

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 (MPs) held the protesters at bay, creating 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 occasionally stopped to reconsider their options seriously.

John Kowalski had passed through the main gate earlier in the day. He wandered through the massive facility, a converted airplane hangar, searching for 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 maneuvered 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 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 toward the thirty-foot ceiling. Each enclosure held a dozen bunk beds, and 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 quite active and noisy compared to the morgue-like atmosphere he had just left. 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 players were having difficulty with their games, with 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 hair stubble. 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 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 behind him. A young soldier, who looked fifteen at most, ended up sprawled out on 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.

Enraged, he looked at the kid with fire in his eyes. "You dumb motherfucker! I had this game in the bag."

"It wasn't my fault," the kid cried out, his voice shaky. I got pushed here by those other guys," he pointed to the 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. He reached behind the kid and tried 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 and ushered the young kid behind the pack, quickly engulfing him. One of them stated in a southern drawl, “Why don’t you boys pick on somebody your 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 MPs forced their way through the crowd and arrived 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 and faced 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 their 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 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 no bad time on my record. I want to serve my year and get back home.”

“So, 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 normal, John turned toward 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 friend from training.

They embraced warmly like long-lost relatives.

“Polack, you son of a bitch, am I ever glad to see you.” The gaunt soldier wrapped his arms around John and slapped his back several times.

“I am too, Bill. How the hell are you?” John reciprocated before separating.

“I’m good. When did you get here?”

“About four hours ago. What about you?”

“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,” Bill admitted sheepishly. “I was so afraid of flying that I checked the train schedule and found that I had to leave a couple of days early to be here on time.”

“How did you get home from Fort Polk?”

“I took the 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 going to Vietnam.”

“I know and thought hard about that on the way here. I’ve got a perfect plan – I’ll get drunk and pass out. That way, somebody can 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 paperwork was a bummer – there must have been twenty-five forms to fill out!”

Bill produced a broad 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 - 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.

“I didn’t like it when we had to ship all our clothes and stuff home. What a hassle! And these new jungle fatigues and boots are so different from those in training.”

“Yeah, pockets everywhere! We do look good, though!” Bill said, striking a pose.

John would not have been more surprised if Bill’s ball cap came off his head and twirled in the air. Bill flexed his arms and posed like a bodybuilder 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 Are Us.” 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 covered 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. Just so happens that 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, 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 some new neighbors move in.”

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

“Yeah, as a 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 not a day had passed without somebody wanting to fight him. After the cops had jailed him a second time for disorderly conduct, he went and signed the papers.”

“The world is filled with jerks. It's too bad he had to volunteer for Nam to escape 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 to school and back. 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 promised to visit Bill in the hills of Tennessee one day, but only if he agreed to see him in Detroit. Bill was ecstatic and could not wait; he periodically reminded John 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. One of the women looked over at me and started to cry. This made the rest of them get up and run over to hug me.”

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

“Well, you know me.” John continued, “I put on the brave act and told them that nothing would happen to me while I was in Vietnam. I told them 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 to my bedroom and tried to sleep but 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 at 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 was the only military passenger. The flight attendants and fellow passengers made him feel special. When they heard he was going to Vietnam, they bought him drinks, offered him magazines and candy, and wished him good 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 hollered, shaking him a few times.

Startled, John jumped up from the bed quickly and bumped 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, it’s 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, we didn’t need the both of us to check today’s shipping manifest.”

“Were our names on it?”

“Yep, we’re leaving for Vietnam at ten o’clock tonight.”



CHAPTER TWO

“This is your captain speaking,” the voice announced on the public address system within the Pan-American jet. We will land in Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, in about thirty minutes. They report sunny skies, temperatures of 97 degrees, and 100% humidity.”

The cabin suddenly quieted. “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 fifteen hours between Vietnam and the west coast of the United States. For example, in Oakland, where many of you started your journey, it’s 8:30 pm Friday and 11:30 am Saturday here in Vietnam. The date is August 7, 1970.”

Again, some comments about a time machine and blasting into the future echoed from the rear seats. Others got busy changing the time and date on their watches.

“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 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 looked at his watch and tried to do the math. “Bill, do you know it took us almost twenty-six hours to get here?”

“Hard to believe. 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 you’d end up in China if you dug straight down in your backyard?”

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

“Nobody. 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 pass below the cabin window, hoping to see more than clouds and ocean.

Before leaving Oakland, an Army Doctor gave Bill some tranquilizers to take before 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 later tell everyone that his favorite part of flying was the takeoff and how he enjoyed the same sensation 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 final destination. After flying over water most of the time, it was a pleasure to see the 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, cutting 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 plane’s altitude gradually dropped, the vistas below changed in shape and 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. The aircraft had an absolute hush, except for the pounding of two hundred rapid heartbeats hammering in unison.

Suddenly, a loud noise signaled the cabin door opening at the front of the plane. Everyone on board fidgeted, trying to get a better look at the doorway.

An Air Force Major walked through the opening. He wore his best Khaki 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 and lifted the microphone from the mounting plate on the wall.

“My name is Major Brown, and here are Captain Willis and Captain Sharkey.” He acknowledged each when mentioning their names. “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 orderly. After disembarking this aircraft, I expect to see everyone joined up and standing in four perfect ranks out on the tarmac. We will proceed to the baggage area inside the civilian terminal once everyone is present and accounted for. You will secure your duffel bags and then proceed directly to the area marked ‘Customs.’ The officials will have you empty the contents of your bags onto counters and perform a standard body search. The MPs 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 nervousness. Some frowned and rolled their eyes, while others stirred anxiously in their seats, looking panicked.

The major continued, “If anyone is trying to conceal contraband, I strongly suggest you drop it in your seats as you leave this aircraft. There will be no questions, and nobody will look for you afterward. 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, where I can guarantee you will serve some hard time for your foolishness.

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

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

As they moved up the aisle, 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 from Oakland?

“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. There were a lot of shady characters in those terminals, and I remember seeing lots of money flashed around.”

“You’re right, now that you mentioned it. I can remember overhearing some guys talking at our stopover in Guam. They planned 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 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 wasn’t

easy 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 airport areas to wait in lines for their takeoff.

Bill and John cleared Customs quickly and walked out to the waiting buses. The vehicles were identical to those used during training on the American bases. Like everything else, they were painted olive green, with one distinct difference—no glass windows—instead, bars and chicken wire covered each framed opening.

The two close friends sat 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 were loaded, the drivers closed the door and started the engine.



The infamous MP convoy escorts in “Rat Patrol” Jeep.

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 loading them and ensuring they were in proper working order while the other guy casually talked into the radio handset.

“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 badass 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. The new arrivals began choking and gasping for clean air as if on cue. The passengers quickly pulled out handkerchiefs or used shirts to cover their noses and mouths to filter some breathable air from the thick red fog.

The convoy appeared to be traveling through a corridor. A ten-foot-high barbed wire fence ran alongside both sides of the road. Hundreds of small, straw-roofed huts, about the size of a single-room lakeside cabin in the States, stood as far back as the convoy 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 stood near the fence and watched the parade of buses pass; everyone 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 nuts.”

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

“The Areca nut grows wild in the husks of some trees around the country. These people cure the nuts and slice them into sections. They wrap a few slices in betel leaf for chewing and add 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 standing along the fence and chewing their cud. Their heads turn as you pass, and they watch 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 villagers stood 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, stood 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 balanced long poles on their shoulders with large bamboo baskets attached to each end. They wore black nylon pants and oversized shirts covered with dried mud and stains. All wore straw conical hats that helped shield their faces from the sun’s intense rays, 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.

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaamnnnnn!” 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 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 or so. Some held half-naked babies in their arms, and others shouted at the fighting youths. A few

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 person passing so far on the convoy was either old or very young. No teenage boys were hanging around on the corners, and no young or middle-aged men were 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 no one 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 can’t imagine fighting a war in my neighborhood back home. It must be hard to focus daily when you don’t know if your property will still be there or if your family is okay after a firefight. 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. The gate reminded the young soldiers of Fort Apache, as portrayed in old Western movies. An overhead sign read, “Welcome to the 90th Replacement Battalion—Long Binh.”

CHAPTER THREE

As the buses unloaded, a trim and muscular Army Captain stood on a platform, patiently waiting for the group to form into a 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 shifted his two-hundred-pound, rock-solid frame from one foot to the other, appearing 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 megaphone and began to speak.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” he began. “I’m Captain Richards, and I’d like to welcome 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), the currency Americans use 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.

“Shipping formations will be at 0800, noon, and 1600 hours tomorrow. 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 remaining behind will work on projects around the center. Until then, you will be on your own and free to use all available facilities. Are there any questions?” Scanning the formation, I noticed that there were 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 that 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 in through the net windows.

John stood waiting for Bill in the shade of a palm tree just outside the money-changing building. The afternoon sun hung low in the royal blue sky and was strong enough to make standing outside in a shaded area uncomfortable. When Bill exited, they 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 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 survey the area.

“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 sizeable, purple-roofed 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!”



The author and three friends from AIT. (author on far left)

“Cool. I’m 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, smiling politely, awaiting their order.

Both quickly scanned the single-page menu, framed in black leather and covered with clear plastic. The 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, returning the menu 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 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 close to mine." They both laughed.

The atmosphere in the restaurant was a refreshing change. It was so peaceful that a person would find it difficult to believe a war was going on outside the base 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 covering the stench of cigarette smoke and spilled beer. A jukebox played different 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 arrives."

They jumped up and hurried over to the bank of nickel machines. Once there, neither of them knew how to load their paper money into the machines because only a coin slot was available. The new military payment certificates were all paper, including 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's window.

They exchanged a five-dollar MPC note for one hundred nickel tokens and approached one of the ten machines. Playing three tokens a pull and winning a few here and there, they could only play for seven minutes before losing all their coins. Disappointed, they returned to the restaurant table to find their food and beers waiting.

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

Farther up the road, 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, 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 between his heavy breathing.

No seats were available, so the two migrated between the stage and bleachers, joining other excited youths tightly packed into the small, crowded space.

“Do you believe this?” Bill asked. “This is the first time I’ve 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 on 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 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 backward and pumped 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 to prevent them from rushing to the stage and grappling the girls.

The band had written this wild song; none of the Americans had heard it. 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 aside and joined the women in the small room. The audience was still excited, and now realizing that the concert was over, they 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 curtain 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, with 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 calm and sentimental. Many in the audience sang along and swayed sideways to mimic the singers on stage.

Bill and John left before the song's end to avoid the rush back to the barracks.

Almost everybody was asleep when they arrived except for six people at the far end of the building. Two of them were sitting on John's bunk. Their conversation stopped, and they all looked up to the new arrivals when the two soldiers reached them.

"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; 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. He started over from the beginning to benefit their new acquaintances.

"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 to the nearest table, where this forever-smiling chick awaited me. There were at least nine other guys getting massages at the time. Man, that chick had magic fingers. It felt so good in the fifteen minutes she worked on me that I almost fell asleep. She was just about finished working on my legs when she asked 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 told me twelve bucks."

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

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

“Come on, guys,” Paul pleaded. “Let me finish.”

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

“Okay, well, I told her I only had five bucks in my wallet, so I’d return another day. Then she says, ‘No sweat, GI, I do for five dorrars.’ Shit, I thought that it 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 off that table, embarrassed as all hell, and snatched back my towel, wrapping it around my waist. She looked hurt, and other people in the room looked at us. I caught my breath, leaned over, my mouth inches from her ear, and calmly told her I did not want her to do this right in front of everyone. She smiled, looked into my eyes, and asked if I was a Cherry boy.”

The small group could not take it anymore and began to howl and roll around on the two cots. The racket started waking some sleeping soldiers, who 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 badass, why don’t you 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 discussing other topics for the next few hours. As they conversed, John could not help but notice the diverse regional accents and slang terms he encountered for the first time in his life. They fascinated him and made him feel far 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 travel north to 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 reading all the names on the manifest, Bill and John quickly left the formation 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 listed on a waiting list posted on the door. Neither had any idea how long it would take to rotate through the list, but they added their names 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, a post office, two basketball courts, a baseball diamond, and the notorious massage parlor. It was like visiting a recreation center or youth camp, with the only signs of war being the bunker line and barbed wire.

After the noon manifest reading, the remaining soldiers filled the holes and tightened the formation. Several Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) weaved through the formation, grabbing personnel for various details. A young buck sergeant, looking younger than most of the men on the street, strolled through the formation and

chose Bill, John, and a dozen other soldiers to paint details. This time, nobody could escape.

John and Bill's group painted in the hot sun all afternoon. Ironically, they painted the fence enclosing the Reception Center's swimming pool. The water teased and beckoned 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. Two service club attendants immediately 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 sounded 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, while others 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 keeping up with the machine’s payout challenging. 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’s 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 that neither could stand without support.

“Oh shit, I can’t see things 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, but we must find our way back to our bunks.”

“I 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 do pass out.”

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

“Hey, assholes 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, escaping through open doorways. Some thought it would be faster to escape by diving through the openings in the sidewalls. In doing so, the mosquito netting pulled from the walls and encapsulated them in nylon cocoons, further enhancing their panic. Outside, the men bumped into one another, confused and unsure 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 tried to control their breathing, gasping as if 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 in different dress levels. Some were barefoot, wearing nothing except green boxer shorts—one even wore a helmet. Others wore just a pair of trousers and boots, another group only a shirt and shorts, and three men 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 heavyset 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 reassuringly.

“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 because I’m in the kitchen cooking all night. 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 drawers,” said another.

Five minutes later, the “All Clear” sounded. Everyone began to file out of the bunker, returning to the barracks – thankful but angry about the inconvenience. Almost everyone dropped onto their bunks but could not 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, which had its basecamp near Cu Chi, 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 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 the back of the neck from the blazing sun. They were lighter and more practical than the traditional baseball caps of 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 unsure what the patch looked like, but thankfully, they 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 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 badass, 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 considered the knife to be much more than a decoration. However, they would later discover that it was the most valuable tool they 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 was piled upon the bed of each truck to protect the riders if they 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. 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 protection for the parade of five trucks.

They passed endless rice paddies, where the Vietnamese painstakingly harvested their crops in knee-deep water. Young boys rode on top of enormous 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. 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 their fellow Americans, waving enthusiastically to the convoy behind 50-caliber machine guns.

Traveling at speeds in excess of 40 mph, the convoy quickly reached Cu Chi, home of the 25th Infantry Division.



CHAPTER FOUR

After leading the convoy deep inside Cu Chi Basecamp, the Rat Patrol jeeps concluded their mission. All 126 Cherries stood in the trucks, trying vainly 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 brushed each other’s backs, loud voices on the side of the trucks barked 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 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 leaped from the trucks and moved quickly to form four ranks, unsure if punishment for not being online fast enough was forthcoming.

“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 in large white letters on the front. 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, bouncing 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. We will review your past training and teach you about your enemy during this time. 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.

“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 the first two hooches but succeeded 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 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 before 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 some reluctance. “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 for the 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. We’ll have to spend one less day in the field.”

Bill briefly considered that statement and 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 will 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 day’s first class.

“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 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!”

Having heard enough, the instructor 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 save your lives!” He pushed both hands into his pants pockets and walked among the group. “Sure, you’ve done this a hundred times in training 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 is rushing over the wire to kill you. Can you 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, 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 while I’m here.”

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

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 held one.”

“Isn’t that too odd 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 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 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 fired his weapon. They hit many targets; bits and pieces of cardboard sailed through the air and fell onto the already littered ground. Puffs of dirt rose 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 waited 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 cleaning 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 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 could also fire the LAW, a two-piece plastic disposable rocket launcher. When it 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 sat 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 held a short rifle in one hand; wood covered most of the barrel and stock. A half-circle, twelve-inch extended black magazine protruded from the housing, an inch in front of the trigger guard. The shooter could 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 lay horizontally, secured to the weapon by a hinge.

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

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

Bill 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. Now, let me introduce you to the Russian-made AK-47 Assault Rifle. This little beauty is your enemy's primary weapon."

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

"Sometimes, 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 more extensive, has a lot of power, and does 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 its path."

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 unused. If Charlie sticks you with this, you'll be in a world of hurt."

He replaced the weapon on the table and then looked up to scan the many faces in the class. Most showed concern.

"During the last six months of training, you have become accustomed to the sound of your rifles. Today, I will fire this rifle and other enemy weapons to demonstrate the distinct sound each one makes. You must 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 firearm 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 have always been 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 to acknowledge 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 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, you just heard

the sounds of your enemy's weapon when firing away from you. Now you can hear the same weapon when the firing is directed toward you."

He moved the class up the range, halfway 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 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 he could barely contain his laughter by this point. "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 turned around and kicked at the dirt, hoping to create a dust cloud large enough for the Sergeant to 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. In addition to the AK-47, his arsenal also included an RPD Machine Gun, SKS Rifle, and Chicom Pistol. When he was confident that his class had learned the lesson for the day, he called out, "The demonstration is over; everyone hustle it 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 convincing. Before we break for the day, I have one final demonstration for you." Staff Sergeant Jones approached 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 deadly and feared by the mechanized and aviation units, although the enemy uses it in routine firefights. It is like our LAW and can penetrate seven inches of armor before exploding. This weapon is responsible for shooting down helicopters and destroying or disabling APCs 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. A couple of extra rounds, each resembling a pineapple attached to a stick, lay on the ground.

Jones leveled the weapon, aimed through the sight, and fired. The men could see the speeding missile and its trailing exhaust; they watched it 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 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 following few classes were the most intriguing of the entire week—they dealt with enemy boobytraps and their deployment.

Sergeants Jones and Ramone were the primary instructors.

“Most of the time boobytraps are very cleverly concealed and remain undetected until it’s too late,” the black sergeant began. “In these classes, we will inform you of the many different types of boobytraps 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 frequently used landing zones. These are all coveted locations for boobytraps.

“Most of their boobytraps 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 Sergeant Ramone walked before class. “Many boobytraps used by the enemy are armed with pressure release devices. A person is safe when standing on one, but the sudden pressure drop will explode the charge as he steps off. You could lose your foot or leg or even die from shock.

“One of the most feared boobytraps 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 boobytraps include American-issued items. Sometimes, the infantry soldier is hot, tired, and 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 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 scour those trails.

“He loves to find grenades, as they are the easiest to convert into a boobytrap. He has 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.

“Charlie's favorite scrounging areas are those locations where Americans get resupplied and those of a former night defensive position. GIs always have an abundance of supplies and seldom use all they get. Unwanted C-rations, detonation cords, 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, set up during the night around defensive perimeters. Sometimes, the soldiers rush and forget about them, leaving them behind.

“Heat tabs, used for heating water and food, are another 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 crack open claymore mines and remove the plastic C-4 explosive to heat their food. If it is not compressed, it burns like sterno. Then, no longer needing the casing with the embedded steel projectiles, the grunts have thrown them into the jungle. What do you suppose Charlie does with them when finding such a prize?”

The class responded in unison, “He makes boobytraps!”

“Correct! The United States Armed Forces has fired millions of artillery and mortar rounds since they arrived in this country, and occasionally, some are duds and do not explode. Charlie is very resourceful in finding them and converting them into boobytraps. 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 boobytrap can waste an entire platoon.”

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

“The punji pit is another boobytrap. 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 1950s 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 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 that seeing them with the naked eye is difficult. 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 achieved our goals. We ask 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; breaking us up now would be a shame.”

“Yeah, pretty cool, huh?”

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

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

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

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

“Why is that?” John asked.

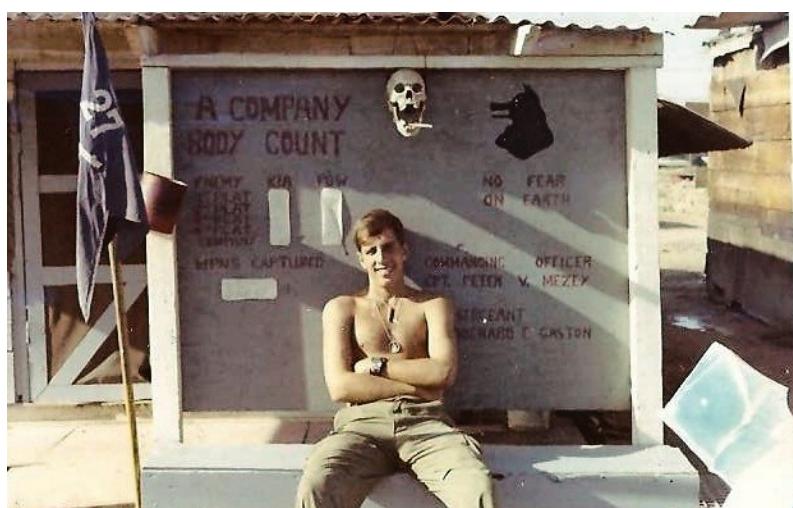
“Shit, you haven’t heard. The Wolfhounds are the most ass-kicking outfit in this division. They’re so bad the VC have ‘WANTED’ posters with huge rewards hung throughout their area of operations.”

“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.

The First Sergeant had been expecting them when they arrived in the new area. 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 black 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. It would have looked like a pirate flag if the board were black. In any case, it was apparent that the board’s purpose represented death.



Scoreboard for Company A Wolfhounds in Cu Chi

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.

He introduced himself after the First Sergeant was sure that all the Cherries had enough time to scrutinize the tote board. “Gentlemen, my name’s First Sergeant Michaels, but you can call me Top. I 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 return to zero?” someone asked.

“We go back to zero each quarter, so what you see listed today is from July 1st until today. If there are no more questions,” he hesitated for a moment. 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 went 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 ends, you can head 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. I want everybody back here in formation again at 0800 hours. Until then, you are all on your own and welcome to visit the Service Club or PX. You’re dismissed!”

Bill and John struck out with the First Sergeant, who quickly rejected 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 base?” 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 sightsee.”

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

“These rear echelon troops 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. There, customers 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 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 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 typically small:

a wallet or a transistor radio, but the games were unimportant. Soldiers only went there to see these American female volunteers. This was the next best place to see “round-eyed” women outside the hospitals.

They found an Olympic-sized swimming pool just down the street from the Service Club with 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 sleeping in the security of the basecamp 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 recalled an earlier conversation with Bill before 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 numerous times in the field, the firebase, and during R&R in Cu Chi. He said they should not take the separation as they would never see each other again.

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

The following day, Top instructed the eight infantry Cherries to empty 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. They didn't have to take fatigues 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 a liner, two canteens, a canteen cup, web gear resembling a wide canvas belt, and a set of suspenders.

Top gave them an hour to get everything squared away. Each loaded their ten magazines with ammo, placing five into pouches on the web gear belt and the rest into the green cotton bandolier hanging 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's nose bore the insignia of the 25th Infantry. Two helicopters were full of clothing, mail, ammunition, C-rations, beer, and ice cases. 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 closed the cover to lock the ammo belt. 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 crew wore olive green-colored 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, sitting 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 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 through the open side bay doors, catching the unsuspecting Cherries in a mini-tornado or vortex.



First helicopter flight to FSB Kien

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

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

That worked, 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 jungles 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. Movement was observed below as soldiers moved about, many walking 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 to catch their breath.

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



Firebase Kien from the air
