

What others are saying about *Cherries*:

“With striking detail and brutal honesty, *Cherries* is nothing if not compelling. Every bit as gritty and shocking as can be imagined, *Cherries: A Vietnam War Novel* is a refreshingly honest account of a life few of us would ever choose to live - and, thus, should feel fortunate that we don't have to. A highly recommended read.”

- Karynda Lewis, Apex Review

“As an avid reader of many historical memoirs, both fiction and autobiographical, rarely have I found one as in depth and revealing as Mr. Podlaski's work....undoubtedly this scene is occurring today with veterans returning from the Middle East. By reading *Cherries*, you will get the knowledge and feel of what it was like in Vietnam, stories that many memoirs of this war collectively failed to mention! *Cherries* is a highly recommended read!”

-Bernie Weisz, Vietnam War historian

“The author is a terrific storyteller. This book flows so well, you will not be able to go to sleep without reading the next chapter. Podlaski has you in the palm of his hand.”

-William E. Peterson, Missions of Fire and Mercy

“Once I started reading John's *Cherries*, I could not put it down - intense, provocative, mesmerizing, emotional, and heartfelt. You will feel as if you are right there in the platoon with the grunts as they live through the terrors, the dangers, the trials and tribulations, and sometimes the joys and humor of being at and in war. One `read' will not be enough. You will want to pass through the pages of `*Cherries*' more than once just to savor the up close and personal story again.”

-Jerry Kunnath, author

“I could never have written this amazing book. When I told my story, I had to fill it full of the emotion I felt but never expressed in Vietnam. Podlaski, on the other hand, managed to stay true to the original experience by telling his story with little or no emotion. The effect is that

Cherries is an excellent primer for students of the Vietnam War that are interested in the grunt experience. The last chapter alone is well worth the price of this book.”

-Terry P. Rizzuti, The Second Tour

“Podlaski takes readers on a gritty, visceral tour of 'Nam through the eyes and lives of the men who fought the war and who, at any given moment could be thrust into harm's way. We are right there with his characters on patrol, setting up claymores, walking point, and above all trying to stay alive. This is the day-to-day life story of the men who started out as "*cherries*" and tried to stay alive.”

-Jeffrey Miller, War Remains

“I am not a person who generally reads war novels, but I really could not put this book down. I read it twice! The author takes you along on the journey where you get to watch the main character grow from a scared young kid just out of high school into a savvy, skilled leader in the span of a year, and he helps you to understand how it happens.”

-Janet Shupe

“I just finished reading *Cherries*. I could so relate to many things in this well written novel. I know what it is like to see so many lose their life. I helped carry them out onto the choppers. My 3rd week over in the "Nam" we were choppered in on helicopters to be a blocking force. Four hours later, we went from 250 or so to only 79. The rest were killed or wounded. It was hard for me to get through this book due to the tears that brought back so many similar episodes.”

-Joel Lee Russell, Escaping Death's Sting

Cherries – A Vietnam War Novel

By

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Author's note:

While *Cherries* is largely a work of fiction, many of the events and anecdotes described in the novel are based upon the actual experiences of the author. The places and units mentioned were real and did exist. All characters portrayed are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, and locales, are entirely coincidental.

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Dedication:

For Janice and Nicole – Thank you for making my dream come true! Cherries is dedicated to you both.

God Bless America's soldiers – Past, Present, and Future

“There's many a boy here today that looks on war as all glory, but boys, it is all hell.”

-General William T. Sherman, Address, 1880

Table of Contents

[What others are saying about Cherries:](#)

[Acknowledgements:](#)

[Dedication:](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[About the author:](#)

[Cast of main characters](#)

[Glossary of Terms](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Many U.S. Army personnel began their journey to South Vietnam from the Overseas Processing Terminal in Oakland, California. It was 1970, and just outside the compound, hundreds of hippies and former soldiers picketed and protested against the war. They targeted those soldiers who were dropped off by cabs and heading toward the main gate. Dozens of Military Police officers (MP's) were holding the protesters at bay and created a clear path through the mob. The crowd tossed flowers at the passing soldiers and chanted loudly for peace. Some in the group pleaded with the new arrivals, trying to convince them to quit the military and refuse to fight in the war. Most soldiers passed through the gates without hesitation; however, a few did stop on occasion to seriously reconsider their options.

John Kowalski had passed through the main gate earlier in the day and was wandering through the massive facility, a converted airplane hangar, in search of friends from his Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) Platoon at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The entire training company had received orders for Vietnam, and each person was to report there after a thirty-day leave.

The PFC was maneuvering his six-foot frame through a maze of cubicles. The rubber soles of his newly acquired combat boots squeaked loudly as he crossed through these quiet sections. An earlier coat of wax on the red tile floor also made it appear wet and slippery; John stepped along cautiously as if walking on ice.

The twenty-foot-by-twenty-foot cubicles comprised of eight-foot high pieces of plywood and two-by-fours rose up toward the thirty-foot ceiling. Each of these enclosures held a dozen bunk beds; sleeping youths occupied many while awaiting their turn to fly off to war.

His efforts to find a familiar face within the maze were unsuccessful, so he began a quarter-mile hike to the other side of the building, which was set aside for recreation.

He found the area to be quite active and noisy compared to the morgue-like atmosphere he had just left. Here, there were hundreds of highly enthused soldiers, all dressed in jungle fatigues – the green machine! Rows of pool and Ping-Pong tables cluttered the area, but were barely visible through the crowd. It was obvious that many of the players were having difficulty with their games, the close proximity of the many spectators inhibiting their movements.

John stood on the outskirts looking in. He removed his olive green baseball cap and ran his hand over the light brown stubble length of hair. Satisfied that it was again growing, he replaced the cap and traced a line across the rough four-inch long scar on the left side of his neck - the consequence of a confrontation with some escaped felons during Basic Training. His hazel eyes continued to scan the many faces, hoping to spot someone he knew.

Suddenly, a player on a nearby Ping-Pong table backed up quickly to return a hard serve from his opponent. He tripped over a spectator, creating a domino effect on the group standing behind him. A young soldier, who looked fifteen at most, found himself sprawled out on top of the adjacent pool table. The remaining balls were scattered, some falling to the floor along with a stack of ten-dollar bills. All of this happened as an African-American soldier, twice the kid's size, was preparing to take an advantageous shot.

He became enraged. "You dumb motherfucker! I had this game in the bag."

"It wasn't my fault," the kid cried out in a shaky voice, "I got pushed up here by those other guys," he pointed to those soldiers standing around the Ping-Pong table.

"Pushed, my ass," the black soldier challenged, "you just cost me a hundred bucks. So pay me what I lost, and I'll let you slide."

"I don't have that kind of money," the skinny kid replied, climbing down from the table.

"Let me see your wallet, and I'll take what I think is fair," the behemoth threatened, reaching behind the kid to snatch the wallet from his back pocket.

The kid pushed back into the crowd, attempting to escape the reach of the thoroughly pissed off Army private.

"It was an accident!" he hollered. "You're not taking my wallet!"

The crowd tightened, everyone shifting to find the best-unobstructed view of the altercation. Trapped, the kid had no place to go.

"Come on brothers, are you with me?" The soldier called out to a group of black comrades standing nearby. "This white boy owes me some money!"

His supporters wielded cue sticks and pool balls and moved toward the petrified youth.

A group of white soldiers took a step forward, ushering the young kid behind the pack and quickly engulfing him. One of them stated in a southern drawl, "Why don't you boys pick on somebody your own size?"

Hearing this, the leader of the black group turned to his followers and said giddily, “I guess we have to kick a whole lot of white ass to get my money.”

“Yeah, let’s do it. We’re with you!” his followers chanted.

Individuals within the black group were now beating the palms of their hands with the thick end of the cue sticks and lofting pool balls lightly into the air. Two of them broke ranks and moved toward the white group.

Suddenly, a dozen MP’s forced their way through the crowd before either of the two groups could strike a blow.

“Let’s break this shit up!” The MP Sergeant ordered, separating soldiers, and shoving them out of his way. He stopped, facing the leader of the black group. “What is this all about?” He asked.

“That skinny white boy owes me a hundred bucks!” The black private protested, pointing out the alleged culprit. “All I want is to get my money back and these white boys want to come over and start some shit with us.”

“That’s bullshit, sarge,” the southern soldier responded. “There was an accident. The kid fell on the pool table and fucked up their game. He doesn’t owe him shit.”

“Is that correct, private?” The sergeant fixed a deep, piercing stare at the kid.

“Yes, sergeant,” he replied in a trembling voice, “there was a lot of shuffling and pushing behind me. I found myself sprawled out on top of the pool table. I couldn’t help myself.”

“That’s a damn lie!” The black soldier protested. “I couldn’t give a fuck about the game; I’m pissed because he pocketed my money during all the commotion.”

“I don’t think he has the balls to do something like that,” the sergeant replied after sizing him up. “I’d be willing to forget this incident if everybody would just walk away and return to what they were doing.”

“What are you going to do if we don’t? Send us to Vietnam?” a voice called out from the crowd.

The taunt was enough to change the atmosphere of the group and some began to laugh and snicker.

“Yeah, you’ll still go to Vietnam, but you may spend a few weeks in our stockade first,” the sergeant growled.

The crowd started to disperse, and soldiers moved away, resuming their activities from before the interruption.

The black soldier shifted back and forth from one foot to the other, his expression changing as he tried to compose himself.

The MP Sergeant looked at him. “Well, what’s it going to be?”

“I’ll let it go, man. I don’t need any bad time on my record. I want to serve my year and get back home.”

“Then, do I have your word that you won’t bother these guys anymore?”

“Yeah, man, you got my word.” He turned and walked back to the pool table and his waiting friends. The kid had vanished.

Once everything was back to normal, John turned and moved toward yet another undiscovered part of the large building. After a few minutes, he heard a familiar voice call out, “Hey, Polack!”

He stopped and looked around for the source.

“Hey, Polack, over here,” a tall, lanky soldier with red hair, freckles, and a broad, toothy grin called out again. He was pushing through the crowd and waving frantically.

John’s face lit up in recognition, returning the man’s wave with a wild one of his own.

“Bill,” he called loudly after seeing his close friend from training.

They embraced warmly like long-lost relatives.

“Polack, you son of a bitch, am I ever glad to see you.” Bill, as gaunt as a scarecrow, slapped John’s back a few times.

“I am too, Bill. How the hell are you?”

“I’m good. When did you get here?”

“About four hours ago. What about you?”

“I got here yesterday.”

“Why did you come so early, Bill? Didn’t they have a flight available when you needed it?”

“I didn’t fly. I took a train instead.”

“You rode a train all the way here from Tennessee? Are you shitting me?”

“Nope, I’ve never been on a plane in my whole life, Bill admitted sheepishly. I was so afraid of the thought of flying that I checked into the train schedule and found that I had to leave a couple of days earlier to get here on time.”

“How did you get home from Fort Polk?”

“I rode in by bus.”

“Damn Bill, you missed out on three days of your leave just because you’re afraid of flying?”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Don’t remind me.”

“Now you don’t have a choice. There aren’t any trains or buses that go to Vietnam.”

“I know and thought hard about that on the way here. I’ve got a perfect solution – I’ll get drunk and pass out. That way, somebody could carry me on board.”

“Maybe they can just give you a shot or something to relax.”

“No thanks. I’ve had enough shots for now! Once I got here, they gave me a worse physical than the one I had to take when the Army first called me up. Here, they move you along like an assembly line.”

“I know what you mean. And that paper work was really a bummer - there must have been twenty-five forms to fill out!”

Bill produced a wide smile, “Yeah. That part took me almost an hour.”

The two young men commiserated about the humiliating experience of having to strip down to their underwear and stand in long lines of strangers from all over the country—herded along like cattle.

“What did you think when you saw the ten doctors on each side of the line giving everyone shots with those air-powered guns?”

“I didn’t have time to think. I just blindly followed everyone else and hoped for the best.”

“A guy in front of me moved his arm just as the doctor pulled the trigger,” Bill commented. “When the blood squirted out, I almost shit myself.”

“The shots weren’t too bad - kind of felt like a punch in the arm. But, as I’m standing here now, they’re starting to ache pretty damn bad,” John said.

“It’ll feel better in a few hours. I feel fine today,” Bill volunteered.

“The thing I didn’t like was having to ship all our own clothes and stuff home. What a hassle! And these new jungle fatigues and boots we’re in are just like those in basic training.”

“Yeah, but it was all worth it. Don’t we look good?” Bill asked, striking a pose.

John would not have been more surprised if Bill’s ball cap came off his head and twirled in the air by itself. Bill flexed his arms and posed like a body builder in the final pose of a competition. His head quivered as he strained his muscles. Bill’s face was stern and solemn as he concentrated on this show of strength.

John suddenly burst out laughing “Damn Bill, what was all that about? It looked like an advertisement for Scarecrows Incorporated.” He stopped chuckling before continuing, “All you needed was a bit of hay sticking out in the right places, and you’d have nailed it.” John pointed to Bill’s face, “I especially like how you managed to cover your front teeth with your lower lip. You did look scary, but it also seemed like you had a mouth full of snuff.”

“Okay. Okay. You’ve had your fun for the day, Polack.” Bill looked more hurt than embarrassed.

Bill Sayers, raised in the back woods of Tennessee, spoke with a heavy southern drawl. He was the third eldest of nine children who shared everything from chores to clothes while growing up on the family farm. He had never experienced the feeling of receiving new clothes—all he had ever worn were hand-me-downs from his older brothers. When the Army issued him the first five sets of new fatigues, he treated them as if they were made of gold.

“C’mon Bill. I’m just giving you a hard time and didn’t mean anything by it.” John wrapped his arm over his buddy’s shoulder and pulled him tightly. “You have to admit - it was funny as hell!”

Both men shared a hearty laugh.

“Have you found a bunk yet?” Bill asked.

“Not yet.”

“Great, then come with me, I have a cubicle all to myself.”

“Lead the way.”

John followed Bill to the other side of the building and then through the maze of cubicles for another ten minutes before reaching the smaller room with six bunk beds.

“Looks like it’ll be nice and quiet here.”

“Shit, it is now. Yesterday, you couldn’t hear yourself think.”

“And why was that?” John inquired.

“I had to share this cube with ten other guys who have been together since Basic Training. All they did was party the whole night.”

“What happened to them?”

“They left on the first flight this morning. So I guess it’s just you and me until new neighbors move in.”

“I’m okay with that. Have you seen anyone else from our AIT Platoon yet?”

“Yeah, matter of fact, yesterday, I bumped into Joel McCray and Larry Nickels. Do you remember them?”

“I do. Where are they?”

“They left this morning with those other guys. And you’ll never believe who else was with them.”

“Who?”

“Sergeant Holmes.”

“No shit? I thought he was returning to Fort Polk this week to start training a new platoon of recruits.”

“That was his original plan, but he had his orders changed during his leave and volunteered for a second tour.”

“Why did he do a fool thing like that?”

“He told me that he was fed up with the civilians and all the hippies. He said that while he was on leave, people spit on him and got into his face yelling that he was teaching soldiers to be baby killers and then sending them off to Vietnam. He said there was not a day gone by without somebody picking a fight with him. After the cops had jailed him for the second time for disorderly conduct, he went and signed the papers.”

“The world is filled with jerks. Too bad, he had to volunteer for Nam to get away from it all. Did you know he was wounded during his first tour?” John asked.

“Yeah, I remember him telling the story about that big Tet offensive in ‘68. He got some shrapnel in his back from a mortar round, but also said that the fighting is not at the same level as it was in 1968 or earlier, so we all have a good chance of making it home in one piece.”

“I hope that’s true.”

In the AIT Company, everyone liked Bill because he always had something good to say about others. Stories told about life in the big cities fascinated him to no end. It was difficult for

him to imagine doing things that many city folks took for granted as part of their everyday lives. He walked everywhere, including the three miles each way to school and back. In fact, the first time Bill had ever ridden a bike was in the Army.

Bill and John became very close while serving together in the Army. They had developed a friendship that made it easy to confide in one another on sensitive issues. John had promised to visit Bill in the hills of Tennessee one day, but only if Bill agreed to visit him in Detroit. Bill was ecstatic and could not wait; he continued to remind John periodically of this agreement.

All the excitement of the day was beginning to take its toll. Both were tired and struggling to stay awake.

“I had it rough last night.” John began, “My mother gave me a going away party yesterday. All of my close friends and relatives were there. After dinner, we all sat in the living room and talked while the news was on TV. Everyone quieted down when a bulletin came on from Vietnam. It seems some outfit ran into an ambush. They showed helicopters burning. Dead and wounded soldiers were carried past the camera, and the commentator sounded so nervous. The women looked over at me and started crying. They all ran over and hugged me.”

“Damn,” Bill said with a sympathetic look upon his face.

“Well you know me.” John continued, “I put on the brave act and told them that nothing was going to happen to me while I was in Vietnam. I told them that we’d all be back in this same living room in a year to laugh off those worries.”

“What happened then?”

“Everyone started to leave for home before it got too emotional. When everyone left, I went up to my bedroom and tried to sleep, but just couldn’t. I kept thinking about that news story and got all shaky and nervous.”

“Polack, you aren’t alone in that feeling. I’m scared too.”

Both sat quietly for a few moments.

John lay back on his bunk and glanced to his watch. It was 3:30 in the morning. He thought about everything that had happened since leaving Detroit only fifteen hours earlier. Everything seemed to be “hurry-up-and-wait.”

On the flight to California, he had been the only military passenger. The flight attendants and fellow passengers had made him feel special. When they heard he was en route to Vietnam, they bought him drinks, offered him magazines and candy, and wished him luck on his tour. He

was very proud and felt honored by the way he was treated. His fellow passengers respected him, and not one person had treated him as Sergeant Holmes had been treated.

“Hey Polack, get your lazy ass out of that bunk!” Bill shook him a few times.

Startled, John jumped up from the bed quickly, bumping his head on the frame of the upper bunk.

“Damn you, Bill, you scared the shit out of me,” he grumbled, rubbing the top of his head. John looked at his watch and noted that it was 1330 hours.

“Jesus, Bill, its one-thirty. When did you get up?”

Bill looked at his watch, “about six hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you get me up sooner?”

“Hell, I’d have been wasting my time. I know you city boys like your sleep. You would sleep all day long if somebody let you. Besides, it wasn’t necessary for both of us to check the shipping manifest for today.”

“What did you find out?”

“Both of our names are listed, and we’re leaving for Vietnam at ten o’clock tonight.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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“This is your captain speaking,” the voice announced on the public address system within the Pan American jet, “we will be landing in Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, in about forty minutes. They are reporting sunny skies, temperatures of 97 degrees and 100% humidity.”

Whoops and cheers erupted from the military passengers. “Welcome to Hell,” someone called out.

The captain continued, “As you know, we’ve passed through several time zones since leaving California, so let me take this opportunity to get you all up to date. First, there is a time difference of thirty-one hours between Vietnam and the west coast of the United States. For example, in Oakland where many of you started your journey, it is 8:30 on Friday morning. And right now in Vietnam, it’s Saturday, August seventh, and 4:30 in the afternoon.”

Again, some comments referring to a time machine and blasting into the future echoed from the rear seats.

“After we touch down, we’re asking everyone to remain in their seats until the plane comes to a complete stop. There will be no need to panic and rush for the doors as this airport is in one of the more secure areas of South Vietnam. It is very safe where we are landing and nobody is in danger. So sit back, relax, and enjoy the scenery.

“On behalf of the crew, we hope you have enjoyed your flight. We do wish you the best of luck while you are here in Vietnam, and God’s speed for a safe return home. Thank you for flying Pan American Airlines.”

“Yeah right, like we had a choice,” one of the soldiers uttered loudly to his companion across the aisle.

John was looking at his watch and trying to do the math in his head. “Bill, do you know it took us almost twenty-six hours to get here?”

“Hard to believe isn’t it? You may also want to think about us being on the other side of the world from Tennessee. It just blows my mind.”

“I thought China was on the other side. Didn’t you ever hear people say that if you dug straight down in your backyard, you’d end up in China?”

“Who is going to do a damn fool thing like that?”

“Nobody is. It’s just a saying that I grew up with.”



“You city folk have some strange notions about things!” Bill returned to watch the scenery passing below the cabin window, hoping to see something more than just clouds and ocean.

Prior to leaving Oakland, an Army Doctor had given Bill some tranquilizers to take prior to departure. On the first leg to Hawaii, he sat in a half-comatose state in the window seat next to John. The effects had worn off an hour before landing in Hawaii, and after fully regaining his senses, Bill found flying to be rather enjoyable. He would tell everyone that his favorite part of flying was the takeoff, and how he enjoyed the same sensation as the astronauts must have felt when they left for the moon.

During this long flight, he had spent most of the time looking out the window, enchanted by the view from that height. It was a new world to him, and he savored every minute.

Bill grabbed John by the arm and pulled him toward the window. “Look, Polack, you can see land,” he said excitedly.

John leaned over Bill’s legs to see for himself. The word spread quickly and everyone started crowding the windows for their first look at their destination. After flying over water most of the time, it was a pleasure to see land below.

From fifteen-thousand feet, Vietnam appeared as a vat of shimmering colors. Bright blue threads snaked through shades of green, brown, and yellow-colored earth. A large mountain chain was visible in the distant northwest and seemed to cut the country in half. It became quiet throughout the cabin as the laughter, talking and singing suddenly ended. The steady roar of four jet engines continued but was unnoticed as every passenger fixated on the scenery unfolding below.

As the altitude of the plane gradually dropped, the vistas below changed in shape, color, and became more recognizable. Soon, the sprawling city of Saigon and its neighboring villages took shape and grew in size as the jet approached and flew overhead. Cars and trucks appeared as they inched along the roads. On the final approach for landing, the tiny, ant-like moving dots took the shape of thousands of people moving about.

The plane landed smoothly and taxied toward the terminal. A few moments later, it stopped abruptly and the engines began their dying throes. There was an absolute hush on the plane, and the rapid heartbeats of two-hundred new arrivals hammered in unison.

Suddenly, a loud noise erupted in the front of the plane when the cabin door slid open. Everyone on board was fidgeting about, trying to get a better look at the doorway.

An Air Force Major walked through the opening; he was dressed in his best Class-A uniform with several rows of battle ribbons proudly displayed over his left breast. Following him inside were two Army Captains, dressed in green jungle fatigues and baseball caps. The trio walked up the aisle, stopping at the forward flight attendant station.

They stood for a moment, surveying the new arrivals. The major stepped to the side, lifting the microphone from the mounting plate on the wall.

“My name is Major Brown and joining me are Captains Willis and Sharkey. We welcome you to Bien Hoa Air Force Base in the Republic of South Vietnam.” All eyes fixed upon the major as they listened intently.

“Our job today is to get you men off this plane, through Customs, and finally loaded onto buses that will transport you to the Reception Center. We want to complete this portion of your in-country training safely and in an orderly manner. After disembarking this aircraft, I expect to see everyone joined up and standing in four perfect ranks out on the tarmac. When we are certain that everyone is present, we will then proceed to the baggage area inside the civilian terminal. There, you will secure your duffel bags and proceed directly to the area marked ‘Customs’. The officials will have you empty the contents of your bags onto counters and perform a search of your body. The MP’s will be looking for drugs and any other illegal contraband that you may be trying to smuggle into the country.”

At that moment, many soldiers exhibited some nervousness. Some frowned and rolled their eyes. Others stirred anxiously in their seats with a panicked look upon their faces.

The major continued, “If anyone is concealing contraband, then I strongly suggest you drop it in your seats as you leave this aircraft. There will be no questions and nobody will come looking for you afterwards. This is also your only warning. Once outside, there are no second chances. If arrested, we will take you to LBJ – which is Long Binh Jail for you Cherries. There, I can guarantee you will serve some hard time for your foolishness.

“When you clear through Customs, you will then exit the terminal and board the awaiting buses. They will transport you to the 90th Replacement Center in Long Binh, which is about a three-mile drive. There, you will begin final in- processing and assigned to your new in-country unit.

“At this time, I would ask that all officers aboard, please stand up and begin to disembark at the front door.”

As they moved up the aisle way, John and Bill noticed a few items left behind on the seats. Bags of weed, pills, and other unidentifiable items lay openly or tucked between cushions.

Bill and John shuffled down the aisle toward the front of the plane. “Look at this stuff. Do you think these people carried it with them all the way from Oakland? I seem to recall that some of us were searched before getting on the plane.”

“No, I don’t think so, Bill. It would have been too risky in Oakland. The guys must’ve bought this stuff during our three stops along the way. There were a lot of shady characters in those terminals, and I remember seeing a lot of money flashed around.”

“You’re right, now that you mentioned it. I can remember overhearing some people talking on our stopover in Guam. They were talking about having a big party once they settled into their new digs, but I didn’t think it would be with grass and drugs.”

“Shit, Bill, dope users are on the rise. This stuff is getting really popular back home and more people than we know are turning to it. Just give me a beer or a mixed drink and my cigarettes and I’ll be happy.”

“I’m with you there, partner. I wonder if anybody is going to try and smuggle some dope into the country.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Each person walked out of the air-conditioned plane, hesitating briefly on the top step of the boarding ramp as the full impact of hot and humid air engulfed him. For a moment, it was difficult to breathe. Some made a feeble attempt to re-enter the plane, but the rush of exiting personnel pushed them back out.

There was a green hue outside as rays of silvery sunlight reflected from everything colored olive drab green: helicopters, planes, gun emplacements, and buildings with sandbagged walls surrounding them.

Dozens of helicopters were lifting off and landing in areas next to the runway. Small green, single-seat Piper Cub airplanes and larger Phantom Fighter jets were also moving about and taxiing toward different areas of the airport to wait in lines for their takeoff.

Bill and John cleared Customs easily and walked out to the waiting buses. The vehicles were identical to those used during training on the American bases and were painted olive green like everything else around, with one distinct difference - there were no glass windows. Instead, bars and chicken wire covered each framed opening.

The two close friends took a seat in the first row behind the driver.

“Why is all this shit covering the windows instead of having glass?” John asked the driver.

“It’s there to protect the passengers from grenades or any other foreign objects that might be thrown in from the side of the road,” he answered.

“Protect the occupants? It gives me the feeling of being a criminal on the way to prison.”

“We are in prison, my man,” the person behind John said with a smile. “Think about it. We’re all locked up in this country for the next year and there’s nothing we can do about it but serve our time.”

“Yeah, you right!” Some of the other passengers agreed.

Once the buses loaded, the drivers closed the door and started the engine.

Two MP jeeps pulled alongside, stopping next to the lead bus. Each had long fifteen-foot whip antennas swinging from the two rear corners and dual M-60 machine guns mounted to a cross bar behind the front seats. The soldier standing behind the guns was busy loading them and ensuring they were in proper working order while the other guy talked casually into the handset of the radio.

“Look at the Rat Patrol jeeps!” John exclaimed.

“What’s a Rat Patrol jeep?” Bill asked.

“Don’t you remember seeing them on TV when we were young? They were always kicking the shit out of the Germans in Africa during the Second World War.”

“You know I never had a TV,” Bill said quietly.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Just take my word for it, Bill - they were a bad ass outfit.”

The procession of five buses began to move, and both gun jeeps raced to the head of the line and fell in. As the convoy picked up speed, red dust from the road swirled through the air, making it difficult to breathe - the horrible residue immediately coating everything. As if on cue, the new arrivals began choking and gasping for clean air. The passengers quickly pulled out

handkerchiefs or used shirts to cover noses and mouths in an attempt to filter some breathable air from the thick red fog.

The convoy appeared to be traveling through a corridor. Both sides of the road had a ten-foot high barbed wire fence running alongside. Hundreds of small, straw-roofed huts, about the size of a single room lakeside cabin in the states, stood as far back as they could see. The barbed wire fences made it appear as if the area was either a prison or a refugee center.

Every person they passed appeared to be very old. Some were in front of their huts, sitting on the ground or cooking over open fires. Others simply stood near the fence and watched the parade of buses pass; every one of them was chewing something and spitting a brown liquid onto the ground.

“Those people are all chewing tobacco!” Bill exclaimed.

“That’s not tobacco,” the driver volunteered, “it’s the juice from betel and nuts.”

“What the hell are betel and nuts?” John asked.

“The Areca nut grows wild in the husks of some trees around the country. These people cure the nut and slice it into sections. For chewing, they wrap a few slices in betel leaf and add a lime, cloves or anything else to improve the bitter taste. When taken like that, the stimulant causes a hot sensation in the body and heightened alertness, although the effects vary from person to person. However, most of them mix other shit with it to get high, too.”

“You mean like dope?” Bill asked the driver.

“Yeah, exactly like dope. Most of these people are high all the time. They wouldn’t be able to stand it otherwise.”

“Just look at all those folks by the wire. They remind me of the cows back home, all of them standing along the fence and chewing their cud. Their heads turn as you pass and they keep watching you until you are long gone.”

The driver laughed, “That’s original.”

The convoy approached a tight right turn, and each bus slowed to complete the maneuver. Several groups of villagers were standing at the corner waiting for the traffic to clear. Just then, John grabbed Bill by the arm and pointed out the window. “Bill, take a look at that!”

Speechless, they continued to stare at the sight greeting them.

A group of seven women, each appearing to be close to a hundred years old, was standing on a corner, waving to the buses as they passed. Their wrinkles were deep and wide, their skin

dark and shriveled like prunes. It appeared that most were heading home after working in the fields, since they were carrying rakes, hoes, and shovels. Two of them balanced long poles on their shoulders with large bamboo baskets attached to each end. They are wore black nylon pants and oversized shirts, covered with dried mud and stains. All of them wore straw conical hats that helped to shield their faces from the strong rays of the sun, and they were all smiling broadly. Many were toothless or had only a few teeth left in their mouths. All looked as if they had mouths filled with black licorice. Their lips, gums, teeth, and insides of their mouth looked like posters from the Cancer Foundation, warning against the dangers of smoking.

“That’s what happens when you chew those betel nuts all your life,” the driver explained.

Bill and John could only look at each other and shake their heads in disbelief.

“Daaaaaaamnnnn!” John finally said in one long drawn out breath.

Farther up the road, young children were everywhere. Most were small boys of pre-school age.

“Hey GI, you souvenir me cigarettes, candy, you numba one,” they called, running along the side of the road to keep up with the buses.

Some of the people on the bus felt sorry for them and began flicking cigarettes through the chicken wire windows. This resulted in several scuffles as each group began to zero in on the tossed tobacco sticks, fighting each other to claim the prizes.

In the background, behind the packs of fighting boys, stood the little girls, not any older than eight years or so. Some held half-naked babies in their arms and others shouted at the fighting youths. A few of them even entered the fracas and began to pull the boys apart, appearing to scold them.

“Why are all the little girls holding babies?” John asked the driver.

“Those little girls help raise the family, cook, and clean around the hut while their parents work in the fields.”

“That’s so sad,” both responded together.

Every human being passed so far on the convoy was either old or very young. There were no teenage boys hanging around on the corners, no young or middle-aged men walking around in the villages.

At another turn, the buses slowed down again. One corner had a small outpost shaped like a triangle. Large bunkers were at each corner of the complex; machine gun barrels poked

through several of the gun slits. A twenty-foot high tower and spotlight stood guard in the center of the compound. Loops of barbed wire and walls of sandbags encircled the small base. Overall, about twenty Vietnamese soldiers moved about the compound. It was unlikely that any of them weighed more than a hundred pounds.

“Look at those guys; they’re only kids.”

“Shit, Bill, we’re not much older ourselves.”

“Yeah, but we can put in our year and go home. These poor guys probably live up the road apiece and will have to continue fighting this war long after we’re gone.”

“I guess you’re right, Bill. I just can’t imagine having to fight a war in my own neighborhood back home. It’s got to be hard keeping focused on a day-to-day basis when you don’t know if your property will still be there, or if your family is okay after a fire. What a life of hell!”

Five minutes later, the bus made a left turn and slowed to a crawl as it approached a gate straddling the road. It reminded the young soldiers of Fort Apache, as portrayed in old western movies. A sign over the gate read, “Welcome to the 90th Replacement Battalion - Long Binh”.

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CHAPTER THREE

As the buses unloaded, a trim and muscular Army Captain stood on a platform, patiently waiting for the group to get into some type of military formation. His folded arms rested against his chest, allowing his bulging biceps to inflate the end of his rolled up fatigue jacket sleeves. He continued to shift his two-hundred pound, rock solid frame from one foot to the other, appearing both impatient and nervous. His deep tan and unblemished complexion accented his straw-colored hair and blue eyes. His green jungle fatigues were heavily starched and sharply creased, fitting like an outer skin – a real candidate for a U.S. Army recruiting poster! After five minutes, he turned on the microphone and began to speak.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he began. “I’m Captain Richards, and I’d like to welcome all of you to the 90th Replacement Battalion. As I call out your name, fall out into the building behind me. There, you will exchange your greenbacks for Military Payment Certificates (MPC), which is the currency used by Americans in this country. Greenbacks are illegal in Vietnam, and possession of any after you clear this area is a court martial offense. After completing your money transfer, find an empty bunk in one of these six barracks.” He pointed out the buildings across the street and behind the formation.

“Tomorrow there will be shipping formations at 0800, noon and 1600 hours. These readings are mandatory and everyone must attend. Those of you called out tomorrow will move on to your new units. The rest of you staying behind will work on projects around the center. Until that time, you will be on your own and free to use all the facilities available to you. Are there any questions?” Scanning the formation, there are no hands raised. “Okay, now listen up for your name.”

The 90th Replacement Battalion was a large camp, measuring two miles long by one-half mile wide. Bunkers alternated with towers on the perimeter. To their front were varied configurations of razor sharp barbed wire, stretching out for at least five-hundred feet. The six-foot high protective barrier resembled tangled spools of lethal thread. The small flares interspaced throughout awaited combustion when the engaged trip wire pins were pulled from the device, illuminating the immediate area in the dark of the night. Deadly claymore mines, positioned randomly around the perimeter served as a first line of defense. Controlled remotely, detonators are accessible within each bunker; two quick squeezes on the "clacker" will blow the

mines. Small metal cans full of loose stones bobbed in the wind; a sudden pull on the wire caused the cans to clang out a warning to the bunker guards.

The barracks were single-story, green buildings and closely resembled their cousin buildings in the states. There was, however, one exception – no glass windows - just like in the buses. Instead, mosquito netting covered each opening. In the event of a rocket or mortar attack, these openings would provide additional exits for quickly vacating the building. The roof overhung sufficiently to keep rain from coming through the net windows.

John stood waiting for Bill in the shade of a palm tree, just outside the money-changing building. The late afternoon sun hung low in the royal blue sky but was still strong enough to make standing outside of a shaded area uncomfortable. When Bill finally exited, the two of them proceeded through the ninety-five degree heat toward the first barracks.

They entered and luckily located two beds, side by side, at the far end near the back door. The two friends tossed their duffel bags onto the bare mattresses and flopped down beside them.

“Well, John, what are we going to do now?”

“You feel up for a walk to scout this place out?”

“Lead the way.” Bill worked his way out of the bed and onto the dirty plywood floor.

They exited the building and walked down the four steps leading to the road, stopping briefly to look over the lay of the land.

“Let’s find out why all those people are hanging around in the street.” John suggested, pointing in that direction.

They walked up the road and came upon a large purple building - the sign on the door read, ‘Alice’s Restaurant’ - a reference to singer Arlo Guthrie’s 1967 hit folk song.

“Will you take a look at this?” John asked excitedly. Latching onto Bill’s arm, he pulled him toward the building. “It’s a goddamn restaurant, right here in the middle of a war zone. Let’s go inside and check this out.”

“Okay, I’ve got your back.”

Once inside, they found the restaurant divided into three sections: a dining room, a game room, and a bar. They hesitated for a moment in the doorway taking it all in.

“How about getting something to eat?” Bill asked. Patting his stomach, he continued, “I’m starved!”

“Cool. I’m kind of hungry too.”

They sat at a table in the middle of the dining room; a young Vietnamese girl quickly offered them menus. She was about four and a half feet tall, with long, flowing, silky black hair. She wore black silk pajama bottoms under a knee-length powder blue dress; slits extended on both sides from her hips down. She was so tiny that she couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds. She stood by the table with an order pad and pencil in hand, smiling politely, awaiting their order.

Both quickly scanned over the single page menu framed in black leather and covered with clear plastic. Items listed were hamburgers, hot dogs, fries, barbecued chicken, coleslaw, ice-cold soda, and beer.

It only took a few seconds before they were ready to order.

"I'll have a hamburger and fries." John said, handing the menu back to the server.

"I'll have the same," Bill chimed in.

"What do you want on your burgers? We have tomato, onion, ketchup, and mustard."

"Everything for me, please."

"Me too," Bill added.

"What would you like to drink?"

"What kind of beer do you have?"

"Falstaff and Black Label is all we have."

"Ewww!" The men responded with sour expressions on their faces.

The server saw that neither of them was happy with the selections. "I'm sorry, but this is all we have," she apologized

John pondered over the choices. "I never tried Falstaff beer, so I guess I'll try one of them."

"A beer is a beer, and I guess we shouldn't be fussy. Make it two of them there Falstaff's." Bill raised two fingers into the air.

"Okay, I'll be back in a minute with your beer, but the food will take a little longer." She left to take the order to the kitchen. Her waist-length hair waved at them with each step, swinging gently from side to side.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Bill."

"What did I do now?" Bill frowned, looking confused.

“Did you hear that chick talk? You were born and raised in the states, and this Vietnamese girl speaks better American than you do.”

“Shit, you call that American? I speak excellent American and her accent isn’t anything close to mine.” They both laughed.

The atmosphere in the restaurant was a refreshing change. It was so peaceful; a person would find it difficult to believe a war was even going on outside the perimeter.

As they might have expected, the décor inside of Alice’s Restaurant catered to the peace-loving hippie movement. Posters of rock stars and the concert at Woodstock hung from the dirty white pine walls. Black neon lights helped to enhance the psychedelic posters and made the bright colors stand out. Gold - colored beads hung in the doorways and crackled like pebbles dropping onto the cement floor when someone passed through them. A strong smell of incense permeated the air; several chimneys of smoke climbed lazily to the dimly-lit ceiling at various locations throughout the building. The aroma was somewhat pleasant, and did an excellent job of covering the stench of cigarette smoke, and spilled beer. A jukebox played a variety of music, changing periodically from hard rock to soul music and even an occasional country western song.

Suddenly, something interesting caught John’s eye. “Bill, there are slot machines in the next room!”

“Wow, I’ve never played one before.”

“Neither have I. Let’s go and try one of them before the food gets here.”

They jumped up and hurried over to the bank of nickel machines. Once there, neither of them had an idea of how to load their paper money into the machines because there was only a coin slot available. The new military payment certificates were all in paper, including the denominations less than a dollar.

A nearby player observed their dilemma and volunteered, “Go over to the cashier window. They’ll change your monopoly money for tokens.”

“Thanks!” Both soldiers replied in unison and crossed the floor toward the cashier window.

They exchanged a five-dollar MPC note for one-hundred nickel tokens and walked up to one of the ten machines. Playing three tokens a pull and winning a few here and there, they were

only able to play on the machine seven minutes before losing all their coins. Disappointed, they returned to the restaurant table to find their food and beers waiting.

It was twilight outside when they exited the restaurant. Dim lights, hanging from the front of each building enabled them to see in the fast-approaching darkness.

Farther up the road, the sound of music, cheering, and loud whistling made them curious enough to investigate. After pressing through the crowd, to their amazement, they found a seven-member band performing on a stage. Three female dancers were half-naked and slowly removing the rest of their outfits. The surrounding bleachers overflowed with cheering soldiers; most were on their feet and roaring their approval.

“Oh my God,” Bill hollered above the noise. His mouth opened wide and his jaw dropped to his chest, exposing rows of pearl white filling-free teeth. His mouth moved up and down, trying to speak words, but nothing came out. He closed his mouth again and swallowed hard. “Come on, Polack, let’s go find us a seat,” Bill finally managed to spit out in between his heavy breathing.

There were no seats available anywhere so the two of them migrated to an area between the stage and bleachers, joining other excited youths that were tightly packed into the small, crowded space.

“Do you believe this?” Bill asked. “This sure is the first time I’ve ever seen anything like this.”

“You mean seeing the half naked strippers or the live band?” John joked.

“I’ve never seen a naked lady in person before.”

“So what’s the big deal? These Asian girls aren’t shit. I’ve seen guys in Basic Training with bigger tits.”

“I did too, but they didn’t affect me the same way. How often will we be able to see something like this?”

“Now, how in the fuck am I supposed to know that?”

Bill was unable to respond. He stood rock-solid, hypnotized by the strip tease taking place upon the stage. The crowd in front of the stage tightened up and pulsated forward as more men arrived and tried to force their way in for a better view of the show.

Pandemonium broke out when one of the girls was completely naked. The audience erupted in catcalls, whistling, waving fists into the air, clapping hands, and whooping it up, the bleachers sounding as if they were going to collapse from the impact of hundreds of feet stomping loudly on the wood boards.

When the other two girls were also naked, the three of them began to dance wildly, gyrating in different directions and moving from one side of the stage to the other. Each of them made obscene gestures and teased the audience. After a full minute of individual flaunting, they all returned to center stage, slowly arching backwards and pumping their hips to the beat of the wild song. There was nothing left to the imagination now and many in the audience were freaking out; some soldiers had to restrain their friends in order to prevent them from rushing the stage and grappling the girls.

The band had written this wild song; none of the Americans had ever heard it before. The rhythm was contagious and sounded like something out of a King Kong movie, inducing the girls to gyrate and work themselves into a sexual frenzy. Most of the men in the audience enjoyed this new sound, finding it difficult to watch the show without gyrating to the beat themselves.

When the number finally ended, the girls quickly dashed off stage, and entered a portable dressing room. The musicians set their instruments to the side and joined the women in the small room. The audience was still in a high state of excitement and now realizing that the concert was over, began to clap their hands and chant for an encore. Several minutes elapsed and not one person had left the area; the chanting and clapping continued in hopes of convincing the band to return for one last song.

The dressing room door finally opened, and the musicians burst out, running across the stage to their instruments. Seconds later, the three girls reappeared, dressed now in different colored silk robes; all using towels to wipe away sweat. The audience roared its appreciation.

The lead guitarist began plucking out soft notes to quiet the crowd. The center dancer of the three picked up a microphone and smiled at the crowd. "We are 'The Crescent' from the Philippine Islands, and we want to thank all of you for attending our concert. This will be the final song of the evening and is dedicated to all of you. Be safe and good luck!"

Suddenly, the guitar tempo changed and the band joined in, the dancers swaying from side to side. This song was heard many more times in various in-country concerts during the many months to come. The crowd quieted and the girls began singing 'The Green, Green Grass of

Home'. The sad song stimulated memories of home and of those left behind. The rowdiness had ceased and the atmosphere changed drastically to one of calm and sentiment. Many in the audience were singing along and swaying sideways to mimic the singers on stage.

Bill and John left before the end of the song in order to beat the rush back to the barracks.

When arriving, they found most everybody asleep, except for six people down on the far end of the building. Two of them were sitting on John's bunk. When approaching the group, they stopped talking and looked up to the new arrivals.

"How are you guys doing? My name's John and this is Bill. Seeing as you're sitting on my bunk, do you mind if we join you?"

One of them, appearing to be the leader of the group, spoke up, "Hell no, we don't mind. Come on and have a seat. This is Dan, Billy, Paul, Mike, Joe, and I'm Steve," he said, pointing them out when saying their name. "We're just shooting the shit."

This was the group's second night in the Replacement Center, and therefore, they knew their way around the basecamp. It was an opportunity for John and Bill to learn more about their temporary home. When interrupted, Paul had been in the middle of a story about the massage parlor on the next block. For the benefit of their new acquaintances, he started over from the beginning.

"It was a real bitch, man. They had twelve tables in this room. You strip in this little back closet, hang your clothes on a hook, and walk out with a towel wrapped around your waist. I got on the nearest table where this forever-smiling chick was waiting for me. There were at least nine other guys getting massages at the time. Man, that chick had magic fingers. In the fifteen minutes, she worked on me; it felt so good that I almost fell asleep. She was just about finished working on my legs when, get this, she asks me if I wanted a hand job."

Everyone laughed.

"Go on, Paul, don't stop now," said one of the guys on the bunk.

"Well you know that sounded pretty good to me." Paul continued, "I never had a chick do that to me before, so I asked her how much, and she tells me twelve bucks."

"Twelve bucks," Joe blurted out. "Shit, I'll beat you for twelve bucks."

The laughter was so intense that it was difficult for the men to hold back the tears in their eyes.

"Come on, guys," Paul pleaded. "Let me finish."

It took a few minutes for the group to regain their composure. Finally Dan volunteered, “Go on, Paul. We’ll try to control ourselves.”

“Okay, well I told her that I only had five bucks in my wallet, so I’d come back another day. Then she says, ‘No sweat, GI, I do for five dorrers’. Shit, I thought that was a bargain, so I told her okay. Now, instead of taking me somewhere else that was more private, she pulled my towel off right then and there and grabbed hold of me.”

Dan and Billy elbowed each other in the ribs; Joe slapped his knee and started chuckling. Paul looked at them incredulously and continued, “That was the last thing in the world I expected. Man, I jumped right off that table, embarrassed as all hell, and snatched back my towel, wrapping it around my waist. She looked hurt and some of the other people were looking over at us. I caught my breath, leaned over, my mouth inches from her ear, and told her calmly that I did not want her to do this right here in front of everyone. She smiled – looked straight into my eyes and asks me if I was a Cherry boy.”

The small group could not take anymore and began to howl and roll around on the two cots. The racket began waking some sleeping soldiers; they scowled at the group and told them to keep it down. Nobody wanted to start any trouble so the group apologized and continued to converse in a lower tone.

“I don’t believe it. Our own Paul chickened out - poor thing couldn’t handle the pressure,” Dan said sarcastically.

Paul shot back coldly, “If you think you’re such a bad ass, then why don’t you go try it tomorrow. Show everybody what you have?”

“That’ll be the day I pay some chick five bucks to beat my meat.” Dan stated, nodding his head affirmatively and looking at the rest of the group for support.

“Yeah, you probably do it every night too, don’t you?” Paul retorted.

Joe interceded, “Goddamnit, Paul. Don’t get bent out of shape. You know we’re just fucking with you.”

Paul sat there and fumed. It would take him a few moments to compose himself and allow the angry color to drain from his face.

The group quickly changed the subject and began talking about other topics for the next couple of hours. As they were conversing, John could not help but notice the diverse regional

accents and slang terms he was encountering for the first time in his life. It both fascinated him and made him feel a long way away from his home in Detroit.

During one of the discussions, Dan informed Bill and John of the radiophone in a building next to the PX. The MARS station allowed a person to call home for a small fee. It was not a telephone, and both parties had to use proper radio procedures and military etiquette, such as saying “over” when one party finished talking, before opening the channel for the other to reply. Bill and John agreed to look into it the following day.

In the morning, the first manifest included the names of those six soldiers from the late night muster. Assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, they would be traveling north to a place called Phu Bai. Somebody in the crowd stated that the 101st was in dire need of replacements as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars were kicking their asses in a valley called the A Shau. Rumor had it that entire platoons were lost during those hard-core firefights.

After all the names on the manifest are read, Bill and John left quickly to avoid any work details and headed straight for the MARS station, anxious to place a call home. Instead, they found a long line of prospective callers and observed several pages of names posted on the door - a waiting list. Neither had any idea how long it would take to rotate through the list, but added their names to it, just in case they were still at the Replacement Center when it was their turn.

With nothing else to do until the next reading in a couple of hours, both decided to walk around the center. They found an outdoor movie theater, another restaurant, a swimming pool, post office, two basketball courts, baseball diamond, and the notorious massage parlor. It was like visiting a recreation center or youth camp, with the only sign of war being the bunker line and barbed wire.

After the noon manifest reading, those remaining soldiers filled in the holes and tightened up the formation. Several Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO's) weaved through the formation, grabbing personnel for various details. A young buck sergeant, looking younger than most of the men standing on the street, strolled through the formation and chose Bill, John and a dozen other soldiers for a painting detail. This time nobody could escape.

John and Bill's group painted in the hot sun all afternoon. Ironically, they were painting the fence enclosing the Reception Center's swimming pool. The water teased and beckoned to them all day. Finally, unable to control himself any longer, Bill dropped his brush, rushed through the gate, and jumped fully clothed into the refreshing and cool water.

The rest of the men in the paint detail exchanged glances in stunned silence. Then, as if on cue, everybody dropped their brushes and followed Bill's lead. They splashed around in the water, unchallenged for several minutes, like a group of grade school children on a field trip. All at once, two service club attendants emerged and ordered them from the pool. Reluctantly, one by one, they emerged from the water and returned to their tedious detail.

Clothes dried quickly in the hot, blaring sunshine, and soon they were all sweating again, contemplating a second dip in the pool. At five in the afternoon, the project only required another hour to finish, but they were all relieved of their duty and told to go to the mess hall for dinner.

After John and Bill ate dinner and cleaned up, they returned to Alice's Restaurant. This time, their attempt to win on the slot machine was successful when Bill hit the jackpot with the first three tokens.

Bill stood there dumbfounded and watched the hundreds of coins dropping into the tray below. Bells and sirens were sounding from the machine and a red strobe light above signaled that somebody had just hit the jackpot.

"Glory be - this sure is my lucky day! Just look at all these here coins," he cried out joyfully.

The noise and strobe light quickly attracted other soldiers who began to gather around the two winners. Everyone watched the payout window; numbers continued to climb and approached one-thousand - falling tokens already filling most of the tray below. Those standing around showed mixed support; some congratulated Bill and were happy for him, others simply looked on, saying nothing. One person, in particular, appeared to be quite upset, complaining loudly to his friend, "Damn! I just left that machine. Had I stayed and played another coin that jackpot would have been mine!"

Someone turned and responded to him loudly, "Yeah, but you didn't, and now it isn't. So get over it and give the guy a break!"

"Fuck it, don't mean nothin'," he mumbled and walked away.

Meanwhile, Bill frantically raked the tokens into old coffee cans and found it difficult to keep up with the machine payout. The counter was still rolling and had passed fourteen-hundred. It stopped suddenly at fifteen-hundred and was quiet again.

Someone yelled out, “Way to go man. You just hit for seventy-five! Don’t spend it in one place.”

It took several more minutes for the two of them to transfer all the coins from the machine tray into empty coffee cans. When they finished, they muscled the five filled cans over to the cashier cage. The woman behind the counter congratulated them and paid Bill in military certificates.

“Come on, Polack, it’s time for us to drink a few beers and celebrate.” Bill said proudly, guiding John to a nearby table.

After a few hours of drinking beer, both were surprised to find that neither of them could stand without support.

“Oh shit, I can’t see things clearly anymore,” John stated, holding on tightly to the back of his chair.

“I can see okay, but everything is spinning like I’m on a merry-go-round,” Bill slurred.

“Are you gonna puke?”

“I don’t think so right now, but we need to find the way back to our bunks.”

“I do remember that we have to turn left and go to the last row of barracks on top of the hill.”

“Let’s get started before we pass out.”

The two of them leaned onto one another, shuffling through the door and then down the steps to the road. Some of the by-standers watched them closely, amused by their inebriated state. Once they reached the road and turned left, the two soldiers started singing marching tunes from Basic Training while weaving across the road. Both were off-key and very loud, one trying to sing louder than the other. Angry voices echoed in the darkness from every building they passed:

“Hey, ass holes pipe down!”

“Shut the fuck up out there!”

“Sing another note and I’ll personally come out and kick your ass!”

They disregarded the threats and warnings, not stopping until they reached their destination. Once inside, they collapsed.

At 0300, the loud blast of air raid sirens abruptly awakened the inhabitants of the 90th Replacement Battalion.

Those drunk or stoned sobered up immediately. Chaos reigned! Cherries spilled out from the barracks, most escaping through open doorways, others choosing speed instead, dove through the openings in the sidewalls. In doing so, the mosquito netting pulled from the walls and encapsulated many of the fleeing youths in a nylon cocoon; this further enhanced their panic. Outside, the men bump into one another, confused and unsure of what to do next.

A voice on the public address system began yelling barely audible instructions above the shrill sirens. “Yellow alert! Yellow alert! Head for the nearest bunker and take cover immediately!”

Thankful for the directive, everyone raced toward the available bunkers. Once inside, the men sat nervously on the ground. All were trying to control their breathing, gasping, as if just completing a ten-mile race. Voices rang out from the total darkness within:

“My heart is pounding so fast, it’s going to explode.”

“What in the hell is happening?”

“Are we getting hit?”

“Where are our weapons?”

“Yeah, how are we going to protect ourselves?”

“What in the fuck does a yellow alert mean?”

The sight within the bunker was also bizarre, with twenty soldiers all in different levels of dress. Some were barefoot, wearing nothing else except green boxer shorts – one of them even wore a helmet. Others wore just a pair of trousers and boots, another bunch only a shirt and shorts, and three men stood in complete uniform with helmets. One of the Cherries stood next to the entrance of the bunker holding a broom – the handle facing outward like a bayonet on a rifle.

Just then, a heavysset person wearing a cook’s hat and apron, leisurely strolled into the bunker and took a double glance at the person standing guard with the broom.

Shaking his head side to side, he took in the curious picture. Of course, since he had been at the Replacement Center for almost four months, similar scenes had played out repeatedly.

“Relax, guys, it’s only a test,” he said in a reassuring voice.

“What do you mean “a test”?” a voice snapped in the darkness.

“The camp officers fuck with us every other night and run this alert at different hours. It’s supposed to remind us that we are still at war. It doesn’t bother me any because I’m in the kitchen all night long cooking. The sirens should stop and they’ll give the ‘all clear’ in another minute or so.”

“What a bunch of lifer mother-fuckers,” someone mumbled.

“At least they could have given us some warning. Now I’ve got to clean the shit out of my pants,” said another.

Five minutes later, the “All Clear” sounded. Everyone began to file out of the bunker, returning to the barracks – thankful, but pissed off about the inconvenience. Almost everyone dropped onto their bunks, but were unable to return to their dreams, still too shaken to sleep. Most just lay in bed awake until dawn.

Bill Sayers and John Kowalski heard their names called during the first shipping formation of the day. Both men got orders for the 25th Infantry Division; the division basecamp was near the city of Cu Chi, which is twenty miles northwest of Saigon. Their convoy was leaving at 1000 hours.

“Thank you, sweet Jesus!” Bill said solemnly, “thank you for not sending us up to the 101st.”

“Amen,” John added.

Those called for the morning transport began arriving at the pickup point, duffel bags in hand, dropping them in the area designated for the 25th Division. With an hour remaining before departure, Bill and John rushed over to the PX to purchase ‘boony hats’. They are very similar to those worn by amateur anglers. The soft, green, cloth-like material enabled a person to shape it into any configuration necessary to protect their eyes and back of the neck from the blazing sun. They were lighter and more practical than the traditional baseball caps worn by new recruits. While both waited for a tailor to embroider their names on the hats, John scanned the showcase filled with division patches.

“Bill, let’s get us a patch for the 25th Division and have it sewn onto the hat too,” John suggested.

They were not sure what the patch looked like, but thankfully, located a display board that identified these unit patches. The patch for the 25th Division looked like a red strawberry, two inches wide by four inches long, with a yellow lightning bolt piercing it diagonally. Each purchased one and had them sewn in place.

John moved to the next counter. Noticing a large Bowie knife among the many knives in this showcase, he immediately purchased it.

“Check this out,” he called over to Bill.

John had already threaded his belt through the leather scabbard. With the knife now hanging from his right hip, he was tying the bottom leather lace around his thigh.

“That knife looks cool as hell!” Bill said, admiring the new item.

“Makes me look kind of bad ass, doesn’t it?” John asked proudly.

“Yes, it does. I think I’ll buy one for myself,” Bill said, then placed his order with the salesperson.

Neither of them thought of the knife as being much more than a decoration. However, they would both find out later that it was the most valuable tool used while patrolling through the jungle.

At 0930 hours, five two-and-a-half ton trucks, commonly called “Deuce -and-a-Half” trucks, arrived. A layer of sandbags were piled upon the bed of each truck to protect the riders if the truck should hit a mine in the road; a soldier stood behind the cab working on the tripod-mounted M-60 machine gun on the roof. The Rat Patrol jeeps arrived to escort the Cherries to their next destination.

Bill and John were among the first twenty to board the trucks and fortunate enough to get a seat on one of the two pull-down benches running the length of the truck bed on both sides of the vehicle. The other fifteen had to sit in discomfort on the hard sandbag-covered floor.

The convoy moved out precisely at 1000 hours. Once leaving the security of the 90th Replacement Battalion, a lone helicopter gunship joined the convoy and circled lazily overhead, providing additional security for the parade of five trucks.

They passed endless rice paddies where the Vietnamese people worked painstakingly to harvest their crops in knee-deep water. Young boys rode on top of huge water buffaloes whacking the big brown animals on their rump with a bamboo stick.

Whenever a convoy passed from the opposite direction, everyone raised their arms and flashed peace signs to one another. Every now and again, the passengers saw the front of an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) poking out from a stand of bushes on the side of the road. Their gunners acknowledged the fellow Americans, waving enthusiastically to the convoy from behind 50-caliber machine guns.

Traveling at speeds in excess of 40 mph, it took no time at all for the convoy to reach Cu Chi – home of the 25th Infantry Division.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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The Rat Patrol jeeps concluded their mission after leading the convoy deep inside of Cu Chi Base Camp. All 126 Cherries stood in the trucks, trying in vain to rid themselves of the clinging red dust.

Bill laughed when John removed his sunglasses.

“What’s so funny?”

“You have white rings around your eyes.”

“And what, that’s supposed to be funny?”

“Yeah, with all that red shit on your face you look like a fucking raccoon.”

“At least you can see my eyes. Your whole head looks like it was dipped in shit.”

“Go ahead and have your fun,” Bill grumbled. He brushed himself feverishly in an attempt to get all the dust removed from his clothes. “Give me a hand wiping my back, and I’ll brush you off.”

“Okay, just don’t play with my ass when I turn around,” John replied.

“You’re all ass and I won’t be able to avoid it.”

“What - are you a comedian now?”

As they finished brushing each other’s back, loud voices on the side of the trucks were barking commands to the group.

“All right, Cherries, un-ass my trucks right now!”

“Come on, come on, move it!”

“I mean now! Let’s go, everyone!”

“I want four ranks starting right here,” bellowed an impatient Puerto Rican sergeant. He stood forty feet away and drew a long line across the ground with a large stick. “Let’s go! Get on the line, I don’t have all day!” He barked.

The Cherries leapt from the trucks and moved quickly to form four ranks, unsure if punishment was forthcoming for not being on line fast enough.

“What the fuck, are we in basic training again?” John mumbled to Bill.

“I hope not. We’re supposed to be all done with that. This is Vietnam, isn’t it?”

The sergeant paraded back and forth in front of the formation. He wore a black baseball cap with the word 'Cadre' stenciled on the front in large white letters. It was impossible to see

the look in his eyes, as mirrored aviator sunglasses covered them. His beer belly looked unnatural for a man with a thirty-four inch waist and it bounced with every step he took.

“Listen up, Cherries!” He shouted in an attempt to get the ranks to settle down. “You are here for a mandatory week-long course of in-country training. During this time, we will review your past training and teach you all about your enemy. Our first class will begin in fifteen minutes. When I give the word, grab your gear and store it in the hooches behind me, then return to the exact spot you are standing in right now.

“You’ll all have plenty of time later to unpack and get squared away. You have ten minutes, starting now. Move out!”

The ranks collapsed as men rushed to find their duffel bags in the large pile. Once in hand they raced to the various hooches. Bill and John could not find two adjacent cots in either of the first two hooches, but were successful in the third one. They threw the gear on top and moved back outside.

“What do you ‘spose this is gonna be like?” Bill asked.

“Most likely a lot of classroom training, just like we did in Basic.”

“Hell, I thought there’s a war going on here. Why are we going to sit around in classrooms?” Bill complained.

“You heard the guy. He said that we were going to learn all about the enemy.”

“What more do we have to learn? A little guy out there has a gun and wants to kill me. I have to kill him first – it’s that simple. We don’t need to learn anything more.”

The Puerto Rican sergeant led the formation to a large shaded area not too far from the hooches. This was the first classroom of the day.

“Have a seat on the ground, gentlemen. If you have any smokes, feel free to light up.”

He stood in front of the group, next to a large six-foot wide green chalkboard mounted between two trees. “Sgt. Ramone,” printed in large, white chalky letters across the top, let everybody know who he was.

“Don’t be afraid to sit on the ground,” he stated after observing the reluctance of some to do so. “You’ll be mighty lucky if this is the dirtiest you get in this country. You ground pounders (infantry) will be living on the ground. So get used to it now while there’s no pressure on you.”



He waited for the entire group to take a seat before continuing, “This area is where you will come for most of the classes during this course. My name is Sergeant Ramone,” he enunciated both syllables and then used the stick to point out his name on the board.

“I will be one of your instructors during this next week. Today, we will review military maneuvers, different attack and defensive formations, the military alphabet, coding, map reading, and the proper use of the PRC-25 field radio. Are there any questions before we begin?”

No hands went up.

“Good, let’s get started.”

Later that day, John and Bill unpacked their belongings in the single-story screened building.

“Those classes we just finished were not all that bad,” John admitted.

“Now I beg to differ with you. It was boring as hell to go over all that shit again. We’ve had enough of it shoved down our throats in the last six months.”

“It may be boring, but look at it this way. It’s one less day that we’ll have to spend in the field.”

Bill thought about that statement for a second, and then replied, “I guess you’re right.”

John looked at his watch, surprised. “Damn, it’s already 10:30. We better get some sleep. I have a feeling it’s going to be another long day tomorrow.”

Both flopped down on the hard, olive-colored canvas cots and quickly fell asleep.

The following morning, everyone drew out an M-16 rifle from the armory before heading out for the first class of the day.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” the instructor began, after everyone was seated in the outdoor classroom. “We will spend the morning taking these weapons apart, cleaning them, and then putting them back together again.”

Moans and objections echoed from the crowd.

“Aw, fuck!”

“We did all this shit hundreds of times already.”

“What a fucking waste!”

The instructor, having heard enough, got everyone's undivided attention when he struck the chalkboard with a stick; it sounded like the sharp crack of a rifle.

"Knock off the bullshit!" He ordered. "This part of the class is so important that it may very well save your lives!" He pushed both hands into his pants pockets and walked among the group. "It's true that you've done this a hundred times already, but how many of you can do it blindfolded? Do you know that most attacks and firefights occur in the dead of the night? It is pitch black and you cannot see your hand in front of your face. Now just suppose your weapon fails during one of these firefights, and the VC are rushing over the wire to kill you. Are you able to take your M16 apart and fix it in the dark, so you can protect yourself?"

He hesitated for a few seconds and then continued, "Before this class is over today, each of you will learn to do just that. The circumstances will be different - it won't be dark and enemy soldiers will not be trying to kill you, but you will successfully demonstrate this ability while blindfolded."

Again, protests and moaning sounded from the group.

"This is bullshit!"

"Fuck this shit! I'm a cook and probably won't handle a rifle the whole time I'm here."

The infantry guys took the advice to heart and began to disassemble and assemble their weapons. Each time, they were more proficient and confident. There was no need for blindfolds; they were all able to demonstrate this task with their eyes closed.

After lunch, the group returned to the classroom with weapons in hand.

"I sure feel more confident being here with a rifle now," Bill said.

"I know what you mean! We've been in-country almost a week and this is the first time I've actually held one in my hands."

"Isn't that odd, too, with everything we've heard about Vietnam during our training in the states?"

"You're right, Bill. I was expecting to get shot at or at least mortared when we walked off that plane."

“I was thinking the same thing. Now, if you think about the replacement center and now this place - aside from the convoys - I haven't seen anyone carrying a weapon or heard shots fired since our arrival.”

“I don't know what to think. Maybe all that shit in training was just a bunch of brainwashing.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Bill responded. “This is, supposedly, a secure rear area, and maybe they already killed all the enemy soldiers around here. I heard some of the guys talking earlier about firebases out in the boonies. That's where the real shit hits the fan.”

“I wish we could just stay here,” John said sincerely.

“Me too, old buddy.”

The class spent the afternoon on the firing range, where each soldier could test-fire his weapon. They hit many of the targets; bits and pieces of cardboard sailed through the air and fell onto the already littered ground. Puffs of dirt rose into the air around each target, as the bullets burrowed deep into the dry, hard earth.

After each person had fired thirty rounds, they gathered and began walking back to the outdoor training classroom.

Sgt. Ramone was waiting there for everyone to complete the short walk back from the firing range. “Gentlemen, everybody enjoy target practice?”

“Yeah, it was great!”

“It's about time!”

“Good, I'm glad you enjoyed yourselves. We're all done for the day, except for the cleaning of these weapons.” The men groaned one more time. “Nobody leaves for chow until each piece of equipment is spotless and returned to the armory. I will look them over later this evening and God help the poor slob who did not do a good enough job. After chow, you are on your own until the morning formation. Have a good evening!” Sergeant Ramone left the Cherries and headed toward the mess hall.

“Well, so much for our sense of security!” John spat.

“I know the feeling.”

The following morning, the class returned to the firing range, where they found various weapons displayed, both on a table and at different intervals across the range firing positions. Five additional Cadres were also present to help with this class.

Sgt. Ramone split the men into five groups so each person would have an opportunity to fire many of them. The arsenal consisted of M-79 grenade launchers, 50 caliber, and M-60 machine guns, one sniper rifle with attached scope, smoke grenades and a 60mm mortar tube and base plate. The Cadre put on a mortar demonstration and fired three rounds: white phosphorus, a night flare, and high explosive, for those soldiers seeing them for the first time. One lucky person in each group would also have an opportunity to fire the LAW, a two-piece plastic disposable rocket launcher. When opened fully, it measured thirty inches long and looked similar to a shortened World War II bazooka.

After lunch, work details picked up spent brass shell casings from the ground, rebuilt the destroyed practice bunker, and cleaned the arsenal of fired weapons.

It was late in the evening when the last detail returned to the barracks.

On the fourth morning, John and Bill walked to the range with the rest of the class.

“What do you think they have in store for us today?” Bill asked.

“I don’t have a clue, but it does seem odd that we’re going without weapons.”

“It sure does,” Bill agreed.

Upon their arrival, the Cherries took a seat on the ground; this was now an automatic reflex and nobody hesitated or complained.

A large, black staff sergeant, who could pass for a professional football player, was their instructor for the day. He was holding a short rifle in one hand; wood covered most of the barrel and stock. A half circle, twelve-inch long black magazine protruded from the housing, an inch in front of the trigger guard. Perhaps it was possible for the shooter to hold on to the magazine and fire it like the Tommy Guns of old. Under the barrel, a pointed, two-foot long, finger-thick piece of silver metal lies horizontally, secured to the weapon by a hinge.

“What kind of gun do you suppose that is?” Bill asked and motioned toward the instructor with his head.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before. Maybe it’s a VC gun or something new we have to learn how to fire.”

Bill simply shrugged, "Makes sense to me."

The 6 foot, 8 inch, and 260 pound instructor removed his black cap with his free hand, using the sleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Moisture on his freshly shaven head glistened in the sunlight. After returning his cap, he smiled brightly to the class, exposing a gold cap on one front tooth.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I am Staff Sergeant Jones, and now let me introduce you to the Russian-made AK-47 Assault Rifle. This little beauty is the primary weapon of your enemy."

He held the rifle high in the air for all to see.

"At times, it is more accurate, deadly, and dependable than your M-16. This banana clip holds thirty rounds instead of the twenty in our magazines," he said, ejecting the magazine and holding it high in the air.

"You should also note that the enemy's bullets are larger." The instructor set the rifle on a table and then pushed out one of the rounds from the magazine. After placing the magazine on the table next to the weapon, he reached into a pants pocket and withdrew an M-16 bullet. With a bullet in each hand, he lifted them both high into the air so the audience could see the difference.

"This 7.62mm round is identical to those we use in our M-60 machine gun. It is larger and has a lot of power, definitely doing some damage when hit. As you can see, the M-16 rounds are smaller, but their design allows them to tumble when hitting something. So a hit to the stomach may exit from the hip or upper back, tearing up everything in between."

He placed the two rounds in a pocket and picked up the rifle from the table. "And this is the bayonet," he continued, grabbing the silver steel appendage and unfolding it until it clicked and locked in a fully extended position.

"It is permanently fixed to the rifle and folds down when not in use. If Charlie sticks you with this, you'll be in a world of hurt."

He replaced the weapon on the table, then looked up to scan the many faces in the class; most showed concern.

"During the last six months of training, each of you has become accustomed to the sound of your own rifles. Today, I will fire this rifle and some other enemy weapons to demonstrate the distinct sound each one makes. It is very important that you recognize these different sounds because not all rifles are the same. The war in Vietnam is a guerrilla war, where you will hear

the enemy more than see him. When ambushed in the dense jungle, with a weapon firing next to you, the sound of the weapon will determine immediately if it is a friend or foe. Your very lives - and the lives of your fellow soldiers - depend on you knowing the difference.

“I’m quite certain all of you were always on the sending end of a bullet since joining the military. How many of you know that every weapon makes a different sound when the bullet is flying toward you or overhead?”

The class shifted about nervously, nobody daring to raise their hand in acknowledgement to his question.

“Is this fucker going to shoot at us?” Bill whispered.

“Would it surprise you?”

The sergeant continued, “Before this day is over, I will guarantee that each of you will be able to distinguish between the pop of this AK-47 and the sharp crack of your own M-16. So, let’s get started.” He reinserted the magazine and chambered a round in the Russian weapon. “Listen closely!” He fired ten single shots downrange, spaced about three seconds apart, and then switched to automatic, emptying the magazine in two short bursts. “Gentlemen, what you just heard were the sounds of your enemy’s weapon when firing away from you. Now you get an opportunity to hear the same weapon when the firing is directed toward you.”

He moved the class up range, half way to the targets, and then returned to the firing line. The Cherries were sitting on the ground, facing the targets. Some panicked after the sergeant fired a short burst over their heads. They jumped to their feet and bolted toward the firing line, like fullbacks running all out to score a touchdown. Yet others crawled toward a nearby dried stream bed and lay prone in the depression.

Upon seeing this, the staff sergeant roared with laughter.

“Damn, you Cherries never cease to amaze me! Listen up!”

He was not trying to embarrass anyone, but by this point could barely contain his laughter. “Nobody is going to get shot on this range. I’m firing twenty feet over your goddamn heads, which is an extremely safe distance.”

He turned and addressed the half-dozen soldiers standing on the firing line with him. “Get your asses back out on that range with the others.”

The men hung back, stalling. One of them even turned around and kicked at the dirt, hoping to create a dust cloud large enough so the sergeant could not see him. Finally, after some

coaxing and encouragement, they all walked back to mid-range and lay in the dried creek bed with everyone else.

“Okay, let’s try this again,” the sergeant yelled when they were all safely in place.

The group remained in that prone position for almost an hour as Staff Sergeant Jones fired the different enemy weapons. Aside from the AK-47, his arsenal also included an RPD Machine Gun, SKS Rifle, and a Chicom Pistol. When he was confident that his class had learned the lesson for the day, he called out, “The demonstration is over; everyone come back to the firing line.”

The Cherries stood up, brushing themselves off before walking toward the awaiting staff sergeant.

Once they were clear of the firing range, he gathered them together. “Okay men, are there any questions regarding the sounds you’ve heard today?”

Not seeing any hands, he continued.

“That’s good, I must have been real convincing. Before we break for the day, I have one final demonstration for you.” Staff Sergeant Jones walked over to his Jeep and emerged with yet another strange weapon.

“Gentlemen, this is a Rocket Propelled Grenade and launcher, called an RPG for short. It is very deadly and feared most by the mechanized and aviation units, although, the enemy uses them in routine fire fights too. It is just like our LAW and can penetrate seven inches of armor before exploding. This weapon is responsible for shooting down helicopters and destroying or disabling APC’s and tanks as well. Unlike the LAW, it has no back blast so the shooter does not have to worry about a clear field of fire behind him. Now keep your eye on the practice bunker to your front.”

The RPG resembled a four-foot green pipe with a long, orange, pineapple-shaped missile sticking out from the front. There were a couple of extra rounds lying on the ground, each resembling a pineapple attached to a stick.

Jones leveled the weapon, aimed through the sight, and fired. The men could clearly see the speeding missile and its trailing exhaust; they watched it all the way to its target. When the round hit, the impact created a cloud of dust a microsecond before the entire structure exploded outward. The results were much more devastating than that of the LAW demonstration the day before. Debris scattered farther away; rebuilding would take twice as long.

“Holy shit,” Bill exclaimed, “look at what that thing did.”

“Wow, that is some awesome weapon,” John added.

“How do you stop something like that?”

“By shooting the fucker before he fires that damn thing!”

“What if you don’t see him first?”

“Then when you see it bearing down on you, either jump the fuck out of the way or take a second to kiss your ass goodbye.”

The next few classes were the most intriguing of the entire week – dealing with enemy booby traps and their deployment.

Sergeants Jones and Ramone were the primary instructors.

“Most of the time, booby traps are very cleverly concealed and remain undetected until it’s too late,” the black sergeant began. “In these classes, we will make you aware of the many different types of booby traps and how to avoid them. You must also take precautions against supplying Charlie in the field.”

This statement baffled the Cherries, “Who in their right mind would do that?” Bill questioned.

“Shhhh, listen, and he’ll probably tell us.” A person, sitting behind Bill, whispered, poking him playfully in the center of his back.

“Use extreme caution when using trails and roads, entering village huts and tunnels, uncovering caches, moving around on rice paddy dikes, and on frequently used landing zones. These are all coveted locations for booby traps.

“Most of their booby traps are intended to maim and not kill. Charlie uses them for two reasons: the first is to slow down a unit, and the second is the probability of shooting down the unarmed helicopter when it arrives to evacuate the wounded.” Staff Sergeant Jones finished the introduction and stepped to the side.

A few minutes passed and then Sergeant Ramone walked before the class. “Many booby traps used by the enemy are armed with pressure release devices. A person is safe when standing on one, but the second he steps off, the sudden drop in pressure will explode the charge. You could lose a foot, leg, or even die from shock.



“One of the most feared of all booby traps is the Bouncing Betty.” The infantry soldiers perked up at this revelation, leaning forward, anxious to hear more.

“Buried, it has a tripping device sticking out of the ground. This mine has two charges: one will propel a balloon-shaped explosive charge upward, and the second will explode at waist level – throwing shrapnel into the stomach and groin areas. If you survive, chances are excellent that you’ll be left without your manhood to start a family.”

Many of the men reached down and checked their genitals, as if they were doing so for the very last time. Each looked at his neighbor with pursed lips and wide eyes, shaking their heads incredulously.

“Some of Charlie’s booby traps include American-issued items. At times, the infantry soldier is hot, tired, and gets lazy. The long patrols in this climate will force many to discard items to lighten the unbearable loads. They may throw away belts of ammunition, grenades, claymore mines, and M-79 rounds into the jungle.

“However, some of these items can also be left behind quite by accident. After a break on the side of a trail, you may get up and unknowingly have an item fall off or out of your rucksack. Charlie makes it a point to search those trails thoroughly.

“He loves to find grenades, as they are the easiest to convert into a booby trap. All he has to do is to tie them to a tree, attach one end of a trip wire to the pin, and run it across the trail. The thin fishing line is hard to see, but is strong enough to pull the pin from the grenade when somebody walks into it.

“Favorite scrounging areas for Charlie are those locations where Americans get resupplied and those of a former night defensive position. GI’s always have an abundance of supplies and seldom use all they get. Unwanted C-Rations, detonation cord, and personal effects lay discarded throughout these areas. Some are buried, but most are not.”

Sergeant Ramone broke in to continue, “A claymore mine is an anti-personnel plastic mine, eight inches wide by five inches high, and one inch thick. It contains hundreds of one-quarter inch steel balls embedded into the cover, and when detonated, they blow outward, covering an arc of 130 degrees; the killing zone is within thirty feet. Every soldier in the field carries at least two of them, which are set up during the night around defensive perimeters. Sometimes, the soldiers are rushing and forget about them, leaving them behind.

“Heat tabs, used for heating water and food, are another simple luxury a soldier can’t live without in the field. Most of us hate C-Rations as it is, and eating them cold is out of the question. After running out of heat tabs, some soldiers have cracked open the claymore mines and removed the plastic C-4 explosive to heat their food. If it is not compressed, it burns like gasoline. Then, no longer needing the casing with the embedded steel projectiles, the grunts have thrown them away into the jungle. Now what do you suppose Charlie does with them when finding such a prize?”

The class responded in unison, “He makes booby traps!”

“Correct! The United States Armed Forces has fired millions of artillery and mortar rounds since their arrival in this county, and occasionally, some are duds and do not explode. Charlie is very resourceful in finding them and converting them into booby traps as well. He will hang them in trees or lay them on the side of a trail, arming them in one of two ways: by a trip wire or command detonation device. This kind of booby trap can waste an entire platoon.”

Jones cut back in, “We’re all creatures of habit, and many soldiers are injured because of it. At least one of every five soldiers will either pick up or kick a can if it is seen lying on a trail. Charlie knows about this strange American habit. He will booby-trap anything that may appeal to the curiosity of young soldiers or to the fortune hunters looking for souvenirs.

“The punji pit is another type of booby trap. They vary in size from one foot to six feet deep. Pointed stakes as round as pencils line the bottom of the pit. Their tips, dipped in shit, can be fatal if they break the skin. These pits look very natural in the middle of a path once twigs and leaves cover them.

“However, many of them were dug during the 1950’s when the French fought here, and over time, they have long since rotted. If a soldier were to step into one of these older pits, the stakes would crumble and the most he would end up with is a sprained ankle or knee. These pits are rare and again, primarily used earlier in the war.

“Do not accept bottles of whiskey or soda from the villagers, as many of them are VC sympathizers. They grind up glass and put it into the sealed bottles. The shards are so fine it is difficult to see them with the naked eye. If you drink from these bottles, the slivers of glass will tear up your insides.

“For those of you heading out to the bush, let me leave you with a final thought. Burn or bury what you do not use. Never leave it behind for your enemy to find, because they will find some way to use it against you.

“This concludes your in-country training. If you learned anything in the course that will save your life, then we have succeeded in our goals. At this time, we are asking that you return to your hooches, retrieve your gear, and fall out into the assembly area for the last formation. Once everyone is there, you will receive orders and transportation to your new units. Good luck everyone!”

“What outfit are you going to, Bill?” John asked.

“Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry.”

“All right, so am I!”

“Talk about luck, this is great! We’ve been together this long; it would be a shame to break us up now.”

“Yeah, pretty cool, huh?”

They picked up their gear and moved toward one of the trucks.

“Where are you guys headed?” The driver called down from his cab.

“1st Battalion, 27th Infantry,” they replied.

“Hey, that’s the Wolfhounds, you guys really lucked out.”

“Why is that?” John asked.

“Shit, you haven’t heard? The Wolfhounds are the most ass-kicking outfit in this division. They’re so bad the VC post ‘WANTED’ posters with huge rewards throughout their area of operations.”

“No shit!” Bill and John responded together. Excitement lit their faces.

The driver announced, “Throw your shit in the back and jump on board, I’ll run you guys up the road to their area.”

“Thanks!” The two men climbed on board and joined twenty other Cherries.

When they arrived in the new area, the First Sergeant had been expecting them. He was waiting outside the orderly room; a gray building with a large blue board mounted to the front. On top, it read ‘Company "A" Body Count’ in tall white letters. Just below the heading, two

eighteen - inch white painted bones formed an oblong "X"; a human skull hung over the center of the crossed bones. If the board were black, it would have looked like a pirate flag. In any case, it was apparent that the purpose of the board represented death.

Beneath the skull and crossbones, the left column listed each of the platoons, and to their right, a column with four rows of numbers. First Platoon had the highest number of kills with thirty-seven. Fourth Platoon only had twelve.

After the First Sergeant was certain that all the Cherries had enough time to scrutinize the tote board, he introduced himself. "Gentlemen, my name's First Sergeant Michaels, but you can call me Top. I would like to welcome you all to Alpha Company, 1st Battalion Wolfhounds. As you can see by the number of combined kills, we are kicking ass out in the bush."

"How often do the numbers go back to zero?" someone asked.

"We go back to zero each quarter, so what you see listed today is from July first until now. If there are no more questions," he hesitated for a moment, and not seeing any hands raised, he continued, "When I call out your name, raise your hand, so I can see you, and I'll assign you to one of the four platoons."

Top called four names before calling Bill and then John immediately after him. Bill was going to the Third Platoon and John to the First.

"Way to go, buddy," John consoled.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"Let's talk to Top after the formation and see if he'll put us together in the same platoon."

"It's worth a try and we don't have anything to lose if he turns us down," Bill agreed.

"Tomorrow," Top continued after completing the list of names, "you eight men will fly out to our forward Fire Support Base Kien. You will draw out weapons and all the other supplies needed just before leaving in the morning. When this meeting is over, you can head over to the platoon barracks and find an empty cot for the night. Signs on each building will let you know if you are in the right one or not. I want everybody back here in formation again at 0800 hours. Until that time, you are all on your own and welcome to visit the Service Club or PX down the road. You're dismissed!"

Bill and John struck out with the First Sergeant, who quickly shot down their request to be together. Disappointed, they departed in different directions, but agreed to meet again in front of the orderly room in fifteen minutes.

“Are you cool with checking out the sights in this camp?” John asked.

“I’ve been dying to see this place. Between those classes, eating, and sleeping, we haven’t been able to do shit in the last week, Bill drawled.”

“Well, we better get started. We only have a half day to sight see.”

Cu Chi was the main base camp for all units of the 25th Division, and it would take the rest of the day for them to tour the enormous base.

“These rear echelon troops really have it made here. It’s like living in a big city,” John stated matter-of-factly while observing the surroundings.

They found the PX similar to a large department store in the states. A person could buy anything from newspapers to television sets; it even boasted a catalog department.

The Service Club included a library, writing rooms, a TV room, a small cafeteria, and individual recording rooms under one roof.

The recording rooms were a little larger than telephone booths, but inside, a person could listen to his favorite record or cassette tape and relax in private. Many of the soldiers in Vietnam recorded letters to their families on cassette tapes and then mailed them home. Upon receiving a cassette, he could return and play it back on the recorders.

Every night, the Red Cross female volunteers (Donut Dollies) conducted bingo games in the cafeteria. Since it was free, there was usually a large turnout. The prizes were small: normally, a wallet or a transistor radio, but the games were not important. Soldiers only went there to see these American female volunteers. Outside of the hospitals, this was the next best place to see “round-eyed” women.

Just down the street from the Service Club, they found an Olympic -sized swimming pool with both one and three-meter diving boards. Bathing suits were available for anyone wishing to take a dip. It too, was crowded during this late afternoon.

Farther down the road, they discovered an authentic Chinese restaurant. Rumors had it that the food was delicious and a welcome change from the Army chow or Service Club hamburgers.

During the tour, someone mentioned that the forward infantry companies came out of the field periodically and would spend three days in Cu Chi to rest and recuperate (R&R). He said that resting in the security of the base camp was a great way of relieving the built-up stress after grueling weeks or even months in the bush.

John lay wide-awake on his cot. Thoughts of leaving for the firebase in the morning rambled through his head. He had no idea what it would be like and the uncertainty continued to feed his anxiety. He flashed back to an earlier conversation with Bill just prior to calling it a night. Bill was nervous too, and expressed how sad it was that they would not have each other for close support any longer. However, Top assured them that their paths would cross on numerous occasions, not only in the field or in the firebase, but also during R&R in Cu Chi. He said that they should not take the separation, as though they would never see each other again.

John was a pessimist and worried that every time something was going to change, it would not be in his best interest. However, he did realize that, in reality, nothing bad had happened to date. On the contrary, every change had turned out to be a good experience. Perhaps the odds would continue in his favor and tomorrow would be uneventful. He felt somewhat relieved and eventually dozed off, alone in the First Platoon barracks.

The next morning, Top instructed the eight infantry Cherries to empty out the contents of their duffel bags onto the ground, telling them to toss all military clothing forward, one pile for fatigue tops and the other for pants. It was unnecessary for them to take fatigues out to the firebase; clean uniforms were usually available during each resupply. Of those remaining personal items, the First Sergeant cautioned the men to take only what they were willing to carry on their backs. After choosing the most treasured of keepsakes, the remaining items went back into their duffel bags for storage in the company supply building - accessible to the men whenever in Cu Chi.

The company clerk, PFC Jimmy Ray, led the line of men to the supply building. First, they dropped off their duffel bags, then received weapons and a limited amount of gear. Each man signed for an M-16 rifle, a bandolier of two-hundred rounds of ammunition, ten empty magazines, a steel helmet with liner, two canteens, a canteen cup and web gear, which resembled a wide canvas belt, and a set of suspenders.

Top gave them an hour to get everything squared away. Each of them loaded their ten magazines with ammo - placing five into pouches on the web gear belt and the rest back into the green cotton bandolier which hung from the shoulder. After packing and inspecting their weapons, the Cherries moved to the portable water tank (water buffalo) to fill canteens. The

water was still cool from the lower night temperatures, but would soon be warm and difficult to drink. Top wished them well and sent them on their way.

The company clerk escorted the group to the landing pad near Battalion HQ, where three Huey Helicopters waited. Each helicopter had the insignia of the 25th Infantry painted on its nose. Two were completely full of clothing, mail, ammunition, and cases of C-Rations, beer, and ice. The clerk instructed the eight Cherries to load up on the remaining chopper.

John and Bill teamed up and headed toward their transportation.

“These are some bad-ass looking guys,” John observed, looking over the crews.

The two door gunners wore flak jackets and sat on each side of the helicopter. Both were busy checking their M-60 Machine Guns mounted on a swivel to their front, the barrels pointing down and outward from each side. Opening a can and extracting a belt of ammunition, the gunners placed one end into the loading mechanism and then closed the cover to lock the belt of ammo in place. The belt of three-hundred rounds would allow the gunner to fire controlled bursts for up to three minutes if fired upon by the enemy.

The entire crew was dressed in olive drab flight suits with dozens of zippered pockets, and olive green flight helmets with black sun shields. The helmets had internal speakers - a small microphone on a flexible metallic arm attached to the side of the helmet for communication. A cord extended from the helmet to a jack in the wall. When plugged in, the crew could communicate with each other through the internal intercom, as well as broadcast over the radio on many available frequencies. Both pilots wore shoulder holsters with 9mm pistols.

“They look cool as hell,” John commented, taking a seat on the floor just behind the pilot. His legs stuck out of the helicopter and dangled toward the landing skids. Bill took a position in the doorway between John and the door gunner.

“Yep, sure do!” Bill agreed, looking for a way to hold on tight.

When the grunts were all aboard, both door gunners leaned out to check the area around the aircraft. Announcing over the intercom that the rotor was clear, a loud whining noise alerted everyone that the turbine engines were starting. The overhead rotor blades began turning slowly, gaining momentum with each rotation. The helicopter started to vibrate and shake wildly as if trying to break away from invisible bonds securing it to the ground.

It lifted from the ground a few feet, slowly at first, throwing dirt and stones in every direction. When at a height of six feet, the chopper turned 180 degrees, dipped its nose slightly,

and then raced forward. The three-helicopter formation climbed into the sky, heading west and away from Cu Chi.

As the airships gained speed and altitude, the wind rushed in through the open side bay doors, catching the unsuspecting Cherries in a mini-tornado or vortex inside.

“Hey, Polack, hold on to me!” Bill hollered in a panic above the noise of the engines and wind.

“Shit, you hold me! My ass is sliding toward the door and I don’t know if I’m being sucked out or blown out.” John yelled, hoping his voice carried over the loud noise level.

“Come on, Polack, I’m not kidding!” Bill screamed, “I can’t stop myself from sliding out the door.”

“Use your right hand to hold onto the door gunner seat and then loop your other arm in mine. I’ll use my left arm to push away on the wall next to the door.”

That seemed to work, stopping their sliding sensation. However, their faces paled and their eyes were wide with terror.

“Keep doing this; it seems to be working.” John shouted, “Neither of us is leaving this ship until it lands.”

Once the flight left the populated areas around Cu Chi, the sights below were mostly thick jungle and small villages with surrounding rice paddies. Dirt trails snaked everywhere, extending in many different directions. Suddenly, a large clearing came into view. Bunkers, and barbed wire surrounded an area the size of a football field; artillery guns and mortar pits were visible near the center of the compound. There was movement below, and many individuals were walking about shirtless and gathering near the main gate.

The sliding sensation finally subsided as the helicopter slowed and dropped altitude. Bill and John puffed their cheeks out and breathed slowly from pursed lips in an effort to catch their breath.

The flight took twenty minutes. The copter was now preparing to land in an area by the front gate, just outside of Fire Support Base Kien.

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CHAPTER FIVE

As the choppers hovered above the landing zone (LZ), the tremendous back-blast of wind from the horizontal blades sent those items not secured sailing through the air.

Several soldiers were waiting nearby; each faced in the opposite direction, covering his eyes for protection against the flying debris.

When the three choppers finally touched down, the rotors continued turning at a high RPM. One of the nearby soldiers ran toward the lead helicopter with the new arrivals, the rest converging upon the other two supply-filled helicopters.

“Okay, Cherries, it’s safe to get off,” yelled the lone soldier. “Put your shit over there by the first hooch inside of the gate,” he instructed, pointing to a dilapidated square block of boxes and sandbags. “Then give us a hand unloading those two resupply ships,” he added before rushing back to the next bird in line.

A single long line of soldiers led away from each of the two helicopters; crates and bags moved quickly along the human conveyor belt, passing from one pair of hands to another. After placing their gear near the hooch, the Cherries split up and joined their hosts at the end of each line, which by then extended through the gate twenty feet. In five minutes, both birds were unloaded and the contents stacked into piles almost two-hundred feet away.

When the two lines of soldiers dissolved and moved away, the RPM on the choppers increased significantly. In turn, each of them lifted a couple of feet from the ground and then launched into the cloudless blue sky. In less than a minute, the windstorm and loud whooping noises were gone.

Bill and John bumped into one another en route to retrieve their equipment. “Bill, that was tough as hell, I tried everything humanly possible to keep up and not drop anything.”

“In my line, somebody did drop a box, but the line never stopped and stuff continued coming as if nothing happened. The guy wiped himself off and jumped back in without missing a beat.”

“I never did anything like that before,” John admitted. “Things were moving so fast that when I turned back around, the guy in front of me was already dropping his package; I caught a lot of them in midair.”

The other six Cherries rejoined Bill and John near their stored equipment, “I think those other guys are trying to size us up,” one in their group stated.

They all glanced at the group from the firebase and found them to be watching the Cherries, commenting among themselves. There was pointing, snickering, and some giving each other a high-five.

There was a distinct difference between the two groups. The Cherries, dressed in brand new fatigues with creases, looked particularly out of place. Their shirt sleeves were neatly rolled up above the elbow; all but the upper most button secured, tops of T-shirts peeking through from underneath. Hair was short, faces cleanly shaven, and the green canvas sides and black leather boots sparkled in the glaring sun.

The other group, however, was just the opposite and offered the Cherries a preview of how they would soon look. Shaggy-haired and browned from the sun, many were shirtless. Their uniforms were severely wrinkled, bleached by the sun and a thousand laundry washes. Some sleeves were cut off, and all fatigues appeared two sizes larger than needed. None wore belts, their boots were muddy brown and yellow, some not even laced.

Three black soldiers stood out from the firebase crowd; each adorned with jewelry fashioned from black shoelaces. Braided necklaces hung from their necks, with four-inch wide bracelets covering their wrists. One of the soldiers had a braided cross hanging from his necklace. This form of ‘braiding’ was the same taught in arts and crafts at summer youth camps. The square and round versions were always popular when making lanyards or whips with the thin, flat, different colored lengths of vinyl strips. In this case, shoelaces offered a much thicker and larger version. This “jewelry” made a statement, signifying the Black Power movement, and many of the black enlisted men in country wore them.

Suddenly, two black Cherry soldiers left their group and rushed over to greet the other three. They began a ritual handshake referred to as ‘DAP’; hands moved up and down each other’s arms, shoulders touched, fingers snapped, chests beaten, palms slapped, fists bounced, finally ending in a traditional handshake. The last step in this process was for them to take their free hand and encapsulate the clenched hands. The greeting alone between the five of them lasted two full minutes.

One Cherry remarked to the others, “Ain’t this a bitch? I bet after all that, they still don’t know each other’s names.”

The group chuckled and some began to give each other high fives.

A black soldier, the shortest and possibly the youngest, left his group and approached the Cherries. He was lighter skinned than the rest, and he flashed deep dimples when he smiled – a distraction from his curiously missing earlobes. He walked with a slight limp, trying to support his weight on the stronger left leg.

“Are any of you Cherries from Detroit?” He asked, looking over the group.

John said excitedly, “Yeah, I am,” and raised his right hand in acknowledgement.

“Where in Detroit are you from, Chuck?” He asked.

John stopped in his tracks, scrunching his face in disgust. He shook his head from side to side and replied, “First of all, my name’s not Chuck. You can call me either ‘John’ or by my nickname, ‘Polack.’ It’s your choice. And yes, I’m from Detroit and live in the Harper-Van Dyke area.”

The short black man began to laugh, briefly grabbed his crotch, and then turned to smirk at his friends. “Don’t you know that over here in the Nam all you pretty white boys are called ‘Chuck’?” he asked in a singsong manner. “You’ve been born again and should start getting used to your new name.”

“Aw, fuck off!” John responded. “I don’t believe in all that extreme Black Power shit. Some of you people think you own the fucking world. I’ve got lots of black friends back home and none give me any shit like you’re trying to do.”

John backed up a few paces, so he could see both the smaller soldier and the four other black soldiers nearby. He did not want any trouble, but if something were to start, he would be ready. Looking the short soldier straight in the eye, John said, “Why don’t you just go back to your ‘bloods’ and practice up on your DAP? You may be good at it someday! Or better yet, maybe I could teach you.”

Immediately, the black soldiers in the other group started to howl and laugh. They gave each other high-fives and began swaying, leaning into each other, as if they were all going to fall over. Then their catcalls began.

“Hoowee, I know I heard that.”

“Damn, blood, I guess he told you.”

“Look here, we have us a white brother in the group.”

The smaller soldier frowned and lowered his shaking head, not even sure that he heard John correctly; nevertheless, he had been embarrassed in front of his peers.

“Hey, brother man, all white boys from Detroit like you?” One of the black soldiers with a small pick sticking out from his Afro hairstyle asked.

“I don’t exactly know what you mean, but in my neighborhood in Detroit, we all try to get along with each other. Besides, aren’t all of us here on the same side?”

“Yeah, man, don’t sweat it. It don’t mean nothin’ . . . we jus’ fuckin’ with ya.”

The short soldier raised his head and looked to John. “That was a good one, man; I didn’t expect a comeback from you. What platoon are you in?”

“I’m in the First Platoon.”

“Cool. Good for you!” He said and walked over to rejoin his group.

After a few minutes, the veteran group merged with the Cherries, questioning them about news updates, hometowns, platoon assignments, football teams, and that ‘free love’ they heard so much about from back home. The chatter gained momentum and became more intense as the one large group split into several smaller discussion groups.

The soldier who earlier challenged John, approached him slowly. He stood about four inches shorter and leaned into his ear. “Hey man, relax,” he whispered. “My name is Junior Brown. My folks live near Six Mile and Van Dyke, which isn’t too far from where you live, right?”

Caught off guard, John did not answer him immediately. Instead, he continued to stare at the young man, unsure of what may come next. Suddenly, Junior took him by the arm and gently led him away from the groups to an area behind one of the mobile water tanks (water buffalos).

“Look here, John, I’m sorry about that ‘Chuck’ shit earlier. I’m really not like the rest of the brothers, but it’s an image thing and something I have to do when not in the bush.”

“What image?” John asked suspiciously.

“Well, you know, the brothers have been preaching that we are the minority over here, and we need to stand together to protect ourselves. Ever since the riots in Detroit and Newark a couple of years ago, they say it looks bad for a black man to be friendly with a white guy.” Junior shuffled his feet and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. Both glanced over to the mixed groups to see everyone talking to each other and being very cordial.

“That’s a bunch of shit, Junior! If that were true, then why are you here talking to me, and why are the other brothers now acting friendly with everyone else over there?”

“It’s a family thing.” Junior began. “See, as it turns out, all of us are in Alpha Company. This firebase supports the entire battalion; guys are here from every company, and families got to stay together.”

“Aren’t we all one big happy family here?”

“Yeah, in a way we really are. Consider your fellow platoon members as brothers, and then those from other platoons are your cousins. As a company, we’re one happy family. The other companies are like neighbors; you’ll help them out and all, but you don’t really want to get into their business. We watch over our own, regardless of color, both in the bush and here on the firebase. We have to depend on one another and watch each other’s back. We can’t let an issue like race fuck that up. By the way, I’m also from the First Platoon.”

“So you’re telling me that we’re brothers now?”

“Yeah, isn’t it a bitch? But I will tell you, my brother, that you blew me away when you mentioned where you lived. In my four months in the Nam, every time I met someone who said they were from Detroit, they actually lived in Battle Creek, Port Huron, or Flint. When I heard you say that you were from Detroit, I thought, oh no, here we go again. Then when it finally hit me that we really were almost neighbors, it shook me up.”

“We’re actually three miles apart from each other, but even so, I’ve never met anyone in the service that lived so close to me.”

“Why don’t you go and get your gear and I’ll show you around and help you to get squared away? Then we can rap a little about home.”

“Okay, but give me a few minutes first. I want to talk to my friend and let him know what’s going on. He’s in the Third Platoon, so I guess he’s our cousin.”

Both laughed.

John walked over to where Bill and the others were listening to one of the “brothers” speak. When he was within earshot, Bill turned and acknowledged him.

“Damn, Polack, I thought you and that colored guy were going to mix it up.” Bill drawled, “I did keep my eye on you just in case something developed.”

“Thanks, Bill! For a while, I thought it was gonna come to that, too. As it turns out, he’s not a bad guy, and I learned that he’s almost a neighbor of mine back home. He’s also in the First Platoon and is going to help me get squared away.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Bill said, somewhat surprised. “You do know that you’re the only one out of this bunch not assigned to the Third Platoon? You see this guy here.” Bill nodded his head toward the person talking to the group, “he’s from the Third Platoon too, and told us that half of their men were lost last week.”

“How did they lose half a platoon?”

“Morris - that’s the guy’s name - said ten of them finished their tours and went home. Four others were hurt by a booby trap.”

“Did they get hurt bad?”

“He said nobody died, but assured us they won’t be back any time soon.”

“Shit! Booby traps . . . Oh, my god . . .” Both thought back to the final class of in-county training a few days ago.

“Bill,” John said after regaining his composure, “I better get going. I’ll look you up later if I get the chance.”

“Take care of yourself, buddy,” Bill said. They clenched hands - not in a conventional handshake, but in the gesture of youthful brotherhood - chest high with palms together and thumbs intertwined. They pulled themselves together and warmly slapped each other on the back.

John gathered his gear and returned to where Junior waited. Together, they headed for one of the hooches.

“Hey, you and that other guy seem to be really tight,” Junior said. “Have you known each other very long?”

“We met on our first day in the service. We went through Basic and AIT together and then met up again in Oakland. His name’s Bill.”

“That’s pretty cool, and now you both lucked out and got into the same company over here.” Junior held open the makeshift door of the hooch and followed John inside.

“This is some weird shit,” John stated, looking around. “I’ve never seen anything quite like this before.”

“It sure beats sleeping under the stars; you’ll do enough of that out in the bush.”

This 'hooch' was as big as an average-sized bedroom in the modest wood-framed bungalows of John's neighborhood back home. It was constructed from wooden artillery shell crates (each measuring two-feet long by one-foot high by two-feet deep) which were filled with dirt and sand and stacked atop one another, forming the walls of a room that was twelve feet across by seven feet in height.

A picture collection, mainly comprised of Playboy centerfolds in simple wooden frames and protected by clear plastic covering, hung on the walls. This display reflected the efforts of a seasoned soldier who may have already gone home; the newest picture was over a year old.

The ceiling had a base of flat steel plating that traversed the walls and supported six layers of green sandbags. Several four-inch thick wooden beams, spaced evenly throughout the hooch supported the heavy roof. A hundred-bulb string of holiday tree lights hung overhead and provided the only source of light.

The cool dampness of the hooch was a relief from the stifling, muggy heat outside. The air was still and without circulation, but the sweet smell of burning incense emanating from a corner covered the predominantly musty odor throughout.

"Junior, just how strong is this thing?" John asked, glancing around the shelter.

"I don't know. Never seen one destroyed. I have heard that it will take a direct hit from a mortar and stop bullets, but those 122mm rockets and RPG's wreak havoc with bunkers and hooches. I wouldn't want to be in here then."

"Did this place ever get hit?"

"Yeah it did; twice at the beginning of last month. Normally, there's only an infantry platoon providing security for the firebase artillery unit. On that particular day, though, an entire company of soldiers spent the night in the firebase, making it really overcrowded. During that night, the VC put Sappers in the wire. One was careless and hit a trip flare, and it immediately lit up the whole damn area."

John listened, captivated, while Junior continued to relay the details of the assault, fascinated by Junior's knack for storytelling.

"Bunker guards began a mad minute, shooting at shadows all around the perimeter. The rest of the company joined in the firing after reaching the surrounding berm. Now, people have

told me that the sight and sound of all that firepower was awesome. Only one mishap occurred when several claymores went off at the same time; the explosions created a powerful, bright light that temporarily blinded the men on that side of the perimeter. Even with their eyes closed, the outline of the explosion remained and continued to affect their vision for a solid fifteen minutes. They said it was like staring at a bright light bulb for thirty seconds, and then closing your eyes - the glow remained for a long time. Hundreds of tracer rounds, fired during the attack, added to the whole fireworks display. There were strings of moving red lights that flew across the ground and ricocheted into the sky after hitting the ground. The next morning, patrols discovered six VC bodies in the wire, and several blood trails leading away from the firebase. Then, two nights later, after the company had returned to the bush, the firebase was hit with twenty mortar rounds, but only a couple of our guys got hurt and there wasn't much damage."

"Where's the company now?" John asked at the end of Junior's account.

"They're in a place called the Hobo Woods, finding VC and booby traps all over the place. In the two weeks they've been there, they've killed twelve of the enemy and found a couple of caches. But we lost a bunch of guys too; some might be back in a week or so."

"When do you think I'll be going out?"

"They were just resupplied this morning, so you missed your chance. You'll most likely go out on the next one in a couple of days."

"Will you be going out, too?"

"Nah, not for a while. I caught some shrapnel in my leg last month." Junior lifted his pant leg to show John two raw and scabbed cuts on his calf. "I'm still restricted to light duty and pull bunker guard each night until I can walk without pain."

"Wow, how did that happen, Junior?"

"We were mortared during one of our resupplies."

"Were you really scared when you got hit?"

"Scare me? Hell yes, it scared me. Brother, I thought the bottom of my leg had been blown off." Junior hesitated for a moment as he replayed the incident in his mind. "I was happier than shit when I found out there were only two pieces of shrapnel, but they went deep into the muscle. I had to learn how to walk again - it still hurts like hell."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, John cleared his throat and started to ask another question before Junior cut him off. “I know you have a lot of questions. I did too, when I first got here, but save them for later. Okay?”

John bit his lip, took a deep breath, and conceded to Junior with an affirmative shake of the head.

“We should go and see the Executive Office (XO). He’ll want to meet you and know that you’re here.”

Junior led the way out of the hooch. The sudden brightness stopped John in his tracks. Shielding his eyes, he stood there for a moment in the doorway until his eyes adjusted.

“That’s why you got to get some shades like me,” Junior quipped. “Not only do they make you look good, but they help at times like this.”

Both men smiled and began moving again. Junior reached into his pocket and pulled out some dirty and crumpled military bills. “Come on, John, I’ll buy you a cold pop.”

“You know, that’s really funny. This is the first time I’ve heard somebody call soft drinks ‘pop’ since joining the Army. It’s been ‘soda’ from day one and people look at me like I’m crazy if I ask for ‘a pop’.”

“I know the feeling. I still call it ‘pop’, too.”

The young men were suddenly aware that it was good to hear their hometown lingo across the world from Detroit.

They came upon a tent filled with cases of soda and beer. Just inside the entrance, cans of soda filled a fifty-five gallon barrel to the brim, smothering them in quickly melting ice.

“Better get them now while they’re cold,” said the soldier who managed the store.

“He’s got that right,” Junior agreed, “enjoy it while you can. There’s nothing cold to drink in the bush. Everything will be either piss warm or hot.”

Junior paid for the two drinks. John quickly opened his can and took several long swallows.

“Whew! This hits the spot!” John proclaimed, then wiping his mouth with an arm sleeve.

“Not bad for a dime, right?” said Junior. “After you’ve been in the bush for a month, you’d gladly pay ten dollars for an ice cold pop.”

They finished the drinks and threw the empties into a nearby trash barrel. Junior led the way to a large bunker in the middle of the compound; it was the main communications bunker,

where battalion personnel constantly monitored activity in the field. They walked down several steps and entered a room. One of the walls had several maps pieced together into one large map, representing the battalion's current area of operations. A small red 'X' marked the individual locations of each unit in the field; at least thirty of them were scattered across a single area of the map. Several PRC-25 radios lined another wall; a lone soldier looking bored sat idly on a stool and waited for one of them to come to life. He would not have long to wait, it was already late in the day and soon the patrols would begin calling in their night defensive locations. Once deciphered, the soldier could update the map with his grease pencil.

"Hey, L-T," Junior called out, "we have us a new Cherry in the First Platoon. Do you have time to meet him before I help him get squared away?"

"Just a second, Junior," a first lieutenant mumbled from behind a handful of reports. His face, disfigured slightly on the right side, looked like he had experienced a fire during childhood. "I'll be right there."

The XO stood about six feet tall, and could not have weighed more than 150 pounds. His custom -tailored uniform was starched with neat creases that could probably have cut paper. Even his boots were spit-shined and gleaming.

Until a few weeks ago, he had been the First Platoon's leader and had humped the bush with them for nine months - three months longer than normal field duty for an officer. The colonel had to force him out of the field to serve as the XO for the company. He only had six weeks remaining in country before heading home. His job at the firebase was to liaison between the grunts (infantry) in the field and the rear, making sure the troops received everything they needed. Another part of his duty was to write letters to the families of soldiers killed in the company.

He walked over to John and extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Lieutenant Dobry. Kowalski, isn't it?" John took his hand and shook it warmly.

"Yes sir," the Cherry responded.

"Welcome to Firebase Kien. While here, be sure to pick Junior's brain and gather all the information you can from him. He has been in Vietnam a while and knows many of the tricks used in the bush." Junior smiled upon receiving this recognition.

“Tonight, to get your feet wet - so to speak - I want you to accompany Junior on bunker guard. This will give you an opportunity to learn a few things and get your eyes accustomed to working in the dark of night.”

“Great, at least I’ll have some company for a change,” Junior exclaimed.

The L-T continued, “Then, tomorrow afternoon, you’ll accompany a team going on road security. Trucks will transport you about six clicks (kilometers) up the road to a knoll overlooking the main highway to Saigon. The team provides security for the passing convoys. They have been going to the same place for the last two weeks and nothing has happened thus far, so you might actually enjoy the experience. Your team leader will brief you before leaving right after lunch.”

“When will I be going out to the field?” John asked.

“The day after tomorrow, when the company receives their next re-supply.”

After a brief moment of silence, Lt. Dobry asked, “Do you have any more questions for me?”

“No, sir, I don’t. But if I think of any, I’m certain Junior will be nearby to answer them.”

“That’s good enough for me. Junior, would you take John over to Supply and help him draw out the rest of the equipment he’ll need for the bush?”

“No sweat, L-T.”

“And be sure to give him a hand packing his ruck,” the L-T added.

“Shit, sir, it was already on my list of things to do.”

The Lieutenant looked at his watch and noted, “It’s almost dinner time, and you two should head out and grab a quick bite first. Remember, you’ve only got a little more than an hour before you have to report to your bunker.”

“Yeah, can’t work on an empty stomach,” Junior agreed, patting his stomach.

“I’ll see you two later then. Have a good night.”

“Catch you later, L-T,” Junior responded. John waved and nodded his head slightly in response.

“Junior, the L-T appears to be a real decent officer.”

“That he is, and he doesn’t act like the other lifers here. You’ll find all the officers in the bush to be like him. You’ll see what I mean when you get out there.”

After dinner, they headed to Supply and drew out the items that John would need for the field. It took the two of them to carry everything back to the hooch. Only fifteen minutes remained before they had to report for the night guard duty.

“We need to get your stuff together for tonight and head on out. It’s almost that time,” Junior said, noting the time on his watch.

“What do I need?”

“Just take your air mattress, poncho liner, web belt, your 16, and throw the rest of your stuff on the cot.”

With those items in hand, they left the hooch two minutes later.

The perimeter is actually a four-foot high earthen berm, created by a bulldozer when constructing the firebase. It circled the many hooches, tents, and smaller bunkers of the compound. Twelve standard -sized bunkers, eight-feet cubed, were evenly spaced on the perimeter. Supplementary firing positions, nothing more than semi-circular metal culverts covered with sand bags, stood in between each bunker.

To their front, rows of spiral barbed wire extended outward for fifty feet. Single strands of wire, pulled taut at ankle length were interspersed within the other coils.

Trip flares, hanging metal cans with stones, and claymore mines completed the defensive perimeter. Hundreds of detonation wires snaked along the ground through the sharp barbed wire, connecting the claymore mines to triggering devices within each bunker.

A green rectangular box with a telephone receiver cradled on top was also standard equipment within each bunker. A wire attached to the landline phone connected each bunker to the Command Post (CP). During the night, they would contact each bunker periodically to ask for a situation report (sit rep). In turn, anyone on the perimeter could use the same phones to contact the CP for special needs or requests of illumination after seeing or hearing movement within the wire. Mortar crews were on alert all night, as it was usually the busiest time of their watch.

Junior showed John another standard piece of equipment - the Starlight Scope. It looked like a telescope, three inches in diameter and twelve inches long. An infrared light source within enabled the viewer to see in the dark, although everything appeared in a green hue.

Their bunker was number five.

Junior walked to the small opening in the front of the bunker and pointed out to the wire. “The claymores within our area of responsibility are spread out across our front and all points forward,” he said, redirecting John’s attention to several devices lying in a row across a sandbagged shelf under the firing ports. “These are the detonators for each mine. You’ll notice that only the center ones are pointing straight ahead and those on either end are pointing in slight angles to either the right or left.” Junior indicated to them to ensure John understood the difference. “These detonators point toward the mine in that direction. So if you see something in the wire, pick-up the right one, remove the safety and squeeze it.”

John lifted one of them for a closer examination.

“Now, as you can see,” Junior continued, “the clackers are similar in design to the V-shaped exercise grips a person might use to strengthen his hands and wrist, except these offer very little resistance and only a small amount of pressure will collapse the handle. We usually squeeze those two or three times in quick succession until the mine blows.

“This is your first night out here so don’t panic and start blowing up the whole place just because you hear something. Wake me if you get spooked. And above all, don’t fall asleep during your watch.”

John consented with a nod and then looked out into the wire, trying to familiarize himself with the scenery to his front, making a mental picture of everything he saw. Of course, it would all look totally different to him when it was pitch black outside.

Meanwhile, Junior cranked the handle on the landline, waited a few seconds, then spoke into the mouthpiece, “This is number five, manned and secured for the night.”

After Junior returned the handset, he looked over to John. “Another thing I forgot to tell you was not to smoke or light a match in the open. If you must have a smoke, then you have to cover up and light it like this.”

Junior placed a cigarette in his mouth then covered himself with the poncho liner. When he emerged, the lit cigarette was invisible in his cupped hands.

“That’s how you do it,” he continued, “To smoke it, cup your hands over it with the filter sticking out between your thumbs like this.”

The flaming portion of the cigarette was invisible in Junior’s cupped hands; only the butt stuck out.

“You have to bend over low to the ground to take a drag. You’d be surprised how far a lit cigarette or flame can be seen at night; a sniper only has to sight in on the glow for a perfect head shot.”

John tried it.

“My man,” Junior said, complimenting him after the demonstration. “You’ll get better with practice.” Junior looked at his watch and said, “We’ll take turns at watch tonight and split it up every two hours. This way, we can both get some sleep during the night. You can have the first shift; wake me in a couple of hours. You have any questions?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Okay. Don’t fuck it up now.”

Junior lay on the air mattress and covered himself with his poncho liner. It was beginning to get chilly in the bunker, so John covered his back and shoulders with his own poncho liner and then moved upstairs to the top of the bunker. Sitting with his feet dangling from the roof of the bunker, he quietly looked out into the wire.

It was dark enough for the shadows to begin playing tricks on his eyes; he was nervous and jumpy. As the shadows continued to move, John slowly lifted the Starlight Scope to his eyes, hoping not to make any sudden movements that would result in a volley of bullets fired in his direction. Through the scope site, he was momentarily relieved to see that the shadows were only the leaves of a distant tree shaking - and not VC sneaking up on him.

At nine o’clock, John retreated to the inside of the bunker. As he entered, the landline buzzed. This startled him, as he had already forgotten about the phone. Taking a few deep breaths, he walked over to the buzzing phone and lifted the handset to his ear.

“Hello?” he said meekly.

“Number five, this is the CP. Give me your sit rep,” ordered the voice on the other end of the line.

“This is number five, all clear,” John reported.

“Roger out.”

He replaced the handset onto the cradle then returned to continue his vigil in the darkness. At ten o’clock, he woke Junior and took his place on the air mattress.

“Everything go okay?” Junior asked.

“Except for that damn phone scaring the shit out of me, it wasn’t too bad.”

Junior smiled and moved to the front of the bunker.

“Get some rest and I’ll wake you at midnight for your next shift.”

A half-hour passed and John had just dozed off when the sound of a large explosion caused him to jump from the air mattress and move aimlessly through the bunker. “What’s happening?” He hollered in a panic, “Are we getting hit?”

Junior reached out and grabbed John by the shoulder. “Damn, John, settle down. We’re not being attacked.”

John stopped, undecided about what to do next.

“Sit your white ass down and catch your breath,” Junior ordered. “You just scared the fuck out of me by jumping up like that.”

“I – I didn’t mean to,” John stammered.

“I know you didn’t, but you sure got a lot to get used to before you go out into the bush.”

John tried to catch his breath and heard voices from the center of the compound: “Adjust right one-five degrees, charge four, six rounds hotel echo, fire.”

He suddenly realized that the destructive rounds were firing outward and were not enemy rounds coming at them. “Man, those big guns are really loud this close up. Why are they firing anyway?”

“The CP said that Charlie Company spotted flashlights about five-hundred meters from their location. They’ve asked to fire several 105mm rounds around the area and will send out a patrol in the morning to investigate.”

A distant and deep crump, crump, crump noise interrupted Junior’s train of thought when the artillery rounds landed several miles away. A buzzing sound also came from the same direction, almost like a circular saw cutting across a wood board.

“What’s that new sound?” John asked.

“It’s probably a Cobra Gunship. We’ll know for sure in a minute.”

“Now, how in the hell can you tell that from this distance, especially in the dark?”

“You’re a question machine. Just keep facing in the direction that you heard the shells hit. If we’re lucky... look, there, see it?” Junior asked, pointing to a long, thin red line in the sky; it extended from somewhere in the air to the ground.

“Get some Charlie Company!” Junior cheered.

After a second, the end of the red line raced to the ground, and the sky went dark again. These 'lightening strikes' continued for a few moments and then stopped for good.

Every fifth round on a belt of ammunition was a 'tracer round', chemically treated to leave a gas vapor trail. When fired from the mini-guns of the Cobra, the rate of fire was so intense those rounds appeared as a solid line to the target.

"Wow, that looks pretty," John volunteered.

"It is to us, but you can bet your ass the VC doesn't think so. They say that when a Cobra flies over a football field firing that mini-gun, you'll find a bullet in every square foot of that field."

"Damn!" Was all John could say.

After the show, things quieted down and John returned to the air mattress, wide-awake. The rest of the night continued without incident and he became accustomed to some of the nighttime sounds of war, making it easier for him to relax.

The next morning at six o'clock, they were relieved from guard duty. Both decided against breakfast, and instead, headed straight to the hooch to get some sleep.

When John awoke at eleven, Junior was already gone, so he headed toward the mess tent to get a bite of lunch. He did not have much time to spare, as the road security team was leaving at noon.

In the mess tent, John was surprised to see Bill standing behind a serving table, dishing out mashed potatoes from a green insulated container.

"Hey, Bill, got stuck with KP, eh?" He ribbed.

"Yeah, but it ain't bad. It is just like slopping the hogs back home. All I gotta do is pass out this food. The cooks do all the pot and pan washing."

"That doesn't sound all that bad. Were you able to sleep last night with all that racket going on?"

"I slept for shit, John, and lost count of how many times I bounced into the air from my cot."

"You should have seen me! I was on bunker guard last night with that black guy, Junior. Talk about jumpy. It was a real bitch for me."

"What are you doing this afternoon?" Bill asked.

“I have to go out on road security detail in forty-five minutes. I understand we’ll be back by seven, so maybe we can get together then, okay?”

“Sounds good; don’t do anything stupid while you’re out there, Polack. I’ll look for ya later.”

The road security team positioned itself on the top of a small knoll, three miles from the nearest village. Using binoculars, the six men took turns at watching the road and the surrounding rice paddies. The view was so unobstructed, they could see for five miles in any direction.

Throughout the entire afternoon, at least thirty kids surrounded the soldiers at any given time. Most of them were hustlers who tried to sell them anything from soda and whiskey, to women, chickens, and dope. It was like a flea market with everybody making sales pitches. The time passed quickly.

One of the soldiers, a pimple-faced, blonde-haired teenager reading a comic book, looked up and commented to the group, “Be very glad that the kids are out here with us today.”

“Why is that?” John asked.

He dropped his book and looked John in the face. “If they weren’t around, then something would definitely happen out here. The villagers know when Charlie is around, and are smart enough to not let their kids be caught in the middle of a firefight,” he remarked before returning to his ‘Archie’ comic book.

The security team returned to the firebase at 1930. It was later than expected, but the cooks held back some food for the late arriving details. The small tent was crowded so John took his tray of food back to his hooch. When he walked in, Junior was waiting for him.

“Come on, man, I’ve got twenty-five minutes before guard duty, and we’ve got a lot of packing to do before then,” Junior said.

“I didn’t have a chance to eat yet,” John protested.

“That’s too bad. I promised the L-T that I would help you get ready for the bush. You’re going out tomorrow and I won’t have another chance before you leave.”

“Oh, alright . . . let’s get this over with,” John whined.

“First thing we have to do is fit this aluminum frame to your back. All your possessions will be carried on your back so you better make sure it’s comfortable.”

Junior removed the frame after adjusting it properly and then attached an empty ammo can to the bottom of the frame. “Put all your important shit in here, like your wallet, camera, radio, writing paper, and anything else that you want to keep dry and uncrushed.”

Once filled and with the waterproof lid clamped into place, Junior attached John’s rucksack to the top of the frame, allowing the bottom to rest on top of the ammo can.

“John, the main thing to remember is to keep this thing balanced. Everything will have its own place. You’ll have to get rid of this air mattress,” Junior said, tossing it to the side. “It squeaks and makes too much noise in the bush.”

“What will I have to sleep on?”

“Your poncho and the ground, just like everybody else.”

“Aw, that blows!”

“Hey, man, this isn’t a Boy Scout outing,” Junior scolded, “Now, go through this case of C-Rations and pick out the meals you want to eat for the next three days, but take just enough to get by. Don’t take any breakfast meals; it will cut down on the weight. All you’ll really need in the morning is coffee or cocoa, and they don’t weigh shit.”

John separated the meals and placed them on the bottom of the ruck. Next, they rolled up the poncho liner and stuffed it inside, covering the cans of food. There was barely enough room left to fit two claymore mines, wires, and clackers into the pack. John pulled the flap over the bulging ruck and then secured it tightly, utilizing the pouches on the rear and sides of the rucksack, stuffing them full of packets of cocoa powder, sugar, coffee, plastic utensils, heat tabs, and cigarettes.

They added four one-quart canteens next, placing two on each side of the ruck for proper balance and then tied four smoke grenades and trip flares to the straps on the back of the ruck. The handles of six grenades fit nicely into the metal rings on the front of the web harness for easy access. The last thing they did was roll up the vinyl poncho and tie it to the underside of the ammo can with two shoelaces.

“Well, it’s packed. Try it out,” Junior suggested.

John put on his web harness, looped the bandolier of ammunition around his neck, and then tried to pick up his rucksack. Surprised, he was unable to lift it beyond his knees.

“Goddamn!” He exclaimed, struggling with the pack while trying to swing it onto his back.

Junior laughed. “My man, there’s a trick to it,” he said and reached to stop John so he wouldn’t hurt himself. “Put it back on the ground, and sit down with your back against the frame.”

John dropped the pack and sat on the hard-packed ground. He slid backwards across the dirt, stopping when his back touched the frame.

“Place your arms through the straps and pull yourself up by grabbing hold of something. If you can’t locate anything, then turn over onto your knees and try to get up that way.”

John secured the frame to his back and managed to pull himself up, taking hold of a support beam next to him. Once on his feet, he weaved from side to side and almost toppled over before Junior reached out and grabbed him.

“It’ll take some time to get the feel of it. Try walking around some more,” Junior encouraged.

The longer he stayed on his feet, the easier it appeared. After a couple of minutes, John was certain he could manage without falling flat on his face. He flashed a wide grin to Junior.

“How does it feel?”

“Not bad now. These sixty pounds don’t seem all that heavy once you get used to it.”

“Get used to it?” Junior laughed loudly. “Bro, listen up, I’ve been humping a ruck for four months, and I still ain’t used to it. Wait until you start humping that thing out in the bush. You will swear to God it weighs three-hundred pounds. It won’t be long before you cut down to one meal a day and look for other ways to make the load lighter.”

Junior looked at John with admiration for the way he tried to conceal his strain under the heavy load.

“Okay, now put the ruck down. Later, you can practice more. I only have a couple of minutes left to finish up.”

John dropped the ruck to the ground and looked at Junior in disbelief. “I thought we were all done.”

“We’re done with the ruck, but now we have to get you ready. Take off your shorts, socks, and belt, and get rid of them,” Junior ordered.

“Get rid of them?” John asked. “Are you joking?”

“No joke, my man. Believe me when I tell you that you do not need them in the bush. With all that humping and sweating out there, you will rub your balls raw if you wear drawers. And not wearing a belt will prevent the ticks and leeches from getting under your belt line and burrowing into your skin. Socks will only give you problems in the bush. Without them, your feet will stay drier and you will not have as many blisters. You can either take my word and do it now, or learn it the hard way.”

John was not interested in arguing with Junior, so he started removing the items as Junior had suggested. When finished, he reached for his tray of now-cold food.

“Not yet, brother,” Junior cautioned. “We still have one last item remaining on the checklist.”

“Now what else could be left?”

“Take your shoelaces halfway out of your boots.”

Without questioning him any further, John untied his first boot and looked up to Junior with a look of uncertainty. “Why am I doing this? I’m not interested in braiding my shoelaces. This silver chain around my neck is all the jewelry I need,” he stated sarcastically.

“Would you just knock off the shit and do what I tell you? I’m already late for guard duty,” Junior shot back.

“Okay Junior, now what?” He asked when both boots were half laced.

“Take the dog tags from the chains around your neck and attach one to each shoelace. Then, retie your boots.”

“Won’t they get all muddy on my boots?”

“They’ll get muddy, all right. At least they won’t rattle as they do now hanging from your neck. You’ll find out how important noise discipline is in the bush.”

John sat back and stared at Junior after tying both boots. “I’m afraid to ask, but are we finally through?”

“Yeah man, go ahead and eat your chow. Try and get some practice with that ruck tonight; it’ll make it a little easier on you tomorrow.”

“Sorry I was so impatient, Junior. All bullshit aside, I really do appreciate all your help. I couldn’t have done it by myself.”

“That’s okay, what are brothers for, anyway? Someday, you’ll be able to help out a Cherry and he’ll be grateful and thank you for your help and understanding. Like I told you yesterday, we have to take care of each other.”

Junior gathered his gear for guard duty and was about to rush out of the door when John intercepted him. “Junior!” He called, placing his hand onto the black man’s shoulder. “I’m starting to get a little uptight. Will it be really bad out there?”

Junior stopped cold. “No sweat, you’ll do just fine. Respect and listen to the old timers who have been here for a while, and do exactly what they tell you. Who knows, it might be weeks before you have your first firefight, and then again, it may be tomorrow. Just don’t go out there thinking you are John Wayne, because it will get you killed. Get some rest tonight and don’t worry about it. I gotta go. I’ll see you in the morning before you leave.” Junior turned with his gear in hand, and quickly dashed out through the doorway.

In the morning, everyone struggled with their gear and stumbled out of the main gate toward the helipad. When the Cherries arrived, every one of them immediately fell to the ground, exhausted. Alpha Company was not in a position yet to accept the re-supply, so the group had to sit in the hot sun and wait for over an hour.

The engines started, thus signaling an end to the uncomfortable wait. The Cherries awkwardly got to their feet and quickly boarded the choppers to wait once again. John and Bill found themselves sitting in positions identical to those of their first helicopter flight. A look of dread and despair came over them.

“Maybe our rucksacks weigh enough to hold us in.”

“Let’s loop arms anyway. It seemed to work the first time.”

“Okay, at least we know what to expect this time.”

When looking toward the gate, John could see Junior running through the whirlwind toward his chopper.

“Thought you’d leave without me saying goodbye?” He yelled over the noise of the engines.

John could only shake his head and try to force a smile.

“Good luck, Polack! I’ll see you soon.”

It was the first time that Junior ever called John by his nickname. John knew at that moment that, not only was Junior his mentor, he had also become his buddy.

The door gunner motioned for Junior to back away. The RPM increased wildly and the chopper began to rise. In an instant, Junior was gone.