bush and lose two or three men in quick little mini fire fights with snipers. Set up for night defense and get our asses kicked for a few minutes at dusk and then again at first light. We were being whittled down one by one. Our foxholes were now cavernous pits with overhead cover--so deep that the shorter guys had to stand on C-ration boxes to peer over the edges. We never knew how many of the enemy we killed in these small exchanges. They carried their dead and wounded away in the dark. We just saw our own guys getting it, one by one. We were depressed, living on the edge of sanity, and afraid of the dark.

At dusk on the 27th of November I forced myself to eat a can of ham and lima beans. The shit made me gag, but it was all I had until we got resupplied. I was depressed as hell about the way things had been going for us. It was the day before thanksgiving and that made me all the more morose. What did I have to be thankful for? I was alive--but for how much longer? I honestly felt that the gods were toying with me like a cat with a mouse, just waiting for the right moment to snuff me. I was really down.

Once it got close to darkness, I never got more than a couple of feet from our hole. We had dug a really deep one today. I was lounging on top of the mound of dirt we had extracted from the hole

putting the finishing touches on my gourmet meal with a heat tab. My trusty Zippo lighter was supplying the flame. Every grunt carried a Zippo lighter. Mine was inscribed with the date of my commission as a lieutenant, and the notation that I had been first in my class, as a graduation gift from the Armor School at Ft. Knox. Even though I knew I was a civilian in disguise, I was proud of the lighter and what it represented.

As I bit into my ham and limas, a tremendous flash and explosion ripped the perimeter in third platoon's sector. I was frozen for an instant, mesmerized by the orange ball of flame across the perimeter. Recovering quickly, I reacted instinctively and rolled backwards toward the trench behind me. A second blast hit the tree about five feet from my head. I was halfway through my roll and dropping toward the bottom of the trench when the tree exploded. The blast blew me down into the hole. Searing heat filled my arms. My left arm burned and then went numb. Blood, my blood, trickled out on the ground. I lay in the bottom of the trench trying to gather my senses. The frantic sounds of guys trying to help their wounded buddies came at me from all sides. "Jesus Christ, they got Larry."

"Somebody get a doc over here, Neil's hit." Familiar voices trying desperately to help their friends who were one step away from a body bag. Within seconds bodies came diving into my hole on top of me. It was almost totally dark now and I couldn't see who was in the pit with me.

I hissed at the others in the darkness, "Where the fuck is Doc? I'm bleeding like a stuck pig." I was scared to death.

"Doc's in the hole with second squad. Neil's hurt pretty bad," one of the guys whispered back.

"So am I, asshole! Somebody get me a bandage and stop this bleeding. I can't move my arms." I was panic stricken.

Incoming fire from rockets, machine guns and AK-47's filled the air above our heads. The gooks were giving it to us hard. Nobody was shooting back. We were all just trying to ride it out and survive. Seven of my men were hit already and we were better off than first and second platoon. Bill, my RTO stopped the bleeding from my arms, and wrapped them up tight. It didn't feel like I'd taken anything in the chest or in any vital spots, so it was obvious I wasn't going to croak just yet. I began to calm down and think about what had to be done. Stray bullets and shrapnel continued to whiz by overhead. I realized that I was bare-headed. Denny, the forward observer, had artillery fire coming in right on top of us to break up the gooks attack. The amount of hot metal flying through the air was impressive. I was in desperate need of a steel pot. Mine had been in the dirt right next to me while I was eating my ham and lima beans, so it should have still been there in the dirt just outside our trench.

I stood up and peered over the edge of the trench. Tracers lit up the night as the fire from our side picked up. No steel pot in sight. I had to have it! Suddenly that steel helmet was the most important thing in the world. Where the fuck was it?

I dropped back into the trench. In the darkness I peered at the faces of the men huddled in the trench with me. In the light from the tracers overhead, I saw the glint of a familiar outline on my RTO's helmet. It was a lieutenant's bar.

"Maynes, you shithead, gimme my steel pot!" I barked at him.

"Fuck you," he shot back.

"What'd you say, Bill?"

"Fuck you, SIR." a little louder this time.

"Oh, good, that's what I thought you said. Take a look at the front end of that helmet and tell me when you got promoted."

He knew I had him, and reluctantly he passed me down my steel pot. We both cackled like fools as Bill crawled out of the trench to find his own helmet.

"Hey Bill," I called after him.

"Yeah?" came from out of the darkness.

"While you are out there see if you can find my Zippo, will you?"

"Fuck you again, sir." Bill found a helmet in the darkness and slithered back to the protection of our pit.

Six called for a sit-rep from each platoon. Herb radioed that his platoon was torn up pretty badly. Ian and the first platoon had light casualties. When my turn came, I gave my report, "I've got seven hit, two pretty bad, and I'm hit too."

I'm hit too? I couldn't believe I said that. What a melodramatic asshole I was. The brushfires from the artillery burnt themselves out and suddenly it was pitch black. The moon wouldn't be up for hours. The worst was over for a while, unless the gooks decided to rush us now that the artillery had lifted.

The radio crackled again, "Two-Six, we've got people who've got to be medevac'd if they're going to make it. Take some men out to that last clearing we saw this afternoon and secure it for pick-up."

"Roger, Six."

Now I'd had it for sure! Just when I was beginning to feel a little secure in the pit. Now I had to go 200 meters through the jungle in the dead of night to get our wounded out. I knew it had to be done, but that didn't make it any easier to take. It looked like a sure wrap in the poncho this time. Who the hell was I going to get to go with me? I couldn't order guys on a one way ticket to Graves Registration.

Each of the squads had a radio in their positions, and all had monitored Six's instructions to me. While I was wondering how to get people to go on this suicide mission, I could hear their quiet voices in the dark.

"I'll go with you, Two-Six."

"Me too."

"I'm in," from all around my platoon's sector their whispered voices came at me in the dark.

"Fuck it, let's go do it," I muttered.

I was overwhelmed. What an amazing bunch of guys. The whole damn platoon was ready to strap up and go out into the jungle to try to get their buddies out. I felt like a first class chickenshit for feeling sorry for myself. I also felt very close to each and every one of them.

I set out for the clearing with twenty ballsy guys. Felling was returning to my right arm and I could hold the pistol grip of my M-16 adequately. It dangled from a sling hanging around my neck. I could half-ass control the rifle with just my right hand. My left arm was crammed into my jungle fatigue strapped down across my chest. If we hit the shit out there, I was good for one magazine through my M-16. I couldn't snap a fresh one in place.

I stopped by the C.O.'s trench to pick up two coned flashlights to guide the chopper in. I leaned in and marveled at the depth of their hole. It looked like a ten-footer. Down at the bottom was Top Webb, digging like a madman. I couldn't resist a little zinger.

"Couple more feet and you might hit oil, Top."

"Fuck you, sir," Top replied without missing a beat. Dirt continued to fly out of the hole at a furious pace.

In pitch darkness we crawled out of our perimeter. We had to find the one clearing in the area suitable for landing a chopper. I was sure the gooks knew where it was and were undoubtedly waiting there to kick our ass--not unlike the Indians of the old west waiting to pounce on some dumbshit settlers at the local water-hole. Any minute now, and they'd be blasting the shit out of us. We crept along through the darkness, trying to move as quietly as possible. Our nerves were on edge, all senses alert.

In about ten minutes we made it to the clearing intact. I could not understand why they hadn't jumped us yet. We set up a loose circle for defense. I burrowed into a knee deep hole with my RTO. We settled down to wait for the chopper. When he got close enough for us to hear his blades beating the air, I had to talk him to us. When he was almost on top of us someone had to get in the middle of our circle with the two coned flashlights and guide him straight down on top of us.

My mind was running wild. It was starting to make sense. That was when they would pop us! When the chopper was touching down! They could take us anytime, but bagging the chopper would make a nice story for the boys back at camp over some fish heads and rice. The little bastards were going to walk right in on us while we were loading up our wounded, snuff us and knock down the chopper too!

"Bad Barron Two-Six, this is Dustoff, over."

"Dustoff, this is Barron Two-Six. I hear you to the east and closing fast. Come straight on. Look for two yellow flashlight cones below you. The LZ is tight. You'll have to come straight down on top of the lights." I finished my transmission and got ready for action.

Our wounded were spread out around the circle. As soon as the chopper got low enough, our guys would carry them to it from all sides and toss them in. It had to be quick or we'd lose everything and everybody.

Jake "the Snake" stood in the middle of our perimeter holding the flashlights for the pilot to home in on. Jake was a touch little kid, barely eighteen, and out here in the middle of nowhere making himself a target. I was still amazed at the guts of all these guys, and very proud to be with them.

"Barron Two-Six, this is Dustoff; I have two yellow lights in sight. I'll make one circle, and then drop straight down on the lights. I hope your light man has done this before."

"Roger, Dustoff. He's good. Good luck to you."

I was sweating like a pig. With all the noise from the chopper, the gooks could be sneaking right in on us. We couldn't hear shit and the dust and dirt kicked up by the blades was blinding. Ever so slowly Jake guided the chopper straight down on top of him. The skids were a couple of feet off the ground when the guys started throwing the wounded in. Still nothing from the gooks. It was unbearable.

Bill and somebody else grabbed me by the shoulders and ankles, and started dragging me toward the chopper.

"What the fuck are you clowns doing?" I shrieked at them.

"You're going to the hospital, Two-Six, right now." Bill yelled. We could barely hear each other over the din of the chopper blades.

"Bullshit, I'm not going anywhere. I'm not getting my ass shot down," I bellowed. "Put me down!"

They dropped me in a heap. I scrambled back to my hole. I'd take my chances on the ground. I was sure that any minute now, we were all going to catch hell. The medevac was almost loaded. I screamed

into my handset.

"Get out! Take it up Dustoff! Take it up!"

I could see the pilot's face illuminated in the eerie glow of the control panel. Ten yards in front of me, he was nodding his head at me as the chopper began to slowly lift. "Roger, we're gone. Good luck to all of you."

Slowly the chopper lifted straight up into the night, transitioned into level flight and then roared off above the treetops. Still no attack from the gooks. Shit! Why wasn't I on that chopper? I whispered for the squad leaders to bring everybody in tight to the center of our perimeter. We waited for a while and then slowly made our way back through the pitch black jungle to our company's position. Each turn in the trail held the fear of an ambush. We moved at a snail's pace, but finally made it back inside our own lines. We had been very lucky.

Daylight came after three packs of smokes. My throat was raw, my head throbbed and my arms were dead from the elbows down. I was a real mess. Another medevac came in about 8:00am to take out the rest of the wounded. It also took out the bodies of our dead. Since I was the only wounded officer, I carried the dead men's papers and personal effects. I also had Larry's steel pot, the one he'd been wearing when the first B-40 rocket hit him in the chest and blew his head off. Larry was another kid I never knew in life, but felt close to in death. His sentiments about the mess we were in were written on the elastic band that held his camouflage cover in place. I'm sure the author, Bob Dylan, would have condoned Larry's using them.

"How many times must the cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?" The words from Blowin' in the Wind.

The question reverberated in my head as I read the headband over and over again. I pulled the elastic band off the helmet and shoved it in my pocket. I threw the helmet in the dirt and got on the chopper for the hospital.

At the field hospital in Tay Nin I had a few x-rays and had some shrapnel dug out of my arms. I showered and shaved. I put on clean clothes for the first time in three weeks. It felt great to be clean. I went to a movie. I went to the officer's club and had a couple of beers. I was alive and I liked it.

Two new second lieutenants were in our Battalion's small officer's club fretting about going to the field. They were both infantry qualified, but had taken Military Intelligence training and had envisioned staff jobs interrogating prisoners in the rear. The colonel's words to Doug when we'd arrived nearly two months ago came to mind: "Before you do anything else, you'll lead a rifle platoon." It brought a smile to my lips. I stayed in the background and didn't say a word.

Each of the company executive officers was in the club giving the cherries a good going over. The execs were all first lieutenants who had done their field time, and now were running the company's rear areas while the company commanders led the men in the field. They kept replacements coming and going, supervised resupply, handled all the paperwork for the C.O. and generally oversaw everything that the company did other than combat. I wanted desperately to stay alive long enough to rotate out of the field, and be our exec sometime down the road when it might be my turn.

The execs were enjoying giving the cherries a good going over. Some of the best war stories ever told were reeled off that evening. Naturally, they all began with, "There I was...", and deteriorated into

tall stories that only resembled the truth--the way most war stories are told.

As a "wounded veteran from the field" with both arms bandaged up like a mummy, I was extended the courtesy of joining in the roasting. The cherries didn't know that I'd been there only seventy days longer than them. They didn't know that I'd been promoted to first lieutenant just last month. They didn't know how new I still felt--but I knew--and I sat quietly listening as Exhibit A--living proof that you can get your ass shot off in the field.

With each new round of beers, the stories got wilder and wilder. Fire fights that even Audie Murphy couldn't have handled were brought up and told of with sadistic glee. The execs were on a roll and all nodded their approval of each new tale. I knew the game they were playing and that the stories were mostly bullshit, but since I still had many months of field time left to do, I wasn't too pleased to hear them. I knew that they were at least partially based on fact.

My mind wandered to the recent past. The memories of groveling in that trench with my arms all fucked up were too real. Sgt. Ice and I had sat in that trench all night and talked, while we worked on a carton of smokes. We were both sure that we'd never last another month. The odds were just too heavy against us living that long. We laughed about the irony of two tankers getting it as grunts. The story of "Shoeless Joe Hardy" in Damn Yankees came up in our rambling conversation. Joe Hardy sold his soul to the devil to play one season of pennant winning baseball for the Washington Senators. Sgt. Ice and I both wanted to make a similar deal for ourselves. All I wanted was one more Christmas. If I could just live until Christmas, I wouldn't mind dying nearly as much. Jerry Ice solemnly agreed, and if the Devil, himself, had popped out of the ground at that moment, he could have signed us up both for thirty more days of life, and a quick exit after the first of the year.

Sitting in that little shithole of an officer's club, the memories of that conversation gave me chills. I barely made it past Thanksgiving. How was I ever going to last till Christmas. I shuddered at the thought.

Major Weiskirk's booming voice snapped me back to the present. He had taken center stage and all the execs were trapped into listening to a more senior officer sling it around. At the moment Major Weiskirk was pontificating on the subject of moustaches. His contention was that all junior officers looked like smart-assed punks with moustaches. I looked around. Everyone had a moustache except the two new cherries and me. I had grown one from the first day I got to the company up north but had shaved it off about thirty minutes before I got wounded. I now featured a slick, sweaty upper lip for the first time in two months.

"There's only one of you lieutenants," the major went on, "who looks decent with a 'stache. That's Farrington. His moustache looks good on him, but the rest of you guys look like shit."

I almost fell off my chair. Augie and Ed, two of the execs, looked at me and burst out laughing. Weiskirk looked my way quizzically. It was embarrassing. No way out.

"Do you really think I look okay in a moustache, sir?" I stammered.

"You? Who the hell are you?" Weiskirk queried.

"I... I'm Farrington, sir."

Augie and Ed were roaring. Tears rolled down their cheeks as they pounded on the table with glee.

"Jesus Christ, Farrington you look terrible. Grow that goddamn thing back and be quick about it." He commanded.

"Yes sir."

Nine

Several days passed before my arms became totally serviceable again. I was feeling antsy, even guilty for being in the rear while my men were still out in the jungle. I knew I was nuts, but I couldn't wait to get back to the field. My men mattered to me.

I caught a ride over to the PX and stocked up on smokes and assorted shit to take back out to the guys. I also bought a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Scotch and a bottle of Jim Beam Bourbon.

Rolling my sleeves down to my wrists, I covered the white bandages that encased my arms. Reporting to the Battalion Commander I stated that I was ready to go back to the field.

Eyeing the white cloth sticking out from under my cuffs, he asked, "You sure you're ready?"

"Yes sir, I'm ready," I replied as crisply as I could.

"Be on the pad at 1600. I'll take you out in my chopper," he ordered.

I threw a painful salute and backed out the door.

At 4:00pm we lifted off the pad headed for the field. Good-bye to showers, hot food and a safe place to sleep. Back to humping the bush, constant danger and sleeping in a pile of dirt. My rucksack was crammed full of goodies from the PX for the guys in the field. The two bottles sloshed in the pack. I hoped the colonel wouldn't notice. He was death on hard liquor in the field.

The chopper dropped into my company's night position. Nobody knew I was coming back. For all they knew, I was in some hospital somewhere pinching the nurses. There was much backslapping and hugging all around. I was glad to be back. They were glad to have me back. I was back where I belonged. Man, was I screwed up.

The colonel had a quick conference with Captain Lutz and then hopped in his chopper and left. I broke out the presents for the troops, including the two quarts of booze. We sat around on ammo boxes drinking warm beer, warm booze and warm soda pop. I sat with the C.O., Top Webb, the other platoon leaders, and the platoon sergeants. We had a few drinks and shared each other's friendship. We felt good about being together. My extended family hadn't been in the shit since that ugly night before Thanksgiving. I hadn't missed a thing. Morale was up and life was worth living.

The new lieutenant who'd joined the company in my absence was running the mortar platoon until Ian rotated out of the field. He decided a celebration was in order. He selected a variety of white phosphorous and high explosive rounds for the mortar crew and announced a "recon by fire" about 200 meters out from our perimeter. We stood around oohing and ahing, and clapped just like the fourth of July as the mortar rounds tore the shit out of a little clearing. No wonder the colonel had a "beer only"

rule for field troops. Old Devil Booze will make you crazy.

December dragged on. We stayed lucky. No big shit to get into, just occasional snipers and small engagements. The gooks seemed to have shifted out of our area further south along the Cambodian border. If they were operating elsewhere, that could only mean that we would be moving soon, too.

Our company had just moved back to Mustang for stand down when the orders to close the firebase were received. Just our luck. No time for showers, clean clothes, haircuts, or much rest. That would have to wait until we got to wherever we were going. LZ Mustang was to be destroyed immediately and the whole Battalion moved to a new area of operations. And there was more bad news—we would be the last ones out.

We had built the firebase and now we watched it as it rapidly came apart before our eyes. All day long men and equipment were lifted out by Chinooks and huge Skycranes. Seventy miles to the south it would be reassembled on the new firebase LZ Tracy. The one happy note for us as rear guard was that we didn't have to make the initial C.A. into the new area. By the time we got there the LZ would almost be done and we would just settle in for the night in our new home. If it was a real hot area we would be the mop up troops, not the ones taking the heaviest casualties. I was none too wild about being the last man out, however, and daydreamed about being somewhere in the middle.

The gooks liked to watch you tear down a firebase and wait to jump you until the numbers were in their favor. My platoon would be the last 30 men out of our firebase that at daybreak had supported more than 1000 men. The tension mounted as we watched our numbers dwindle throughout the day. Countless sorties of choppers lifted up and flew south to the new LZ. My platoon sat around the old resupply pad just outside the bunker line. We were armed to the teeth. Extra ammo, extra machine guns, tons of grenades. If we got hit we would be on our own. A fire base several miles away had its artillery registered on our position. They could shoot covering fire if we got attacked, but if it got to that, our ass was out anyway. No help could get to us.

I talked to Captain Lutz for the last time around 1700. He took the main body of the company out on the last three Chinooks. After securing their pickup, we were to be extracted by six Hueys who had been working another area all day long. A lot depended on everything going just right, or we would be sitting there in the dark with nowhere to go, and no way to get there.

After Captain Lutz' three shithooks lifted off we were all alone. I moved the platoon into an elongated oval around the pad. We would run like hell from all sides when our six Hueys came in to pick us up. If they didn't make it by dark, at least we had the makings of a defensive perimeter to ride out the night. A dead stillness settled over the destroyed firebase as we sat and waited for our ride out. Just hours ago it had been a beehive of activity. Now it looked like a deserted garbage dump. We were losing the light fast and had no choppers in sight.

My radio suddenly squawked to life. "Bad Barron Two-Six, this is Killer Spade Three-Four, inbound. Over"

Holy shit! They were coming for us after all.

"Roger, Spade 3-4, I hope you're close. It's getting dark."

"Estimating five minutes out, Barron Two-Six, get ready with smoke."

Goddamn I was relieved. We were going to get out after all. My other radio on the company frequency crackled with a message from Sgt. Lumbert.

“Two-Six, we’ve got gooks moving in on the far side of the LZ. Can’t tell how many yet, over.”

“Roger, Two-One, keep your eyes open and get ready to haul ass. The choppers are three minutes out.”

It was getting tight. I had to tell the choppers what to expect. “Spade Three-Four, this is Barron Two-Six. We’ve got gooks closing in on the north side of the firebase. Suggest you land in line to the west the firebase lead ship on top of the smoke. We’ll dive in from all sides. Popping smoke now, over”

I could hear the rotors beating the air as the choppers came in over the trees. I popped a canister of purple smoke and threw it where I needed the lead ship to land. Hopefully the others would land directly behind him at the same time. We were lucky to have a big pick up area. We had no time to waste on ships coming in one or two at a time.

“Barron Two-Six, I’ve got purple smoke. We’re coming in on top of it,” radioed the chopper pilot.

“Roger on the purple. We’re ready for pick up. Come on down.”

The Cobra gunships broke out of formation and rolled in on the far side of the fire base. They concentrated on the tree line 200 meters to our north saturating it with rockets and mini-gun fire as the lift ships came down to pick us up. A beautiful sight, thousands of red tracers coming out of the sky as the Cobras worked the area. That would stop the little gook bastards from getting to us! All thirty of us crouched, ready to run for the choppers the minute they were close enough to the ground. The Hueys floated down in a perfect line and we all ran like hell, diving into the choppers from all sides. In less than 15 seconds we were pulling up and into the air. The door gunners were blasting away like crazy. No way to tell how much return fire we were taking. The noise was deafening. I didn’t care. I was cackling like a maniac. We were up and out. We’d cheated the gooks again. The euphoria had me!

Five minutes out of Mustang, the crew chief handed me a headset. The flight leader explained that his choppers had taken some hits and were overheating. They couldn’t carry the load. They would have to drop us. He was turning toward a Special Forces camp on the Cambodian border. I couldn’t believe my ears. Rescued from Mustang to be dropped in the middle of nowhere, hopefully close to a Special Forces encampment? I would have rather fought it out at Mustang. At least there we would have had some artillery support. To be dropped on the Cambodian border without so much as a map of the area wasn’t my idea of fun.

The flight leader did his best to locate the Special Forces camp in the gathering darkness, and dropped us on its outskirts. Lightened of their cargo, the Hueys lifted off to make their way home for resupply. My mood matched the color of the night sky as we watched the choppers return to their base.

A very jovial Green Beret captain had been alerted to our arrival and came out to find us, and guide us into the encampment.

As he led us through the outer wire of his perimeter, he told me in the conspiring tones, “By the way, we’re expecting a little attack tonight. Great that you dropped in on us.”

A little attack, huh, that’s beautiful, just fucking beautiful! No wonder he was so jovial. He’s expecting an attack, and thirty Cav troopers drop in on him armed to the teeth. I’ll bet he believes in Santa Claus too!

The camp was totally different from any we had ever operated in before, but typical for Special Forces. In the center of the camp was a small tight circle surrounding the “Team House,” a heavy wooden blockhouse. This heavily fortified inner circle was designated “American Only” if it got to be

“Last Stand” time. Outside of it was another circle of barbed wire which was manned by the most trusted of the Vietnamese soldiers that the ten man A-Team was there to train. Radiating out from the second circle there were five star points defended by the CIDG’s (Civilian Irregular Defense Group). CIDG’s were notoriously undependable, and would chance sides at the drop of a hat – hence, the “Americans Only” inner circle.

The Captain, his team sergeant, Sgt. Ice and I spread our men out inside the second circle with orders to pull back to the inner circle when the star points got overrun. Everyone was thrilled with the prospect. Then the four of us went into the team house. The green hats could hardly contain themselves. They were chortling with glee.

“Boy, we’re gonna kick some gook ass tonight! What a surprise those little shits are in for.” The team sergeant laughed heartily and banged on the heavy wooden table in the dimly lit room.

“Hey, who wants a beer?” He offered.

“Bring it on,” Sgt. Ice replied, perking up noticeably.

The burly sergeant strode to a huge refrigerator humming noisily in the corner of the room. He opened the door and Ali Babba’s cave was revealed to us. Beer, nothing but beer, dozens and dozens of frosty beers inhabited that refrigerator. Sgt. Ice grinned at me across the table. Maybe this wasn’t so bad after all.

The Captain flipped on a television in the other corner, and the theme music from Bonanza filled the room. What a strange and silly war we were caught up in. Drinking beer and watching Hoss, Ben and Little Joe save the Ponderosa while we waited for hundreds of pissed off gooks to try to kill us out in the middle of nowhere.

Many beers later, the team leader invited me up to the roof to “take the night air.” Clutching a can of Pabst, I struggled up a rickety ladder to an observation deck.

“See those lights?” He questioned.

Peering into the darkness I could make out many lights a mile or so out to our west. “Yeah, what is that, a Cambodian Village or something?” I tried to sound intelligent.

“No, that’s a convoy of trucks bringing up the troops that are going to attack us.” He said it matter-of-factly, but it hit me hard. We were standing on the roof watching the enemy tune up for the fight. I didn’t like it at all.

Retreating down the ladder, I grabbed Sgt. Ice and we went outside. The glow of the lights was visible from ground level now, and Sergeant Ice shared my panic when he figured out what it was. We walked to our positions to brief the squad leaders.

Time had passed quickly in the team house drinking beer and watching Bonanza. It had seemed like a safe place to hide from the war. Now as we waited in the darkness of our fighting positions time dragged slowly by. We were all mesmerized by the dull glow of the lights to the west.

Every ten or fifteen minutes, the CIDG’s would open up shooting and yelling like wild men, but it was just nerves. The NVA still hadn’t attacked.

Dawn was approaching. No sleep, no attack. I worked my way back to the team house to see the Captain. The team sergeant was still at the table, still clutching a beer.

He got up and stretched, then said, “No attack tonight, lieutenant. They must know you’re here. Guess I’ll turn in.” He turned and lumbered out of the room.

At 0600 the radio spit out a message for me. A C-123 would pick us up at 0700 to get us back to our

outfit. What a relief! The Captain's eyes were downcast. His ace in the hole was being snatched away from him. Now he'd have to tough it out with his three hundred CIDCs and ten Americans. I felt sorry for him, but overjoyed for me and my men.

He walked us through the wire to await our airplane. He wanted us to stay, but I knew he was too army and too proud of Special Forces to put in a formal request to keep us there to bail him out. We had been ordered out, and he accepted that. I admired him. He was a professional soldier. I told him I was sorry I he couldn't bring his team out with us and let the fucking CIDG's go it alone. It was supposed to be their war wasn't it?

He laughed and we parted friends.

A fat stubby C-123 cruised in low over the trees. It landed on the dirt strip and taxied toward us lowering its ramp. We ran like hell and scrambled aboard. Gathering speed rapidly we lifted into the air and made a slow climbing turn over the camp. It was all there below us; the two wire circles, the five star points, and the blocky team house in the middle. It looked like a star fish. As I watched, large orange flashes erupted all over the camp. Dirt and smoke billowed up as enemy rounds landed on the camp. We were out, and the gooks were attacking. They had picked their moment.

Glad to be out, but sad for the ten Americans who were caught in the camp, I flew south lost in my thoughts. None of this made much sense to me. The war rumbled on uncontrolled. We were just along for the ride.

Two days later I heard that the battle had lasted all day. Three of the star points fell, but the gooks never made it to the inner circle. I was glad to hear that all the green berets made it through alive.

Ten

Catching up with my unit at LZ Tracy was another culture shock. Gone was the thick foreboding jungle. In its place we had wide open spaces, and endless rice paddies. There were Vietnamese civilians around too—no more free fire zone. If something offended you, you had to call in for permission to shoot it.

LZ Tracy sat very near the junction of the Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong rivers as they flowed south into the Mekong Delta. Changing tides controlled the water level in the rivers, and since LZ Tracy was built on land about one foot below sea level, the fire base often turned into a swamp at high tide.

My band of renegades arrived late in the afternoon after our “escape” from the Special Forces camp. We spent the majority of the day cooling our heels at Cu Chi where the C-123 had dropped us. Finally some choppers were kicked loose to get us to the firebase. Naturally, our arrival was greeted with hoots of derision by the poor bastards who had been building bunkers for two straight days. They thought we’d been taking a little in-country R&R at Vang Tau or something. I was sure the stories of the “hard times” at the Cambodian border were going to be very elaborate when my boys sat around bullshitting later that night.

Barron Six was back at Tay Ninh taking care of business with our exec, and the company had been stuck on the firebase helping to build bunkers while they waited for us to show up. No one had told them that we got dumped on the CIDG’s at the border. No wonder they were riding us so hard as we straggled in off the pad.

I reported in at Battalion HQ. Colonel Graham told me to take command of the company and get it off the firebase. We were to patrol five kilometers or more to the south and set up for the night. I saluted, and headed back to the company area to brief the platoon leaders. In two short months I had gone from scared-to-death cherry to Company Commander, even if it was only temporary. Two of the other lieutenants had been in-country longer, but I was given command. I hoped they weren’t pissed off.

Moving off the LZ with my own platoon in the lead, I felt a sense of pride. I didn’t give a shit for the war, but I was damn proud to be with these guys. They had become my family. I was walking with the CP section, and Sgt. Ice was leading the second platoon. We had our best people on point and kept a sharp eye for booby traps.

Humping five clicks in the jungle around Mustang would have been a formidable task in the late afternoon. But in the wide open spaces of LZ Tracy, it was no more than an hour’s walk. Endless acres of rice paddies stretched out in all directions. Much of it was under cultivation; the rest was waste land, a

casualty of the war. Water was everywhere. Mud, muck and slop had replaced the vines and heavy underbrush of the jungle as our enemies. We were forced to walk on dikes in the fields, as it was almost impossible to move in the muck of the paddies. The hundreds of canals and irrigation ditches that crisscrossed the area all had lush foliage standing twenty feet high on their banks. Great cover for the enemy. As we walked out in the open toward them, nerves on edge, we would wonder if the next one could be the one where the gooks were waiting to pop us.

That first evening we were just beginning to feel the differences in this new area of operations. As dusk approached we continued to cross endless rice paddies trying to get to the tree squares far in the distance that looked like they might have some dry land for our night defense. I could see the head of the column. In the jungle you could only see two or three guys in front of you. Paul Robinson was on point. "Robbie" was on his third tour in the Nam, at barely twenty-three. He was one of those grunts who supposedly couldn't make it back in the real world. War brought out the best in him, which by civilized standards, was the worst. He liked what he did and was deadly efficient. At night Robbie set up his own booby traps using a hodgepodge of enemy munitions. At first light, he had to dismantle them before any of our own people got blown up by mistake.

Robbie had been sent to my platoon as a trouble maker, and a hard case. He wasn't very military. That was fine by me; I wasn't either. I had found him to be a good man, and extremely trustworthy. In a fire fight I wanted him right next to me. I trusted him with my life. I can't think of higher praise.

For those reasons and more, Robbie was walking point that afternoon. He had a sixth sense that would keep us out of trouble.

The head of our column halted and the rest of us took up defensive positions along the dike as we waited for a report from upfront.

"We've got booby traps up here, lots of them," was Sgt. Ice's report over the radio.

"Take it real slow and see if we can make it to that tree square in the distance." I radioed back. I had to get the company out of this open area and under some cover before dark.

The word "booby-traps" flashed through the company in about two seconds. Once again we moved out. There was a noticeable change in the company, however. Troopers who minutes before had been lollygagging along like they were stomping grapes, were now slowly high-stepping like some piss poor Marcel Marceau impression.

We couldn't make it out of the paddies now. It was getting too dark, and we were moving in slow motion. We hit seven booby traps and mines without losing anyone. Robbie had spotted each one and disarmed it or marked it, so the rest of the troops could ease past. This guy was special.

I had to radio in to Duke Six, the Battalion commander, and let him know what we were up to. Duke Six nearly blew a gasket when I reported we were stuck in the rice paddies with booby-traps all around us.

"How many men are down?" He wanted to know if we had called for a medevac. I could feel the concern in his voice.

"Nobody's hurt yet. We've disarmed or marked the seven we've hit so far." I knew back at the firebase they were all listening in on the net. They'd know that we were no bunch of cherries. We had our shit together; at least Robbie did.

“Stop right where you are, go no farther,” came Duke Six’s instructions. “Set up in place for the night. We’ll pull you out in the morning.” He commanded.

“In place” was not the greatest place to set up. We were strung out along a ten foot wide dike in the middle of the rice paddies. Now that it was dark we couldn’t even get off the path into the muck of the paddies for fear of tripping a booby trap. We were going to have to lay there on the dike all night long. We couldn’t be overrun but we sure could be shot up from a distance.

Around midnight, we began receiving fire from the tree line we had been headed for. It was just small arms fire, and poorly directed, but it was annoying to lie in the dirt and watch the tracers zip by over our heads. We refrained from firing back in fear that showing our positions would bring on a mortar barrage that would really carve us up.

I was frantically calling Battalion to try to get some artillery fire on the position out to our front. I wanted to get a few 105mm rounds on their ass to run them out of the area. As of yet, they were only harassing us with light fire. I didn’t want it to get any worse.

After an unbearable delay, fire control radioed back that the coordinates we’d given them were remarkably close to a small ARVN compound. They’d been advised of our night position, so it didn’t make any sense for our “allies” to be firing us up. Fire control would check it out and get back to us when they had an answer. My rude reply was that if they didn’t get the ARVN bastards to knock it off, we would assault their compound and kill every one of the little shits.

The rules of engagement were very different in our new A.O. Back at Mustang we’d have been shooting the minute we took incoming. Here we had to call it in and wait for clearance. More time passed. Stray bullets continued to fly overhead. Finally an answer came from HQ. Yes, it was the ARVN’s “test firing” their weapons who were the source of our discomfort! They had been instructed to knock it off. All of this madness took three hours. We could have resolved the issue in about two minutes if we opened up on them, but I didn’t feel like a court martial, so we had just laid in the dirt and waited it out.

In the morning we were lifted out by chopper. Good thing too. If they had let us proceed on to the ARVN compound, we’d have taken them apart by hand. They were all gooks to us, and absolutely worthless.

Eleven

Duty around LZ Tracy turned out to be almost relaxing when compared to the time we had put in at LZ Mustang. There were booby traps and other minor irritants, but we knew we aren't facing any more main force NVA units, just the local VC trouble makers. Once we adjusted to our new circumstances, we didn't mind the area at all.

Set up a military camp around a semi-populated area, and the locals are going to find out how to make money from the lowly G.I. LZ Tracy was no exception to this rule. We'd hump the area all day long in the blazing heat, and as soon as we set up in our night position, kids would ride up on bicycles with bags of iced down cokes to sell to us for a buck a piece. We never bothered to ask where they got them from. We knew that somewhere in the supply chain this official or that official had siphoned them off for the black market. American soft drinks that had left the states destined for us, eventually got to us, even if we had to buy them back from some Vietnamese kids in the middle of nowhere. WE all knew that somewhere a lot of people were making a ton of money on this war, too; but that was their version of the war. Ours was out here in the shit living and dying, on a day by day basis.

The local Boom-Boom girls from the neighboring village also improved their standard of living courtesy of the boys of the Battalion. For the Vietnamese, having a firebase set up shop in your area was a little like having General Motors open an assembly plant in your hometown back home. High times and lots of work and money for everyone.

The local whores would sneak out to the firebase after 10:00pm. They set up shop on the dirt airstrip outside our barbed wire defenses. Our young nineteen year old Romeos slithered out through the protective wire each night to get laid. This "secret" among the enlisted men eventually found its way to the Battalion Sergeant Major. He was a thirty year man, and livid with rage at the alarming rate of V.D. among the troops. Now that he knew the source, he devised a plan to wipe out the problem.

Just before midnight, when the Sgt. Major was sure there was a full house out on the runway, he put his plan into action. Rousting a dozen sleepy grunts from the bunkers, he stationed them along the bunker line facing the "whorehouse." He quietly passed out a case of parachute flares. Dozens of us stood around anticipating some high humor.

On the command of "Fire" from the Sgt. Major, a dozen flares rocketed skyward over the landing strip. One by one they popped open bathing the area in an eerie light as they gently floated to earth under their small parachutes.

The ensuing scene was right out of the Keystone Kops. Mack Bennett would have had a field day

directing the action. Bodies were lying about everywhere, generally in pairs, in the prone position. At first they tried to stay dead still, thinking perhaps, that the flares were just routine. The Sgt. Major's bellowing voice changed their minds in a hurry.

"I've got you, you little fuckers! I'll court martial every one of you little bastards!"

Immediate panic set in as dozens of bare-assed grunts leaped into action. The scene was bizarre as the "fornicators" scrambled to get back inside the barbed wire before the Sgt. Major could get his hands on them. Those of us in the audience were howling with laughter. All the while the Sgt. Major ranted at them across the open ground.

"You'll wish you'd been born dickless when I get through with you!" he hollered. "Keep those fucking flares up, goddamn it!"

Suddenly there was total darkness. True to their buddies, the flare launchers quit launching. Sgt. Major was livid!

"Get me some light!" He bawled.

Teams of grunts crawled out in the darkness to drag their pals back through the wire. No more flares went up. The Sgt. Major ranted and raved, and caught no one. Vowing to impose terrible retribution, he retired to his bunker for the night.

Later that week, the Sgt. Major began hanging around the medical tent. The six new guys who came down with the clap paid a large price for their buddies who got away.

Twelve

Working by the rivers, we had a lot of contact with the navy. Down river from us, they had a small base that they ran Swift boats out of. The swifts were lightweight, shallow draft boats that looked like scaled down P.T. boats from World War II. Mounting .50 cal machine guns and 40mm cannon, they cruised the rivers looking for trouble. Often, they took along half a dozen grunts from our outfit to “assault” the riverbank when they drew fire. None of us cared for that duty.

I seldom wore my rank in the field. My usual attire had become a blue J.C. Penney T-shirt coupled with the standard jungle pants and boots. I also wore a red and blue Cambodian Mercenary scarf around my neck or head to combat the heat. The re-emergence of my moustache and a longish head of hair completed a less than military look. Top Webb would sometimes shake his head and comment that I was “a goddamn walking target” with all that color on me. I looked like one of the boys.

Navy crew men on the Swifts always snickered at our appearance when we straggled aboard for one of their little “float and destroy” missions. Generally, the chief of the boat would throw his weight around a little and treat us like peons. That never sat too well with my grunts, so they immediately began asking me a bunch of questions about the mission, making sure to address me as “Sir” at every opportunity. Even the old chiefs would eventually figure out that I was an officer. They would invariably scratch their heads, and ask, “You’re an officer?” My guys got a big kick out of tormenting the swabbies and they wanted to make sure that their lieutenant got a little respect from the navy.

One chief drew himself in mock respect, and asked solicitously, “Well, SIR, what would you like us to do with the boat?”

“Take us down river to the widest part, and have the engines break down. We don’t feel like getting shot up today,” was my reply.

“Sir, I think you’re my kind of officer,” quipped the chief.

From then on river duty was never too much of a problem. Sometimes we sat around on the boats and talked about home, just like we did out in the jungle. We traded stories about girlfriends, cars, school, football games—stuff like that.

More than once I got asked “Why are we here, what’s the war about?”

In the beginning, I said what I had been told, and what I believed—that we were fighting communism, and helping the Vietnamese to control their own destiny; to ensure free elections, the democratic process, and to keep the north from taking over the south. After being in the war for a few months, those stock answers made me puke. The next few times the new kids asked me the same

question, I answered. "I don't know, maybe just to put in our time and go home," because I really didn't know.

Christmas was a bittersweet time for us. We humped our way back to our firebase for Christmas Dinner. Dinner was preceded by our version of the Army-Navy Game. An ass-kicking game of eight man football in which each player hit like hell in hopes of breaking an arm or a leg, earning a free pass out of the war. The navy team was made up mostly of Seals, their equivalent of our Green Berets, and they were touch sons of bitches. I played flanker for our team and went at it as hard as I could. The game was never dirty—just hotly contested.

We played on the same dirt runway that had gained such notoriety in the Sgt. Major's great Boom-Boom caper. Vietnamese, from the village, moved through the spectators selling their black market cokes at a buck a whack. No hot dogs though. All in all, it was a weird scene. The army team won 12-6. I had a great time but didn't do anything spectacular in the game.

After the game we adjourned to the mess tent in the proper spirit of brotherhood. There we found a feast of turkey roll, canned peas, instant mashed potatoes, cranberries, and beer. It was a treat.

Jack Benny had remained my close friend and confidante during these months, even though he resisted my efforts to lure him back to a rifle platoon. He preferred the safety of the fourth platoon, never walking point. I couldn't blame him.

On this particular Christmas, Jack and I and another good friend, Jim Fisher sat on a bunker and contemplated life and death in the Nam. Jim had been with the company for many months before lucking out and catching a job as a chaplain's assistant in the rear. He had come with his chaplain to Celebrate Christmas with us grunts on the firebase, and we were glad to see him. He entertained us with stories of flush toilets and hot showers on a daily basis. The three of us drank many a toast to the dead and got roaring drunk. When two choppers flew slowly overhead trailing red and green smoke playing Christmas carols, we all cried. Peace on Earth, Good will toward men. God, how we wanted to believe it. But in the death and destruction that had become our daily lives, peace on earth and goodwill toward men were just ideas for other people to believe in. It was a strange war.

Jack put the proper footnote on the evening about 2:00am. He staggered over to the top of the berm, tottered back and forth, and shrieked to the outside world, "I hope you all die of syphilis!!"

With that he toppled over and slid down to the base of the berm, landing in the piss trench. Jim fisher and I retrieved him, and dragged him to the nearest bunker where he heaved his guts out before passing out for the night.

Thirteen

At 7:00am, we saddled up and moved out. It was pure agony for our Mr. Party, Jack Benny. I was in bad shape too, and sucked down four canteens of water before noon. There's nothing like a good Christmas drunk to make a man appreciate the war. We weren't heading anywhere in particular, just west towards Cambodia to stir up some shit.

Since we were working in semi-populated areas, we had picked up a couple of National Police men to go along with us. I don't know if they were secret police or what, but the civilians were scared to death of them. One of them was named Lon and he attached himself to me. He was the first Vietnamese I had taken the time to talk to and I liked him quite a bit. He hated "Commies," and was determined to catch all the local VC.

Two days after Christmas I got a package from Ty. Along with the usual Sports Illustrateds and Sports Sections from the Sunday Chronicle he had included a heavily wrapped bottle of Wild Turkey 101 proof bourbon. What I received was fifty pieces of glass in a mashed box with the faint odor of eight year old bourbon wafting up from the paper. Piss on the military postal system.

While we had been celebrating the joys of the Christmas season during the one-day truce, our enemy had been hard at work. All those booby traps we'd been stepping on had to be replaced. Without the worry of GI's pestering them, the VC laid in a whole new crop. After all, Christmas didn't mean shit to them. They just wanted to blow us all to kingdom come. Our first few days after Christmas were filled with more blown off legs and more maiming.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, we were chasing some VC suspects through a farm area. We had to ask permission before we shot anybody because there were so many civilians around, so we were reduced to just chasing them. Frustration was getting the best of us because we couldn't catch anybody.

Lon had had enough of this crap. We were poking around in a hut when he decided to do something about it. In the hut was a civilian who had to be the oldest living Vietnamese. Next to him, Ho Chi Min was a rookie. Old Papa-san had the traditional white wispy beard trailing down his chest and vacant, distant eyes. He weighed no more than ninety pounds and was dressed in the traditional black pajamas. The old man cowered in a corner and I said nothing. I wondered what an old, old man like this must think of a bunch of huge foreign kids bursting in on his small corner of the world waving weapons in his face. He was obviously the village elder and Lon was sure he could give us some information about the VC "tax collector."

We were always looking for the mythical VC tax collector. I had a mental image of some gook Robin

Hood sneaking around and taking the civilians' money to finance their side of the war. But these people didn't have shit. What could he have possibly collected? Hell, these people barely had food. Whenever we stopped for chow, I made my platoon collect all the C-ration cans in a pile for the farmers to pick through when we left. Mostly it was the children that I wanted to have the food. They hit the cans like a horde of locusts the minute we moved out. These people couldn't have had too much if they'd pick through our leftovers.

In the hooch, Lon started yelling at the old man. Calmly, he turned to me and said, "He say he know nothing. He lie. I fuck him."

With that Lon turned on the old Papa-san barking some commands which I couldn't understand. The old man was whining and sniveling; that I could understand. Fear, intense fear was etched on his face as he groveled in the dirt of his hut. Lying on his stomach, the old man held his left arm up to Lon. Lon stomped a boot in the small of his back and grasped the old man's wrist. Bending the wrist back against itself, he deftly broke a finger on Papa-san's hand. Hurling more abusive language, Lon snapped off another finger. The old man was wailing in pain, but he didn't move a muscle. Lon turned to me again, "He still lie! I kill him."

"No! Enough!" I said, finding my voice. "Leave him be. No killing," I commanded. I was stunned by what I'd just witnessed. Stunned that in a culture that revered its elders, Lon, who was my age, had savaged this old man because he didn't give the right answers. Creeping doubts about the side we were supporting nagged at my consciousness. I didn't regard Lon with any less affection; I just didn't understand what was going on.

We left the old man moaning in a heap on the floor and continued our search. Sutton was packing my radio, since Bill, my regular RTO was pulling some duty for Captain Lutz. Sutton was a tall lanky kid from the hills of Tennessee. He never said too much, just did his job and kept his mouth touch. When he did talk though, everybody listened. Lon, Sutton and I were slogging along, still hunting the VC tax collector, just waiting for the day to end, when a blinding flash and loud explosion launched Sutton into the air. He had tripped a bouncing betty, the kind of mine that pops up out of the ground and takes you off at the knees. Sutton went down screaming with pain. Huge gouges and chunks of flesh had been ripped from his legs. If he hadn't been six feet four inches, with such long legs, he would have been blown in half. Shit, we were stuck in booby traps again and Sutton was close to dying. Doc pumped Sutton full of plasma and morphine, and tried to keep him alive while we waited for a chopper. Medevac got to us in eight minutes. Sutton had a chance to make it if he didn't die of shock before they got him to an operating table.

I was sick. Nothing made any sense. We walked around and terrorized the civilians for a while and then they watched while we kicked their booby traps and blew ourselves up. Dozens of villagers had been watching us out their hut windows as Sutton tripped the mine. They said nothing.

We located another booby trap. I tried to blow it up to keep it from maiming any more GI's. I was too close when it blew. Hot shrapnel filled the air. A chunk caught me in the face and lodged in my cheek bone, next to my right eye. Blood poured out of my face. I felt intense heat under my eye.

Lon went nuts. He ran to the nearest hooch screaming and yelling the whole way. When he emerged, he was dragging a little girl out with him. He had a pistol jammed in her ear. I was dazed and not sure if he had wiggled out or what. Lon ranted and rave all the while clutching that little girl. He was

going to blow her head off if they didn't come out of those huts and show us where the rest of the booby traps were hidden.

One by one the villagers came out and slowly walked to different positions. They marked the rest of the booby traps. They had known all the time, but weren't about to help us until Lon threatened to kill one of their own. It had been a great day for winning the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese. We hated them, they surely hated us. Who could blame either side? If the people we were trying to "save from Communism" hated us, I couldn't see that we had too many outs. We were unwanted and unloved in a place that could get you killed.

After Doc cleaned my face up, I didn't look too bad. There was a nickel sized hole in my cheek where the shrapnel had entered and a little bulge on my cheekbone where it had lodged.

I stayed with the company that night and went to the rear on the resupply chopper in the morning. I needed to get the shrapnel out of my face as it was grinding on my cheekbone when I talked. It was more of a discomfort than really painful, but I definitely wanted it out of there before it started moving around.

The chopper dropped me at Cu Chi instead of our Battalion HEQ at Tay Nin. There was a small aid station there, so I decided to find a doctor before I scrounged a ride to Tay Nin.

The Aid Station was pretty grim. Not much more than an old brown tent with holes in it flapping in the hot wind. Two young Spec 4's were lounging about when I walked in. They slouched to attention and looked rather disinterested; but when they saw the hole in my face they perked up.

"How'd you get that? Must hurt a little, uh?" One of them offered. I nodded my assent. It hurt. Anything to keep up the mystique of the wild-eyed boony trooper. REMF's (rear echelon mother-fuckers) usually regarded those of us who actually fought the war with a mixture of fear, respect, and a little disdain. Disdain, as in, how could we be so stupid as to have to be out there where people were shooting at us. Since only about one in twelve who went to Vietnam actually fought as a grunt, the REMF's thought that anybody who couldn't weasel out of it must be really stupid.

We definitely had them, though, in the fear department. REMF's never knew what to expect from guys right out of the field, so they had to be careful not to excite us or we might go off on them. Respect was grudgingly given to us, because, after all, we were the ones who were in the shit day after day getting our butts shot off. The REMF's had no idea what that was like, and they didn't want to know, either.

Fixing the Speedy 4's with my best psychotic stare, I asked, "Where's the Doc?"

"He's not here, but he'll be back soon," said the taller of the two.

"I'll wait."

Gary Cooper couldn't have been less talkative. The Speedy 4's looked at me like I was a Doberman on a long leash. I tried to look hard.

Eventually the doctor arrived. He was a big disappointment. He was an "Army" Doctor, more Army than Doctor. All spit and polish. This guy was probably some dud who barely made it through Med School, and was overjoyed to be in the army, because he couldn't practice medicine anywhere else. What was worse, he outranked me. He was a Captain. Undoubtedly he had taken a direct commission, a little course in how to wear the uniform and then he was off to blood and guts in the Nam. Undoubtedly

he was pissed off at being stuck in an Aid Station instead of pulling duty in a hospital around Saigon. I could tell that he liked being a Captain better than he liked being a doctor.

Captain Doctor probed around in my face a little muttering to himself the whole time and abruptly chucked his tools in the alcohol.

“Did you get it, Doc?” I queried. His effort had lasted about fifteen seconds.

“Nah, I can’t dig it out. He replied. “Don’t worry, in time it’ll work its way out. Let’s just forget it.”

Wait a minute, I thought thoroughly pissed off. I’ve got metal in my face and he wants to forget it. Somewhere off in the future it’s going to work its way out. Maybe I’ll be having a drink with a beautiful woman, and this piece of gook crap will start oozing through my skin! No way!

I argued my case. Captain Doctor said he wasn’t going to do it, and that was final. Turning on his heels he stormed out of the tent.

The two Speedy 4’s had taken all this in and one offered consolation. “Don’t feel bad, lieutenant, that guy’s an asshole. He’s only been here three weeks. He’s scared to death; thinks he’s at the front or something.

The other one joined in, “He’s never here in the afternoon. He has to take a nap. He’s afraid to sleep at night. He made us build an igloo of sandbags around his bunk in the barracks. A real idiot and a piss-poor doctor too!”

Hey, these guys were alright, almost like grunts. We quickly united against the common enemy—Captain Doctor.

“How come you guys are medical orderlies instead of grunts, you two pre-med in school or something?” I asked. Both of them said they had been. A plan came to mind.

“Ever cut up frogs and that kind of shit?” I continued.

“Sure, I even got to cadavers,” the tall one boasted.

“No shit, well how about I’m your first live one and you cut this shit out of my face. Can you do it?” I asked.

“No sweat, but the Doc would wig out if he found out,” replied my new surgeon.

“I’ll worry about him. Let’s just do it,” I pressed him.

“Okay by us, let’s do it.”

The operating table was a stretcher supported by a bunch of ammo boxes full of sand. The stretcher was covered with dirt, sweat stains and dried blood. Even by my standards it was primitive. We didn’t have time for anesthetic.

One of the Speedy 4’s held me down by the shoulders. He even stuck a piece of wood in my mouth for me to bite down on. I started laughing. The “surgeon” stuck a long curved pair of forceps into the hole in my cheek. I quit laughing. Sweat popped out all over me blood was running down my face into my mouth. I could feel the forceps scraping along my cheekbone as he searched for the shrapnel.

He couldn’t quite latch on to it and he ripped my skin as he probed deeper for the metal.

“Almost, almost, I’ve... got it!” He exclaimed.

He held the bloody forceps over my nose with a chunk of shrapnel gripped firmly between the tips. I was queasy, my head throbbed. Over the shoulder of my “surgeon” I could make out the form of Captain Shithead striding back into the tent. He began ranting and raving.

I sat up and glowered at him. “I ordered them to do it. If you cause them any trouble over this, I’ll

hear about it and I'll be back from the field to kick your ass," I threatened.

"I could have you court-martialed for this!" He blustered.

"Forget it, you REMF; you don't even know my name. Remember—any trouble, and I'll be back or I'll send someone to do it for me." I was sure that would keep the pompous bastard from sleeping for weeks. I turned and rumbled out of the tent, passing my new comrades who were drawn up in mock attention. They smiled broadly as I passed.

I made my way to the chopper refueling area. I liked the blood all over my jungle fatigues; it enhanced the boony-trooper image.

A two-seater loach was heading for Tay Nin. The pilot told me to hop in. To impress me, he flew about two feet above the tops of the trees at max speed. I didn't give him any reaction; just sat there silently, and let my face drain all over his co-pilot's seat. I could tell he liked my style.

Our Battalion surgeon got a kick out of my story. He was a displaced hippie from Greenwich Village, and we all thought he was the greatest. He told me he could fix up the hole by sewing it up, and then resewing it a few times, each time making it smaller. He guaranteed me a small scar. I was to stay out of the field for a few days to keep from getting infected. Things were looking up. I had time on my hands and nothing to do.

I checked in with our company exec and told him I was going to catch a ride down to Long Binh to see a buddy of mine, Pat Cline.

Back in the real world it was getting to be New Year's Day. I had made it past Christmas alive and was looking for a few days of relative safety in the rear.

Bumming more rides on more choppers, I worked my way south to the 9th Replacement Center, where I had first arrived as a scared cherry in late September. I was still scared, but I was no longer a cherry. I was wearing a clean uniform with the proper rank, Cav patch, and a Combat Infantry Badge. I also had a 45 caliber pistol on my hip and a 38 caliber revolver in a shoulder holster, both of which were hidden under my fatigue shirt. Weapons were taboo in the rear areas, but I'd become too accustomed to them to walk around without one. I couldn't hit a bull elephant in the butt from 30 feet with a pistol, but just having them tucked away under my uniform gave me the sense of security I needed.

I stood out like a sore thumb in the land of the REMF. Cav troopers were not supposed to hang around in the rear areas. We might get zany and hurt someone, I guess was their reasoning. Walking to my buddies' company, I could see that I was getting "the look" from the REMF's. I liked the attention.

Pat's first sergeant greeted me suspiciously and said Pat had gone to the PX. The PX! What a treat! I was right back in the rear.

Heading for the PX I saw Pat walking about 100 yards in front of me. I could tell it was him by his long ambling gait. IN the real world, Pat's nickname was the Hawk. I always greeted him with a loud screeching "Haawwk" yell. What the hell; why not here?

"Haaawwwkkk, Haaawwwkkk," I screeched as loud as I could.

Up ahead, Pat froze. His shoulders hunched over, and he turned toward the sound. I was laughing my ass off, and running toward him. I'm sure he was shocked, but there was no mistaking the old Hawk yell. We hadn't seen each other in over a year, but I was glad I had tracked him down on the other side of the world.

The next two days were very enjoyable. I listened to the Rose Bowl on AFVN radio. The only time in recent history that Ohio State ever beat USC. Of course as a West Coastie, I had covered all bets with my Midwestern yuks out in the field. I was going to be tapped out when I got back there.

Pat even fixed me up with a date with a nurse lieutenant. Pat and his date took us to the officer's club for dinner. I was a fish out of water. I had no idea what to say to a girl. I had been living in the dirt and filth with other grunts for so long; I had lost all social graces. Naturally, as I sat there I still had my pistol concealed about my person. I kept quiet, hoping that my date would accept the "strong silent type," and not think I was a total idiot. Halfway through dinner, she brushed against the pistol I had on my hip.

"What's that?" She questioned.

Seeing an opportunity for conversation that I couldn't afford to miss, I replied easily, "That's my 45. Wanna see?"

"You're carrying a gun?" she asked nervously.

"Sure, I've got two of them. Check out this 38." I reached for my shoulder holster and yanked out the pistol.

The look of horror on my date's face told me I'd made a big mistake.

"He's got a gun!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The dining room went deathly still. I was trapped in the land of the REMF with GUNS. Didn't these people know there was a war on? Everybody I knew carried guns, morning, noon and night. I even slept with an M-16 strapped across my chest in the field. The only reason I wasn't carrying it with me in the rear was that I would have had to walk funny with it hidden down my pants leg.

Wary looking field grade officers began to move toward our table.

"Take it easy son. We don't want any trouble," the closest one said. Trouble, what trouble? I wasn't making any trouble.

"Now just give us the guns and everything will be all right," he continued.

THE GUNS. That was what scared them! I apologized profusely and said I meant no harm. Two majors escorted me to the club office where I checked my guns, only after they assured me I could have them back when I left the club.

Returning to the table, I could tell by the look of distrust in my date's eyes that it wasn't going to be my night; romance was out of the question. I sat quietly and waited for the night to get over.

Pat had cooled out everyone in the vicinity of our table by telling them that even though I was a semi-deranged grunt from the field, he had absolute control over me. He was giggling like an idiot. I sat and drank.

It was obvious that I was a liability in the rear. I left the next morning before I did any more damage to Pat's reputation. We parted company with a good laugh and a firm resolve to it again the next time I was lucky enough to get shot.

In Tay Nin, Doc Gross did some more sewing on my face and released me to go back to the field.

The boys were all lined up to greet me as the resupply chopper dropped in on my company. First in line were all the Ohio State backers. I was touched, indeed tapped out, by their welcome. I paid off each and every one. It was just like I'd never left.

Action was still sparse around LZ Tracy. As January wore on, we continued to hunt half-heartedly, and hoped that we didn't find much. Our operations took us closer and closer to the Cambodian border in search of trouble. We were once again operating in free-fire zones where we could shoot first and ask permission later.

In our company we had a kid everyone called George Washington. He was a snake fancier. Almost two weeks into an operation, George caught a python. It was a big snake—almost ten feet. George quickly established a rapport with his python and decided he was going to keep it for a pet. Unfortunately, George's snake made a lot of people nervous, particularly some of the brothers.

George knew we'd be hitting the firebase in a few days and he was determined to take the snake in with him. Each time we crossed a stream or canal, George would jump right in with his snake wrapped around him and wet it down. George wore the snake coiled around him from the waist up, with the snake's head extended down the length of George's right arm, its V-shaped head controlled at George's wrist. That snake was heavy too, and George's buddies all humped a piece of his gear while George packed his snake. Day after day, we searched through the wastelands of westernmost Vietnam like that.

Finally we got the word to move back to the firebase. The next morning we were to work our way back to one of the rivers and be picked up by boat. C Company was going to relieve us and work the area while we got cleaned up on Tracy. We bedded down for the night, hoping that we wouldn't get hit on our last night in the field.

Since George had adopted his python, we had a ritual to follow before we all went to sleep. George and a large number of interested friends would make sure the snake was safely tucked into a canvas bag that was tied shut. The call would go out around the perimeter, "Snake's locked up for the night," and most of us could get a little rest.

On this last night something went wrong. Around midnight, George went to check on his pet. The bag was empty! The snake had worked the drawstrings loose and was on the prowl. We had a python that hadn't eaten in days loose inside our perimeter. Noise and light discipline went to all hell. Flashlights popped on, matches were struck, Zippos cranked up to full blast lit up the night. The place looked like a Klan meeting.

"Snake's loose! Snake's loose!" was all you could hear throughout our position. Everyone was awake and guys were frantically shaking out their bedrolls fearing they'd find a large python poised to take a bite out of their butt.

Parties of vigilantes stood back to back armed with machetes, ready to hack the snake into hundreds of pieces if it should show its ugly head. Meanwhile, George was searching frantically, hoping to find his pet before the mob got a hold of it.

He spotted the snake making tracks for the bush close to our perimeter line. Chasing it down, he once again wrestled it back into the canvas bag. A snake watch was immediately posted.

In the morning, we made for the river and a ride back up to Tracy. Spirits were high as we humped along the dike leading to the river. We were in good spirits, but we looked like shit. Many of the men had their uniforms hanging from them in tatters. We had once again spent three weeks in the same clothes and it was no surprise that they didn't last. Once they started to rip up, guys would cut the legs

off their pants making a crude looking pair of Bermuda shorts. We looked terrible but we liked it.

C Company came off the boats all cleaned up and ready to go. In two or three weeks they would look just like we did but right off the firebase, they were almost too clean. The two companies passed each other walking single file along the dike. They tried to look tough for us. We postured for them. George was walking right up front, wearing his snake. When they passed George they couldn't contain themselves. Their heads snapped back for second and third looks.

"Did you see that? Son of a bitch's got a snake." They whispered among themselves. On and on they came, each and every one of the 120 men in C company, right past George and his snake. We kept straight faces and walked on. It was an everyday thing that one of our guys was strolling along all wrapped up in a python. Hell, didn't we all have snakes?

Back at the firebase, George built a permanent cage for his snake, and set it to work cleaning up on the rat population. The snake was a big hit and George said he'd try to rustle up a couple more next time we went out.

Fourteen

Life on LZ Tracy settled into monotonous routine. Each day the detachment that was permanently stationed on the LZ requested men to perform the odd jobs around the LZ. The rifle company that was on stand down grudgingly gave up the number of men requested, and off they would go to burn shit, collect garbage, patch up bunkers or any of the other chores that had to be performed.

We always thought they were taking advantage of us. They always thought we were a bunch of lazy bastards. My personal view was that stand down time was supposed to be spent writing letters home, cleaning up your gear and getting your mind right for the next time out.

When the details got too chickenshit, I raised hell and pulled my men off of them. There was a pudgy duffle-bag shaped lieutenant named King who was in charge of all the bum details for Headquarters Company. I lived to terrorize him. I left notes around the firebase promising dire consequences if he didn't lighten up. They were always anonymous, but King had an idea who was behind it. He cringed whenever he saw me coming. The colonel was afraid to send King out to a line company because he was semi-inept. King was relatively safe on the firebase and I thought he should suffer a little for that privilege. I never meant him any harm, just a little discomfort. Eventually, King realized that I was a prankster instead of a true whacko and my edge was gone. We looked forward to matching wits with each other.

One morning the recon platoon leader came over to me to get our Vietnamese Scout. Our scout, Yung, was a "Chu Hoi," a turncoat. He had been on the other side, captured, turned around and sent out to us to act as scout. It took a little while before you could feel good about putting too much trust in a soldier with that background. But Yung had gradually overcome our doubts and been accepted as a member of our group. He was assigned to the company as a whole, but considered himself a member of my platoon. He loved to torment Ed Lumbert, the first squad leader, by playing Vietnamese music on his transistor radio. Ed listened to nothing but rock and roll, and hated gook music. Yung also referred to Sgt. Lumbert as Sgt. Bullshit, which was quite apropos.

Guys in the field are always trading pictures from home, and Yung was a great collector of "things American." He had traded me a picture of his sister in exchange for pictures of my sisters. Yung often pulled out one of my sisters photos and proclaimed loudly, "My wife, my wife." Then he would throw his arm around my shoulder saying, "This is my brother in law." We all got a big charge out of Yung's antics. I didn't know too much else about him other than he was from up north somewhere and had cared

enough about me to trade family pictures.

Yung was adamant that morning about not going anywhere with recon platoon. They were all “bullshit” and he was staying with us. The recon platoon leader said he was going on a “snatch mission” to search for the VC tax collector. (That guy, again.) He had orders from Duke Six to take Yung along with him. Eight of them were supposed to ride around in a chopper then swoop down on a village nabbing the VC shaking down the locals. It was a bullshit mission—very little chance of success.

I told Yung to go on the mission. While he was gone, I would see Duke Six and make sure he could stay with us. No permanent transfer to recon. By the time Yung got back to the firebase that afternoon it would be all squared away. Yung grudgingly agreed to go.

When I saw Duke Six, he said it was fine for Yung to stay with us. He was glad that we could work well together. That settled, Sgt. Ice and I settled in for a long day of pinochle with our favorite pigeons, Sgt. Wescott, the new fourth platoon sergeant who had taken Sgt. Iles’ place and his partner George Washington, the snake man.

The game was short-lived. Captain Lutz needed me for a patrol. The battalion couldn’t stand the thought of grunts just lazing around, so they had to have a few “day patrols” around the LZ. I was to take ten men and patrol toward the west looking for anything that didn’t look right. That meant that anybody we saw should be questioned and any men between 18 and 60 better have papers or we should drag them in.

Good old Lieutenant King was pulling tons of guys for work around the LZ, so I had plenty of volunteers for my hike in the paddies. We only expected to be out a few hours, and just took water and ammo. I carried 23 loaded magazines, close to 450 rounds of ammunition; two magazines taped butt to butt locked into my M-16, and three full bandoliers wrapped around my waist and chest. On normal operations, I always carried extra ammo in my rucksack for reloading the spent magazines. Today I felt a little short with just 450 rounds.

Our patrol turned out to be nothing special. We roused a couple of Vietnamese who were out plowing their rice paddies with water buffalo. They had the proper documents and if they suited up and became VC terrorists at night, well, that was their business. We’d just have to catch them in the act. Couldn’t very well shoot them for plowing their fields. The day wore on and I was giving serious consideration to turning back towards LZ Tracy.

Bill yelled that there was a message coming in from Battalion on the radio. I went over to him and took the headset. It was Duke-Three, the Battalion exec.

“I’m sending in choppers to pick you up. The snatch team hit the salt a few clicks from you.” he informed me.

“Roger, Duke-Three,” I acknowledged. My mood sobered. This was not good. Our little day hike was about to turn ugly. In less than a minute the flight leader was on the horn calling for us to pop smoke. They were on top of us already. I barely had time to pull the guys together and tell them what I knew.

“Party’s over. We gotta bail out recon,” I said hurriedly. I threw out a canister of yellow smoke. The choppers IDed it and came down to pick us up. What a great C.A. this was going to be, me and ten guys who were strolling along on a nature walk just four minutes ago. Thank God I’d brought along two machine gun teams. I never went anywhere without at least two machine guns. This time we might

need them.

Above the noise of the chopper, I got the word from Duke-Three on the radio. He had been running the snatch mission from his chopper when the trouble started. The snatch team had dropped in on a little tree square village and gotten shot up. They didn't come out. He needed to dump us in there to secure the area.

Shit! Why hadn't he grabbed a platoon off the firebase? Why send in my ten men?

In the distance I could make out Duke-Three's chopper making slow turns high above a large tree square. The tree square was roughly the size of two football fields side by side. The trees marking its perimeter were thirty feet high or more and completely enclosed it. Surrounding the tree square were acres and acres of flat open farm land with no cover whatsoever. We made one pass over the tree square. Below us were dozens of thatched-roof houses, some of them burning. Smoke billowed up at us and we could see bodies on the ground.

I told the pilot to dump us about 300 meters from the tree square behind a small dike in the open fields. If they could shoot us from that range, then more power to them. Jumping off the skids of the choppers to the ground, I had no idea what to expect. We took cover behind the foot-high dike. I needed a little time to sort things out. I wasn't about to attack anything over 300 meters of open ground until I had a clearer picture of what we were up against. Crouching behind the dike, I told the guys we were going in nice and slow. We'd leap frog our way up to within 100 meters, with one fire team covering the other while they moved. Duke-Three was circling above us calling for an assault immediately. Bill garbled up his transmission by popping the squelch button a few times and making weird hissing noises into the mike. Bill was good at stuff like that.

We began to move up toward the tree square. High above us two Cobra gunships came on station to fly cover. Duke-Three was upset with our cautious approach and ordered the Cobras to shoot up the tree square. Happy to oblige, they rolled in on the little farming village. Rockets and machine gun fire pelted down through the trees. We had a ringside seat, and used their fire as our opportunity to move up to within 100 meters of the tree square. We were still in flat open ground but we found another small dike to lie behind.

My men stretched out to the left and right of me with the machine guns on either flank. When we rushed the tree square, it would be up to them to lay down the covering fire. Seven of us were going to do the 100 yard dash while the four guys manning the two M-60's covered. If we didn't make it, they had the radio to call some other poor assholes in to pick our bodies up.

My six runners and I shucked off all non essential gear. I was down to one bandolier of ammo. I didn't figure to get a chance to shoot much more than nine magazines, so I left the rest behind the dike. Duke-Three was getting hot. He could see from the air that we were in position to assault but he steamed that it was taking so long.

I gave the word for the M-60's to open up. They started off on the trees as we got ready to sprint. No return fire yet. Suddenly there were hordes of people running toward us from out of the trees. We dove back behind the dike.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" I shrieked at the top of my lungs. They weren't soldiers; they were women and children.

"I see people rushing you; do you want the Cobras on them?" I could hear Duke-Three questioning over the radio.

“No, No, Goddamn it, they’re civilians!” I yelled. I could see the two Cobras overhead queuing up to roll in again.

The machine gunners had quit the moment I yelled cease fire. They were good men; the best. Sixty terrorized Vietnamese came running out of that tree square straight toward us. If we had taken any incoming fire at all, I’m sure my guys would have dropped them all, but they didn’t. They held back and nobody fired.

Duke-Three couldn’t tell what was going on in all the confusion. He demanded a report. I was surrounded by screaming crying Vietnamese. Many of them were wounded. They had been hiding in their homes and gotten shot up by the cobras. Now they were bleeding all over us. My men put aside their weapons and began tending to the wounded.

“Duke-Three, we’ve got a lot of wounded friendlies down here. Can you get any aid teams out from Tracy?” I questioned.

“Roger Barron Two-Six, I’ll get what I can.” He answered.

What a crock of shit! All these shot up Vietnamese for what? Were they going to like us any better for this screw up? I left three men at the dike to help with the wounded and we headed for the tree square. I hoped to God that we would find some VC; something, anything to justify the destruction that the Cobras had brought down on these people. We walked slowly, hoping to get shot at. Hoping that the US Army didn’t destroy people’s homes and terrorize them for no reason at all.

I was sure that my men hadn’t shot any of these people but we were part of everything that had happened, and because of that I felt responsible. We moved into the little village looking for vindication. Fires raged everywhere. Dead livestock littered the area. These people’s whole lives were going up in smoke courtesy of Uncle Sam. Rounding a corner I could see three bodies out in the open in the village square. They wore US uniforms; part of the snatch team no doubt. Moving over to the first one, I rolled him over with the toe of my boot. A familiar face stared lifelessly at me. It was Yung! He had three holes in his chest marked by patches of dried blood. I cursed the war. It was all bullshit—Yung’s favorite word. So much for Yung’s one afternoon with the recon platoon. My little “brother-in-law” was dead.

We found no VC in the village. Whatever happened went down long before we got there. We loaded the dead onto choppers and flew silently back to Tracy.

January wore on, and with each passing day the amount of enemy contact increased. We had never really understood why we had been pulled out of the area around LZ Mustang. Now we began to figure it out for ourselves. Our area of operations was directly astride the shortest route from Cambodia to Saigon. At one point the Cambodian border was only 54 miles from Saigon, straight down a dirt road and through open flat country. LZ Tracy and other Cav firebases were set up around that 54 mile corridor.

The big brass couldn’t bear the thought of another Tet Offensive like 1968 when the whole country went up in flames, so we were out there to intercept the enemy before they could disperse themselves in the populated areas. Day after day we chased them. Sometimes we caught them. Sometimes we didn’t. Night after night they hit us in our night positions, holding us there while the main body of their forces slipped by us to be far away in the populated outskirts of Saigon by daybreak.

We caught very few; generally the ones who couldn’t get far enough away from us before daybreak. During the daylight hours we caught them in groups of three and four. Usually they gave up pretty easily. Sometimes, however, they’d fight.

I liked to gas them into surrendering whenever I could. Most people, American and Vietnamese alike, are deathly afraid of gas because they don't understand it. I had fit that description before I roomed with Keith Compton at Fort Ord. Keith was the officer in charge of the Gas Chamber and the Infiltration Course of new trainees at Fort Ord. One of our Friday night diversions was to go out and watch the new trainees suffer through their "confidence building" in the gas chamber or on the infiltration course. No matter how often they heard that "it can't kill you," invariably, a certain number of trainees would panic the moment they got their first whiff of gas. After countless trips to the chamber, and discussions with Keith about the properties of gas, I began to feel comfortable with gas. I enjoyed standing out in the open waving a gas canister about my head while it spewed noxious fumes. We never wore masks, either.

In Vietnam I used the Friday night horsing around for real purposes. Whenever we had gooks trapped in caves or bunkers, the word went out for the "gas man." I couldn't wait to do my stuff. It went against my grain to kill the gooks unless we absolutely had to, so gassing them into surrender was a good alternative. Robbie shared my point of view. He was a ruthless killer as there was at the right time and place, but he had respect for life, and respect for the enemy and would go out of his way NOT to kill if he could. On several occasions I saw Robbie promise to shoot the next guy who took a free shot at a defenseless gook. Knowing his reputation, most troopers would quite firing immediately and settle in to watch the show. If we were gassing them, Robbie and a couple others would cover while I crawled close enough to lob in my gas grenades. I always unscrewed the firing mechanism and removed it. The loud "pop" it made when it ignited the gas always warned the gasees. I liked to surprise them.

A lit cigarette inserted into the opening in the bottom of the canister is perfect for igniting the gas and makes no noise. After firing a couple of those babies to where they were really spewing out the gas, I'd chuck them in on top of the gooks. Nine times out of ten, they came flying out of their holes, coughing and sputtering, clutching their useless little plastic gas masks. If they didn't come out, we killed them.

I could take gas seven days a week, but hated the spraying the Air Force was doing overhead. We were never told too much about it, other than the chemicals they used were powerful defoliants. Some days we'd walk out of lush greenery into a moonscape. Every tree, every bush was barren. They were all stripped of life. We didn't mind the after effects because it opened up our field of vision so much and deprived the enemy of cover, but the few times we got sprayed ourselves as the planes lumbered overhead pissed us all off. You could feel the mist float down on your skin. I worked hard to douse myself with canteen water as much as possible after we got sprayed. If it could screw up the trees that much, we knew it couldn't be any good for us.

Fifteen

One afternoon I escorted some prisoners back to Brigade HQ. I was waiting for a ride back to the firebase when I ran into my pal, Tim, the world's youngest chopper pilot. I hadn't seen him since he and I had played poker with Benny Guy when we first came into country together. He was flying Loaches, the small scout chopper, like the one I'd ridden to Tay Nin when I got my face done.

Tim and I exchanged gossip on who we'd seen and who we hadn't. Neither of us had seen Benny Guy. Tim seemed a lot more solemn than I remembered him from our "cherry" days. I asked him what was troubling him.

"Did you hear about the two officers who drowned yesterday?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I heard some cherry pilot dumped his chopper in the river and killed them." I said casually.

"I was the pilot." He said quietly.

My heart sank. I should have known. I should never have made a statement like that. Tim was crushed and I was a jerk. I tried to apologize. Tim nodded his forgiveness and began to tell me the story.

He had been called out to the river below LZ Tracy to pick up two of our Battalion's officers and a VC prisoner. He picked them up on one of the navy "Tango Boats." They were built like miniature aircraft carriers with a flat deck big enough to land a chopper. Lieutenant White and Captain Ellrod Hayes had gotten in with the VC. Tim had lifted off the deck and transitioned into level flight. He didn't have enough altitude and dipped his skids into the river, catapulting the chopper into the river upside down. Tim's eyes filled with tears as he told me how he had tried to drag Lieutenant White to shore. He had a hold of his hair, but the weight of the lieutenant's equipment kept pulling him down. Captain Hayes had been knocked unconscious and went down with the chopper. The VC, clad only in black pajamas, with both his hands tied behind his back had swum to shore. The two officers both drowned.

I felt bitterness at the needless waste of life, and pity for Tim because he was going to carry that story around with him for a long time to come.

Back with the company, I tried not to think about the whys and wherefores of who died and who didn't. There was no such thing as a "good" way to get it. I was more and more convinced that it was all bullshit. Guys were dying and having their lives ripped up for nothing.

We had spent a couple of days slopping around in the streams and irrigation canals digging up weapons caches. The gooks definitely were stocking up for a big show for Tet, and we were busy trying to find all their stash we could. We were finding masses of equipment, all wrapped in oilskins, hidden away in the muck of the stream bottoms.

I had finally acquired enough seniority in the field to rate me an air mattress. After months of sleeping on the nearest pile of dirt, it was a treat to blow that beauty up and set up my sleeping area. On one particular night I had taken great pains to insure a good rest. My air mattress was blown up and draped with a poncho to fight the dampness. On top of that was my nylon poncho liner to act as a blanket. Over it all was a makeshift tent of my mosquito netting draped over two bamboo stakes. My "face towel" was spread out on the air mattress so that I could wrap my face and ears as a final protection against the huge mosquitoes that preyed on us while we slept.

At 2:00am I was sleeping big, maybe even dreaming of home, when all hell broke loose. AK's popping, machine guns chattering, and mortars dropping in right on top of us. For the first time in two months, I had fallen into a deep sleep and my brain was fighting to gain consciousness. I came awake with a loud scream. This was no dream. It was really happening.

While still asleep, I had rolled over to protect myself from the incoming fire. I had pulled the rubber air mattress over on top of me. That's how I finally got to full consciousness; lying there on my back with an air mattress on top of me. It took less than two seconds, but seemed like a lifetime. My first conscious thought was that all though my reflex action to take cover was admirable, hiding under a rubber air mattress wasn't the safest place to be. Shit was flying everywhere.

A mortar shell impacted about twenty meters from me. The orange flash blinded me. I heard a scream. It was my medic. He had been running for a hole, and the blast took him full on in the face and chest. Two of the guys jumped out of a trench and dragged Doc back in with them.

I was crawling for all I was worth. I had to find a hole. It was pitch black, no moon, and I couldn't see a thing. The only visible light was from muzzle flashes and detonations of enemy mortars inside our perimeter.

I found a trench and rolled in on top of Captain Lutz and Top Webb.

"Jesus Christ, Two-Six, where are you hit?" whispered Top.

"Shit, Top, I don't know. I don't think I am." I hissed back.

"Well, you're bleeding all over me again, goddamn it." He snorted.

Aw shit! Not again. I was panic stricken. Running my hands all over myself in the darkness I began to calm down. Nothing in the chest or trunk. I wasn't going to bleed to death. I could taste blood. It was my goddamn face again. I was seeping blood from my cheek and eye. I wasn't even bleeding from enemy fire. Doing the forty yard low crawl over here to find the hole, I had ripped my face open again. What a pain in the ass. I had to get to my men.

"Thanks for the use of the hall, boys, guess I'll drag my ass over to my positions and see what's up." I whispered as I lifted myself out of the trench and slithered toward my section of our lines.

"Drop in any time, sir," I heard Top Webb cackling in the darkness as I crawled off to find my men.

Other than Doc, who was full of shrapnel, my guys were all okay. Doc was in a lot of pain, but he would make it if we could get him to a hospital quick enough. He was lying in a heap, full of morphine, moaning with pain. I was glad I couldn't see what he looked like in the dark. The mortar had hit right at his feet and the whole front of him was hamburger.

When things started to die down, Six got reports from the platoons. We had some men hurt bad and a medevac was on the way. Six asked me to go out and secure the pick-up zone. Sure, why not. Off we went into the night, me and a dozen stand-up guys, dragging our wounded with us. Jake the Snake

was on lights again, just like old times.

Locating a suitable area for the chopper wasn't too easy in the darkness, but we found an area that we thought would do and set up our defenses to wait for the medevac. Off to my left I could hear movement. It was between us and the main body of the company. We were cut off. Shit! We were going to get it for sure. No luck this time. We got ready for them to jump us. We would put up a hell of a fight before they took us out.

We were tense, ready to fire. There was considerable movement right out in front of us!

"Two-Six, where the fuck are you guys?" called out a familiar voice.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, don't anybody shoot! Who's there?" I asked.

"It's J.J. and the Soul Patrol, Two-Six," came the reply.

J.J. Johnson, a black kid from Philadelphia, and seven of the "brothers" had followed us out of the perimeter. They had trailed us to the pick-up zone and were there to help.

"Man, you guys are nuts, J.J.? What are you doing out here?"

"We couldn't let our favorite lieutenant get his ass fired up out here, so we decided to come along." J.J. laughed as he explained.

I thanked him for coming out with us and told him to spread the rest of the black grunts he had with him around our defense. Now we had a force of twenty and I felt better about our chances.

Jake guided the chopper right in and we got our wounded out without incident. For the next few days, we all had a good chuckle about J.J. and the soul-patrol riding to our rescue.

In the field there was very little racial tension. It was common knowledge that in the rear areas there was a self-imposed segregation between blacks and whites. In the jungle, we couldn't afford that kind of crap. We were all just grunts, and we had to take care of each other.

One of the benefits to working in the flatlands by the border was the opportunity to get clean now and then. Not in the rivers or streams, because they were filthy and full of leeches, but in huge water filled bomb craters. Sometimes we'd come across an area that had taken a B-52 strike. The water table was so high, that in time these craters would fill up with seepage. The water was crystal blue, but it was brackish and stung your eyes and certainly couldn't be swallowed. All it was good for was swimming.

When we found an area with pools (often fifty feet across and fifteen feet deep), we'd make a serious attempt to set up our night position close enough to them so that we could hike back and catch a swim before darkness set in.

I'm sure the sight of thirty or forty naked GI's splashing around in a bomb crater would have given the gooks a good laugh, but to our knowledge they never caught us at it.

I did hear that C Company got into a little trouble over swimming, but not with the gooks. They were supposed to be under cover watching some trails for enemy activity one afternoon. After a few hours they got bored with their "ambush" and made for some craters. Duke-Three flew over their ambush position as they were all floating around on their air mattresses. He took a couple of pictures with his Nikon and had them posted at Battalion HQ. C Company was on the shitlist, and drew some bad duty for a while. The next time c company was on the LZ for stand down, someone threw a gas grenade into Duke-Three's sleeping hooch. What goes around comes around.

Our company was pretty discreet about our use of the pools, and avoided getting caught. It was pretty tough to see that water and not want to get into it, no matter what the consequences. When we

set up close to a pool we'd dig like crazy to get our positions ready so we could haul ass for the pool. The first few guys there always got the pleasure of jumping in before the crowd got there and stirred up the mud from the bottom.

One afternoon we came across two huge pools and as it was getting late in the day, we knew that the swimming lamp would be lit. Our new forward observer, Sam Ault, was an avid swimmer. He had only been with us a little while after taking over for Denny, the duck walker. As soon as we found a night location, Sam dropped his gear and made for the pool.

He was dressed in traditional grunt swimwear; bare ass naked, olive drab towel draped around the neck, steel pot on head, unlaced jungle boots on feet, blown up air mattress under left arm and M-15 hanging from shoulder strap over right arm. Sam hauled ass down the trail going for "firsties" in the pool.

Running along the trail, bare assed, and almost to the pools, Sam was shocked to see two NVA soldiers in full combat gear step out onto the path in front of him. I suppose they were a little shocked too. You don't see a naked GI carrying an air mattress in the jungle every day. Sam stopped dead still. The gooks stood in front of him frozen and bewildered. Sam recovered his senses first and shot them dead. Then he went swimming. Up until that time, nobody knew anything about Sam and we all thought he was a bit of a geek, but from then on, he was a cult hero.

My contempt for the war was growing by leaps and bounds. My original premise that we were in Vietnam to help a valiant population fight off the advances of sinister communism had been shelved long ago. When Ty had dropped me off at Travis, I was armed with statistics—that 85% of the eligible voters in Vietnam had voted in the last "free" election and that it was our duty as good Americans to insure that the democratic process was allowed to flourish. How embarrassing. After several months of being there, I realized that the Vietnamese people wouldn't recognize "democracy" if it bit them in the ass. What's more, they couldn't care less. The people did understand the village elder and the local boss, however, and that's all they needed at that point in their evolution. I couldn't fathom why we as Americans had to shove democracy down their throats or kill them. We feel the national urge to reshape backward nations with hundreds of years of history in our own democratic image. The war, for the Vietnamese, was a power struggle between two different factions, who cares what labels they used; for control of the country. It was Vietnamese fighting Vietnamese in a civil war. Kind of like if some foreign powers cut California in to two states by running a line across the state at Salinas, and all the northern Californians went down to southern California to fight for control of the whole state. I knew it was a simplistic explanation, but it was better than "saving the country for democracy."

Sixteen

Tet was approaching and things were deteriorating rapidly. If we weren't finding the enemy, Battalion would send in the choppers, pick us up, and drop us someplace where we could. Each night the Air Force would fly infrared sensor missions over the length and breadth of our area. In the morning, they'd scoop us up and drop us on top of the hottest readings. Most of the time we'd be a few hours too late. We would find signs that the enemy had been there, but moved on. Sometimes we'd catch a few stragglers, but most of the time the main groups would have vanished into the populated areas. We felt like border patrol guards in the southern United States trying to stem the tide of illegal aliens, only these illegals could stand and fight when cornered.

On one of our CA's I noticed the co-pilot grinning back at me from under his face plate. With his visor down, all I could see was a mouthful of teeth, but it was obvious that he knew me. My mood was somber. Today I was in the first wave again. Look out for the red LZ. The co-pilot flipped up his visor. It was Tim. He was flying slicks now instead of scouts. I was happy for him, happy that he had gotten another chance to fly after dumping his chopper in the river.

I reached for a headset to talk to him when the chopper began lurching all over the sky. Tim's face showed instant dread and he and the aircraft commander hunched over their instruments trying to straighten us out. Over the noise of the engine and rotor, it was impossible to tell if we were taking fire or not. The chopper shimmied and lurched and began to lose altitude. We fell out of formation. The other five choppers droned on without us. Now it was just us—my six men, the two pilots and the two door gunners trying to get somewhere safe before we fell out of the sky. I hoped the pilot had a good map. I wanted to know where we were when we hit the ground. The jungle floated up to meet us as we struggled to stay in the air. Off in the distance, I could make out what looked like a military camp. I tried to keep a directional fix on it so we could walk toward it if we crashed short of it.

Lower and lower, we could almost touch the trees. We braced for impact. At the lower edge of the camp, we pancaked in. The undercarriage of the chopper collapsed as we slammed into the ground. WE bounced back into the air and the pilot cut all power. Hitting again we slid crazily along the ground. Time for us grunts to get out before it blew up. We dove out the sides and rolled in the dirt.

The chopper slid to a halt in front of us. My guys were spread out all over the ground. We were all out and bruised but no broken bones. No free ticket home for anybody. The slick was a mess but didn't burn. We all lay there in the dirt laughing.

In less than an hour another slick picked us up and took us to the LZ where the rest of the company had jumped without us. They ragged on us for "chickening out" on a red LZ. We told them to get stuffed.

February marched along. In the field everything was the same. Short timer's calendars were in vogue for anyone with less than 100 days. Their helmet covers were neatly marked with calendars that the grunts could mark off day by day as they got shorter, ultimately saying piss on the war, and going home. Going home—home to forget the war, home to be clean, to talk to a girl and to kick tires at the local hangout on a Saturday night. All other manner of graffiti adorned the helmets. Some of the guys were quite gifted as artists and poets. Every time I looked at some new piece of wisdom adorning a helmet, I remembered the elastic strap from Larry's helmet back in November. "How many times..."

The last time I saw that strap it had been employed as an elastic door closer at our company headquarters in Tay Ninh. Anybody who cared to read it could lean down and read the thoughts of one American kid who never made it home. I thought it was a good place to leave it, as a fitting monument to Larry's quiet statement against war. Some men have grandiose monuments, some have none at all. Larry had an elastic band on a wooden door that other kids like him could see.

J.J. had adorned his helmet with DR. DEATH in big bold letters. In the real world, he was a nice, mild mannered kid from the streets of Philadelphia, but in the shithole that was Vietnam, he was DR. DEATH. One of my favorites that I saw around was "Kill for Peace." Several of the kids had that as their commentary on the war. For a nineteen year old caught up in the war none of us understood, "Kill for Peace" said it all.

For the next couple of weeks we had more infrared contacts and more CA's. Our company had been detached from the 1st of the 8th and placed temporarily under the command of the 5th of the 7th. That Battalion had a reputation for taking some heavy casualties, so the guys weren't too thrilled to be operating with them.

I, on the other hand was ecstatic. The 5th of the 7th was Benny Guy's outfit! Hopefully we'd have a chance to get together and catch up on the last few months. If we worked with Benny's company we could make some plans for R&R. We were both closing in on six months in country. In a couple more, we could get out to Australia or Hawaii, or any place, just to get away from the war for a few days.

We ran across B Company from the 5th of the 7th. I spied two lieutenants and went over to talk to them.

"Is Benny Guy in your company?" I asked.

"Who?" one of them answered.

"Benny Guy, he and I came in country together. Do you guys know where he is?" I rattled on.

Both of them looked at me like I was stupid.

"Yeah, we knew him. Benny's been dead for three months."

I couldn't speak. Nausea washed over me. One of the lieutenants went on with the story.

"Benny hit a red LZ first or second time out. They got tore up real bad. Gooks were layin' dead waiting for them. The LZ was on fire. No way to get them out."

I only half heard the explanation. Benny had been dead since Thanksgiving. All these weeks and months I'd been chasing around the jungle trying to stay alive and Benny never had a chance. Why him and not me? He was infantry and he liked it. He had believed in what we were supposed to be doing over here. Me, I had arrived a scared armor lieutenant, stuck in the infantry. I was still alive, and Benny

hadn't lasted a month. Fate? Luck of the draw? I couldn't make sense out of anything. I only knew I hated this war.

I kept to myself for days. Depression was a constant in the field, but what I was feeling bordered on insanity. I surrendered to a state of morbid fatalism. If Benny hadn't lasted a month, I surely had pushed the odds as far as I could. I was going to get it. I was resigned to death. I walked up front with the point men. I wore my red and blue mercenary scarf draped around my neck. I was a big target. I just wanted to get it over with. If I lived, I lived. If I died, well, my friends were all dying... I could die, too.

My men tried hard to shake me out of my self pity, they were great guys, and my devotion to them gradually brought me out of my trance. They were my responsibility and a real reason to stay alive.

After almost six months, I had finally figured it out. I knew what the war was all about; at least what it was all about for us. We weren't there to win the war; who lived and who died didn't matter to anybody but us. The whole reason for us to be out there in the shit was to keep each other alive to go home. We weren't there to take any territory. We fought over a piece of ground, won it, and then left it, time and time and time again. It was lives that counted. My men's lives. That was our war.

I talked to each replacement that came under my command and told him just that. We would fight like hell when we had to, but the primary mission was to keep each other alive. Alive to get on a Freedom Bird and go home. Winning the war was out of our hands, but staying alive was something we could fight for.

True to their reputation, the 5th of the 7th was right in the middle of it and we were right there with them. We were being shot up so much in our night positions that we began trying different tactics. We moved into a phony night defense, waited until dark and then moved out to a different location. Moving the whole company in the darkness was not easy, but we were willing to try anything to keep from taking the casualties that were piling up on us.

One night we used our new tactic about a mile from the Cambodian border. We moved a few hundred meters in the darkness and set up in a tree square for the night. Our map plots showed that C Company was about a mile north of us covering the road that comes in from Cambodia straight to Saigon. I sent out a small ambush team in front of our position.

Around 2:00am the ambush team radioed hearing people moving out to their front. Out to their front was Cambodia so we knew it was definitely the enemy.

"We can hear feet shuffling along on the path across the paddies," came the whispered report over the radio. "There's tons of them coming."

I told the ambush team to haul ass back to the perimeter. If there was a big attack coming they couldn't be out there in the cross fire. I alerted the line that our guys were coming back in, and to watch for them. I also informed Six. We all got ready for another night of shoot 'em up. We weren't in very good shape for defense. Moving up in the darkness, we hadn't dug in and we had no claymores or flares out for protection. If they hit us hard, it was going to be an ass kicker.

The ambush team came diving into our defense line just as the gooks opened up. We all stayed as low as we could and tried to ride it out. Most of the fire was coming from the side of the perimeter that faced C Company's position on the road to the north. The gooks weren't rushing us, just blasting away at us from their positions. They were holding us in place and keeping our heads down.

Over the Battalion radio net we could hear why. C Company was taking it bad. Set up astride the road, they were right out in the open with no cover at all. The land out to their front was wide open flat wasteland all the way to the border, like 200 football fields laid end to end and side by side. The gooks had sent hundreds of men down that road, and C Company was in the way.

We were stuck in our position with our small fire fight. Even though C Company was less than 1500 yards away over flat ground, we couldn't get to them. The gooks had known exactly where we were, and about fifty of them were making sure we couldn't move.

3:00am, the night sky was lit up now, as flare ships flew overhead kicking out hundreds of parachute flares to light the darkness. We were fighting our own little battle, but watched C Company's fight with a morbid curiosity.

Cobras came on station and worked the area in front of C Company with rockets and mini-guns. We could see the yellow-green tracers from the gooks' weapons arc up to meet the red tracers pouring out of the choppers. Spooky, the mini-gun equipped C-47 came on station and made pass after pass pissing down a long line of read death. Every sixth or seventh shell was a tracer and as thousands and thousands of rounds poured out of the guns, it looked like one solid red line reaching down from the sky.

Two hours passed with no let up. We heard that C Company was over run and the fighting was hand to hand. Artillery was coming in from all directions to seal the border. The aircraft went back to their bases time and time again for more ammunition. We could hear the screams and yells of both sides in the hand to hand combat. We were so close but we couldn't break out to get to them.

Some choppers were getting to them in the darkness to resupply ammo and take out the wounded. The same choppers came the short distance to our positions to take out our casualties. By now it was almost 5:00am. Captain Lutz called the platoon leaders together and said we had to get to the other company no matter what. They had almost had it. The chopper pilots would lift us out of our positions one load at a time, ferry us the 1500 yards to C Company and drop us in the middle of the fight. Who wanted to volunteer? What fun, we'd all go sooner or later. Why not now? I volunteered.

The two choppers that were dumping wounded would come by for us before they tried to make it in for another load. I asked my platoon who wanted to go with me. They all said they'd go. I picked some of my most psychotic for the first drop. Naturally, Robbie was right there. In two minutes the choppers were on us. We scrambled aboard while the rest of the company popped away at the gooks who had been harassing us all night. I dove into the chopper and into a pool of blood and ooze that covered the floor.

Up we went, a couple hundred feet in the air for a sixty second ride into the grimmest scene I ever saw. In the half light of the approaching dawn, the pilot hovered above what was left of one of the platoons from C Company. The chopper couldn't land but we got down low enough for us to get on the skids and jump the last few feet to the ground. I hit and rolled into a pile of bodies; one American kid and three NVA. They were all twisted in the grotesque shapes of death. The kid had gone out hard, taking a few with him. I Hoped I could do the same. All around me I could see the same scene. Piles of bodies stacked up. Some ours, some theirs. Many of our kids were lying there in shock, bleeding and dying. We were too late. Too late to save many lives. Most of the killing had been done. With the approaching dawn, the NVA were breaking off contact, and retreating to the sanctuary of Cambodia, a mile away. What carnage. As half light gave way to morning's glare, the ugliness of the battle became

more and more apparent. Surrounding my position behind a small dike lay 26 dead Americans and more than 100 dead NVA. The platoon I'd jump in on top of only had three kids left alive. The three just lay there in the dirt, too crushed by what had happened over the last few hours to say anything. Everyone they knew was dead.

With daylight, the rest of our company broke out of their position and did a fast trot to get to us. The gooks that had been holding them all night pulled out and made for the border, too.

When we had enough manpower, we took off after them. All the way to the Cambodian border, NVA bodies littered the ground. The choppers, artillery and Spooky had made them pay a terrible price to get to C Company. We knew we couldn't catch up with the main force, but our frustration drove us after them anyway. At the border we were ordered to turn back. We couldn't stand it. We envisioned the surviving gooks sitting around their camp just inside the border, safe in their knowledge that US forces wouldn't cross the border. We revised our estimate of where the border actually was and pushed on. We didn't care if we got in trouble. Gentlemen's agreements between governments not to cross borders didn't mean shit to us. We wanted vengeance. A couple of clicks inside Cambodia, we had to stop. Just over the border could be explained away, but we were stretching it. We reluctantly turned back.

Retracing our steps, we made our way back to the battle site. Robbie was going over the enemy bodies one by one. I was not one for cutting off ears or maiming enemy dead in any way, so I kept close watch on Robbie to be certain he didn't do it. He had his long buck knife in his hand, and I had to be sure.

"You're not cutting those gooks up are you, Rob?" I questioned.

Robbie shook his head no and reached into his pocket. Pulling out a fist he opened it up to show me a handful of gold teeth and fillings. "Get me a lot of Boom-Boom next time in Vang Tau." He laughed as he considered his good fortune.

I shook my head in amazement at the guy.

"You want me to pick you up a Thomspson sub-machine gun or anything," Robbie asked, eager to share the spoils.

"Naw Rob, nothing for me, but thanks for asking."

The chaplains came out that afternoon and we had a service for the dead. We always had a service for the dead. This time there were too many. C Company had held off close to 1000 NVA at the border, but lost over thirty men.

I was never comfortable with religion in the field. I believed in the memorial services as a way of paying respect to our dead buddies, but whenever the chaplains came out for regular church services I did a slow burn.

The hypocrisy of it all ate at my guts. I recognized that a lot of the kids had been brought up in very religious families and they needed their faith to get them through the rough times. I was even sorry that I wasn't more devout, but it was just too hard for me to believe in the all knowing, all loving, father figure of God we were brought up with when we were living in death every day.

If I was that loving God, I wouldn't have let this shit go on.

When the Chaplains came out to see us in the field it might be any day of the week; Wednesday, Friday, or Sunday, it didn't matter. We called a halt to the war and set up for church. All the Protestants

over here with one chaplain, all the Catholics over there by that bush for mass. I always told my guys to go to the services if it gave them hope and comfort. I just couldn't do it. Neither did I harbor any ill feelings toward the Chaplains. They were good men doing the best they could in an ugly situation. But to me it made little sense to blow a whistle, stop the war for an hour, say a few prayers and then watch the chaplains fly off in their choppers while we went back to killing—killing for peace, because we had love in our hearts for our fellow man.

During the services I usually sat by myself and thought of home, of my family, of people and things that I loved. I tried to think of things to live for. That was my religion. I thought of Benny Guy and all the others whose lives were wasted, and I often found my eyes filled with tears for them—and for me.

Seventeen

Morale stayed low after our battle on the border, but we were released from the 5th of the 7th, and returned to the command of our own Battalion. That made us feel a little better.

The war droned on around us as we fought to stay alive.

Over the months I had developed a desire for explosives. I liked to blow things up. We always carried blocks of C-4 plastic explosive with us, and I used it whenever I could. C-4 is pretty stable, and you can slap it around and do just about anything to it as long as you don't give it the proper jolt to cause it to explode. When we were out of heat tabs, the guys would pinch off a chunk of C-4 and burn it to heat their C-rations. Sometimes, when the men were desperate, they'd pry open the back of their claymore mines and pinch a little C-4 out of there. That was a bad idea, because invariably, when we had to use that claymore in a fight, instead of a loud, forceful blast spewing death and shit in all directions, that claymore would go "poof" and all the metal and shit that was supposed to blast through the air to maim the enemy would just poop out about twenty yards and fall on the ground. It always gave us a big chuckle.

I had a little band of explosives junkies to assist me in making bigger and better blasts. Whenever there was a bunker complex to destroy, we did it with C-4. Each time we got more elaborate, stringing "det" cord from place to place so that we sent the whole place up in sequential explosions. Always when it was time to touch it off, we'd gather the company to view our work. More 4th of July stuff.

Often in the thick jungle, we had to blow trees out of the way to cut an LZ. If the choppers couldn't get in, we didn't get food, water and ammo. Blowing up the trees was fun in that we packed them with explosives to blow them down in a specific direction to leave a clear space for a chopper to hover down to us. Sometimes we made mistakes in our calculations. Out of one such mistake was born the legend of "Big Tree."

"Big Tree" was the biggest tree we ever dropped. It would have been more at home in the Redwood forests in California than in Vietnam. We had to drop it because its huge leafy top blocked the approach to the only suitable landing spot for our Resupply chopper. The rest of our company set up our night defenses while the "blasters" and I carved out a landing pad. Big Tree was saved for last.

We painstakingly packed the base of Big Tree with pound after pound of C-4. We wrapped the trunk with hundreds of feet of det cord to link the explosives and supply the jolt we needed to touch it all off. The explosives were stuffed in the notches we'd hacked out with our machetes. We were ready. The rest of the company, at least the interested ones, walked the 200 meters from the night perimeter

to watch the show. Six of us had worked for an hour to make sure that everything was just right.

“And now gentlemen, for your viewing pleasure we are proud to present, Big Tree, in his final appearance at this location!” announced Ed Lumbert.

We yelled “fire in the hole!” just like you’re supposed to and touched it off. The blast was deafening.

Big Tree rose in the air. Instead of blowing it down to one side as we had planned, we completely disintegrated the base of the tree. We had used far too much C-4. The rest of the tree, literally tons of it, was detached from the base and blown up about two feet straight up. As it dropped back on its shattered stump, Big Tree steadied for a moment and then began to tilt slowly toward us. It gained momentum as it fell. We six blasters were doing a “feet don’t fail me now,” running like hell to escape the huge tree as it bore down on us. At least 200 feet from the original base, the top of the tree crashed to earth, smashing the shit out of our neatly stacked gear. Nobody was hurt, just our egos. Our audience gave us a standing ovation mixed with howls of laughter.

Shortly thereafter, the incident was immortalized in the ballad of “Big Tree,” sung loudly to the tune of “Big John.”

I often thought that the events in the war were scripted in the theater of the absurd. Along with things like “Big Tree” and Sam Ault’s swimming adventure, each of our encounters with the South Vietnamese Army was bizarre. From the CIDG’s at the Special Forces camp to the ARVN’s who fired us up on our first night around LZ Tracy; we had come to expect the worst from our allies.

Another such strange encounter came out of a combined mission we ran with an ARVN detachment close to the rivers. Our part in the affair was simple. We were to move into blocking positions a few clicks from the river and stay undercover. The ARVN’s were going to come down from the river on boats, disembark, and beat the bush sweeping everybody in their path toward us. A basic tiger hunt or hammer and anvil operation, the idea being that we would catch the enemy as they ran to escape the ARVN’s.

We took up our positions with limited enthusiasm. Mostly, it meant a wasted day, waiting for the ARVN’s to arrive. We found a great location to set up in. We tucked ourselves in behind a four foot high dirt and gravel dike with a path on top of it. We had lots of trees and cover to hide in on our side of the dike, but the other side was all open fields for several hundred meters. We could see anything that might approach us the minute it broke out of the distant tree line. All we had to do was wait.

I received progress reports on the ARVN’s over my radio. The day dragged on and no enemy came running out of the distant tree line. After several hours of good sun tanning behind our dike, we saw the lead elements of the ARVN company break out of the far tree line.

I got on the horn to Six, radioing that we had “friendlies” in sight. My men got up on the dike to signal the ARVN’s. I watched through my binoculars as the main body of their force spilled into the fields. We all gathered up our gear to rejoin the rest of our company. Another day of doing nothing—no enemy contact—another good day.

The ARVN’s had stopped coming toward us and were deploying in the field. I couldn’t figure out what they were up to. I didn’t exactly want them to walk up and shake hands, but their behavior was strange. I watched them through my glasses. They were scurrying around very animated and they were setting up their mortars. My guys could see what was going on and they all stood on the dike waving

their shirts and yelling at the top of their lungs. I had a bad feeling.

It became obvious that these little shits were going to take us on. I got pissed off. Yelling into the radio, I told Six that unless some coordination was affected real quick, we were going to be locked in a fire fight with our "allies." He was trying like hell to raise their American advisors, but having no luck. We quit waving and took cover back behind the dike as they dropped the first rounds into their mortar tubes.

It was laughable. They were terrible shots. Looking directly at us across an open field, they couldn't come within 100 meters of us with their first few rounds. We knew that sooner or later, even the ARVN's would figure out how to walk it in on us, so our situation was turning grim.

Robbie yelled over at me, "I Think I can get 'em to stop Two-Six."

"Go ahead on. Can't get any worse!" I yelled back.

Robbie grabbed an M-60 machine gun and stood on top of the dike. He shook his fist in the air and yelled in Vietnamese across the field. He got no reaction from the ARVN's. Robbie continued yelling in Vietnamese and punctuated it with a fifty round burst directly across the front of their line. We watched the tracers hit the ground a few yards in front of them. The ARVN's jumped back from their tubes raising their hands in the air in surrender.

"Let's go give 'em some shit," laughed Robbie.

It sounded fine to me, so off we went across the field to abuse the ARVN's. The bastards had known who we were all along. They were just being macho little assholes. There were 24 of us and about 150 of them. By the time we crossed the 300 meters to their position, their two American advisors had shown up. I told them in very indignant terms how I felt about being mortared by "allies." The advisors apologized, saying that the ARVN's were pretty much on their own, as part of the effort to turn over the war to them, Vietnamization, it was called. What a crock. We got ready to move out. The ARVN's had counted us and were feeling cocky again. As we headed back toward our own people they started talking shit at us in Vietnamese. Robbie understood every word. He wheeled and cranked out another burst at their feet. The ARVN's fell all over each other diving for cover. Robbie finished by telling them all about their mothers and fathers in their own language and we pushed on without further incident.

I was the senior officer in the company, with respect to time in the field. Herb had rotated to a rear job. Ian was long gone to a staff job at Division. Captain Lutz, Top Webb and I were still there, hoping our turn would come soon. I was operating in a very strange mental state, almost sure that I would die, but wanting to live. My men followed me easily because they knew that my own self worth depended on keeping them all alive. They also knew how I felt about the war and viewed me as a little "different" from the traditional officer. One day one of the guys brought a picture from a newspaper from home. The guy in the picture was a mass murderer who had done some horrible things to his victims. The guys all agreed that he looked just like me. It was a compliment, I guess.

When we were back on the firebase, we looked for new diversions. Ammunition deteriorated rapidly in the heat, humidity and general filth we lived in. We were always trading in old stuff for new. After a while the ammo dump at each firebase always had a ton of old corroded junk lying around.

For fun, Robbie and I, and anybody else who wanted to, would get rid of the old grenades. We sat on the ground outside of the berm with piles of old rusted shitty looking grenades. Pulling the pins on a

couple, Robbie and I would face each other and let the hammer fly. We held on to the grenade as long as we dared before letting it go. The object was to get an airburst. Any frags that hit the ground before they blew up counted against you. Grenades are supposed to have a three to four second delay before exploding, and often we'd let them cook in our hands for a good two and a half seconds before winging them. I was getting a little weird, but I couldn't help myself.

Sgt. Ice left to go on R&R. He went to Hawaii to spend some time with his wife. I was glad to see him get out for awhile. He had been running on the edge just like me for months. When he returned to us ten days later, he was very subdued. Drawing him out in conversation one night, I heard the story of his R&R. On the whole, it had been great, the worst part of it, of course, was having to come back. The dread of going back out to the field was particularly unsettling to Sgt. Ice. He too had developed a sense of fatalism that said he wasn't going to make it. Being in Hawaii with his wife, and then returning to this, was almost enough to drive him over the edge. He told me that on two different occasions in Hawaii he'd been choking his wife in his sleep when she'd finally gotten him to wake up and release his grip. He said the nightmares were bad and once or twice he woke up on the floor covered with sweat. His wife was terrorized by the nightmares he was having and didn't understand the yelling and thrashing he was doing in his sleep. But no matter how bad the nightmares had been, and how badly he felt about choking his wife, he said that getting away was worth it. He said I could never understand what had happened to us, or the stress we were under, until I got out of it, even if only for a few days. I decided to put in for R&R as soon as possible.

Struggling through the next few weeks was tough. I now had a new goal. No longer was it the insurmountable obstacle of lasting for a whole year, it was only weeks, days until I could get a breath of air. I had originally planned to wait at least eight months before going on R&R but after talking with Sgt. Ice I put in for R&R in my seventh month. If I waited eight months and got croaked just before I was due to go, think of what I'd have missed. I was a man possessed. I had to live for R&R. Just like last November, when I was willing to mortgage my life for just one more Christmas, now I just needed to make it to R&R.

My day to leave the field finally came. I was headed for Australia. That meant I would be out of the shit for at least ten days. To me that was a lifetime. Taking the resupply chopper to the rear, I waved good-bye to my band of grunts. I was an old-timer going on R&R. Who'd have believed I'd last this long.

At Division I stood in line for the mandatory V.D. check. There was a major in line in front of me who was indignant about dropping his pants for the medics. I guess he thought V.D. was just for the enlisted men. Clearing with the medics, I caught a flight for Cam Ranh Bay.

Cam Ranh Bay was a place I'd only heard of before. It was so secure that it was almost like being back in the states. They hadn't heard a shot fired in anger in six months. When the President came to Vietnam to see the boys, where did he go? Cam Ranh Bay. We heard they had to fly in some grunts from the field, just so he'd have some real soldiers to look at.

I was overwhelmed by Cam Ranh Bay. So clean, such blue water, so safe. I checked in, drew a bunk in the barracks, and went out to explore the area. I passed a PX, a theater, and a couple of clubs as I walked, but I was most interested in getting down to the water. I had to investigate that beautiful bay. Walking toward a dock, I noticed something that looked familiar. Two new ski boats complete with Evinrude outboard motors bobbed in the water next to the dock. A group of very tan Americans was

idling around the boats. I stood there with my mouth agape. The group noticed me and some of them waved a greeting.

“Hey, how you doing,” one called out.

I couldn’t respond. My mind was still in shock. I drifted toward the dock and found my voice. “What do you guys do?” I mumbled.

“We take people water skiing. Wanna go?” They offered.

“Nah, I don’t think I can,” I answered. I don’t know why I said no. Maybe it was just too strange for me to be there. I turned and headed back toward the club. I was bewildered.

“We’re here every day if you change your mind,” they called after me. “It’s our job.”

I needed a drink. Some kids fought and died every day and some went water skiing. Nothing seemed fair. Nothing made sense.

Next morning I queued up with 190 other guys waiting for our R&R flight to Sydney. As I got to the ticket counter, the Sergeant on the desk held out my ticket, and then he pulled it back.

“Sorry sir, I give you this with that moustache the way it is. Not regulation, below the corners of your mouth. If you were to trim it up a little, I could give you this ticket.” He leered at me.

I studied him. He was a Sergeant First Class, the same as Jerry Ice, but they were worlds apart. Jerry Ice was a stand-up guy out in the field; this guy was a ball busting REMF playing a little game with airplane tickets. I understood the game and knew I had to play.

“Sorry if I’m out of line, Sarge, out in the jungle we don’t get cleaned up too often.” I answered, keeping my tone conversational.

He could tell by my division and C.I.B. that I was from the field, but he was showing me that in his area I wasn’t shit.

“You’ve got five minutes before your plane leaves, lieutenant, I’ll hold this ticket till you get that ‘stache trimmed up to regulation,” he informed me smugly.

I had no options. I sprinted for the latrine. Inside, a dozen or so guys were showering and shaving.

“Somebody loan me a razor,” I shouted. Several were thrust at me. I quickly took off the “Fu Manchu” tails of my moustache, thought for a moment and then hacked at it some more. I took it down to a little Charlie Chaplain brush over the lip. I looked ridiculous. Pleased with myself, I headed back to get my ticket. Keeping a straight face, I presented myself to the sergeant who was my tormentor. We played the game out to the end.

“Oh, that’s much better, Sir,” he smiled.

“Thanks, Sarge, I rather like it myself. Thanks for suggesting it.”

I grabbed the ticket and took my grotesque little moustache to the plane. As soon as we were airborne, I went to one of the restrooms and took the rest off. I was slick lipped again. That sergeant had beaten me, but he’d never have the satisfaction of knowing it.

We were flying on a World Airways Charter, and the ladies serving us were very pleasant. One of them had been at that stewardess get-together at the Frigate in Burlingame the night Ty and I got bombed before I drove to Travis. She didn’t remember us sitting at the bar, thankfully. I gave her a note for another World Stewardess that I knew from college. Amazing, only a day or two removed from the field and I was capable of having a conversation with a woman. Sgt. Ice was right. It was good to be out and alive.

In Sydney we went to a hotel in King's Cross. In a ballroom, we were assigned hotels around the city. The Australians were most pleasant, but each hotel only wanted so many "Yanks" on its guest list. We got to pick our hotels by rank, and since there were only about a dozen officers on the flight, I got to pick while everything was still available.

I asked the gentleman at the desk if I could have the hotel that was farthest from the part of town where most of the GI's would be hanging out looking for whores; preferably something by the beach. He smiled, knowingly, and suggested the Bondi Beach Hotel. Mike Sullivan, a chopper pilot from the Cav thought that sounded good to him, too, and he and I jumped in a cab and headed for Bondi Beach. We had been the only two Cav Troopers on the flight, and apparently the only two who wanted to get out of the red light district.

The desk clerk at the Bondi Beach Hotel greeted us warmly. Since it was the middle of fall below the equator, it wasn't really beach weather, and the hotel wasn't that full. I didn't care that much about the beach itself, just to be out of the war was a treat for me. To sleep in a real bed for the first time in seven months would be special enough.

I immediately headed for the shower. The red dirt in my pores finally yielded to soap and water and I got clean for the first time in months. I shaved and put on cologne and deodorant. I laughed as I thought about the pitiful stink of wearing the same clothes for three weeks. The boys from "Bad Barron" would hardly recognize me all cleaned up.

Mike Sullivan, whose nickname was Gaucho, and I had agreed to meet in the hotel bar after we got cleaned up. The bar was just like I wanted it to be; a nice big bar with six huge pool tables and lots of people having a good time.

Shooting pool and having a few beers we tried to fit into the crowd. Two guys at the table next to us were sizing us up. We noticed, and prepared for the worst.

"You blokes are Yanks on holiday, aren't you?" one of them commented. We nodded yes, we were. "You'll probably not like us then. We're draft evaders," he went on looking for a reaction from us.

Gaucho and I both started laughing. "That's great. Wish we were, too. Here, let us get you a drink," I offered.

The Aussies were surprised at our reaction, but seemed pleased at our gesture of friendship. We four began drinking and shooting pool together. Our new friends, Peter and Phil, turned out to be fine gentlemen, and they decided they were going to adopt us for the duration of our stay. Peter and Phil took it upon themselves to help us meet some "proper lasses." The four of us rode around Sydney in Pete's TR-2 and went to places the normal GI on R&R would never get to see.

They took us to a wedding where we met dozens of friendly people. The bride and groom drove through the streets of Sydney in a horse drawn carriage. WE followed along in Pete's Triumph honking and carrying on. We went to a private rugby club and talked sports with guys just like us. They couldn't have cared less about the war, and we put it aside for a few days. I met a beautiful girl named Jane and was thunderstruck by the simple pleasure of sitting and talking with her. She said she was so pleased that I wasn't "a yank with a moustache." I laughed hard at that comment and didn't tell her why.

I went out to play "football" with twenty Aussies, and had the time of my life. Their game was a little foreign to me, but I threw myself into the tackling part of the game with reckless abandon. Who knows, maybe I could get lucky and break a leg. They liked my spirit.

Jane and I went to restaurants and had real food. We went to clubs and danced to a rock and roll band.

The days passed too quickly. I became restless. I couldn't sleep.

Early one morning, I was standing out on the balcony of my room at 4:00am. Smoking a cigarette, I was looking down at the beach and across the way at the lights of the city. I knew it was coming to an end, but I didn't want to forget any of it. I wanted my mind's eye to be a camera and capture forever the images I was seeing. It was all so peaceful and quiet.

I was lost in thought about life, death, and why some of us had to struggle with those absolutes, while the rest of the world slept blissfully on, safe from the everyday horrors of war. I was on the verge of feeling very sorry for myself, when I felt Jane's presence. I had no idea how long she had been there, only that she was there now. She said nothing; just stood by my side, letting me gaze out to the world before me. She took my hand and held it softly. She understood.

In the morning Jane had to leave. She was a hostess on the train from Sydney to Melbourne. By the time her train got back in a couple of days, I would be gone. She had been spending any time with any "Yank." It always came to nothing. She had graced my life with softness for a few short days against her better judgment. We parted hoping to see each other again, perhaps to know each other better, but knowing we never would.

In two days I was on a plane headed back for Vietnam. Sgt. Ice had been right. R&R cleared my mind of some of the darkness. Life was worth living. I had to find a way to live till September.

Eighteen

Back in country, I was once again looking forward to being back with my men. I can't explain why, but I missed them, and was ready to be back in the jungle. I met up with another lieutenant from my Battalion, Dave Phillips. Dave had just come back from R&R in Hong Kong. His wife had met him there. We told R&R stories for most of our trip back to our Battalion. Dave showed me some pictures of him and his wife enjoying Hong Kong. They made an attractive couple.

In our absence the Battalion had moved again, this time to another firebase up by the Black Virgin Mountain. Out of the rivers and back into the heavy jungle. That was fine by me. I was anxious to check out the new firebase.

Dave and I flew out to the LZ and hung out on the pad while the chopper took on supplies. Each of us would ride out to our company when they got resupplied. While we were waiting, a radio-man from the tactical operations center came running out to get me.

"Colonel wants to see you right away, sir," he said hurriedly.

I dropped my gear and headed into the middle of the firebase. Colonel Graham greeted me with a handshake and a big grin, saying "You're my new air operations officer."

I was stunned. Just like that, I was out of the field.

"We got some replacements in while you were in R&R. You're senior in the field. Now you work for me on the firebase," he continued. "A new second lieutenant took over your platoon two days ago."

This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. What about my men? I was counting on being with them for a while longer before I turned them over to some cherry. All my Midwestern farm kids, inner city black kids, southern hillbillies and East LA Mexicans; how were they going to get along without me and how could I make it without them. I cared about them all. What would they think of me for leaving them without even saying good-bye? Was I running out on them?

The colonel finished his welcome to staff. I saluted and went to get my gear. Dave was just ready to hop on the chopper when I arrived back at the pad. I quickly told him what had happened. He clapped me on the back, "That's great, you know why? 'cause I'm next!" He exclaimed.

I had been the only officer senior to him in the field. Now he was senior, and due to rotate out of the field as soon as we got another replacement. He was happy for us both.

Dave went off to rejoin his company. I went in to the TOC to find out what my new job was. The TOC was pretty standard for all of our firebases, and was basically a great big room built underground and filled with radios and electronic gear. A reinforced tunnel resembling a mineshaft led down to it, and everything was shored up with heavy timbers.

The guys manning the radios were mostly grunts with at least nine or ten months in the field. They pulled their last two or three months on the firebase monitoring the radio nets and keeping the colonel informed of what each of his five rifle companies was doing. When one or more of the companies was in the shit, the colonel had a lot of information to digest and a lot of orders to give. It was important that the guys manning the radios had been out there and knew their stuff.

My new job, as air operations officer was to coordinate all the air support for the colonel. It was a Captain's job, but we didn't have any spare Captains lying around, so the colonel chose me. As a grunt, I'd been on dozens of C.A.'s. As the air officer, I'd be the one riding around in a chopper watching from above; talking to the lift ships, coordinating the Air Force bomb runs, getting targets marked for the gunships. Any combat assault in the Battalion had to be arranged by me. Keeping track of landing zones, pick-up zones, artillery prep, how many lift ships; all that crap. It was mind boggling. The colonel told me not to worry. The guy I was replacing would be there for a few days and break me in. I was relieved.

On the first day in the TOC I just sat and watched the way the place operated. The area was full of gooks. B Company was in deep shit. That was Dave Phillips' company. He had just flown out to join them a couple of hours ago. They were operating with a unit from the 11th Armored Cavalry. The fighting grew uglier as the day wore on. Listening to the radios in the TOC you could get a mental image of the progress of the battle. B Company was taking heavy casualties. The 11th ACR was losing several of its vehicles. Gooks dropped out of the trees and fought the crews of the "tracks" as they rumbled along. We heard guys screaming that there were gooks in their tanks. The fighting raged on all afternoon. Later that evening the casualty reports began filtering back to us. Dave Phillips had been shot through the head less than two hours after he rejoined his platoon. He was dead.

I sat by myself that night. I didn't have anybody to talk to. Everybody who was important to me was out in the jungle sleeping in the dirt. A friend who had taken joy in sharing his R&R pictures with me was dead. I was miserable again.

Two ex-grunts from my company came to talk to me. They were short timers and were pulling radio duty in the TOC. They filled me in on what I had missed while I was on R&R.

This new LZ, LZ White (after the lieutenant who died in Tim's chopper crash in the river) had been trouble from the start, much worse than LZ Mustang last Fall. My company had built it, and had taken a pretty determined attack from the gooks right off the bat. The gooks worked their way into the middle of the firebase and tossed numerous satchel charges into the bunkers to blow them up. A lot of the guys had been shot up. None of my men had died. Jack Benny got blasted by an RPG, but he wasn't dead. He'd been medevac'd to the states. He was out of the war. I was glad for Jack to be out of it, but sorry he'd gotten hurt so badly. Another friend I never had a chance to say good bye-to. You came alone, and if you were lucky, you went home alone and alive.

Sgt. Rock from the recon platoon had gotten the "hero of the night" award during the attack. Rock was all army and a crazy son of a bitch. During the fighting, Duke-Three kept insisting over the radio that the perimeter hadn't been breached. Duke-Three was underground in the TOC and couldn't see shit. Everybody up top could see gooks running all over the firebase. Rock got so pissed off that Duke-Three wouldn't call for fire on the positions that he crawled around in the dark until he found a gook, killed him, and then carried the body over to the entrance to the TOC, threw the gook down the corridor to the TOC, and screamed "Now do you believe they're inside the perimeter?" Then he went and killed a

few more and stacked them up in the tunnel leading down to the TOC.

The boys were rolling pretty good when they told that story. Duke-Three was not the most popular executive officer the Battalion had ever had. He was not too high on my list either, since it was his snatch mission that got Yung killed. I felt better just sitting with some guys from my old company. They understood how I felt and were glad to talk about the old times. I was thankful that they took the time to come by.

The next morning I was trying to learn my new responsibilities. I bent over to pick something up and ran into the tip of a radio antennae. It hit me in my eye right above my pupil and rode the top of my eyeball back into the socket. I thought I was blinded. Doc Gross, who had done the sewing job on my face some months ago, now had to work on my eye. He said I wouldn't lose sight but I had to wear a patch for a couple of weeks. I was glad it was my left eye and not my shooting eye. I was still thinking like a grunt. The colonel got a kick out of my eye patch. He also thought I was a bozo and a klutz for doing it.

"You make it through all those months in the field, and can't last two days on the firebase," he chuckled.

I took the ribbing in silence.

Part of my duties included going with the colonel to briefings at higher headquarters. I think he took me along for the black eye patch. At one such meeting at Dau Tiang, we were getting the lowdown from the commander of the 11th ACR. He waxed eloquently about the mission and laid it all out on the maps. I was the lowest ranking officer at the meeting and stood to the back as we clustered around the map table.

"A lot of the boys are going to have to die in this one," he intoned solemnly, "But they're good boys. They won't mind. They'll do the job."

What?! I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. Won't mind dying? I'd just spent seven months out there with those boys, and believe me they minded! I was shaking with rage. Who were these old farts to send young boys to die for nothing? I was afraid my face would give me away.

I was aware the general had stopped talking. He was looking directly at me. Oh shit!

"How did you lose your eye, son?" He asked.

What? Now everybody was looking at me. My eye? My eye, oh, yeah.

"I didn't lose it, sir. It's going to be okay in a week or two," I stammered.

Everyone seemed pleased and turned back to the plan of attack. My darkest thoughts hadn't been found out.

On the way back to LZ White, the colonel said he had another job for me. This operation, Code Name Montana Raider, was going to be a biggie. We had trapped a large portion of the 9th NVA Division, and they seemed willing to slug it out with us. The TV Networks were sending people out for coverage for the good folks back home. I was to make sure that none of the correspondents got themselves killed. He laughed as he designated me "press liaison officer," the only one ever at Battalion level.

The press came to the firebase. I showed them around. They wanted to go out to the fighting, but not too close, mind you. I flew them out so they could get some tape of the boys at the front.

After all the others had left, an NBC team came out. Bob Jones was the chief correspondent. He

was different than the others I had seen. I liked him. He took one look at my eye patch and deranged overall look, and said there was no way he was sending any pictures of me to the folks at home.

We sat up all night and talked. I told a few war stories, but mostly I listened to him. I wanted to hear anything that he could tell me about the real world outside of Vietnam. It was late April, 1969. Bob Jones thought that the Paris Peace Talks were going to be successful, and that the war might be over soon. I told him that the boys in the field didn't share his optimism. Bob Jones stayed around for a couple of days and when he left, my brief career as a liaison officer was over.

My old company came in for a stand down. I was happy to be with them again. We sat around and told "There I was" stories and reminisced about the months we'd spent together. For me it was bitter sweet. I missed them terribly and felt they still needed me. According to them, the new lieutenant was a green cherry who was going to require a lot of breaking in. I told them I was sure he was no greener than I was when I first came out. The boys all agreed.

"That's for sure! You didn't even know how to walk when you arrived up north," laughed Ed Lumbert.

"We had to teach you everything you know, Two-Six." they teased.

It was hard to keep it light. These guys had meant everything in the world to me and in the space of a few days, we were separated. Someone else was responsible for them now, and they for him. I couldn't usurp the control that the new platoon leader had to have. I had to let go. They knew that I had been good for them, and they had been the best for me. We stayed alive together. I was the only officer in the Battalion who never had one of his men die. My guys got wounded now and then, but we all lived. I was prouder of that than anything else I did in the war. My guys all went home alive.

While the company was on the firebase, Captain Lutz's replacement came in. Now he was out of the field, too. The Captain that had awed us when he first arrived at LZ Mustang was getting out of the field. He was given command of the pathfinder detachment at Division headquarters. The transition was complete. It wasn't our company anymore. You can't go back. The day Captain Lutz left, the whole company lined up to shake his hand. They thanked him for his leadership and his compassion. He was the best I ever saw.

Over the next few weeks, I learned my job. I flew almost every day. The first time I got into the Command and Control chopper, I was lost. I stared at the bank of radios without a clue as to how to operate them. A warrant officer pilot gave me a run through on the equipment, and I worked at mastering its operation. After a while I was comfortable in the "Charlie Charlie" chopper. Each day I verified plots for all the line companies. It was important that the Battalion Commander knew where his people were at all times. Sometimes I dropped in on a company commander to give him a message from Duke-Six. I was a glorified "gopher" but it was an interesting duty.

Our battalion was beaten up pretty badly during Montana Raider. Shortly after that operation came to a close, we closed down LZ White, and went to division headquarters to act as palace guard. Battalions rotate the duty over the course of a year, and maybe it was just our turn. At any rate, it came at a good time for the men. We spent a couple of weeks lounging around outside the wire at Phouc Vinh. Headquarters for the battalion was actually inside the wire in a building with electricity and everything. The line companies patrolled outside the perimeter of the base camp and nobody got hurt.

There were no CA's and no firefights. We just sat around making sure nobody attacked the base.

I tracked down Captain Lutz at the Pathfinder Barracks. We sat around and talked about old times. We remembered them all. Times that had been bleak and dismal came back as fond memories. We had loved the men we served with, so for they were all happy memories.

We went to a poker game with a bunch of pilots. Next to the skills of the enlisted men in the field, the pilots were babes in the woods. I got lucky and was the big winner. The pilots made sure that I got invited back for the next game. They wanted a shot at getting their money back.

Our stint as palace guard was up too soon, and it was time to build another firebase. We built it along another river below Cu Chi, and named it LZ Rock after the recon sergeant. He wasn't dead or anything. He was just such an impressive soldier that the colonel wanted to honor him. Our old Duke-Three had been kicked up to Division, so the stories about Sgt. Rock tormenting him by throwing dead gooks down into the TOC could be dusted off and retold. We had a new Battalion Executive Officer now, a fine southern gentleman who was finishing out his tour with us. He was the new Duke-Three. It always amazed me that many of the field grade officers who made decisions on the Battalion level had no experience. Most of the majors and some of the Lieutenant Colonels had made their rank in the peace time army. They had never actually led men under fire. It wasn't their fault, it's just the way the Army was. They were too young to have served in Korea, and certainly had too much rank by the time they got to Vietnam to be out there in the field with the lieutenants and captains.

Each new person had to learn how he fit into the war. It didn't matter whether he was a private, lieutenant, or major. We all arrived dumb. That was the basis of a beef I had with the new Duke-Three.

Delta Company had made contact with a large enemy force. They were getting shot up pretty bad. Duke-Six was in the Charlie Charlie over the point of contact trying to coordinate support. I was duty officer in the TOC getting airstrikes laid on, and medevac on station for the wounded. The new Duke-Three was overseeing everything in the TOC.

We could hear from monitoring D Company's internal radio net that they needed the medevac immediately. That was our job, to anticipate the situation, and get the proper support. The medevac came on station but couldn't raise anybody from D company to give him pick-up instructions. We could hear him calling for D company, but they were all on the wrong frequencies. The pilot was getting frustrated and running low on fuel.

Duke-Three refused to let us break in on the net to send the proper frequencies to the chopper to talk to the ground people. He said that Duke-Six would control everything from his chopper. We could only monitor, we couldn't break in. That wasn't the way our TOC worked. Time was growing short for the people on the ground. If the chopper didn't get in to pick them up, it wasn't going to matter. I couldn't stand it any longer. I grabbed a handset and sent the proper frequency to the pilot. He acknowledged, changed to the proper frequency and contacted the troops on the ground. It all took about seven seconds. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the major was livid. I had defied him. I was right for the men in the battle, but dead wrong by military standards for going against his orders, even if he didn't understand how we did things.

I knew I was in trouble. When everything cooled down the major took me outside. He was a gentleman for not ripping me right there in front of the enlisted men. Outside, he began to chew on me pretty good. I was respectful and apologized as much as I could. I knew though, that I would do the same

thing again under similar circumstances. The guys in the field were too important to me.

I was still locked at attention taking an ass chewing when Duke-Six landed. He headed straight for the TOC and passed right by the major and me.

"What the hell took so long to get that medevac in?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer he continued, "If that was you, Garry, that finally got him in, good job." He moved on toward the TOC. What a great guy. He had obviously known what was going on, and was saving my butt while letting the new major save face. Nothing more was ever said and the new Duke-Three and I worked well together.

Two days later my old company was in the shit. Once again, I listened to familiar voices over the radios in the TOC. I could feel the urgency in their tone, and I hurt for my friends who I knew were dying. My old platoon had walked into an ambush. Shit, the company hadn't walked into a big ambush since Captain Lutz's first day last fall. Now there were new people in charge, and the same old mistakes to be made. The night before they had found a bunker complex. They didn't have time to destroy it before dark, so they pulled back and set up for the night. In the morning they had walked right back in without clearing it. The gooks had moved in during the night and were dug in waiting for them. Several of my old "blasters" had walked in first packing C-4 to blow the bunkers. Wilbur Smith, a quiet kid from Bomont, West Virginia, had taken a couple of hits right off, and the C-4 on his body detonated. There was nothing left of Wilbur but a boot with a foot in it. All day long they fought. They were trapped and couldn't disengage. We got medevacs to pull out any wounded they could get to. I felt guilty for not being there with them and mad at the stupidity that hallowed them to waltz right back in there without checking it first. Some of the wounded came directly to the firebase instead of to a hospital. The one medevac we had working was trying to pull out all the wounded he could. I talked to some of my old men while they were getting patched up by Doc Gross. I saw Robbie.

"Tell me what happened, Rob," I asked.

He laid out the story, finishing with, "Never would have happened if you'd been there, sir."

I felt the same way in my heart, but who could say. It could have happened to me on my first day with the platoon in the bunker complex with the well. But it didn't. It never happened to me and my men. Now some of the old-timers that had been with me all those months were dead. The platoon was knocked down to eleven men.

I hated their platoon leader. I didn't even know him but I hated him. He'd gotten my men killed. I hated myself, too, for not being there to save them.

I went back into my shell. I didn't want to know anybody. I didn't want to care about anybody. Sooner or later, they all got killed.

Nineteen

Two of the last remaining old-timers from my platoon stopped to see me a few days later. They were getting out, going home. Nobody at all was left from the old Bad Barron Two-Six days. Sgt. Ice had made it out. I was on the firebase, and now, these last two, Turtle and Fritz, were getting out too. We talked about our friends. Turtle told me the only regret the platoon ever had about me was that I never once smoked a little dope with them. I laughed at the comment.

"You know why I couldn't, don't you," I said.

They nodded. They knew. They knew I couldn't get loaded with them one night, and order them to assault an enemy position the next day. Those things never worked out. I knew of a few platoon leaders who had a toke or two with their men. When the shit got bad, they didn't have the instantaneous response to command you have to have. Too much possibility of your men thinking, "Hey man, we get high together, why don't you walk point."

Turtle and Fritz always got a kick out of my straight arrow point of view.

"Well, we still wish you'd got high with us just once."

"Maybe sometime in the real world guys, I don't even like the shit, but if we ever run into each other in the real world, I'll smoke one with you, proudly." I offered.

The boys drifted off to find their way home and I drifted off into memories of grunts smoking dope in the field.

Months and months ago, I was checking our perimeter on a beautiful starlit night. I heard a strange moaning sound from one of the trenches. I almost tripped over Grider, a little banty rooster type, from the hill country of Tennessee. He was lying on his back, gazing up at the stars, moaning "Oh woowooooow, beautiful, ooooh."

I went and woke Sgt. Lumbert. "Grider's sick," I said.

"Sick? What do you mean sick?" asked a sleepy Lum.

"Too damn sick to be pulling guard duty. I don't ever want to see him sick like that again," I said quietly. Lumbert understood.

Another time I'd been rushing forward to the point of contact in a fire fight. I went right past Robbie and another "loadie." They had both just taken a hit and tried to hold the smoke in as I passed. I tossed them a look that said get moving.

They couldn't hold in the smoke any longer. Coughing as he exhaled, Robbie rasped, "Man, we'll be there in a minute. We're just getting ready."

Down in the muck of LZ Tracy, Top Webb had once emerged from a bunker clutching a bag of

weed.

"Sir, we've got some goddamn pot smoking hippies in this outfit. I'm going to catch every last one of them, and bust them all!" he promised.

Gee, I wonder how he could ever have gotten that impression of the guys. All he had to do was look around. More than half the company wore peace symbols somewhere on their person. Those that didn't have a medallion or a ring drew the peace symbol on their helmets--or they wrote "Kill for Peace" on their helmet and displayed it defiantly as their comment on the war. These kids knew more about peace and what it really meant than any sign carrying demonstrators back at home. They understood peace because they knew war.

Maybe they were a bunch of pot smoking hippies. What did it matter? In our night position, sometimes I'd smell the distinctive odor of pot. Following my nose, I'd come across a small circle of friends in the bushes. I'd generally make some idle conversation and finish with, "Bad night for smoking, the breeze is blowing right in toward the first sergeant." Then I moved on. They knew that I trusted them to be careful. Those that could handle it smoked a little, and those that couldn't, like Grider, were kept out of trouble by the others. It was better that way than being a jerk and busting them all.

It's possible that Top Webb made his own compromise and played a game with them too. Even for a career soldier like Top, it had to be surrounded by peace signs and roach clips and not take notice.

I was spending a lot of time talking to pilots. That was my job. The flight leaders would come in to the TOC and I'd brief them on the day's operations. When there wasn't much flying to do, we just sat around and talked. They'd catch me up on the latest gossip; who was going where, and who was most recently killed. It seemed like half the guys from OCS class that had gone to fly choppers had cashed in. The news was always grim.

I remembered being disappointed that my vision kept me out of flight school. Now I was glad the way things had worked out, glad to have been a grunt. In retrospect, I wouldn't have had it any other way. I wore the crossed sabers of the Cav on my collar and I was damn proud of them.

In mid June, Duke-Six asked me if I'd mind going back to the new Battalion headquarters at Bien Hoa and handling the Adjutant's duties. Would I mind? Hell no, I wouldn't mind. That was the next best thing to going home. Bien Hoa, the land of the REMF.

Adjutant was another Captain's job, but until another one rotated out of the field, I was it. The colonel for some strange reason thought that I was going to stay in the Army. He was giving me all the experience he could for when my promotion to Captain came in October. I planned to be a civilian by then.

In Bien Hoa we worked in a real building and did all the paperwork for the Battalion. All replacements came through us. We cut their orders and kept them moving to the firebase and to the line companies. We also got to send the lucky ones, who were through, home. My job was to rubber stamp everything that needed a signature, and sign it "for the commander." An E-7, Sergeant First Class, honchoed the operation, and four clerks ground out the paperwork. I was only there because Army regs require an officer's signature.

Sick call came through us, too, and the toughest job of all was to sort out the sick from the malingerers. I believed in the field troopers getting all the legitimate time they could in the rear, but now and then I had to boot some guys back out who were taking advantage of us.

Redmond, a tall lanky black kid, was one of my favorites on sick call. He managed to worm his way out of the field more than most. His latest scam was a badly "sprained" ankle, which wouldn't allow him to hump it out in the boonies.

We had a basketball hoop set up on a slab of concrete next to the tent where the guys in from the field slept. Usually about noon a game would start up and go the rest of the afternoon. Good for morale, and kept the kids out of trouble. I usually stayed in the office or kept out of sight. Officers put a damper on things. The game was standard playground basketball, winners kept the court.

There was a lot of "in your face" and pals slapping after good plays. I was watching from the corner of the building one afternoon, and just about to go back into the orderly room. I saw Redmond glide down the lane, soar into the air, and stuff it with both hands. That brought the house down. A lot of whooping and yelling and Redmond slapped five all around. I ran over and slapped palms with him. He was caught up in the moment and then looked up and realized who I was. Thirty grunts howled with laughter at Redmond's predicament. True to his scam to the end, Redmond immediately dropped to the ground and clutched at his ankle. He rolled around in agony at my feet. I wasn't buying.

"There's a chopper leaving for the firebase in two hours. You can be on that, can't you?" I deadpanned.

"Yes sir, I can," a subdued Redmond answered.

"Then get up and finish your game. You've still got the court--and Redmond, I don't want to see you in here for at least a month."

The game went on and Redmond stayed with his company in the field for a while once he got back out there.

It took a little time for the thieves that were running our little HQ to get comfortable with me. They knew my reputation from the field; that I wasn't chickenshit, or a stickler for regs, but they had to see for themselves. Once comfortable, they took me into their confidence--sort of. We only had one jeep to do all the Army stuff and do all the stuff that was important to them too; important stuff like go to the PX, or the NCO club, or to the steam bath, or make a hot dog run, things like that. There just wasn't enough jeep to go around. I was used to dealing with grunts, but these guys were different. They had been brought up in the army supply system. They regarded the war as one big scavenger hunt, where they could take what they needed.

They asked me if I would mind if they added a vehicle or two to our inventory. I said that was fine, as long as they were discreet, and I had no problem using a vehicle when I needed one.

In a few days our motor pool had grown to three jeeps and a deuce and a half truck--all freshly painted with the proper numbers and our Battalion crest on them. The boys were also working on our own private chopper from discarded equipment, but that was a longer range project, and I hoped to be home in the States before they got caught for that one.

Our daily routine was easily handled. Do the paperwork. Move the troops in and out. Keep the supply of men going to and from the war. It didn't take much effort. With all our new vehicles I had a little time to do some exploring on my own. I had heard stories about the officers club at Bien Hoa Air Base. We were located just on the other side of the flight line at the Army Base so I drove around the base to find it.

Everything I heard was true. It was Mecca, and even better than a lot of clubs in the states. Inside it

was another world--deep leather chairs, wonderful air conditioning, long plush bar, steaks and baked potatoes with wine, and flush toilets in the men's room. I could have pitched a tent and spent my remaining two months right there. I bought a club card for three bucks and thought I'd come back when I could.

I also took an occasional trip over to Long Binh to see Pat. We sat and talked at the club where I'd made a fool of myself with my guns some months earlier. I still carried a .38 under my shirt, but this time I was more discreet.

The colonel asked me to track down one of our AWOL's. Scuttlebutt on the firebase had him somewhere in the Bien Hoa area. The kid's name was Jackie Robinson. I took it personally, because Jackie had come into my platoon toward the end of our time on LZ Tracy. He was sent to me as another hard case. Jackie and I worked it out, and he stayed out of trouble for months. Now he was AWOL, and if it went too long he'd be a deserter.

I had an idea where to look. The rumors about the rear were true. There was a lot of racial tension. Part of it stemmed from the fact that the blacks felt that there was a disproportionate number of them doing the fighting and dying. They were mostly right. There was a higher percentage of blacks in combat than in the Army as a whole. Also, black grunts pulled longer field tours than whites. White grunts might get to take a rear job for their last couple of months as radio men, cooks, drivers, supply donkeys, or whatever--anything to get out of the line company and back to the firebase or even farther to the rear. Blacks usually pulled their full time in the line company. I didn't blame them for being bitter.

In the rear areas blacks had their own clubs. Whites and blacks seldom mixed socially. I went to a black club I'd heard of to look for Jackie Robinson. A half dozen black soldiers barred my entrance.

"What do you want here, man?" One of them questioned. They gave no respect for rank or the fact that my CIB marked me as a grunt. Most of them were REMF's.

"I came to see Jackie Robinson," I responded evenly.

"Yah, well he don't wanna see you, so get your white ass out of here," he rasped.

I stood my ground, saying, "He'll see me. Tell him the old Barron Two-Six is here. Give him my name."

Two of the men vanished inside the club. The others stood blocking the door. The two returned in a minute. "He said he'll see you, but he ain't coming with you," one said.

I walked inside. The club was a shithole. Dark and grimy with Vietnamese whores lolling about everywhere. The GI's were all black. I was lead to a table in the back of the room. There sat Jackie, looking like Edward G. Robinson in Little Caesar. He was obviously in charge.

"Hi Two-Six, how you been?" Jackie stood and greeted me warmly. That surprised the men standing and watching.

We talked for a while about old times and then got down to business. I told Jackie I could keep him out of jail if he came in voluntarily. He railed about injustices and how shitty things were for blacks. I told him he couldn't change anything by being a deserter and that while the rest of us went home to our families, to forget the fucking war, he would still be stuck in this shithole with a bunch of gook whores. There was no going home for him if he didn't square away his problem. I told him where he could find me if he wanted to talk some more or give himself up. Then I left.

Two days later Jackie turned himself in. He said going home and being out of the army was important to him. He got in some trouble, but it worked out and eventually he went home, free.

July dragged on. It was too soon for me to be thinking of going home, but I was getting shorter, day by day. I had a relatively comfortable existence in the rear. Duke-Six and Duke-Three both came in from the firebase to rotate home. I scurried around as their host. They were amazed that our little Battalion rear area had been "allocated" so many vehicles, but were pleased to use them. Relieved of the burden of command, they were like anybody else, and wanted to relax for the few days before their flight home. They, too, had heard the stories of the fabled Air Force Officer's Club. A trip to the club for dinner was high on their list of priorities. I went along as their driver and guide.

Dropping them off at the front entrance, I drove around the building to park the jeep. When I walked back to the entrance, the colonel and major were still at the entrance in heated debate with a burly Air Force first sergeant who was the NCO in charge of the club. He wouldn't let them in. I could hear him explaining that there were too many army people trying to use the air force club, and that he didn't care what their rank was, they weren't getting in.

I joined the group.

"What's the trouble, Sergeant?" I asked innocently.

Peering past the colonel and major, the sergeant regarded me with glee. What good fortune. He'd just kept two army brass hats out of his club, and now he was going to get to destroy a young lieutenant too. I could see the look in his eyes, the same look that jerk sergeant had worn in Cam Ranh Bay over my R&R tickets.

"You see, sir," he started slowly with obvious disgust, "I just explained to your major and colonel here, that this is now a members only club. We can't just let every officer in Vietnam come in, just Air Force, or card carrying members and guests."

That was what I'd been waiting to hear. I had him. Reaching into my pocket, I slowly withdrew the club card I had bought on my only other trip there.

"Well then, I guess there's no problem." I said, then stepped forward and waved my membership under the asshole's nose. "These gentlemen are my guests. We'll be three for dinner."

The sergeant stepped aside, defeated, gave me a little salute, and said "Yes sir, please go right in."

Duke-Six and Duke-Three pounded me on the back as we strode into the club.

"Goddamn it, Bobbie, I knew there was a good reason for sending him back to the rear," chortled the colonel. He wouldn't let me pay for anything.

Before he left the country, Duke-Six signed some leave papers for me. I had some leave time on the books, and he told me to use it to get out of the country. If I went to Tan San Nout, I could stand by for an R&R flight. If there were extra seats on the plane stand-by people with valid papers could go. I was willing to try. The scroungers at our HQ could get along fine without me hanging around. I went to Tan San Nout.

I had to catch a flight in the first two days, though, or I had to give it up and come back. Suddenly, the possibility of getting back to Australia to see Jane was very real.

The first afternoon, there was one flight to Australia. Standbys were called in order of time in country, and with over ten months, I was in pretty good jape. There were extra seats on the plane; I tried not to think about the dead kids in the field who weren't showing up for those seats. Some of the standbys would get to go. Tickets were passed out. They were getting closer and closer to me. No more

room. The plane was full. I was three away from getting on. A bunch of spec 4's didn't get on either, but they had a plan for tomorrow's flight. One of them had a buddy who was a clerk in the processing center. They were going to have him alter their papers to show that they were serving an extended tour and had been in country sixteen months. That would put them right at the head of the line, in front of me. They offered to include me if I wanted.

I couldn't do it. It went against my grain. Everybody was always trying to get an edge on everybody else. No one played fair; I had to take my chance on tomorrow's flight with what was legitimately mine.

In the morning I wasn't third in line anymore. All the forgers were in front of me. They all got tickets. I didn't. The guy in front of me was the last one to get a ticket. I was left at the gate. The forgers kept looking back at me apologetically and half expecting me to rat them off. I couldn't do that either. I watched them board the plane and thought about going back to my unit.

In Vietnam it was July 22nd, 1969. I had less than 50 days to go. I sat and had a coke at the snack bar while I waited for one of the guys to drive up from Bien Hoa and pick me up. There was a TV on above the bar tuned to Armed Forces Vietnam Network. I hadn't seen a TV since that night at the Special Forces Camp in December. I watched as Neil Armstrong came out of the lunar lander, and descended to the moon's surface. It was live--all over the world, even in a snack bar in Vietnam. "One small step for man..."

Peace, brotherhood, what a crock I thought. The whole world united behind this effort, and right at that moment how many more kids getting maimed and killed in this shitty little country, never to see home again. Day after day it went on, and politicians talked peace in Paris and Washington D.C. and scientists from all over the world sent men to the moon--and every day more and more lives were wasted in the sewer that was Vietnam. Bitterness washed over me.

The camp loudspeaker blasted me out of my thoughts. "Anyone holding valid leave papers desiring an R&R flight to Hawaii report immediately to the boarding gate."

I sat for a second. It wasn't Australia, but it wasn't here, either. "Fuck it," I said as I grabbed my gear and sprinted for the gate. I rounded the corner and saw a dozen other GI's dashing for the boarding gate. I got there first. I shoved my leave papers at the sergeant doing the loading.

He remembered me from the Australia flights. He laughed and said "Relax sir, you're gonna make this one."

I shucked off my jungle fatigues and yanked my crumpled khaki's out of my bag. I dressed in thirty seconds. "There's going to be a driver here looking for me in about 45 minutes. Give him these clothes and tell him to pick me up in a week!"

I left my fatigues in a heap and ran for the plane. I got a loud cheer as I bounded onto the plane, the last man on. They closed the door behind me and we took off for Hawaii.

In Hawaii, I stayed with my aunt and uncle for a few days. They're great people, and they tried to make sure I had a good time. They were a little upset by my nightmares. I woke them up with my yelling and screaming a couple of times. It's a good thing Sgt. Ice's wife wasn't there. I might have choked her. Hawaiian air must do strange things to people.

A week later, I returned to Vietnam, ready to hide for 40 more days and go home. My orders were there waiting for me. I was going home on the ninth of September.

Captain Nathan Smith had rotated out of the field to take the Adjutant's job, and with official orders and going home date set, I was now an official short-timer relegated to odd jobs and hanging around.

Things had gotten ugly in the field, however, and the whole Battalion moved up to Quan Loi which was just about the worst place in the whole damn country. No more comfort in Bien Hoa for us. Quan Loi was a small base camp in the middle of the old French rubber plantations. It was extremely close to the border, and very vulnerable to attack. The camp sat on a small raised area that was barely even a hill, with the thick rubber forests and jungle sloping gently away from it on all sides. There was a short runway that ran right down the middle of the camp, and incoming planes had to drop straight down out of the sky to hit it just right. The soil was a horrible red clay that was choking dust when it was dry, and boot sucking mud when it rained.

The line companies built a firebase named LZ Wescott out in the boonies and operated from there. The firebase was named after my old pinochle playing buddy from the old Bad Barron days. Sergeant Wescott had been killed recently when he took an RPG round in an ambush. He had been a good man. He and Sgt. Ice had been the best of friends. Bob Wescott had made it through a full tour with the Fourth Division before coming to us in the Cav. He lasted almost two full tours before he got snuffed. How he had a piece of ground named after him. Some men had elastic door closers for a memorial, some had LZ's named after them, most had nothing.

I seldom went to the firebase. Bob Wescott had known he was my friend. I didn't feel comfortable with the piece of dirt that was named after him. I was developing short-timers nerves. Quan Loi suffered through nightly rocket and mortar attacks. I hardly slept. The thought that a big piece of shit might fall out of the sky and randomly select me to kill was daily torture.

One day I was sitting in the orderly room doing nothing when four black grunts came in to see me. "Word is that you've always been straight with the brothers," their leader stated.

I said that I hoped that was true. They said they needed my help. They were upset with the "rear job" situation for black grunts.

"We took a count. There's 54 grunts back here pulling duty in the rear. You got 54 short-timers doing everything from burnin' shit to cooking. Ain't one of them black." He finished.

There it was. As true an indictment of the system as you could hear. Blacks got no break at all. They did full time in the field.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"We want some of those jobs for black short-timers. It's gotta be fair," their spokesperson asserted.

I knew this situation was unfair, but I hadn't realized it was Whites 54--Blacks 0. I had been caught up in my own little world ever since the colonel had sent me to Bien Hoa in June.

I asked the men to give me a list of blacks with ten months or more in the field, some from each company. The list had to be the sharpest, straightest, most deserving grunts they could think of, no fuck ups. I would give the list and a true picture of the problem to the new Duke-Six. He was the one who would have to give the order to the company commanders to send in a fairer cross section of the men when they had rear jobs open. I knew it smacked of a quota system, but it was a start. Duke-Six agreed that something had to be done, and ordered the company commanders to fill their rear jobs with both black and white grunts when they came open. Our Battalion operated with a better balance and more racial harmony as blacks began to feel that they had a chance to get out of the field a little sooner.

Twenty

As resident short-timer, with no real responsibilities, I was given command of part of the perimeter defenses of Quan Loi. That was to be my last thirty days, commanding a bunch of disinterested troops pulling guard duty on the outer bunker line of the base camp. I was not pleased. I wanted desperately to be back in Bien Hoa, anywhere, but not out on the green line facing the gooks night after night. I was back in the war.

I set up my command post by the ruins of the old French Plantation house. In its day it must have been impressive, complete with huge tiled swimming pool. All of that lay in ruins now, just so much rubble inside our bunker line.

I had two sergeants assigned to me to help me organize the defense of our sector. Late each afternoon, a detail of thirty or so unhappy GI's was brought to us to man the positions. During the day we didn't have shit. No defense whatsoever. My first priority was to improve the position. I scrounged all the help I could get for manpower, and we went to work on our sector. We planted foo gas (similar to napalm), out along the barbed wire. We put in hundreds and hundreds of trip flares across the open ground between the outer wire and the bunkers. We added more sections of concertina wire to the rows we already had. I stockpiled ammunition and grenades on each of our bunkers. I brought in a fifty caliber machine gun for the bunker directly in front of my CP. Every day we worked. I wasn't going to get caught short.

Each night we settled in to wait for dawn. Night after night we received enemy probes along our lines. I was a jumble of nerves again. I never slept at night, only sleeping a few hours once we safely made it through to daybreak.

There was an artillery battery with 155mm guns up the hill and to the left from my Command Post. They fired day after day, hour after hour. The Quan Loi area was crawling with gooks.

On the night of August 12th, 1969, we went through our usual routine of setting up the defenses. I was short some men, and had only three or four men for each bunker. There was a good seventy five meters between bunkers, and I was stretched very thin trying to cover my 300 yards of the line with fifteen men.

A mechanized platoon from the 11th ACR had pulled in on my right flank, and I went to see the platoon leader about coordinating our defenses if we got hit during the night. He was very new and hadn't seen much of anything yet. The platoon sergeant was an old hand though, and I was sure he could be counted on if it got ugly. The lieutenant talked big, and was jumping up and down ready to

"kick some gook ass."

I returned to my CP and settled in. Usually I kept a dozen or more guys in the tent to act as a quick reaction force if the line got breached. Tonight I had two kids to act as runners if things got bad.

I always lined the men up when they first arrived in the afternoon and said, "Anybody shorter than me gets to stay in the ten." They were all shocked that an officer with twenty-some days left was still out there. I wasn't too thrilled about it myself.

About 1:00am I went out for a bunker check to make sure that somebody was awake and alert on all my bunkers. One of the two kids I'd designated as runners was with me. We had checked the first two bunkers and were crossing the open ground in front of the artillery battery when a trip flare popped right in front of us. IN the eerie light of the flare I saw the outlines of people on the ground. Gooks! Tons of them, right on top of us!

"Gooks in the wire! Gooks in the wire!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. I pulled out my pistol and blasted away at the one closest to me. He was ten feet away. The kid with me started blasting with his M-16.

Gooks were everywhere. They must have spent hours crawling inch by inch through the barbed wire and the hundreds of flairs I'd laid out in front of us. My very last line of defense had caught them.

We had purposely left a patch of open ground in front of the bunkers like that was the end of the trip flares, and then we laid another patch almost up to the bunkers themselves. That was how far they got before they got careless and tripped one. Flares popped everywhere now as the gooks got up and rushed us. The ones I could see were dressed only in black shorts. They were bare everywhere else so that they could crawl along and feel the wires running out from our flares.

The kid with me took an RPG round as we ran for the closest bunker. It tore off his leg at the knee and the blood was rushing from him as I dragged him through the dirt.

I jumped up on the bunker and started laying out fire with the machine gun. Looking to the left and right I could see fire coming from all our bunkers. At least somebody was shooting back at the enemy from each bunker. We were being overrun by countless gooks and I had fifteen men to hold them off.

"Blow the foo gas!" I yelled. I had to seal the perimeter with flames so that no more of them could get in on top of us. The detonator wires were all cut. We couldn't blow the gas. I turned the machine gun to the 55 gallon drums holding the foo gas and blasted away at them, hoping to ignite one or two with the tracers. It worked! Two of the drums exploded throwing jellied gasoline all along the perimeter wire. Now we were getting somewhere!

The bunker to our left took two rapid hits from RPG's. I felt the concussion and watched as timbers and sandbags flew into the air. No one was left firing on the bunker. I had to have somebody there, or the gooks would go right through us and get to the artillery behind us up the hill.

"Take the gun, you two come with me." I barked out orders and headed for the decimated bunker. The gooks were making for it too. We shot at each other over open ground as we raced to get there first. We won. We reached the destroyed bunker and put out as much fire as we could. Dropping our weapons we threw dozens of grenades out to our front. If we couldn't shoot them, we'd maim 'em. Grenade after grenade saturated the area. We threw as many as we could as fast as we could. We drove them back.

The kid I'd left on the machine gun was still hammering away. Any minute now the gooks were going to get pissed off and send a few rounds his way to shut him off.

I had to have more help.

Two gunships arrived on station above us. They went right down the line in front of our positions, unloading with everything they had. If they could stay up there for a few minutes, they could keep any more of the gooks from getting inside the wire.

I headed for the mechanized platoon's position. I had to have more fire power. The platoon sergeant had anticipated me. He had a couple of vehicles fired up and was heading toward our positions.

I told him we were pretty much overrun and there were gooks on all sides. My guys were holding on to the bunkers, but just barely. He said he'd button up and tend to business.

The good Sarge rumbled down the slope toward my bunkers with two small Sheridan tanks. Sheridans mounted a huge main gun capable of firing beehive rounds that spit out 9700 steel fleshettes. The beehive rounds when they went off were like a huge shotgun blast spewing out thousands of barbed nails. Mindful of where my men were, the two Sheridans got online and went to work. Huge yellow fireballs and a godawful buzzing as they touched off round after round. Each time, 9700 steel nails exploded out of the barrels of the big guns. They broke the attack.

Little by little we got more help. We'd been fighting for almost three hours now, and reinforcements were starting to get to us. Medics appeared to pull out the dead and wounded. Guys came out of nowhere to help. Choppers stayed on station above us raining death down on the tree line outside the wire. Flares lit up the night.

I raised Duke-Five on the radio and gave him a report. He promised more men as quick as he could get them.

The platoon leader from the mechanized platoon came to my CP crying and sniveling. The first big shit he ever saw and it reduced him to a spineless wimp. He began to strip off his clothes saying that he couldn't take it. I told two medics to drag him out of there before his men saw what a mess he was. Didn't he know that we were all scared to death? That didn't give you the right to quit.

The first light of dawn crept into the sky. The fighting had died down to individual encounters with the few live gooks trapped inside our positions. They knew they couldn't get out through the wires in the daylight, so it was fight to the death time. Body parts lay everywhere. The Sheridans had cut a swath right through them.

As it grew lighter we could see the dead bodies marking their farthest advance inside our lines. They had gotten within twenty meters of the big guns, a good 100 meters through and behind my bunker line. Several of them lay dead just below the guns they had come to destroy, surrounded by the satchel charges they never got a chance to use.

I did a last sweep with a dozen riflemen spread out on either side of an armored personnel carrier. We knew that there were still some live gooks hiding in the waist high elephant grass between my bunkers and the artillery. It was 6:30 in the morning. The battle had taken on a festive mood, not for those of us still fighting, but for the hundred or more spectators watching us from above on the hill. They sounded like a football crowd as they watched us slowly work our way through the last area that could afford the gooks any cover.

Up ahead a gook popped out of the tall grass. The spectators cheered and shouted as a dozen scared kids opened up on the gook.

"Cease fire, cease fire," I shrieked. I needed a prisoner if I could get one. The riflemen quit shooting.

Our gook had taken cover. We crept closer to where we had last seen him. The crowd on the hill shouted encouragement. I yelled all the Vietnamese I knew to get him to surrender. If he showed himself we wouldn't fire. I wanted him alive.

We could see him again. Little by little he showed more and more of himself. I yelled for him to surrender. He stood up. A dozen guys had shot at him from less than 50 yards and he was barely scratched. It looked like he'd only taken one hit. He was bleeding from the right side and was all hunched over. I moved toward him. I held my rifle above my head with both hands and slowly lowered it to the ground. He understood. He dropped his weapon and came toward me.

I was reaching for his arm when my eyes caught movement in the grass behind him. Another gook popped up and opened up on me with an AK-47. I had a hold on my gook's wrist. I ripped him toward me and dove for cover. The riflemen opened up on the second gook.

I drug my gook back toward the cover of the armored personnel carrier. The guys on the hill went nuts, whistling and clapping. What entertainment! The firing wore down. Others attended to my gook's wounds. I sat there drenched in sweat.

The sergeant on top of the track leaned over the edge with a big grin on his face. "You going out after the other one, too, lieutenant?" Then he slapped his leg and rocked with laughter.

"Fuck no, kill him." I retorted.

The riflemen and the machine guns on the track raked the grass with fire for a good two minutes. The sergeant asked me what I wanted to do next.

"Why don't you take this track over there and squash anything that might still be alive in that brush," I instructed.

He complied. When we finally walked to the spot, there wasn't much left to pick up. I was drained. It had been a long, long night. The final body count was put at 270 dead NVA around the base camp. A good number of those had stacked up right in front of my positions.

For the next few days we had all the help we could use while we rebuilt our defenses. Each night they sent us out dozens of extra men to man the bunkers. Whoever was in charge must have realized what almost happened.

I was counting my days left in the teens. Each passing day was sheer agony. Each night was harder than the one before it. I never left my area. I stayed right there in the dirt. If I'd been in Bien Hoa, I'd have probably been hanging around the officer's club trying to pick up the nurses or playing poker, but I was in Quan Loi and I stayed at my CP and counted the days. Two lieutenants I'd known in the states came to see me. They had been in the small club at Quan Loi and heard other officers telling stories about the crazy hermit out on the green line. They heard that it was me and had to come see for themselves. I was happy to see familiar faces, but too paranoid to be very social. They understood.

Another night, another attack. This time we were ready. Each bunker was heavily manned. I had over twenty men gathered at the CP to go where the trouble was the worst. The gooks couldn't get through us.

Shit started flying. We knew the drill. The bunker down the slope in front of my CP seemed to be taking the brunt of the assault. I still couldn't see much in the way of enemy troops, but the firing was intense. I could see the kids on the bunker blasting away to their front. The Sheridan that was held in reserve began to rumble down the hill toward the bunker line. I was working my way down from the CP

to the bunker. The Sheridan was about twenty meters to my left going in the same direction. I was keeping as low as I could and got within 50 feet of the bunker. A blinding flash and roar exploded against the left side of my head. It knocked me to the ground. I saw an impact on the bunker and the men on top of it were sliced down like stalks of wheat. Tumbling and rolling toward the bunker, I righted myself to be confronted with deathly silence. Nine kids had been blasting away on top of that bunker, and now they were deathly still. My mind was numb. I knew what I'd seen but I couldn't let it register. It was too horrible to believe. I shut it out. From inside the bunker, I heard a low moaning. One kid was still alive. I pulled him out. He was heavy. I hoisted him to my shoulders and tried to make my way back up the hill. I couldn't carry him far without falling. All the while he was moaning and crying. I kept yelling for help. Finally some men came down the hill to help. I gave them my wounded kid and turned back to the bunker. I held the position alone with nine dead GI's.

"Come on you goddamn gooks, come and get us," I raged at the night. Tears stung my eyes. My mind was exploding with the reality of what had happened, but I couldn't face it just yet. I had to put it away. I yelled, I screamed, I cursed. I knew that they weren't coming back, but I wanted them to. Whoever had been out there had turned and run when the Sheridan came on line. The Sheridan--I couldn't get the Sheridan out of my mind. The blinding flash, that awful buzzing and the white hot imprint on my brain of nine men being cut down like wheat with a scythe.

I crawled around among the dead. Their bodies were laced with steel fleshettes that stood out of their heads, their eyes, their necks, like hundreds of nails driven into each man.

Nine thousand seven hundred fleshettes from less than forty meters. That's what had killed these kids. I gagged and choked as my brain allowed itself to admit the truth. I lay there crying with rage as the reinforcements from the CP finally reached the bunker.

I couldn't talk to anybody. I turned my back and sat alone. The medics took the bodies out. In the dark no one examined the bodies as closely as I had. I was the only one that knew! And the knowledge was devastating.

Duke-Five found me in the darkness. He could see that I was destroyed. He tried to console me telling what a good job we'd done holding off the attack.

"Sir, you don't understand," I mumbled. "Something terrible happened here tonight."

"I know, I know," he comforted.

"No sir, you don't know. The Sheridan killed all those kids," I told him. I could sense the shock on his face even in the darkness.

"Are you sure?" he asked with disbelief.

"100% sure, Look at these." I said opening my fist to show him a handful of the barbed fleshettes I had pulled from the bodies.

Now he knew, too, and I was relieved of the terrible burden. He was a major; he would take care of it. I just wanted to be left alone to try to wash the stain of what I'd seen out of my mind.

A medic found me and told me the heavy kid I'd carried up the hill didn't make it. He also gave me a handful of fleshettes they'd pulled out of him before he died. The other side didn't have fleshettes, only us.

When the sun came up I was still sitting in silent vigil by the bunker. The helicopter of the Division Commander landed in front of our positions. The General's Aides scurried about. I just sat there in the dirt. They approached the bunker. Some major I'd never seen before began briefing the General on the

battle. It was all bullshit. He said that enemy fire had decimated the men on the bunker. I couldn't let it go down that way. I was going home in two weeks to be a civilian, so I had no thoughts of keeping my mouth shut to save a career. I lurched to my feet. Suddenly, there was Duke-Five at the General's side. He said a few quiet words to the General, and then lifted the canvas flap hanging over the side of the bunker. Thousands of fleshettes were embedded in the side of the bunker, and the angle of entry showed that they had come from inside our lines.

Duke-Five pointed me out to the General, saying, "Lieutenant Farrington was running to the bunker when it happened. He saw it all."

"Is that true, son?" the General asked.

I stood to attention. "Yes sir, every word," I said, relieved that the General knew the truth.

The General was visibly shaken. He issued orders on the spot that a full and honest explanation must be given. He was a good man.

I thanked Duke-Five for his courage and returned to my CP.

One by one, the days wore down. I stayed at my CP and sweated them out. We had limited enemy action, and I was glad.

A few days into September, it was time for me to leave Quan Loi and find my way home.

I processed through Division HQ, turned in my gear, and headed for the 9th Replacement Center. A couple more days of sitting around and I'd be on my way home.

One of the final ironies of the war, for me, was the way we received our awards and decorations to place on our uniforms for the trip home. We went to the PX and bought them from a Vietnamese.

I took my orders to the PX at the replacement center and stood in line like everybody else. When it was my turn, I handed the paperwork authorizing my medals to the little Vietnamese girl behind the counter. She called the names off as she assembled my medals. "Silver Star, Bronze Star with V, Purple Heart, Cross of Gallantry, Air Medal, Commendation Medal"--she droned on and on in her little sing-songy voice. Thirteen medals in all. I was getting them from a Vietnamese on an assembly line. I wondered if she cared that they represented a year of my life.

Behind me in the line a young Spec 4 said to his buddy in a loud stage whisper, "Just our luck to get in line behind a fucking war hero."

I turned to them quietly and said, "I never wanted any of them. I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time."

They could see the pain in my eyes. They didn't say anything more.

I sat around the club waiting for my turn to leave the country; the same club I'd sat in with Benny Guy and my friends from Panama on my first day in country. Half of them were dead. The "Hjungle" had indeed "keeled" them. It had taken a good shot at me, too, but I had survived. I sat there, haunted by their ghosts.

Across the room, I watched the nervousness of the "cherries" that had just arrived to fight the war. I had been them, and now they would be me. If I could only tell them something that might help them live, but what? Should I tell them that nothing they did here was going to matter--that the war was a crock and that some of them would die for nothing while old men argued about "Peace with Honor." Should I tell them to keep to themselves and not make friends who might end up dead, leaving them devastated? Could they possibly understand that the only winning was in staying alive to go home?

Would I have understood if someone had told me that last year? I fit in the war. Why should I poison their minds? I kept silent and sat with the others who were going home, a vast chasm between us and the new people.

I held a place of honor at our table. My four rows of medals and CIB guaranteed it. Infantry was what I'd become, and I'd grown proud of it. I'd dabbled at being a REMF during my stint in Bien Hoa, but the last month at Quan Loi had sucked me back into the ugliness of war. I still didn't know what the war was really about; I only knew what it had been about for me. I knew that I was changed forever. The ugliness of the war was part of me for the rest of my life. I couldn't forget. I didn't want to forget. I would try to make sure that other young men knew the possibilities before they went off to fight "Communism" in some shithole of a foreign country that was having a civil war. Old men send young men off to die in a foreign country because the country needed to be reshaped to match the old men's dreams of what the world should be. Their ego and pride call that "National Interest" and young men die for it far from home.

I stood and watched my Freedom Bird approach the terminal at Bien Hoa. The same wild cheering and clapping I had heard a year before resounded through the building; only this time I was part of it. I had kept my word to myself. I was going home.

We landed at Travis twenty-one hours later. I walked outside the terminal. My corvette was parked at the curb. Ty was leaning on it, his face a big grin.

"Hey, what'cha been up to?" he said.

"Not much, just killing for peace," I grinned back.

He tossed me my keys and we drove off to find a bar.

As read on the Something Awful forums, April-May 2007.
Transcribed by depraved. Edited by Moruitelda.