# BETWEEN THE LINES

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**Letter # 1**

*October 18, 1968*

*Hi everybody,*

*Well I've been in the Nam for over 24 hours, and it's been raining the whole time. I'm still in Da Nang so I don't have an address which you can write me at.*

*I've been assigned to the 5th Marines, 1st Mar Div. But because of the rain, the helicopters cannot get us into the area. It could be one day or one week before I get to my unit. There's no hurry anyway cause right now 1/5 is being hit very hard by NVA. We seen a chopper come in from 1/5 with medevacs. Right now I'm sleeping on a cot with a roof over my head and a wooden floor, so I'm doing all right. The air field is right beside my hut and those phantoms and skyhawks fly out of here 24 hours a day. About 80 go out an hour.*

*On my flight out to Okinawa, we stopped in Hawaii for 45 minutes. What I saw of Hawaii was little, but it was awful hot. I can say I've been at least. Okinawa was real nice and the weather was a cool 90. The towns were worse than Mexico, so you know I had a real good time. I like places like that. You really learn a lot.*

*About 5:00 am today the lights went out on the Air base and Marine base. Then about three rocket rounds fell about 3 miles away. That's about the only thing I've seen so far. I'll write tomorrow. I don't want ya to worry cause I'm all right and can handle myself.*

*Call Sharon and tell her I'm okay.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Sharon was my girlfriend.

**Letter # 2**

*19 Oct 68*

*Dear Mom & Dad & kids,*

*Well, the rain finally ceased enough for the choppers to get in and get us out to our regiment.*

*My address is as follows:*

*PFC O'Connell P.E. 2422671*

*3rd BN 5th Marine Regiment 1st Mar Div*

*Mike Company*

*FPO San Francisco, Calif. 96602*

*The mail should get to me all right with that address.*

*I am at a place called An Hoa. It's a base situated about 30 miles from Da Nang (I don't know in what direction) and built in the middle of a mud puddle.*

*My company just came back from a 27 day operation and got hit pretty bad.*

*Tomorrow I start 4 days of orientation and then I'm just like the rest of them.*

*Well, the light situation seems to hinder my writing for now. I'll try and write tomorrow.*

*Take care & don't worry.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I've always been struck by the line, “Tomorrow I start four days of orientation, and then I'm just like the rest of them.”

I had watched Mike company come back into An Hoa from an operation. The Marines looked nothing like any I had ever seen before. The spit-shine and polish was long gone. Every marine was weighted down with enormous packs on their backs. They plodded along. They could hardly lift their feet when they walked, and most of them needed a shave. Their trousers were rolled up to just below their knees. The bare skin between the top of the socks and the roll of the trousers was caked with a red-tinted mud.

**Letter # 3**

*20 Oct 68*

*Dear everybody,*

*Well it's another rainy day in Vietnam. When they say it's been known to rain 40 days and nights you can believe it.*

*Today I had to fill sandbags and build a bunker where a mortar round came in last night. No big worry. It was at least 300 yards away. That's for really!!!*

*Tomorrow I draw my rifle and packs and the rest of my gear.*

*You wouldn't believe this but I've slept better in Vietnam than I have in a long time. The food ain't been too bad but the only thing is that supplies are hard to come by so there is only two meals a day. Everybody says An Hoa is gonna be another Khe Sanh. I hope not.*

*A lot of guys are getting souvenirs off the NVA like crazy, so if I do I'll send it home to Tommy. I've seen NVA watches, belts, hats, and canteens that are engraved.*

*Well got to go for now. Take care & God bless ya all.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Hard to believe one could be in Vietnam for days without a weapon, but it was true.

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Tommy was my kid brother. He was fifteen at the time. He wanted to become a Marine when he turned seventeen, but drugs changed his mind for him in the two years that preceded his seventeenth birthday. A heroin addict, he would succumb to AIDS before he turned forty.

**Letter # 4**

*23 Oct 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Well, I'm sorry I haven't written in the last two days but I had to get resupplied with writing material, that is, run down to the PX and buy it.*

*Well, it finally stopped raining but the NVA have taken advantage and started their move towards Da Nang. The artillery as of this morning has killed 100 and all the companies have moved out again to stop them from going any further north. That's about it on the war scene.*

*Would you believe I bought a case of "RC Cola" today? It only cost me $2.40 or $.10 a can. Over here it don't matter whether it's hot or cold, but unfortunately it's hot. When ya open the can it blows over so much you almost lose your head. Plus I bought a carton of cigarettes for $1.20. That's pretty cheap.*

*I wish you could see me because ever since I left Mass I've been growing a mustache. Don't tell me where it's coming from but ya can definitely see it.*

*Oh, no big thing, but I finally got to take a shower after a week. Boy, did I stink. The dirt must have been a 1/4" thick.*

*Other than that, I'm in the best of health and feel real great. There is no need to worry as I'm in the rear until I finish school which is Sunday. But even after that I don't want ya to worry.*

*Well, got to go.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Have ya received the allotment?*

**—Between the Lines—**

The first time I ever shaved in my life was at Parris Island, and even that night, standing before the sink and mirror, not one whisker, or even peach-fuzz, could be seen on my face. I shaved because the Drill Instructor had ordered me to. The only thing shaving did for me the first time was to turn my face into a bloody mess.

———

What I was calling a mustache was nothing more than sparse, individual whiskers. I was trying to impress my father, wanting him to think I was a man, able to grow facial hair.

**Letter # 5**

*24 Oct 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*This letter is gonna be short because the light is getting dim fast.*

*Well, everything is really going good with me and I hope it's likewise.*

*Has Bobby reported back yet? I bet he was really glad to get home again. I bet Cheryl was happy too.*

*Have Tommy and Marsha been doing good in school? Have them write also if they will, as it's a real boost.*

*I'm enclosing a clipping from a South Vietnam paper, as this is the unit I'm in.*

*Well got to go. Take care and don't worry.*

*Love ya all, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The clipping was a picture of President Johnson presenting a Presidential Unit Citation to the Fifth Marines, acknowledging their exemplary combat performance which had resulted in the defeat of a strong enemy force during a drawn out battle somewhere in the mountains surrounding Da Nang.

———

Cheryl is my older sister. Bobby is her husband. Back in 1968, just after returning from their honeymoon, Bobby received his draft notice. On the day he reported for induction, two busloads

of men were transported to the South Boston Army Base for physicals and possible induction into the armed forces. Out of the two busloads, only two men were drafted—Bobby and one other guy. The others dodged the draft one way or another

Bobby was offered a chance to avoid Vietnam if he enlisted for three years instead of being drafted for two. The Army told him he would serve his time in Germany if he agreed to their deal, but Bobby said he would take his chances with the two years which meant he would end up in Vietnam.

Somehow he ended up going to Germany anyway, instead of Vietnam. The other guy took the Army up on the three-year deal which was supposed to keep him from going to war, but the Army did not keep their word. With the broken promise, he ended up in Vietnam where he was wounded and awarded a Purple Heart.

**Letter # 6**

*27 Oct 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Well how's everything been back in the home front? By the time you receive this letter it will probably be Halloween or after Halloween, so I wish you all a happy Halloween.*

*I was just wondering how Joe has been making out with his flower shop lately. Has he gone out of business yet? What's daddy planning on doing if he does?*

*I'm all done with school and will be going out with the company probably Friday. They went out yesterday and will be back Monday or Tuesday. As of now they haven't made any contact.*

*Last night I had bunker watch and sat behind a huge 50 cal. machine gun but didn't get a chance to fire it as everything was peaceful on the war front.*

*Have you been receiving the allotments? I hope so. A few days after the 1st of December, I'll be sending a money order home for about $275. Out of that I want ya to give Tommy and Marsha and Cheryl all $5 for Christmas, and I want mamma and daddy to pay one of their bills. Plus I want ya to pick out a friendship ring for Sharon, and when Christmas nears, bring it down for me. I'll write more information later. Got to go for now.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. The dot on the map marks An Hoa.*

**—Between the Lines—**

My father worked part time, delivering flowers for a guy by the name of Joe Kaplosky who owned the flower shop. Actually, before I joined the Marines, I also worked at the shop. I delivered dish gardens, and at Christmas time I sold wreaths and Christmas trees. In one of my father's daily letters to me, he stated how Joe was thinking of selling out.

———

The stationary I wrote on had a map of Vietnam in the upper left hand corner of the envelope, so I marked where An Hoa was located on the map. During the indoctrination school, one of the

instructors stood before a map of Vietnam which was set on an easel. Using a pointer, he touched it to the map and said, “Marines, you are located here—this is An Hoa.”

Thus, I knew where to pen the dot on the small map for my family’s knowledge.

**Letter # 7**

*28 Oct 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Well, finally received a letter from you dated the 23rd. That really ain't too bad time for mail.*

*There's no worry about deep foxholes as they've got some at least 8 ft deep with thick walls of sandbags.*

*I also received a letter from Cheryl but was awfully disappointed as I didn't receive one from Sharon. But I'll give her another chance. I've got to.*

*Today I went out as security with a private contracting company putting in another runway which will run through a village. The village people are opposing this, so today when the surveying team went out, me and 4 other guys had to protect them from any trouble, but trouble didn't come. I had a real good time fooling around with the little kids who have been left without a family by the war.*

*If your map goes into any great detail, it might show Liberty Road which runs from Da Nang to An Hoa. There is also Liberty Bridge which ain't there no more because the Cong blew it away, plus last night, a guy lost his legs up near the old bridge site. I'll be going out in that area Friday. We are going to sweep from An Hoa to the river.*

*Well, got to go for now but will write tomorrow.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was acknowledging my Father's first letter. In his letter, and in many that followed, he would tell me to find a deep foxhole, get down in it, and not to come out.

———

My Father had written that he had a map of Vietnam that was a supplement to a National Geographic magazine. He had located An Hoa on it, but years later when I looked at his map, I found that it did not show Liberty Road, composed of red laterite mud during the monsoons, and choking red dust during the hot, dry, summer—the road we controlled during the day. The one the enemy claimed to be theirs in the night time.

**Letter # 8**

*30 Oct 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*I just got back from a company size patrol which was really a joke. We moved out last night at 12:30 and surrounded a village. Then this morning we went in looking for Viet Cong. I think we found maybe one. Then we moved out of the village at 9:00 this morning.*

*Right now we are restricted to the tents because we are supposed to go out on an operation. I don't know how often ya get to write on an operation, but I'll write as much as possible.*

*No mail has come in since the 28th, but I'm hoping there will be some today.*

*It's funny that in your letter you said to find a big foxhole because that night (the 28th) the NVA mortared holy hell out of An Hoa. I did get a face full of mud from a round that landed in a stream. Actually, I wasn't scared; but it kind of gets on your nerves when ya don't know where the next round will hit.*

*It has started to rain off and on in the last few days but nothing like it did during my first week in country.*

*On my address, add "1st Plt." to it as that's the platoon I've been assigned to.*

*Well can't think of much more to say except don't worry.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

*PS. Say "Hi" to Tiger Lilly, too.*

**—Between the Lines—**

I went on my first combat patrol in which we surrounded a village located not too far outside the defensive perimeter of An Hoa. I was too new in country to appreciate an uneventful night in the bush. All I remember is being on watch in the middle of the night that never grew dark because of the illumination overhead. The way the greenish yellow flares swayed back and forth beneath the parachutes made everything before my eyes seem to move, and made for strange and eerie shadows. The world was awash in shades of chartreuse green colors.

———

An Hoa did get mortared but none of the rounds landed close to my position. Maybe I lied trying to make my father think I was John Wayne or something. I don't know.

What I have found out from these letters is that as an eighteen year-old kid, when nothing was happening around me in Vietnam, I was making up all sorts of stories, but when the horror struck, I wouldn't even write.

———

Tiger Lilly was the family cat. I missed her as much as I missed everything else back in the world.

**Letter # 9**

*2 Nov 68*

*Hi everyone,*

*Well, received two letters from ya written on the 24th & 25th of October. I would have written earlier but we've been out on an operation rounding up about 70 VC.*

*So how's everything back at the home front? The cold weather should be blowing into Quincy pretty soon. It won't be long before the first snow, either.*

*Well, I got shot at for my first time yesterday; and let me tell ya, I was really scared. The bullets were kicking up the dirt for about 30 seconds but I was hugging the ground.*

*We are back in the An Hoa area but we should be going out within the next couple of days.*

*I got a letter from Sharon and one from Dwight. Nothing is new with Dwight, and Sharon said that her father bought a 1964 Bonneville. Not bad.*

*Well, I got to go for now and shower but I'll write later.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I had no idea I was being shot at. I heard something like someone snapping their fingers close to my ears, then being knocked to the ground, followed by the weight of someone on top of me. I realized I had been tackled as if I were in the middle of football game.

Then I heard my fire-team leader screaming, and felt his spit on my face—spit that had come forth from his mouth with every other word. “What the fuck’s wrong with you? You crazy or something? That's AK-fire!”

My fire-team leader had knocked me down to the ground, taking me out of the enemy’s line of fire. He most likely had saved my life.

———

When taken under fire, I had been standing in the middle of a village while some of 1st Platoon searched hooches for the VC, or signs of their existence, such as hidden weapons. In the village, I was lost as I did not know what the VC were going to look like. I did see women and children clad in black pajamas, but no males who seemed old enough to be the enemy. I had been told that males looking older than say, twelve, were automatically considered VC. Males older than twelve were to have their hands and arms tied behind their backs, then tied to other suspected VC, then sent to “who knows where” for interrogation. I had been told this just before being shot at.

———

After being shot at, a feeling of mistrust seeped into my soul. Although I had not been wounded, I had been changed, or fitted with a new filter in which I would observe the world. I had lost the ability to trust. Hadn’t the women, and even some of the innocent looking children, hadn’t they come out with, “No VC,” just before we were shot at?

If there were no VC, then who was it that had tried to kill us?

Even after seeing us almost killed, even after being shoved about and knocked to the ground by us angry marines, a few of the Vietnamese women still adamantly repeated, “No VC.”

Today, I can still see one of the women smiling defiantly with deceit—her rotted teeth, her entire lips and mouth stained with the red juice excreted from her chewing on beetle-nut. I can still sense her anger—her mistrust—as she probably wondered if we had really come to help.

_____

For the longest time, whenever the marine who had knocked me to the ground got close to me, he would say, “Fucking O'Connell—you crazy bastard—you'll never make it out of Vietnam alive.”

_____

Dwight was a high school friend of mine who wrote me often while I was in Vietnam. He was home in Quincy, holding down the fort at the pool room.

_____

Sharon's Dad was a World War Two veteran. Before I left for Vietnam, the last thing he said to me was, “Keep your head and ass low—and don’t try and become a hero.”

_____

I had hoped I could borrow Sharon’s Dad’s Bonneville when I got home from Vietnam.

Sharon's Dad used to lend us his car on Friday nights, and even gave us a few dollars so we could go to the drive-in. He often gave us enough money for food, too.

**Letter #10**

*3 Nov 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Well today is a pretty peaceful Sunday as we are resting up for another operation. I've got a feeling that we should be going out pretty soon.*

*I've enclosed a picture that my squad leader took for me. In the background is the bunker I run for every time the mortar rounds come screaming in. Plus ya can probably notice the watch I bought while I was in Mexico. It keeps perfect time and tells the number of the day.*

*The mail hasn't been coming in lately, but I hope it does soon.*

*Do you think you could send me a package of goodies as I really starve over here. I like some Oreos, vanilla-wafers, some fritos, malted milk balls, reading materials, and an old pair of drumsticks, plus anything else ya think I might like, OK? And one more thing. Funny books. I'm serious.*

*In about two more months I'll be eligible for R&R. I'm probably gonna wait until March or April, though. I'll probably go to Bangkok or Australia.*

*Well, can't think of much more to say for now. Take care, and please send a package, OK?*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

As I kid, I liked playing the drums—mostly to records—but sometimes in a band consisting of a few kids I went to school with. I liked playing songs by the Beatles, the Animals, and the Doors. Although I had never had a drum lesson, I was a pretty good drummer—or at least I thought so—and drumming always relaxed me. I could get lost in my mind.

———

Another way of getting lost in my mind was thinking about going to Bangkok or Australia for R&R.

**Letter # 11**

*12 Nov 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Ain't been able to write because we've been out in the field. I should be in the rear in about 2 more days. I am safe and sound so don't worry. I've gotten all the mail ya sent and package.*

*Thanks.*

*Got to go.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS Call Sharon*

**—Between the Lines—**

My father begged to hear from me, even if it was only to know that I was still alive. Nine days had passed since I had written last. This had been one of those letters I scribbled to claim my existence.

**Letter # 12**

*13 Nov 68*

*Hi everyone,*

*I hope you ain't been worrying why you haven't heard from me, but when you are out in the field they don't pick up the mail too often.*

*I've received your mail up to the 3rd or 4th of Nov. I received the package! It was great!! Thanks a lot!!! It lasted me a good three days. That ain't too bad.*

*For the last 9 days we've been sitting on the top of Hill 85. We have not been in any combat at all. That's very surprising. We've got 6 mortar tubes and for the last 9 days they have shot close to 1,800 rounds. That's really a lot.*

*I've been in the best of health except for a few mosquito bites and a burnt finger. I had a book of matches go off in my hand.*

*Well got to go for now. Remember, I can't always write when I'm out in the bush.*

*Take it easy & God bless ya.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Call Sharon as I don't have time to write her today. I'm sorry.*

**—Between the Lines—**

Hill 85 was a sandbag-fortified compound out along Liberty Road. This compound overlooked a village known as Duc-Duc. Beyond Duc-Duc was the An Hoa combat base. There was a blue bus with chrome bumpers and fenders that traveled along Liberty Road. Painted on the side, in Vietnamese, was, *Da Nang—Duc-Duc*. The bus reminded me of the blue bus the Doors sang about. "The blue bus, is calling us..."

———

The mortars were fired from 4.2-inch mortar tubes commonly known as four-deuces. The mortar tubes actually resembled an artillery piece. The mortar-men fired all night, and when the rounds were propelled out of the tube, the opposite force drove the steel stabilizers into the earth which shook the entire hilltop, making it very hard to sleep when one was afforded the chance.

Also near Hill 85 was a German hospital affiliated with a religious order, where treatment was given to sick and wounded Vietnamese—not only South Vietnamese civilians, but wounded enemy soldiers too, or so it was rumored. Some of the Germans who worked in this hospital were taken POW while I was in Vietnam. They were taken into captivity by the North Vietnamese and held captive until they were released with the American POWs in the seventies up in Hanoi. Not all were released. At least one had died while in captivity.

**Letter # 13**

*17 Nov 68*

*Hi everyone & Tiger Lil!!!*

*Well as you can see I can't write as often as I was because things in Vietnam are starting to grow bitter. We have moved down from the mountain into a fortified position about a mile from An Hoa. There are 12 Marines and 10 ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). They ain't worth their weight in shit. Yesterday when we came under fire, they were all ready to run. One did but he's no longer with us.*

*Right now there are massive air strikes going on about 1,000 meters from our compound. They are pretty cool to watch.*

*Today we have to rebuild a bunker which got hit the night before we came here. Lima company lost 3 men on the direct hit.*

*Well got to go but I had to write to tell ya I'm in good health and really moving good.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

As for this fortified position, it was a CAP (Combined Action Platoon) located near the village of Duc-Duc. Often the platoon I was in would spend the night with this CAP unit, usually when the word had been passed that the VC were going to strike in the dark.

_____

As for rebuilding the bunker and the loss of Marines the night before, I most likely was frightened out of my mind, yet knew of no other way of saying it except to mention it in a letter to those back home. Without giving it any thought back then, what I was writing in my letter had to be worrisome to my parents and loved ones, because I feel the worry as I write this book.

_____

As for the ARVN, or PFs (Popular Forces), they were noisy at night. Along with the noise, they gave away their positions when they lit cigarettes in the dark; I used to wonder if it was on purpose.

_____

And for the airstrike, I can still remember this particular one. I can hear my squad leader complaining that he could not hear the AFVN radio over the scream of the jets which were drowning out his country music hour.

**Letter #14**

*20 Nov 68*

*Dear everybody!!!*

*I'm out on road security today and was also on it the last two days. We go back to our compound tomorrow.*

*Things have started to get pretty hot around here. The VC have rocketed and mortared An Hoa 3 nights in a row and are expected to hit again tonight. I'm sure glad I'm not in there now. I don't know when we are going back there.*

*As for on the road, we have been fired at on and off for the last two days, but they are pretty bad shots.*

*I received the package you sent me. It was great. The food is all gone but I'm still reading the books. Oh, about the drum sticks—I'm gonna practice on ground, floor, walls, and etc. so when I come home I'll know some new beats and will be pretty good.*

*The weather has been pretty hot (85), but it rains off and on. At night it does cool off to about 60. That is pretty cold over here.*

*I've received letters from you, Bobby, Dwight and Sharon. I also received one from a Charles Bently on Beach Street. I guess his class in school got my address and decided to write me. Do you know him or how he got my address? I wrote him back anyway.*

*The whole Fifth Marines have gone on an operation except for us. That's pretty decent.*

*We played cards last night, and I won $30. That sure helps out.*

*Well got to go because it has taken the last half hour to write this page because of off and on rain.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

*PS. Thanks for the package and Thanksgiving Cards. You too, Cheryl.*

*Happy Thanksgiving.*

**—Between the Lines—**

Road security consisted of manning positions along Liberty Road. There were two marines to a position, and the positions that were several hundred yards apart, stretched the length of the road from An Hoa to Liberty Bridge. Many Vietnamese civilians traveled the road by foot, and some by motor-scooter. There never were males of military age, for if there were, we would have apprehended them, automatically declared them to be VC, and have sent them to An Hoa for interrogation.

We made certain every civilian had an ID card. The card was in Vietnamese, and I didn't read the language, so I really didn't have any idea what the ID card was all about. But if they had one, if it looked half official to me, then they were allowed to continue on to wherever they were headed. The Vietnamese must have hated this, because sometimes they were asked to show their ID at every position the marines manned along the road.

Sometimes when we stopped a motor-scooter, we would make the driver dismount, and we would jump on and drive the scooter a few hundred yards in either direction, driving like madmen, like one would drive a dirt-bike. Sometimes there were saddlebags filled with cookies attached to the scooters. The cookies tasted like Animal Crackers from back home. Sometimes the marine driving the scooter would lose control and take a spill. The driver and the Animal Crackers would be spread all over the road. One way or another, the Animal Crackers the Vietnamese had started out with would never make it to their destination because they were either left spilled on the road, or scooped out of the baskets by the handful, and stuffed into the mouths of us marauding marines.

Between stopping the Vietnamese every few hundred yards to check their IDs, and harassing the drivers of the motor-scooters, is it any wonder why we were sniped at by the invisible VC who so far had not proven to be good shots.

———

I was still a new guy, and thus, when the entire 5th Marine Regiment—all except Mike Company—was sent to Go Noi Island in pursuit of the enemy, I felt I was missing out on something. Being held back in reserve and performing road security while the rest of the Regiment was in constant contact with the enemy, well, I felt left out of the mix.

———

Sometimes being a lowly grunt in the field was not the worst thing in the world. A lowly grunt was a very small target. The enemy would rather fire mortars and rockets into An Hoa, targeting its air strip, artillery batteries, command bunkers, beer and mess halls, and supply huts, than waste their precious ammo on grunts in the field. Yes, many nights when I heard the incoming exploding inside An Hoa, I would be glad that I was not there during the attack.

———

I always answered any letter that was sent to me, even if I did not know who the letter came from. If the letter or letters were from school kids, I would urge them to stay in school. I knew school sure beat hell out of being in Vietnam.

**Letter # 15**

*22 Nov 68*

*Hi everyone!!!*

*How's good ole Quincy? It's probably still the same.*

*Right now we are in the middle of a typhoon. It's probably gonna be like a good, ole fashion hurricane. A typhoon has a lot more rain than a hurricane, and it floods all the rice paddies making it look like one big huge lake. We should be safe from the winds because we are back up in the heavy bunkers of the compound.*

*It seems that the VC are not gonna wait for Tet to make a big offensive as they tried to take over the compound about 700 yards away. After they failed, they turned around and hit us. We were up all night. Then this morning we moved into the village where the fire was coming from. We found a good amount of innocent villagers dead. Let me tell ya, dead bodies stink. There were families crying all over the place because their relatives were dead. It was gross, but as you say, "If you sleep with dogs, ya gonna wake up with fleas."*

*I don't know whether any VC were killed.*

*I received a letter from Mrs. DeLuca today. She was wishing me good luck. I also received a package from Sharon.*

*I went swimming today down the river. It was the first time I've got washed in about two weeks.*

*I can't believe Marsha got her learner's permit. When she gets her license and I get home, there will probably be a big fight over who is gonna use the car.*

*I'll be sending home $170 a little after the 1st. I'm pretty sure you know what I want done with it for Christmas.*

*Well got to go for now but I'll write when I can.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The compound seemed surrealistic to me, like a castle—a stronghold—but not made of granite. Instead, the compound was constructed of green-gray, meshed-plastic sandbags filled with the

red-laterite taken from the countryside. From the outside world, the sandbagged walls appeared windowless, but there were openings—slit-like openings—for us to see and shoot out of.

The compound was surrounded by a moat which was at least eight feet deep, and wide enough that no one would be able to jump it. The moat was filled with stagnant rainwater—great place for mosquitoes to breed. There was only one way in, and one way out of the compound—over a wooden plank which spanned the moat. At dusk, when the marines on road security were back in the safety of the compound for the night, the plank was lifted from its position, and dragged inside.

Rumors were constant—most of them pertained to intelligence reports stating we could expect to be attacked on any given night. In my mind I envisioned hundreds of VC charging the compound—something like a human-wave attack. And my visions also had the moat teeming with desperate VC thrashing in the water, and I lobbing grenades down upon them until the water turned to blood.

Night after night I stayed awake—frightened—not knowing if I would be alive in the morning. I found myself hoping that Puff—flying overhead—lighting up the world with its illumination flares floating down to earth beneath white parachutes, never went home, for Vietnam was becoming a scary place in the nighttime.

———

My father used to say, "If you sleep with dogs, you are going to wake up with fleas." I might not have understood what my father meant, or how to comprehend the dogs and fleas before Vietnam, but after seeing the carnage bestowed upon the village of Duc-Duc, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what he had been saying.

———

The village of Duc-Duc started about fifty yards from the compound and stretched for a few hundred yards into the rice paddies east of An Hoa.

At first, movement was seen in the village, spotted through a Starlight Scope by a marine sniper who had the scope mounted on his rifle. With my naked eye, I could see nothing in the dark, but when illumination flares began to float slowly down from the sky, flooding Duc-Duc with artificial light, then too, I was able to make out human figures with conical shaped hats and weapons in hand, moving about, but the movement was only visible for a second or two, as the figures ducked from the light. But as the flares burnt out, and before the next ones could illuminate the village, the movement of what we now considered to be the VC commenced again, until the next flares had the enemy hiding once more.

Without warning, flashes of light and explosions came from within Duc-Duc, followed by green, purple, and red tracer rounds crisscrossing the sky, and the distinct clack-clack-clack sound of AK-47s sending those rounds skyward. Then there were more flashes, maybe from satchel-charges, followed by free burning fires. Bamboo huts were aflame.

What seemed to be a few stray rounds, or a ricochet or two, came our way—ricochets distinguished by their weird, whizzing sounds.

These stray rounds not meant for us, but which would still kill you if one was unfortunately hit by this type of round, flew harmlessly over our positions, as we were lying low on top, instead of inside the bunkers. Lying flat on top gave us a better view of Duc-Duc down below.

Suddenly the sound of direct-fire was right over our heads. The ricocheting whizzes were replaced by the distinct crack, finger-snap of AK-fire closing in quickly. When it dawned on us we had become the target, we all scrambled for cover inside the bunkers.

Inside the bunker, I was told by my fire-team leader to keep a good eye out for the enemy, which meant I had to look out the small, slit-sized opening. Although the AK-fire stopped when we had disappeared from the enemies' sight, the thought of a round coming through the slit, and straight into my eye frightened me, but I still managed to keep a good look out.

The fighting abruptly ended when three red flares were seen in the air, fired by the enemy. The flares looked like roman candles to me. When one of the guys in the bunker saw the flares in the sky, he said, "Charlie's all done—headed out."

The enemy's flares had been a signal from their commanders to their troops to retreat, which meant for them to melt back into the countryside, but never too far from the civilian populace, or us marines.

The battle was over without us ever firing a round. We were never afforded a definitive target, and to have fired indiscriminately into the village would have resulted in civilian casualties.

———

Dawn came—a beautiful sight to my weary eyes—an indication that I was still alive. Dawn was followed by the sun rising above the horizon, its long rays made visible as they passed through the smoky haze filtering up from Duc-Duc.

With the sun to our backs, we cautiously made our way into the village. Woman and children were crying. The main trail was blocked by a dead water-buffalo with a large gaping wound to its neck. Hot ashes still smoldered, but nothing that remained resembled huts.

The stench of burnt flesh and detonated explosive powder permeated the air. I had never smelt burnt flesh before, and only knew it was the odor of flesh after another marine told me so.

We found no VC, but we definitely had seen what the VC would do to those who slept with dogs.

———

The villagers wrapped their dead in the white parachutes our illumination flares had dangled from as they floated down to earth. I cannot remember how many bodies there were, but I do remember later in the day, while out on road security, seeing the dead being buried in a village cemetery, and colorful flowers being laid on top of the graves. This was a strange sight to me, because in Duc-Duc, there were no flowers; maybe someone riding the blue bus from Da Nang had brought them.

———

I recall about six months later digging up those graves as we looked for hidden weapons supposedly buried in the cemetery, but all we found were dead bodies still wrapped up in the once white, silk parachutes, now almost a rouge color, having been permeated with the red laterite.

———

Mrs. DeLuca lived next door to my parents. Her letter must have been another reminder for me that there was another world on the opposite side of the earth.

_____

One day, a group of us were down at the lake to get washed, and for a swim. I got talking to Brother Bell, a black marine from Harlem. I said, "Now I see why they call this Alligator Lake."

"What you talking about?"

While pointing to the distant shoreline, I said, "There—over there. I just saw a gator slip into the water."

Bell could not get out of the water quick enough, and when he figured I was only fooling, he picked me up and threw me to the ground—but only in fun—and called me every name in the book.

There were no alligators in Alligator Lake, and I do not know why we called the lake what we did.

**Letter #16**

*27 Nov 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*Received a letter from ya written on the 20th. I'm sorry I haven't written lately but I just ain't had a chance. If you keep an eye on the papers you will see what is going on around An Hoa. I'm starting to get scared as we are really starting to get hit heavy. I've seen a lot of guys get shot in the last few days. The night I received Barbara's package was the worst night. I'm in good health except for sore feet.*

*Well got to go as now, you don't dare stay in one place too long.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS Call Sharon because I ain't got time to write.*

*PPS Don't worry*

**—Between the Lines—**

*"I'm starting to get scared as we are really starting to get hit heavy. I've seen a lot of guys get shot in the last few days. The night I received Barbara's package was the worst night..."*

I do not know where I was really coming from. I had not seen any guys get shot—not yet. I think it was more like *I had heard stories* about guys getting shot, and that these stories developed into pictures inside my head. Before long, I not only visualized these stories, but placed myself in the middle of them.

The truth was, all sorts of stories were coming back to us guys of Mike Company about the fighting taking place on Operation Meade River—the combat operation Mike Company, much to my dismay, was not a part of.

I was hearing about all sorts of guys getting hit. One of the guys I heard about was someone I had gone through ITR with—PFC Burke. Somehow I heard he had stuck his head up over a rice paddy during a firefight to see what was going on. The storyteller said that Burke took a bullet in the head, and was dead.

I could see Burke in my mind—see him in ITR and Camp Pendleton—see him laughing in the mess hall, or the barracks, but now he was no more. I wanted to tell my parents this, tell them what was going on, but I could not keep the story straight. I could not distinguish fact from fiction.

_____

I got many packages from my family while in Vietnam, including several from my Aunt Barbara.

_____

It seems like I was always having my mother call my girlfriend.

Why was I not finding time to write Sharon?

I am lost.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Walter L. Burke**

**Killed in Action**

**November 22, 1968**

**Letter # 17**

*28 Nov 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*Happy Thanksgiving. I ain't got too much time. I wrote you and Barbara yesterday, but the chopper got shot down, so you might not receive the letter.*

*I'm safe and sound, well, sound, and I miss ya all. I'm sending $175 on the1st. Call Barbara and tell her I'll try and write again.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS Sorry it's short, but!!!*

**—Between the Lines—**

Thanksgiving Day was spent along Liberty Road, on road security, manning a position with Brother Bell. It rained hard that day, so the two of us built a poncho-hooch to try and stay dry. We did not bother the Vietnamese moving along the road, for we did not want to go out in the

rain. In the afternoon, Brother Bell and myself were huddled together—not touching—but trying to keep every inch of our bodies inside the poncho-hooch which was a few square inches too small for the two of us, and our gear.

We were not doing a good job of keeping an eye out for anything, and thus, my platoon sergeant —Sergeant Thompson—and another marine traveling with him, were able to sneak up in a jeep upon Brother Bell and I without us knowing.

The two of us were somewhere in our own worlds, when right outside our shelter, gunfire broke out—shots fired into the air. We scrambled for our weapons, and when I burst out of the hooch, tearing it partly down, there was Sergeant Thompson, who had done the firing, standing before me with his M-16 aimed at my chest.

For a moment I was relieved that I was not facing the enemy, but as I looked at the anger in Sergeant Thompson's face, and how his finger wrapped around the trigger of his M-16, I began to have doubts about surviving.

In fear, I felt myself growing angry, and mustered the courage to ask Sergeant Thompson what he was doing. He bellowed, "Doing? I'll tell you what I'm *not doing*. I'm *not giving* either one of you fucking idiots the hot turkey dinner I have for you. That's what I'm not doing—but what I am going to do is blow your fucking asses away, just like the VC should have."

With that said, and my life in limbo, and the rain pouring down, Sergeant Thompson moved towards me, shoved me into the mud and kicked me in the shins. He then turned to the poncho-hooch and ripped it apart. "Drown like fucking rats, you maggots!"

Next, as if he had changed his mind—as if he was going to dish out the turkey dinner to us—he scooped mine and Brother Bell's fair share of food out of the steaming pans, and threw our Thanksgiving dinner down at our feet, where he stomped it into the mud with his angry boots.

"Not only drown, but fucking starve too!"

Brother Bell and I spent the rest of the day standing out in the rain, taking our anger out on the few Vietnamese traveling on this rainy day between Duc-Duc and Da Nang, as we demanded their IDs with excessive, verbal abuse.

———

My Thanksgiving food consisted of Animal Crackers I had stolen from the Vietnamese who had traveled Liberty Road on a great American holiday.

———

I wonder if the Vietnamese had known that it was Thanksgiving Day, and if so, what did they have to be thankful for.

———

Sergeant Thompson was the most hard-core marine I ever met. He had already won a Bronze Star before I arrived in Vietnam—he had assaulted an enemy bunker and killed all sorts of VC by himself. Yes, in Mike Company, he was seen as a hero.

———

As for the helicopter getting shot down, somewhere in Vietnam a helicopter must have gotten shot down and I had heard about it. I did not see the crash with my own two eyes, but I must have seen it in my mind.

The fact of the matter is that I had not written my Aunt, and the talk about the helicopter, maybe that was just a simple way out.

**Letter #18**

*29 Nov 68*

*Hi everyone,*

*Having a wonderful time, wish you were here. The temperature is real cool (ha). Makes it sound like a vacation. At the time it is, as we are back in the compound.*

*I'm gonna ask you to send me something, and I don't want ya to be surprised as I'm pretty well grown-up now. You've got to be over here. Could you send me a 5th of Vodka? Don't worry, they don't care if you get stuff like that through the mail. Everybody is gonna have a bottle for Christmas, as we are gonna be in An Hoa. I'd be happy if you did, and don't worry, I wouldn't drink it all in one night.*

*Well got to go for now because we are using candles to write, and they have got to go out because of snipers.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Consider my proposition*

**—Between the Lines—**

After being out in the bush, having had nothing to hide behind except for the darkness of the night, the security of being back inside the compound was something to feel good about. The compound may have seemed like a place in hell when I had first stepped foot in it a month or so before, but now it felt like heaven with its heavy reinforced bunkers, and a roof over my head.

_____

Grown up? Maybe I should have said *aged*, or better yet, *worn*.

_____

My father must have known me better than I knew myself. He knew I would have downed the entire fifth in one night. And because he did, he never sent the bottle, and it really did not matter because my hopes of spending Christmas in An Hoa were dashed when we were told to prepare for an operation which would take place somewhere in the mountains.

**Letter # 19**

*2 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody,*

*It's been a few days since I've written. I've received your mail up to the 25th and also received a package from ma & grandpa. Will you please thank them for me as I probably won't have time?*

*In one of your last letters you wanted to know more about the country. Well, scenery wise, the country is beautiful, except for the barbwire and bunkers spread out all over the countryside. The people themselves are filthy and make me sick. You learn not to trust them, and if you can find any reason to shoot them, you do. I've been shot at by too many innocent looking people to have any mercy. They learn to fire a rifle even before they walk.*

*I've enclosed an article about the operation where they surrounded those 1,000 VC. Fortunately, Mike company was the only company in the 5th Marines not to go, but these pictures will give you an idea what I look like, combat wise, and a little idea what a village looks like and all that stuff.*

*Common sense says that if all the companies are out except for us and the VC know this, they will hit us hard; and let me tell ya, they have. We haven't gone a night without getting hit. If it ain't mortars, it's rockets. If it ain't either of them, it's sniper fire or an assault. When I die, I've got to go to heaven, because I've been through hell.*

*It doesn't bother you at all killing these people cause they are pure scum and sneaky, and also if you don't kill them first, they will get you.*

*Well, got to go for now, and don't worry cause I've got my stuff together.*

*Hope you like the pictures.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I did not get to see the letters that I had written to my family for more than sixteen years. When my father did give me my letters, I found them to be very disturbing, especially this one. I felt shameful. Did I really have such an opinion of the Vietnamese back then? I find it hard to accept the hatred I had inside me. If the reasons for the hatred are still within, then I am blessed, because I cannot fully recall the reasons for the venom I expressed in this letter. Maybe I had been drinking, or maybe I was just pissed off and tired.

———

I had not had a full night's sleep in ages. I would be awake on watch for a few hours, then a few hours of sleep, curled in a ball, wrapped in a camouflaged poncho liner on top of wet ground—then another watch, a little sleep, and then patrol the next day, all day. This routine was day in, day out.

Or could it have been the frustration once more of not being a part of Operation Meade River? Could I have still been yearning to be a part of the action, despite learning that another marine I had gone through training with had been killed in the fighting?

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Douglas L. Warner**

**Killed in Action**

**November 29, 1968**

**Letter # 20**

*7 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*I haven't had much time to write in the last few days. Things have been busy, but today is a real nice, cool day, about 70. It hasn't rained in about two or three days which is great.*

*In the last two days, I've received packages from John and Ruth, Prudential, and a fruit cake from the City of Quincy. Plus, I received my first issue of the Quincy Sun. I don't think I'll have time to write John and Ruth, so you can thank them for me.*

*The package from Prudential had this pen in it and two good books, plus candy. I read both books on watch in the last two nights. The books were John Steinbeck's "Of Mice & Men" and the other, the movie script of "Bonnie & Clyde."*

*Tommy must be off probation by now. I hope he stays out of trouble or he will end up in the Marines and over here, too... Hey Tom, the guys get a big kick out of your drawings and letters as we compare letters from our little brothers. So keep up the good work.*

*Marsha, so I heard you're really starting to become the biggest thing since Marilyn Monroe. How's school and work? Be good and maybe when I get home and buy my new Corvette, I'll let you drive it. Remember, it's going to be stick so you better learn to drive on a standard car, too.*

*Cheryl, sorry I haven't written to you lately; but I've heard from Bobby a few times, and I owe him a letter so I'll write that today. It's a shame you've got to give up your apartment. It was beautiful. How's the Mustang running?*

*Well, everybody, got to start going. I tried to write everybody a little bit. Oh, I almost forgot Tiger Lil. Hey Tiger, when I get home I'm gonna bring ya a big petunia and a few marigolds, so take it easy, Putty Cat!!!*

*Well got to go. I've been receiving your mail regularly.*

*Love ya all, Paul*

*PS. Quincy over North*

*USMC over VC*

**—Between the Lines—**

There were two high schools in Quincy. Annually, on Thanksgiving Day, they played each other in football. My father must have told me that Quincy High had beaten North Quincy High. This was good news for me, because I had attended Quincy High, but my parents might have been disappointed, because they were graduates of North Quincy High. And then in the same light, there was the hope of being victorious over the enemy.

_____

My sister Cheryl worked for Prudential Life in Boston. They had sent me a package of goodies for Christmas.

_____

The Quincy Sun was a new, local newspaper, which is still in business to this day. I looked forward to reading the Quincy Sun, and the others in my platoon read it too, even though they had no idea where Quincy was.

_____

My brother Tommy had gotten in trouble back home. I forget what it was because there were so many times of trouble in his life. As if my parents did not have enough to worry about with me in Vietnam, add Tommy to the mix. My mother and father must have been going out of their minds.

**Letter # 21**

*10 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*I've been receiving your mail pretty regularly now as they have finished the airstrip at An Hoa. I received a package yesterday from some VFW in Dorchester. The package was bought at Jordan Marsh and was called, "Chow Hound." The price tag was $8.00. It had two things of sardines packed in sherry wine, mackerel packed in port wine, a salami, a box of cream cookies, and expensive candies like butterscotch, plus more.*

*Got some bad news. I'm going up in the mountains supposedly for 120 days or until April. We are going near Laos. We leave in a few days. To make things worse, I'm carrying the PRC-25 radio. The gooks like to hit the radioman, but they'll have to be good shots.*

*Well, Davey Rowe got out of boot camp on the 2nd and is now at Lejeune.*

*The song, "Drummer Boy" is on now but it doesn't seem like Christmas with temperature at 80 and no snow. I dread Christmas something bad.*

*You said ya sent a package. I'm keeping my eyes open for it. I got a feeling it's coming today.*

*Well people, got to go, but I'll write later on.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The packages continued to come. I was living from one package to another. Packages were a relief from the day in, day out C-rations. The only problem with the packages was the weight they added to my pack. And then there was the PRC-25 radio I was going to carry. No way was I going to carry both, so most of the time I wolfed down the edibles in the packages in a very short span of time.

_____

We had been told we would be in An Hoa for Christmas. I was counting on it. I was not looking forward to Christmas, but at least being in the rear would have made it tolerable. Then overnight, the word had changed—we were leaving An Hoa, headed up into the mountains. And to make things worse, I was getting stuck with the radio because I was the *new guy* in the squad.

---

Dave Rowe was a high school pal of mine. He joined the Marines after hearing my stories about Parris Island. I painted a comical picture. Many of my friends would end up joining the Marines this way—word of mouth.

**Letter # 22**

*16 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*Don't mind this letter if it appears dirty, but that is what I'm living in.*

*Today I received a package from you and letters from Cheryl, Bobby, Sharon and her parents, the DeLuca's, Paul Files, Playboy and Congressman Mr. Burke. The mail was dated all the way back to the 6th of December. The package was great and the booze was beautiful! I want you to thank Cheryl and Bobby for their present.*

*Well, three days ago we were chopper'd onto Hill 500 where we were met by an NVA battalion. I need not say more except I escaped without a scratch, but I'm still shaking. I hope I never have to see a dead Marine again. I lost my best buddy from Indiana, and my other buddy got medevaced as he lost from his knees down.*

*I was really shocked after hearing about Jimmy Pettiti. This goddamn war is taking all my friends. Please find out more about him and call his father and tell him I'm sorry and all that.*

*This week has been really bad after hearing about Tommy. I could kick his ass. I almost cried when I heard about it. I guess he'll learn his lesson just like me and end up over here fighting for his life. It's too bad people got to come all the way over here to realize what's going on and to see the light.*

*I'm not mad about the booze, as I am thinking like a man now and not a kid.*

*I guess Christmas will be spent here. The other night when everybody was getting killed, I wished I was back home. Your whole life flies by as every bullet tears into somebody. I think I grew 10 years older in a minute.*

*Well got to go, and thanks for the package again. I'm OK and not even scratched.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Keep Tommy in the house until I get home.*

**—Between the Lines—**

This letter leaves me feeling sick today. I'm asking myself, “Who was I back in Vietnam, and what was going on inside my head?”

Yes, we had boarded helicopters in An Hoa and transported westward, up into the mountains, but we never made contact with the enemy. Why did I claim we had? Why was I scaring my parents? Did I want to sound like a John Wayne? What was it?

I know that the day before we were flown into the mountains, we were briefed about the operation. We were told that reconnaissance units had spotted at least a battalion of NVA in the area we would be assaulting. Some of the guys who had been in-country for sometime were talking bad stuff—talking about hard core NVA—talking about a hot LZ—reinforced bunkers—getting our *fucking asses shot up*.

On the morning of the actual assault, we boarded helicopters, and up into the mountains we went. I remember the helicopter banking to one side so that the bulkhead window I had been staring out now practically became the floor as we spiraled down towards earth. At first, looking out the window, all I could see was one deep shade of green, then as we came closer to landing, the trees of the jungle became apparent, and so was the distinct thumping of the rotor blades controlling our rate of descent.

Just before we landed the helicopter seemed to level out, and then the nose rose as the helicopter flared, while at same time the tail gate lowered. The crew-chief, with his pitch-black sunshield covering up his face, gave us the *thumbs up*. The load of marines weighted down with their weapons, ammo, and all they owned in heavy packs carried on their backs, scrambled from the helicopter, emptying out in seconds.

The LZ was actually a huge bomb crater created by the detonation of a bomb dropped from a B-52 bomber—dropped maybe a day or two earlier. Beyond the crater, the obliterated earth, the supersonic bomb with its razor sharp shrapnel had left trees snapped cleanly like broken toothpicks, and a further distance from ground zero, trees were still standing, but pretty much splintered and splattered by clumps of moist earth held together by what had once been the roots of trees and other jungle vegetation.

I came running as fast as I could out of the back of the helicopter knowing the helicopter was an enormous, prized target for the enemy. I wanted to get as far away from it as quickly as possible.

I expected bullets to be tearing through our bodies—bullets we would not have heard over the sounds of the rotor blades starting to spin furiously as the helicopters lifted up and away from the LZ.

I scrambled with the rest of the marines, trying to keep up with my squad leader. He needed me close by—I had his radio on my back.

I was weighted down with all my gear: a rifle, grenades, a claymore, canteens of water, bandoliers of ammunition, and a three day supply of C-rations—and added to all of this was the *fucking radio*.

We scrambled under blown apart tree trunks cantilevered at all sorts of angles, or over them when they laid flat upon the earth. I ran, tripped, stumbled trying to keep up. As I got further and further away from the LZ, I got slowed down—the radio antenna getting snagged in tangled vines. Finally into the cover of the jungle, I felt all alone as every marine was now scrunched

down low in the vegetation, out of sight of the supposed enemy, out of sight even of their fellow marines. Everyone was hiding to exist.

As for the enemy—where was the enemy?

I should have felt fortunate, as the enemy had not been waiting on our arrival. I should have felt blessed, but instead, anger, and a strange feeling of betrayal came over me as I resented the feeling of fear which had consumed me for at least a week—from the moment I heard all about the hardcore enemy which would be waiting for us up in the mountains.

Adrenaline from expectations of being torn apart by enemy fire had coursed through my body, yet I had not been hit, nor even shot at. What had frayed my nerves was not something in real life, but something imagined in my mind.

My letter had expounded upon my fear.

---

Jim Pettiti was from Quincy. We went through ITR, Staging, and Okinawa together. We sat next to each other during the flight from Okinawa to Da Nang. We also were together on our first night in Vietnam, sleeping in a tent beside the Da Nang airstrip. The next day we split up—Jim going north with the 3rd Marine Division, and I, going west to An Hoa.

Somewhere in the area of the DMZ, Jim was shot several times in the leg by the enemy. My parents had written to say Jim was lucky to be alive. They said he had been left for dead at first, before being saved.

Today, Jim is retired from the US Post Office. We still see each other and love to talk about our training days and the different guys we trained with. And we talk about Burke and Warner, and when we do we always recall Burke with his constant loud, boaster like rant about his love for New York City, and how he was going to kick some ass in Vietnam. Also, in my mind, I see Warner lying in the bottom bunk. I see his smile, red hair, and freckled face.

---

Jim once told me about a house party he was at after the war. Jim had mentioned Vietnam or something, and some guy at the party said to him, “What do you know about Vietnam? You were only there a month.” Jim knocked the guy right on his ass.

Jim might not have known the history of Vietnam, but he was quite certain of his own.

---

Jim actually had been a great high school football player, and easily could have played college ball, but instead joined the marines

---

My brother Tommy had stolen my sister Cheryl's car from my parent's driveway. He did not know how to drive, and got no more than a hundred yards down the street before he smacked the car right into a tree.

He managed to drive the car back to the driveway, parked it, and said nothing to anyone. My sister came home from work, and there was her car in the driveway, smashed to hell.

It seemed to me Tommy was destined for the Marines Corps.

Instead of sending me a fifth of Vodka, my father sent me two Whiskey Sours which were premixed, and came in cans. The booze was great. I downed each can, one right after the other, in one, non-stop swig.

**Letter # 23**

*23 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*Well, here it is two days before Christmas and I'm already homesick. It's really bad when they play, "I'm Dreaming Of a White Christmas" and "Silver Bells." I've missed two Christmas now but maybe I'll make it home for the next one.*

*I got Sharon's graduation picture the other day. It came out real good. I've got it wrapped in seven pieces of plastic.*

*I've received cards from Phyllis and Gus, Joan and Richard, and also one from Ma and Grandpa, but I think I already told ya. Thank them all for me.*

*We were supposed to move to a different location yesterday, but the choppers haven't been able to get in because of heavy rains.*

*This month's check was for $141 so I'm sending home $120 in check. How much money do I have now? If you people run into any jams, I want ya to feel free to use my money.*

*Tell Cheryl to tell Bobby I'll write to him when he gets to Germany.*

*Inform me a little more about Cheryl's new job and why she's leaving Prudential. I'm not nosy, just curious.*

*Well got to go for now. I'm in good health and still unscratched.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Mike Company was spread out all over the top of Hill 500. The jungle had been cleared from the top, and done so, either by the use of *detonation cord* (det-cord) wrapped around the trunk of a tree—the tree severed by the supersonic explosion of the cord—or by a few marines who got to use chainsaws. Having never used a chainsaw before, I was not chosen to operate one, but I sort of wished that I could have been. To me, the chainsaws looked like fun to use, and the sounds of them cutting through wood filled my world with excitement.

Some marines hacked away at tree trunks with machetes—I was one of these guys. Using machetes was brainless. It took hours to fall a tree, but it killed time. Getting to see and hear a tree which was chopped down little by little using machetes, watching it crash into the jungle, brought a good feeling to me knowing that I had contributed to the effort.

We constructed huts built for two. They were framed with bamboo limbs and branches. We draped our rubber ponchos over the frames. This gave us a place to stay dry. We built beds by

laying cut bamboo branches side by side, tying them tightly together with parachute-string, then laid the bamboo bed perpendicular to the thicker branches spread a few feet apart like floor-joists, so that the bed afforded us the chance to sleep above, instead of in the mud. We then covered the bed with cardboard from the empty cases in which twelve individual C-ration meals had been packed in. This way, the irregularities in the bamboo would not be felt when laid upon. We slept on top of all of this wrapped in our quilted, camouflaged in dark shades of green, brown and gray, poncho liners, which always had a dank odor, but no more offensive than our own stench.

In addition to building our huts, we dug waist-deep, two-man foxholes within a scamper of our huts.

At night, decaying jungle matter on the ground glowed. Someone said it was phosphorous. It reminded me of the hands on a watch made to glow in the dark, like some sort of radioactive material.

I, along with a few others, gathered some of the glowing matter and arranged it to form the letters USMC. I remember we also made a *peace sign*, but Sergeant Thompson came and destroyed it—he kicked it all over the jungle floor with his salty looking boots doing something like a war dance. When he was satisfied his point had been made, he bellowed out, "What are you guys, some kind of fucking hippies?"

I remained silent with the others, for no one dared talk back to Sergeant Thompson—never.

---

So often the word was that we were going to move in a day or two—or in a week or so—or tomorrow. I always felt like no one knew what we were doing.

---

We stayed awake half the night on watch listening for the enemy. Some nights we went out on LPs, or ambushes.

---

Patrols were run every day. Each day a different platoon had the duty, so every third day it was 1st Platoon's turn to patrol. The patrols were coming up empty-handed. So far there was no sign of the enemy. Mostly—to me—patrols meant getting tangled in vines, and lost in the thick jungle.

---

The radio on my back was kicking my ass. The only good thing about the radio was that it kept me from having to walk point, and I had the say on who got the plastic wrapping that the batteries to the PRC-25 came in. The plastic was valuable—it kept dry, the wallets and pictures of high school sweethearts.

---

I loved Sharon. She was my girlfriend and I was so proud to have her. I showed all the guys in my platoon her picture. They fell in love with her too. Even the black marines called her, "One sweet sister."

I treasured her picture which I kept wrapped in plastic inside my pack, careful not to bend or fold it. At least once a day I would unwrap her picture so I could get a clearer view of her—so I could feel like she was right with me in the jungle.

**Letter # 24**

*Christmas Day, 1968*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*It's about 4:00 in the afternoon on that most happy and most merriest day of the year, Christmas. Today was no different than any other day except, maybe once in a while, someone would remind ya what day it was.*

*Don't believe anything ya read in the papers like everybody gets to see Bob Hope. He wouldn't have the guts to come to Hill 500. His chopper would get shot down coming in.*

*The cease-fire lasted about 25 minutes here as some gook thought he'd play Santa and come through our lines. But by the looks of his head today, he didn't have a chance.*

*There hasn't been any mail for a few days, but I'm hoping they'll fly some in today.*

*Did ya have everybody up for Christmas? When did ya bring Sharon's ring to her?*

*Well, got to go; but I'll write later. I miss ya all, and next Christmas will be at home.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS Happy Birthday, Mom*

**—Between the Lines—**

I always think of a Marine by the name of Gary Heeman when I think of Bob Hope.

About a week before Christmas, the word was passed around that one man from each platoon would get to see the Bob Hope show in Da Nang. So the names of the 1st Platoon members were written on small pieces of cardboard from C-ration flaps, and tossed into a steel helmet. As a name was pulled out of the helmet, I wished and hoped real hard with my eyes closed that I would be the winner—not that seeing Bob Hope mattered, but simply because I would have liked a few days out of the bush—but the winner was Gary Heeman.

A day or so before Christmas, Gary and a few others—the winners from each platoon—boarded a helicopter which had landed on the top of Hill 500. I watched as it lifted away, bound for Da Nang with the lucky marines.

A day or so after Christmas, when Gary returned, I sat with him and a few other marines while he told stories about his time in Da Nang, and the Bob Hope show. Gary did not mention much about the show other than he had been a great distance from the stage—that the people looked tiny. Most of his stories were about the food he ate—hamburgers, steaks, and hot dogs—all you could eat—and the beer he drank; an endless supply. When someone asked him if he had spent time with any Vietnamese girls—such as prostitutes—he commenced to tell us that he was married and the father of a child. He said, “I looked, but I’m the faithful kind.”

Two weeks later Gary would be shot dead by an enemy sniper. As I watched his bloodied body being wrapped in a green rubber poncho, I remember saying to myself, “I guess Gary wasn’t that lucky after all.”

Every time I hear the name *Bob Hope*, I think of Gary Heeman, and somehow in my mind I blame Bob Hope for Gary’s death, even though I know this is an absurd thought—a case of displaced anger.

_____

Before Christmas, I had my two sisters go out and buy Sharon a friendship ring. Years later, my sister Cheryl would tell me the story about the night the two of them brought the ring to her. When they got to Sharon's house, she was sitting on a sofa in her living room with some other boy who was never introduced.

To this day, I have never seen the friendship ring.

_____

My mother's birthday was on December 29th. She always said she got cheated out of gifts, because some of her Christmas presents were considered to be for her birthday.

**Letter # 25**

*28 Dec 68*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*How was everybody's Christmas? I bet mom and dad are sure glad another Christmas is gone.*

*I just got back from patrol. Patrols in the mountains are real bad. We didn't have any contact so it was like walking all around the Blue Hills.*

*I got the postcard you sent me. It sure makes me homesick. I also got my first Playboy. The January edition is real good.*

*You mentioned about money. I told you, you can borrow it anytime you want. I think you're doing just great with the money.*

*You don't mind if I put in a little order for a package, do ya? Well, here goes. I'd like some canned fruit, shak'n pudding, malted milk balls, two more cans of booze, 12 funny books, some damn good paperbacks, and etc. Thanks.*

*My hair has grown a lot, and it hasn't been cut since November 1st, so I'm starting to blend in with the rest of the gang. I haven't washed in 23 days, so you can probably imagine what I smell like. Plus my trousers split up the seam 10 days ago, so when ya sit down you get invaded by ants. Other than that, I'm OK.*

*Last night we got attacked by two monkeys. The monkeys over here throw rocks. They are called Rock Apes. They are big enough that if you fall asleep on watch, you'll be carried away by them. It happened to a friend of mine.*

*Well, got to go.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS I'm up for Lance Corporal*

**—Between the Lines—**

My family used to send me postcards from back home. I still remember one of them. It was an aerial view of Paragon Park. The park featured a great roller-coaster ride. My parents used to take me and my brother and sisters to Paragon Park every summer. Sharon and I spent a lot of time at the park also. There was a Tunnel of Love, and we loved to hug and kiss in the dark where no one bothered us.

———

As a Christmas gift, my mother and father gave me a subscription to Playboy magazine. Needless to say, at the age of eighteen, the pictures of topless, sexually provocative girls were exciting to me, and of course, to the other guys who got to look at the pictures after I was done.

———

My trousers always seemed to be split—either in the seam of the crotch, or worn in the knees—and the red ants constantly were inside my trousers. It was bad enough having a constant case of itchy crotch rot—I could have done without the red ants.

———

There may have been rock apes in Vietnam, but I never saw one. I think the stories were a way of trying to scare us into staying awake at night while we were on watch.

**Letter # 26**

*4 Jan 69*

*Dear Family,*

*I'm sorry I couldn't write on New Year's Day, but we moved from Hill 500 to Hill 734 which is about 20 miles away. Laos is right down the bottom of the mountain. There is a river separating Vietnam from Laos. There is a chance 4 regiments of NVA are gonna try and infiltrate into South Vietnam. So that is what we are doing here. The rumor is we'll be here for about 15 days and then sweep to the river which will take 10 days and then get choppers back into An Hoa and get ready for Tet. We've been out of An Hoa since November 1st, I think. That's more than two months in the bush. That should give ya an idea of what's been happening.*

*So how's things on the home front? Well the holidays went by pretty fast. I sent home $120 a few days ago. Inform me if it arrives.*

*Bobby leaves for Germany pretty soon, doesn't he.*

*I was wondering if Steve has heard anything from "Uncle Sam?" It's about time he took the big step.*

*Oh, I'm pretty sure I get promoted to Lance Corporal this month. That's what my squad leader told me. That means a little more money.*

*Well, got to go for now. I'm in perfect health, and it appears my luck is running good.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Most of New Years Day, 1969, was spent waiting around for helicopters which seemed like they were never going to arrive, to take us to our next objective. We were in the *hurry up and wait* mode. It was not unusual to wait at an LZ for hours at a time for helicopters which were said to be only minutes away.

When the helicopters did finally arrive, we were whisked off in the direction of what was rumored to be the Laotian border. Later on in life, I would learn we were operating in an area the NVA had designated as *Base Area 112*—an enemy sanctuary deep in the mountains. Many avenues of the Ho Chi Minh trail passed through this area.

_____

The LZ on top of Hill 734 looked just like the LZ at Hill 500—trees blown to smithereens and deep craters formed by the bombs dropped from B-52 bombers.

Upon our landing, we scrambled from the helicopters, and then slogged our way out of the deep, muddy craters, and finally making our way into the cover of the jungle. There was no dust blown into the air by the downwash of the rotor blades as the helicopters departed, for the LZ was actually the floor of a damp rainforest. Until the B-52 raid had demolished the trees and vegetation making up the triple canopy, the jungle floor had probably not ever seen the light of day.

_____

From my fighting hole on Hill 734, I had a view of a river flowing through a valley below, and another mountain range beyond, rumored to be Laos, but my squad leader's map did not show any boundaries, or the word Laos.

_____

My brother-in-law, Bobby, was headed to Germany with an infantry unit from Fort Reilly, Kansas.

_____

My cousin Steve had joined the Navy and was aboard a destroyer off the coast of Vietnam. He often thought of me when he saw the tracers at night, filling the night skies of Vietnam.

**Letter # 27**

*9 Jan 69*

*Dear Family,*

*Well, it's been a while since I last wrote, but there was no sense if the choppers weren't coming in to get the mail. It rained for one week straight and stopped just long enough today for a few choppers to get in.*

*Well, the NVA know we are in the area as they fired at one of our positions the other day and killed one guy. Every night they throw grenades in at us, but they haven't got close enough to do any harm. We are moving right down to the Laos border in three days. I guess the Marine Corps isn't satisfied being as close as we are right now. They won't be satisfied until half of us are dead. As of now, I've got no idea when I'll get back to the rear. I hope we are back in by next November.*

*I haven't received any mail since the 1st because of the weather, but I'm hoping we get some today. If we don't, it could be a good month. But keep writing, cause sooner or later, I'll get it. I'll write as much as possible, but don't worry if you don't hear from me.*

*Well, got to go, but please pray for me cause I'll need it.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

There was a never ending rain, but life went on, except for one marine.

———

Life went on with patrols during the day, or being assigned to a daytime observation post. At night, I either stood a perimeter watch or was assigned to a listening post. Every third night I would be assigned to lay in ambush with my squad, usually alongside a trail if there was one that led to our positions. This type of existence had me growing weary, leading me to feel worn down from getting only a few hours sleep, here and there.

We were soaked. Our hands were shriveled as if they had been submerged in water for a long time—as if we had been swimming. The only chance to get out of the rain was during the brief hours of sleep inside our poncho hooches—a makeshift bamboo frame covered with a green rubber poncho, and another rubber poncho spread out on top of the mud.

Just before falling asleep, sleep which came quickly to my exhausted body, as quick as if I had been drugged, I would hope whoever was on watch, sitting outside in the pouring rain, stayed awake, for  inside the hooch, when it was my turn to sleep, the sound of rain drumming on the poncho roof would lull me to sleep. Between being practically comatose, and the rhythmic sound of the rain beating hard on the poncho—masking what might be the sounds made by an approaching enemy—I would have never heard the enemy coming to kill me.

———

I still remember the day the enemy killed the marine I mentioned in this letter to my parents.

The day was dark. Daytime in the jungle was always dark—dark greens, browns, and dull grays. The trees rose up into more trees, and then even more. We were, as it always seemed, beneath a triple canopy where not even on a perfect day did the sunshine make it down to this part of earth —not one ray of sunlight.

Breaking the ambient sounds of the jungle was one short burst of AK-fire followed by a loud yell in the distance, “Corpsman up!”

The radio airwaves came to life, and even though Marine Corps jargon was being used, I got the message loud and clear—someone had been killed.

I listened to the radio, and when I heard the request for a "routine medevac," I knew one of ours was dead. Not wounded—not an, "emergency medevac"—but a routine medevac in nature. *Take your time. No hurry. No reason to jeopardize the safety of a helicopter or its crew. The dead marine can go out with the mail*.

I did not know the dead marine or his name, and I never learned it, but what I do know and remember is the story Sergeant Thompson recited to us about this marine's death.

"The marine was on perimeter watch, but wasn't paying attention. He was writing a letter instead of watching out for the enemy. The enemy came up and shot him straight through the heart. He bled to death, all over the letter he had been writing to his girlfriend."

Then Sergeant Thompson continued as his voice grew with anger, "You fucking guys, listen up. If I catch one of you writing a fucking letter while on watch, I'll kick your fucking ass all over this fucking mountain, then I'll shoot you dead."

_____

The word was passed to expect the enemy to begin probing our lines day and night. The word was now becoming factual. Chicoms (Chinese-Communist Grenades) were being thrown at our positions at all hours—night and day.

**In Remembrance of**

**The Marine killed on Hill 734**

**January 1969**

**Letter # 28**

*11 Jan 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I've received a lot of mail from you all. First off, I'm in A-1 condition and going as strong as ever.*

*Cheryl's car sounds real nice. I wish I could be home to drive it seeing it's new, but then again, I'll get my chance when I get home.*

*I'll be writing for a package from you. They always help the situation.*

*The "Quincy Sun" had stopped coming for awhile, but I've started to get it again. I received the card from you announcing the relocation of the flower shop. Tell Joe I wish him the best of luck and to throw $10 in my bank account. Ha, ha!*

*You mentioned about having Marines from our area on TV. You said there was one from Quincy by the name of Julian Terri? I know him real good because at one time he hung around the bowling alley. He is getting pretty "short" and should be home in no time.*

*Well, the rain has stopped for awhile so I think I'll hear from you more often.*

*Well, got to go for now, but I'll write later.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Amazing how the mail from home lifted my spirits. But was I in A-1 shape? I might have thought I was if I had written this letter in the morning, before actually seeing my first dead marine, but if the letter was written afterwards—say later in the day—then I was in denial.

On this date, January 11, 1969, I saw my first dead marine. Back in training, I was told that once you saw your first dead marine, your life would never be the same again. They said the sight would turn you cold, then hard. You would become, in fact, *Hardcore*. You would become hardcore unless you snapped mentally, and that's why the Marines Corps sent me to Parris Island. They wanted to see how much I could endure before the mental snap.

_____

I was on perimeter watch. It might have been in the afternoon—the same afternoon I had forgotten, "Never volunteer for anything." My father used to say this, and it was also a phrase uttered by many marines to each other.

Volunteers were needed to help another platoon carry their dead marine up the hill. The platoon had been on patrol some distance from our defensive perimeter when it was ambushed by the enemy— one KIA.

I volunteered. My curiosity had me wanting to see a dead marine.

As I stood on top of Hill 734, coming from somewhere below, I could hear machetes hacking away at the jungle. The hacking sounds were slowly progressing up the hill. After a few more minutes passed, I caught sight of the marines as they broke out of the jungle and into the clearing used as an LZ. Struggling, they climbed the last few yards to the top of the mountain where I stood.

I felt like I was watching a movie scene where hunters were returning from a hunting trip with their prize.

The dead marine I was waiting to see was not being carried—he was being transported—by what could have been considered porters. At first I thought I was looking at a dead tiger. Then the picture changed. I was looking at a marine slung from a bamboo pole—his wrists tied to the pole at one end, and his ankles tied to the pole near the other end. Each end of the pole was bearing down hard on the shoulders of two marines—pall bearers—one in the front, one in the back—who had the responsibility of carrying the deadweight of their fellow marine who no longer was alive.

I stood awestruck with drooped shoulders and my arms hanging long to my side. I was without military bearing as my mind registered the picture before me—a body slung—head hanging—neck fully extended—mouth wide open—jaw dropped—a last-minute scream.

The platoon I came to assist wanted no help. They were too proud. They wanted to carry their own. One of the marines with the weight of the bamboo pole pushing down upon his shoulder was my friend, Ed Pralicz. I stared at him as he trudged by. He looked me back in the eye, maybe for a second or two. I could see it in that brief moment of time—I could see the change in his

eyes. Somehow, in my soul, I knew that his blank stare, surrounded by a dull look of expressionless anger painted upon his face, was the sign of being hardcore.

I watched the body being lowered to the ground—the bootlaces having been cut away from around the dead marine's wrists and ankles. I saw a very small wound in the front of his head—more a black-and-blue mark than a hole. I could not see into it.

There was dried blood. Just a dried trickle running from the small entry wound to the bridge of the nose. Would that be enough to kill you?

I did not get a look at the back of his skull where the sign of certain death must have been. How would I notice something that was no longer there?

I imagined what was missing. I rubbed the back of my own head with my own hand.

The Gunny, who had asked for the volunteers, was hardcore. He went through the dead marine's pockets. He took a wallet from the back one, and from a shirt pocket he took a package of cigarettes, and a cigarette lighter. I can still see the Gunny throwing the lighter and the pack of cigarettes to me which I fumbled. Gunny said to me, "The poor guy won't need these anymore. You might as well smoke them."

I stooped down and gathered the pack of cigarettes and lighter into my hands, but I was only in my infancy of hardness. I was not ready to smoke a dead marine's cigarettes.

I asked Ed Pralicz what had happened, and as he told me, I became jealous of him. How could I have been jealous? How could I think Ed Pralicz had something of value that I did not have—something I desired?

I was in competition to gain the trophy of *hardness,* wanting to be the first of the new guys to possess it, but in my mind, the distinction of being the first had gone to him.

I asked Ed all sorts of questions. I wanted to know everything that had happened, but all he said was, "There was one short burst of AK-fire. Slingerland went down. I crawled up to him and dragged him off the trail. He was dead."

"You didn't shoot back?"

"At what? We never saw a thing."

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My sister bought a brand new Chevy Malibu to replace the car my brother Tommy had wrecked.

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One night, while watching the local news, my father saw a marine being interviewed by a television reporter who was reporting from Vietnam. The marine's name was Julian Terri. He said he was from Quincy, Massachusetts. I knew Julian had arrived in Vietnam before me, and that his tour of duty was getting close to the end. He would be back in Quincy soon.

Julian is one of the fortunate ones who survived. I see him once in awhile at Marine Corps League golf tournaments, and at an occasional Vietnam War memorial service. He's like a lot of my friends who are Vietnam veterans, who wear a good smile and love to joke around—but it just might be a facade.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Harold J. Slingerland, Jr.**

**Killed in Action**

**January 11, 1969**

**Letter # 29**

*20 Jan 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*We got some mail in today, but they haven't passed it out yet. We are on Hill 412 now and will be for the next 10 days. Then there is a question whether we'll sweep to the Laos border or go to the Arizona Territory near An Hoa for Tet.*

*The weather is starting to get real hot, and I'm being pestered with "Gook Sores," which are like impetigo. I've got big open sores on my hands and arms. They hold about a pint of puss and blood each. Well, that's enough for that subject.*

*How's things on the home front? Tommy still getting into hot water? How's Cheryl's car running?*

*I've only got about 300 days left. When I get home I'm gonna try and get stationed at Boston, Portsmouth or Newport. But most likely, I'll end up at good ole Lejeune.*

*Well, got to go, but at least you know I'm OK.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

On the 15th of January, I thought of myself as being one of the unlucky ones. I was still the new guy, and because of this I was volunteered to gather the canteens from my squad members and fill them.

I collected the canteens from the guys in the squad while they sat around sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes, writing letters, or just plain hanging out. They were going to continue doing this while I had to climb down the mountain, which in some places was so steep that I slid more than walked, down on my ass.

I was not happy. I felt I was being cheated out of a chance to rest.

There were about a dozen new guys going on the *water run.* It was going to be very physical. The climb to the top of the mountain had been a struggle the day before—so steep that often one would have to grab onto a tree and pull his way up, or be pulled up the mountain by the marine to your front, and here I was going to have to repeat the climb weighted down with a slew of full canteens—water for the others lounging on the top of the mountain.

The stream we were going to fill the canteens from was a stream we had crossed the day before. We had not filled our canteens at the stream then because we were in quick pursuit of those who had ambushed the pointman, a popular black marine nicknamed, *The Judge*. If we could have stopped along the stream the day before, I then would not have had to climb down, and then back up the mountain for a second time. Yet if I had not gone on the water run, I might have been killed alongside Gary Heeman.

———

We were filling canteens down at the stream. A few marines were stooped over at the waist, filling their load of canteens two at a time—one in each hand—canteens buoyant with air when empty—resistant to being pushed down below the surface of the water—air bubbling out as the water flowed in—a change in weight, and void of bubbles, indicating a full canteen.

Marines who were not actually filling canteens kept a close eye out for the enemy, for we knew the enemy was in the area. For in a sense, we coexisted with him, relying upon the same waters for survival.

I was one of those filling canteens when the sounds of a quick, sudden burst of AK-fire filled the jungle, sending me scrambling for cover, but without knowing where the fire had come from. With fear, I wondered if I was safely hidden, or was I in direct view of the enemy. Was he training his sights on me at this very moment?

I heard someone say the AK-fire had come from the top of the mountain—AK-fire not directed at us, but fired into the perimeter.

Whoever had been in charge of us said we had just been ordered over the radio to get back to the perimeter. I had personally heard the message with my own two ears. “Water-run, get your fucking asses back here now!”

I remember the sense of urgency I felt from this message, for very seldom did I hear profanity coming from the radio. Most messages, even during the height of battle, seemed cool and calm, as in a way to reduce panic.

The climb back up the mountain seemed effortless. Today, I have no memory of the climb, but what I do remember is getting to the top of the mountain where I confronted the sight of Gary Heeman on the ground, covered in blood, and Mahoney screaming bloody murder in pain. Gary Heeman was dead, a bloody mess, and Mahoney was shot through the knee. They had been shot while sitting in my fighting hole—the hole I had not been in.

I stood with a dead stare at the foot of the hole where I thought about Gary Heeman—how he had been the lucky one to have seen Bob Hope—how he was married, had a child, and most importantly, how he had been faithful. I did not think it was fair for him to have been the one killed—not a husband and a father. Maybe someone like myself who did not have a wife and child at home should have taken the bullet, but not Gary.

———

Mahoney screamed like The Judge had the day before, but Mahoney's screams faded when the morphine took effect. The Judge's screams ended when he took his last breath. I think of The Judge today when I hear someone say, “So and so died peacefully—So and so died suddenly—So and so was killed immediately—So and so never felt a thing, ever knew what hit him.”

The Judge did not fall into any of those categories. The Judge screamed himself to death. I swear he knew what hit him, felt every last ounce of pain, and it seemed to me, where ever he was going, he was not prepared for the trip.

_____

I never actually saw Mahoney or his wounds. I only heard accounts, some of which might not have been true. Some of what I was hearing was while Mahoney was still screaming in pain. I heard that his kneecap was shattered. Someone else had said it was his thigh. Someone else had said it was both.

I felt *his* pain in my mind as if the round had shattered my own kneecap, or tore apart my thigh. To relieve the pain suffered from hearing Mahoney's screams, I massaged my legs with my own hands to bring comfort to my soul.

_____

I could tell the location of the LZ, knew where the dead and wounded would be lifted from. It was easy to know—all I had to do was listen to where Mahoney's screams continued to come from.

When Mahoney finally stopped screaming, I thought he had died, but it turned out to be the calming effect of the morphine.

I was relieved by the sounds of his silence. The captain was probably relieved also, because Mahoney's screams were giving our positions away, and also because of the fear of painful injury being planted into the minds of us still left to endure in the jungle.

While I sat in silence I wondered how I might die, as in, would I scream like baby, or take my medicine like a man. The Marine Corps had taught me many things, but it had not taught me how to act at the moment of death. Who would that be left up to?

The silence was broken by the sounds of helicopters coming in our direction for Gary Heeman and The Judge. One routine medevac, and Mahoney, who would benefit from being treated as an emergency.

_____

The jungle was thick vine, entangled through trees and trees, and more trees, reaching to the sky. Was it sunny above? Cloud covered? Raining? There was no way of knowing, for even the smoke from our canisters barely found its way through the jungle cover. The helicopters would have trouble spotting our dyed-yellow smoke marking the thinnest part of the overhead canopy.

There was no way a helicopter could actually land. It would have to hover above the jungle, which it did for what seemed like ages.

Our casualties had to be pulled up from the jungle—one at a time—by what was known as a *jungle-penetrator*; something like a bullet-shaped cage, weighted with steel so it would have a chance of penetrating the jungle canopy. The penetrator was attached to a guide-wire which was fed down from the helicopter hovering above.

I never actually saw the helicopter, or the dead, or Mahoney—none of them who were being placed inside the cage to be pulled up through the jungle. I only felt a slight breeze—the helicopter's down draft.

After our casualties were flown away, I delivered the canteens of water to their rightful owners. I was left with extra ones that had belonged to Heeman and Mahoney. When I asked Sergeant Thompson what he wanted me to do with the extra water, he simply looked at me and said, "Drink it—you might as well—you went and got it." This left me thinking about Slingerland's cigarettes.

I was trying to figure out in my head what the difference would be between the water and the cigarettes as I downed one of Heeman's canteens. I said to myself, "There's no difference. The cigarettes and water belonged to guys who no longer are alive. Drink and smoke without any guilt. If the shoe was on a different foot—if I was the one who was dead—the others would drink my water and smoke my cigarettes. Wouldn't they?"

It was at this moment that I knew, if I was given the chance again to smoke a dead marine's cigarettes, I would do so without any qualms.

**In Remembrance of**

**The Judge**

**Killed in Action**

**January 14, 1969**

**—**

**Private First Class**

**Gary L. Heeman**

**Killed in Action**

**January 15, 1969**

**Letter # 30**

*21 Jan 69*

*Dear Family,*

*Just want to say I'm OK. I'm sending this paper cause it mentions An Hoa and Operation Taylor Common which I'm on. Read it cause it is real interesting.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Along with this brief letter, I folded and stuffed into the envelope a copy of a newspaper known as *The Sea Tiger*—an official publication of the United States Marine Corps. In this particular edition, there were pictures of marines in the field that resembled the conditions I was living in—the mud and filth—and stories about the fighting going on around An Hoa and the surrounding mountains. Fighting taking place as Operation Taylor Common wore on. The news reports and

pictures depicted the world I existed in—a world so much different than the one I had once known.

_____

About this time, I was wrongly accused of falling asleep on watch, and I received a bad ass-kicking from Sergeant Thompson because of it.

What happened—and I still believe it to be true—was that Brother Bell fell asleep on watch. Not I.

When Sergeant Thompson came charging down upon our position to find out who was not answering the radio, instead of Brother Bell admitting he was the one, he said, “O'Connell had the watch. I woke him. He’s the one who missed the radio check. He’s the one who fell asleep.”

I said, “That's bullshit, Bell. You never woke me.”

As Sergeant Thompson began to maul me, I tried desperately to convince him of my innocence, but he was not hearing any of it. He punched and pounded and kicked me to the muddy ground. I was overcome by his physical rage and superior strength. All I could do was curl into a ball; my fingers interlaced, held hard against the back of my skull. My arms, bent at the elbows, pressed tightly against my ribs. This was the only protection I could afford myself.

I felt the first few blows to my body as I tried to roll away. Then I grew numb, and then as I realized that Sergeant Thompson was trying to kill me, I gave up. There was nothing else I could do.

Somehow—and I don't know how long it took—a few guys pulled Sergeant Thompson from me, and I slowly rose up to my feet with the help of a few other marines.

As I pulled back, I said nothing. I felt that anything else I might have said would have only sent Sergeant Thompson into a deeper rage that would have come down upon me.

As for Brother Bell, when he tried to tell me once more that he had shook me awake, I told him to go fuck himself. I told him to get a new foxhole buddy—I was done with him. Actually, at that moment, I was done with the two of them in my mind. I could care less whether Brother Bell or Sergeant Thompson lived or died.

**Letter # 31**

*22 Jan 69*

*Hi everyone,*

*Well I've received a lot of mail from you. I also received my package. It was great and those “pills” came in handy. You might as well start another one, and if you could, send me some “Instamatic 124” film, I can borrow my buddy's camera and get some flicks for ya.*

*I hope you received the paper I sent you about Operation Taylor Common.*

*I also received the pictures of Cheryl's new car and one of Bobby. I've got them wrapped in plastic so the rain won't wreck them.*

*Well got to go for now, but at least you know I'm alive.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

A *pill* to my father was a mixed drink—a *seven and seven*—Seagram's Seven whiskey mixed with Seven-Up. In many of his letters he would tell me he was having a few pills while he wrote me. The pills he was sending me continued to be canned, whiskey-sours. I loved finding them in the packages from home.

_____

It was late in the day when the word was passed down for the 1st Platoon to get their gear ready. We were going out to recover a pallet load of explosives—C-4—which had broken away from an external sling which had been hanging from the underbody of a helicopter. The sling had snapped, and the load of C-4 had plummeted to earth. The *higher-ups* feared that if the enemy got to the C-4 before we did, they would be able to use the explosives to make booby-traps and use them against us.

_____

I boarded the helicopter without any idea where we were headed or what to expect. There had not even been enough time between the order to "saddle up", and scrambling into the back of the helicopter, for a rumor to get started.

As usual, the side-windows of the helicopter were void of plexi-glass. The wind blew freely through making it hard to stare out. Somehow, despite the deafening noise of the rotors, and the wind blurring the eyes, the word was passed from one marine to another by screaming in each other's ear, "Stand and face outboard—rifles aimed out the window—be prepared to fire!" This was frightening to me. I had never heard this order given before. In the past, while landing at an LZ, we always sat anxiously across from each other with the butt of our rifles firmly on the deck —weapons pointing upward, clamped tightly between our knees involuntarily pressed together, while our stressed bodies braced for the landing. Some guys use to look like they were lost in prayer, or lost in space. But this time was different. We were not sitting—we were standing and prepared to fight.

Only the rhythmic thump of the rotors overhead, and the heavy machinegun sound of the 50-cals being fired by the helicopter door gunners—rounds being pumped at who knows what—could be heard. Over this sound, there would be no way of telling whether we were taking fire, not unless there had been a spray of blood and someone keeled over.

No words were passed to exit the helicopter, or if there had been, I did not hear any. Instead, I sensed the marine beside me making a move to get out, so I followed. Outside the helicopter, I found myself in a natural clearing. The C-4 could not have fallen to earth in a better place.

The mad dash for the jungle—the scramble, keep low—was in full fury. I saw other members of the platoon charging hard for the cover. I did the same thing. I thought if I could make the jungle —get down low, hug the earth, catch my breath, and listen—I would have a chance at survival. Hopefully there would be nothing more than the ambient sounds of birds, lizards, and even curious monkeys in the trees overhead—jungle creatures returning to their ways of life.

With all their wind and fury, the helicopter departed, and the jungle sounds returned, signaling that maybe we were in fact, all alone.

All the preparations for landing in a hot LZ—the firing of the 50-cals—every marine standing with his weapon aimed out the window—weapons locked and loaded with the safety off, selector on full-automatic—all was precautionary. All just in case.

We had been spared from a death I had imagined in my mind.

The C-4 was not too far from where we landed. We had gotten there first. We had out-run the enemy.

We quickly gathered the crates which fortunately had not broken open. Some marines climbed trees to cut away the cargo-net tangled in the branches, and freed those cases of C-4 which were overhead. Miraculously we were able to account for every last crate—every single stick of C-4.

We stacked the crates in a cargo net which had been sent out along with us. We had worked feverishly, having been told that as soon as the load of C-4 was ready to go, the helicopter would return and take it—and us—out of the jungle, back to the safety of the company perimeter where we had started from.

But *the word* changed. The crates of C-4 now were going to be lifted out in less than ten minutes, but we were going to spend the night alone in the jungle—us being just one undermanned platoon. Not many guys.

To quiet our pissing and moaning, *the new word* was that in the morning a helicopter would be sent for us, and we would be safely on our way. But after surviving the night—without incident —*the word* was changed once more. We were going to *hump* back to the company, and no one even knew how far it was, or how long it would take, or whether we would bump into the enemy —at least not I.

You should have heard us marines; "Fuck you! Fuck the Corps! Fuck everything and everybody!"

Sometimes *the word* was too good to be true. Not having to walk—riding in a helicopter instead —had been like music to our ears. I had fallen for *the word* this time. I had let it seep within, caressed it through the night, and wrapped my arms around it. No wonder I felt betrayed and lied to the next morning.

I had personally taken *the word* to heart. It was bad enough the enemy was having its way with us, now I felt the Corps was fucking us too.

But as usual, we did what we were told—we shrugged it off—while at the same time we shook our heads, and shook the last bit of discontent from our minds, because once again, we were going to need our utmost attention to keep the enemy from surprising us during the hump back to safety.

———

We made it back without the enemy harassing us, yet every marine carried a wound—the wounds from blood-sucking leeches. There was not one marine who had been spared a leech found attached to his body somewhere. I had leeches sucking blood from my shin, one sucking blood from my armpit, and one sucking blood even from my crotch—very close to the base of my penis, beneath my balls.

There was no pain—leeches are gentle in their own way—but just the thoughts of a leech sucking blood turned me into a fear-filled child wanting to rip the leech away. But leeches cannot be pulled away without the head—separated from the rest of the body—staying attached to the skin. An invitation for infection to set in.

Leeches, to be properly removed, had to be made to release their suction by touching them with the head of a hot glowing cigarette, or dousing them with mosquito-repellent, or sprinkling salt over their blood-thickened bodies, which would then turn the leech into a thimble-size glob of blood—my blood. Every drop valuable if I had been shot.

**Letter # 32**

*24 Jan 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Right now it's about 7:30 in the morning. I had last watch from 5:30to 7:30. It isn't getting dark until around 7:15 at night compared to back in October when it was dark at 6:00.*

*In the last two days, we have discovered an enemy base camp. There was only one NVA left behind and two NVA girls. We had to kill the guy and one girl. We completely destroyed the base camp and brought the girl in as a POW.*

*If you send me that "124" film, you'll have to enclose some stamps as it cost 20 cents to send the film home. You can take the money out of the bank for the film and stamps.*

*We are moving again tomorrow to Hill 226. They say this should be the end of Operation Taylor Common. Then we will go back to An Hoa for a rest, I hope.*

*My red pen just quit on me. I guess it needs an R&R. So do I!*

*Well got to go, but I'll write from 226.*

*Love Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Freeman was walking point the morning we discovered the enemy rest camp. The thick jungle we were patrolling had forced us to travel a well used trail. We were trying to move quietly. To have hacked our way through the thick jungle—the sounds of the steel machetes thrashing through the vines, sometimes with even a dull clang—might have alerted the enemy that we were coming. We never felt safe following a trail that the enemy probably used also.

Freeman was taking his time. Each step was measured. After every step, Freeman would freeze, then slowly swivel his head left to right, and back again, sometimes more than once. We all seemed to repeat after him—looking left, then right, and even behind us—something like playing a game of follow the leader.

The pace continued to be slow, everyone with their eyes and ears tuned. We had been in the jungle long enough to know the ambient sounds of the jungle creatures, but no length of time helped us in knowing for sure what the sounds of the enemy were, for he never seemed to make any noise.

Freeman continued his pace. It was wearing for me, not grueling—grueling would be a term better used to describe a steep climb or a quick paced hump, or having to hack through the jungle with machetes, but wearing because of the damn weight of the radio on my back, and the constant, stop-start-stop-start pace of our patrol.

I could not get a rhythm in my mind to ease the load on my back because my attention was on trying to shift the way the radio was riding on my back. I was trying hard to keep the straps from cutting the circulation of blood to my arms and hands which were growing numb and useless.

Freeman continued—almost tiptoeing at times—further along the trail.

After the next step, he suddenly dropped to one knee in a millisecond of time—from standing, to down on one knee in one swift but fluent movement.

I froze. Then I dropped as if I was still playing follow the leader.

Freeman looked back at the column and hand-signaled for another set of eyes, for Sergeant Thompson to see what he had come upon. Freeman had discovered footprints—someone with small feet, wearing no shoes. The prints of someone barefooted.

The two of them conferred with whispers and talking hands. When they finished whatever it was they had talked about, Sergeant Thompson waved us on with a hand signal we all understood to mean, onward, so we continued on.

When I got up to the point where Freeman had dropped to one knee—where him and Sergeant Thompson had conferred with one another, I looked down. I did not see anything different than what I had been seeing for the last hour. The weight of the radio on my back had weakened my neck muscles, thus my head hung low, and thus, my eyes, close to being in a vegetated state, had only been taking in the trail of rotted, decayed jungle matter. My focus was no more than a few feet in front of my boots.

But as I focused more intently, I too made out the footprint with my eyes—then more than one—then many. I was astonished thinking how someone—Freeman—could have picked up on such a minute sign of enemy existence. Yes, Freeman had me in awe. I was left feeling that he was extraordinary, possessed the eyesight of an eagle. He was someone I hoped to be someday.

The footprints led us down the trail to more footprints, and even more. Freeman, with Sergeant Thompson right behind, crept even slower than the slow pace we had been moving at. The movement was like a simple, but agonizing movement of Tai Ch. No way did we want to stumble into a trap, but no way was Sergeant Thompson going to let anyone turn and go the other way either.

I looked into the jungle and saw a snare, then more than one. I pointed to the snares and the column stopped, and Sergeant Thompson came back to me and looked where I was pointing. He nodded his head slightly, gave me the slightest pat of approval on my shoulder, then crept back to Freeman.

I had learned about snares and how they were used to trap small animals in case one had to survive in the jungle without food—learned about them at a one-day class on survival back at Camp Pendleton.

We did not go much further before we realized we were in the middle of an enemy base camp, so well camouflaged that we had no idea we were in it until we were. In fact, we were deep inside the bowels.

The camouflage was perfect. Objects and things hid looked like things one would have normally expected in the jungle. Nothing looked out of place at first until someone with a trained eye made out hidden objects, and the objects then began to appear for what they really were. Once they jumped out, it was like, *how did we ever miss them in the first place*.

There were thatched huts on stilts, a small set of bleachers made of bamboo, and running water supplied to each hut via aqueducts made from split bamboo carved out clean. There also were huge wicker baskets of uncooked rice, red cans with a picture of a fish and Chinese writing on the label, metal pots, seasoned caldrons, hundreds of black pajamas, Ho Chi Minh sandals, and the sounds of livestock—live pigs.

The pigs were restricted to a pen constructed of a bamboo picket fence. The bamboo was held together by jungle vine. The vine was also used for hinges allowing for a swinging gate in the fence. Also, vines held together the huts built up on stilts—vine tougher than rope.

I was mesmerized by the sights—by what I was seeing. I no longer felt the weight of the radio upon my shoulders as my thoughts changed, as I was lost in awe at the sight of birdcages handmade from matchstick thin bamboo. Birdcages hung in each hut, but there were no birds.

The camouflage continued to surrender, and more was revealed. The rest camp was in a draw—a ravine—where a beautiful stream, fed by an underground spring, ran through. There were cliffs along the edge of the draw. The cliffs had natural caves created by a million years of seeping water eroding rock one grain of sand at a time.

Suddenly, one marine saw the profile of someone who was not in Marine Corps uniform at the edge of a cave. The marine fired his weapon. The sound of the single shot filled the jungle.

The mouth of the cave was checked and no one was found, thus someone was going to be picked to go inside the cave—but whom?

All of sudden everyone wanted to appear big in size—like a giant—so he would not be volunteered to be the one. It was like everyone wanted to be huge—too big to squeeze into such a small opening.

When Sergeant Thompson said, “Which one of you is going in,” I was so glad I had the radio on my back. I was spared.

The marine who had fired his weapon was being stared at, and he piped up, “I'm not sure I saw anything. It might have been a shadow.”

Sergeant Thompson—with bravado—says, “A shadow? Are you fucking dumb? This damn place hasn't seen a shadow since the beginning of time.”

A new guy—newer than I—volunteered to be the one to go inside. With only a red-tinted flashlight and a forty-five, he disappeared into the pitch dark which nearly began right at the mouth of the cave.

Sergeant Thompson, seeing that he had lost sight of the new guy, said, “Far enough. Back the fuck out.”

Sergeant Thompson then looked at the marine who had fired his weapon and said, “You better have a fucking body the next time you shoot, you dumb motherfucker.”

The setting sun we could not see turned the dim lit jungle in the direction of further darkness. The word was passed to prepare to move out. We would be coming back tomorrow.

We returned in force the next day. All of Mike Company made the journey. The point element entered the base camp first to test the waters. There always was the chance the enemy had moved into the camp during the night, but the camp appeared to be just the way we had left it.

One of the benefits of returning in force was having enough marines to surround the entire base camp—to setup a defensive perimeter—and to have enough marines left over to search the huts and caves. Another benefit of having the entire company was having S-2 personnel with us—scouts.

We had two kinds of scouts. One kind were marines trained in gathering intelligence from the enemy, and deciphering the information. The other kind were Kit Carsons—former VC or NVA soldiers who had been captured or voluntarily turned—changed their allegiants—or we sure hoped so. Putting it another way, Kit Carsons were traitors, and we hoped they only changed sides once, for our good, and for their good too.

Rumors were more abundant than the official word. Rumors had it that the camp could support hundreds of soldiers at one time with food and shelter

As for the pigs, rumors had it that they were way out of their natural habitat, that someone must have herded them from the lowlands into the mountains. Rumors also had it that there was a good chance of camp attendants hiding somewhere amongst us, most likely in the caves.

The rumors began to change into *the word.* The word was backed up by our Kit Carson scout. He said there definitely had to be enemy hiding in the camp. The Kit Carson knew. He had stayed in camps just like this one, just a few years ago when he had traveled south along the Ho Chi Minh trail, presumably from Ha Noi as a new soldier in the North Vietnamese Army. An army eager to kill Americans.

Different than yesterday when we had half-heartily explored the caves, we had marines more than willing to go inside the dark in hopes of finding the enemy the Kit Carson was singing about.

I thought we should have simply *fragged* the caves—thrown grenades blindly into them and let the shrapnel and concussion wound or kill the supposed enemy. My way would have had no one being exposed to the chances of dying. I was not alone with this thought. Other marines low on the totem pole shared the same idea with one other, but the rational of those in command was that confirmed kills were needed, or POWs taken to justify yesterday’s shooting in the jungle.

———

I do not remember the girl I mentioned in my letter to home—the one I said was taken POW—but I do remember the one killed.

There had been a commotion outside the mouth of a cave. I could hear marines yelling in English while the Kit Carson yelled in Vietnamese. They were yelling simultaneously into the cave what must have added up to, “Come out with your fucking hands in the air.”

When I walked over towards the cave because of my curiosity, I found out a marine was in the cave. He could hear breathing, and it was not his. Just as I began to ask who the marine was inside the cave, there were three or four explosions—pistol shots—which sounded from within. Some of the marines standing outside the cave jumped back. I was one of them. No one seemed to make a move to go inside the cave, not after the shots, and not without knowing who had done the shooting. I most definitely did not want to.

Someone came rushing up from behind us and pushed his way through, shoving guys aside. "Look the fuck out you goddamn cowards!" It was Sergeant Thompson and he was making his move for the cave. Just as he knelt and got down on all fours, just as we all could see that he was too large—he might make it a few feet into the cave, but not much further—the marine who had been inside, who had either done the shooting or been shot at, came crawling backwards, feet first.

I felt a bit of relief when I saw him stand fully erect, unscathed. While he was trying to catch his breath, he said to no one in particular, "There were two of them—I only saw their eyes." When asked if he had killed them, he said with confidence, "For fucking sure."

I do not remember who went in to pull the two bodies from the cave, but I do recall there was not much enthusiasm for the chore.

I waited with other marines outside the cave. I had not been expected to be the one to go into the dark, or to help drag the dead into the light of the jungle. No, once again, I was saved by the radio on my back.

A rope was sent with the two marines who went into the cave. It was tied around the ankles of the first body to be dragged out by marines who did not seem to mind the less dangerous duty. As if playing tug of war with an opponent that had surrendered, the first body was tugged out into the open. Then the second body was dragged out in the same manner.

The dead had been lifted by their feet and hands to lay them flat—face up—on a slab like rock. I had watched from a place in the background at first, but then inched myself forward to get a better view.

One of the bodies was dressed in a military uniform which was worn looking—dull olive green. The closer I got, the more I could see that the uniform—with red insignia on the collars—clothed a Vietnamese male. He had a mop-head of black hair which had tickled the top of his ears in length, a face colored jaundice yellow, and large eyes wide open with fear—he must have died so suddenly that he never had time to blink. The more I looked, the more I noticed that his face was contorted, and that there was a single bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. The hole was larger than the hole I had seen in Slingerland's forehead a week or so earlier. I could only imagine that the back of the enemy's head must not have been there because the bullet, being from a forty-five—a big slug—had to have snowplowed its way through the skull, just the way it was designed to.

Sometime later, I would hear it said that the dead soldier had in fact been an NVA Colonel—or so the Kit Carson had stated.

The other body was like a page from a book of human anatomy—a book I might have daydreamed through in high school—focused more on the pictures than any of the words.

Nothing was said as my eyes locked onto the intestines which had sprung loose from the body before me. The body was that of a female. Flat chest, brown nipples—braless. She was only a female because she was without a penis.

Her face could have been the face of any Vietnamese person—male or female—I had seen traveling along Liberty Road.

I would hear a rumor that the girl had been the Colonel's lover. When I asked somebody where they got that from, he said, “The Kit Carson.”

———

Next on the list of things to do was kill the pigs.

I wanted to be one of those to do the killing. I wanted to be one of those to get to fire his weapon and see its effects, but I was ruled out—I still had the radio on my back.

Had the pigs been human, I would say I had watched a massacre, but their sounds were not yells or screams, but instead, squeals.

The pigs ran in circles—in a panic—just like humans would have reacted. There were so many pigs, it seemed like we could have run out of ammunition before the last pig squealed.

———

As I sit and write today, I must say, I do not know or remember what ever happened to the bodies. I do remember we left the enemy base camp before dark, and from a safe distance—from the safety of our former mountaintop base—we watched Marine Corps jets drop bomb after bomb down upon the camp. There were sounds—the scream of jets and exploding bombs—more than anything else, as only a hint of dust and smoke filtered up through the canopy of trees, showing where we had made our presence felt.

The next day, the marine who had fired his weapon on the day we had discovered the base camp, said to Sergeant Thompson, “Sarge, I guess I really did see someone the other day when I fired my weapon.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because of the two gooks we blew away—one of them had to be the one I saw.”

“No fucking way.”

“Why not, Sarge?”

“Because I said so.”

Sergeant Thompson then ended the conversation for all to hear with, “The next time you fire your fucking weapon, you better have a foot-on-chest-kill to show for it. Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

## Letter # 33

*31 Jan 69*

*Dear everybody!!!*

*Received mail yesterday and got 6 letters from you, 2 from Sharon, and one from Bobby.*

*We moved again today, but would you believe we are on the lowlands? It's like being in heaven after the mountains. But, in two or three days, we'll be back in the mountains.*

*I've enclosed a picture. Don't worry about the bandage, it's only covering up a minor gook sore. I hope you like the picture.*

*Steve must be at the Great Lakes freezing. If you can get his address, give it to me. Tell him not to become a corpsman because he'll come to Vietnam and be with the grunts.*

*Well, got to go for now, but I'm still alive. I might look different in the picture, but that's because of the strain that's on you over here.*

*Well, no worry!!!*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

After nearly two months in the mountains, humping up and down steep terrain—so steep that sometimes at night we slept with our feet braced against trees to keep from sliding down the mountainside—we finally got into the lowlands. We saw sunshine and blue skies. The blue skies brought helicopters, one after another, delivering supplies to us. We received food, water, ammunition, mail, and new guys to replace the few who had been lucky enough to rotate home after serving their time, or the unlucky who had been killed, or the wounded who had been medevaced out, who after their wounds healed, may have considered themselves lucky enough to have survived.

The sunny lowlands gave us a chance to catch our breath and to dry out from months of being in the rainforest jungle.

When we had come to the edge of the lowlands, looking across the open space towards the edge of yet another mountain range most likely on our agenda, we came to a halt. There was tall elephant grass at the base of the distant mountain. The grass—green from the monsoon rains—was swaying back and forth, erratic at times from an occasional gust of wind.

The wind felt good. I could not remember the last time I had felt a natural breeze. The wind never blew through the jungle, thus, until the moment we had stopped, there had not been a change in the air for what had seemed like a long, long, time.

The wind had some of us seeing things as we scanned the tall grass still swaying. One or two marines had scanned the frontage with binoculars. No one could say either way that it was just the wind, or maybe the enemy scooting around, setting up to ambush us when we made our move in their direction.

Maybe we were being paranoid. Maybe it was just our imagination running away with us, but the Captain was not taking any chances, and so we slipped back out of sight, back into the cover of the jungle where we waited for a squadron of jets to bomb and strafe the further edge where the open land turned into elephant grass, which then stretched into the base of a new mountain waiting to be climbed.

When the jets arrived, there was no cheering. We were too damn tired to cheer like I had seen in World War II movies as a kid.

The airstrikes went on for some length of time. I would have enjoyed an entire afternoon of airstrikes, for it had given me a chance to sit on my ass and catch up on some sleep.

When the strikes ended, we assaulted quickly across the lowlands and through what had once been tall grass, now turned into bomb craters of freshly turned earth. Wisps of smoky fumes from bombs dropped with delayed fuses filtered up through the new fissures in the earth as we searched for signs of the enemy, but we did not find any. The enemy had either fled at the first sounds of our jets, or maybe he had never existed in this place at all. Either way, it did not matter now that we were climbing yet another mountain.

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Now something new was about to happen. We were going to travel along what was indicated on the map to be Highway 14. In my head, I actually imagined a highway like at home—maybe not a two lane highway, but not the skinny trail that it turned out to be.

Highway 14 probably had been wider at one time, probably back in the French Colonial days. I saw evidence of this—an old, rusted bulldozer abandoned to the side of the trail. Where the bulldozer was left might have been clear at one time, but the tropical vegetation had overrun it. The way things grew in Vietnam, I doubt it had taken much time at all.

This is what was new—we were going to travel light and move quickly. To lighten our load, our nonessential equipment was to be shipped to the rear via cargo nets slung from beneath helicopters. We were not going to carry packs, or most of us were not, for I was still going to be carrying the radio on my back. Those not burdened with a radio had only their weapons, rubber ponchos, bandoleers of ammunition, food, and two canteens of water attached to a cartridge belt worn around the waist. For food, C-rations were out. We were going to eat Long-Rats—Long Range Rations—much lighter in weight than canned food.

Long-Rats were freeze-dried rations—just add water, either hot or cold. They were both appetizing and filling. The packs of food—compact—could be stuffed into the kangaroo pockets of our jungle utility shirts and trousers. The Long-Rats actually were a delicacy after months of bland tasting C-rations, but there was a downside—we were only issued enough food to eat twice a day, and we were going to hump our asses off. Regardless of how many calories we needed to sustain our stamina, two meals a day was it.

In a sense, we were going to operate more like a reconnaissance unit, but instead of a small team, we would be company sized—maybe one hundred, fifty men—give or take a few. And besides the diminished rations and the forewarned speed at which we going to be traveling at, the word was that we were looking for a regiment of NVA soldiers—a thousand or more—who were looking to infiltrate the countryside.

**Letter # 34**

*5 Feb 69*

*Dear family!*

*We just finished a 12-mile sweep of the Laos border, and we are now on Hill 305. The big Generals haven't decided when they are gonna end this operation, but they better hurry because we are all getting pretty tired.*

*Kilo Company has really had it bad, as 6 men drowned yesterday, and they got pinned down today and took 8 more killed and over 30 wounded. But Mike Company is doing pretty good.*

*I have enclosed some pictures taken on Hill 500 of me and my buddy, Pralicz. I'm also gonna send back the other pictures as they are starting to fade. They were great!*

*On my next package, could you send some more booze, some devil dogs, a small jar of coffee or packets, a small jar of Nestles hot cocoa, small bottle of hot sauce, canned pudding (butterscotch), one sponge cake with canned frosting (milk chocolate), and etc. I hope it ain't too much.*

*Getting back to the pictures, notice how skinny I am? I'll gain the weight when I get home. Also notice my tattoo? I've got two now.*

*Well, got to go as I've got to write Sharon, Bobby, and "???" from California. It's some girl I met from Riverside, up near L.A.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

We had traveled south on Highway 14 for a few days. The highway followed the curvature of the Son Vu Gia River. Sometimes we could see the river, and sometimes not, but we could always hear its flow. When we could not see the river in sight, it was because a narrow strip of jungle vegetation stood between us traveling the trail and the turbulent river.

We moved at a quick pace, just like we had been told to expect. The further one was back from the lead element walking point, the faster one had to move to keep up.

We were coming at the enemy with speed more than force. I still did not have a clear picture of why we were doing what we were doing, yet all I had to do was hump the radio and keep up with my squad leader.

Besides the quick pace, the sun was beating down. I was not used to the heat from the direct sunlight. The jungle had been warm and moist, but void of any sunlight filtering down through the thick canopy, and the two meals a day was not suffice as my food seemed to be metabolized in the first twenty minutes, even before it hit my stomach.

Hunger was a way of life, and also the feeling of thirst. Even though there was the river beside us, and we stopped to fill our canteens sometimes—but only when we were told—I was gulping down water, sometimes spilling more than what went into my mouth because I was drinking on the run. Often I found my canteens were empty.

Sometime in the afternoon, we came to an abrupt stop resulting in a chain reaction—as if the guy in front had slammed on his brakes and forward momentum had carried one another into the rear of the marine he was following. Then "follow the leader" had us drop and face outboard, each marine alternating his field of vision—one looking left, the next marine looking right. Those

looking to the right looked in the direction of the Son Vu Gia. Those looking left had a tall curtain of elephant grass staring them practically in their face. My memory is not good enough to remember whether I was looking left or right, but it does allow me to remember why we had stopped.

Up near the front of the column someone had spotted an enemy soldier at the river's edge, on the opposite side of the river. Because I had the radio—the volume turned down low because the word had been passed to remain quiet—I knew more than some of the other guys in the squad. I knew that our sniper team had moved into position, and thus, when I heard the single crack of fire, I knew it was our side doing the shooting, and hoped it was their side doing the dying.

Whether the enemy was hit or not was just a rumor. I heard nothing over the radio indicating the official results, but I did hear the rumor of an enemy soldier being hit in the head, falling dead into the river, and being swept away by its current. I also heard a guy say, “They didn’t hit shit,” in reference to our snipers, but maybe this negative remark was nothing more than jealousy by a few grunts envious of snipers, for the snipers had life just a little bit better than us grunts—they did not sit in ambush at night, and they didn't go into the dark to listen for the enemy, and they never walked point. There also was a rumor that they ate three meals a day so they did not shake with hunger while sniping.

Another stop along the way to *who knows where* was at a cave to the left of the trail. Bicycle frames—but no rims, tires or bicycle seats—were discovered inside. There were more than one hundred frames, and in this same area, the trail looked like it could get muddy at times. It was here at this point that we once again were reminded that we were onto a crafty enemy, for lengths of bamboo—two or three feet in length—were laid perpendicular to the trail, tightly up against each other forming an all-weather means of travel. I was intrigued and left in wonderment at the sight. I would never have thought to lay bamboo down to make a muddy trail passable. I did not possess this type of imagination or ingenuity. Back home in the world we never had to give these things any thought. We just took for granted asphalt and concrete, and went on our merry ways.

---

The Son Vu Gia flowed swiftly, north to south. In peaceful times, the river would have been perfect for white-water rafting, but these were not peaceful times.

Rumors had it that in trying to cross the Son Vu Gia, six marines from Kilo Company had been swept away and presumed to have drowned. There were different versions of this rumor. Some said the bodies were found—some said they were not. As I looked at the river flowing before me, I had thoughts of being carried downstream—ending up dead—never to b found again, because one rumor had it that we too were going to cross the Son Vu Gia at some point in time.

The problem being was that at its narrowest points, the waters were more turbulent, and at its wider parts—maybe the lesser of two evils—one would be out in the open for too long—a sitting duck, and neither of these options took into consideration the water’s depth.

Rumors seemed never ending. Maybe the rumors I still remember were merely thoughts and fears in my own mind, because in no way was there this much communications amongst us marines.

To add to the mental strain and fear, somehow I had heard that Kilo Company had “hit the shit” and suffered eight KIAs and thirty wounded. I had heard that the enemy had gained the

advantage of higher terrain, thus they fired down on Kilo Company—some of the dead had been shot straight through the top of the head.

Adding more to the rumors was Gunny saying, “I can smell the ragman.” When someone asked Gunny what he meant, when he was asked who the ragman was, he said, “Who the Christ do you think he is? Who the fuck do you think we've been chasing for days? It's the ragman you fools—the fucking enemy.”

Gunny finished his spiel by taking a deep breath of air through his nostrils. He seemed to savor the aroma. I too took a big whiff, but could not smell what he could, for he had many years of experiencing the scent of the enemy.

To Gunny, the scent was like a drug which instilled inside him the desire to do battle.

---

The girl from Riverside was real, but at the same time, a fantasy. I had really met a girl at a beach in Carlsbad, and talked with her for a few minutes, told her I was headed to Vietnam. But I never learned her name, or her address. Fantasies of this girl with her long blond hair, a beautiful tanned body, a sweet smile, a California beauty, must have been keeping my mind from reality.

Some things I still do not understand.

**Letter # 35**

*7 Feb 69*

*Dear Family,*

**MEAL, COMBAT, INDIVIDUAL**

**BEEF, W/Spiced Sauce**

**B-1A UNIT**

*As you can see, I've enclosed another flap off my breakfast. It wasn't too bad as there were two chocolate wafers and one can of peaches with it. Plus, I made a cup of “comoffee.” It's made like coffee except you add a packet of cocoa. It's pretty tricky to make at first because ya gotta put in the right proportions, but I'm the best “comoffee” maker in my squad.*

*Yesterday was a real cheerful day for us. In the morning around 1100, the choppers brought in hot chow for all of us to have two helpings. We had steak, potatoes, green beans, gravy, bread, and chocolate milk. It was the first hot chow since Christmas. Then, at 1300, they brought in assorted accessories like potato sticks, corn twist, cigarettes, combs, mirrors, toothpaste, writing gear, socks, T-shirts, Bibles, and even little pen-light flashlights. Everybody pretty well got their share of the above. To top it off, at 1600, another chopper came in with beer and soda, cakes, and would you believe, ice cream? Well, they did. They brought enough ice cream in so everybody got two hoodsies. They had it packed in dry ice. Plus, we all got a piece of cake and one beer and one Pepsi. So, yesterday was pretty good. This morning everybody woke up with the shits. Pardon my language!*

*Now, I'm gonna write a little bit to everybody:*

*Tommy... It seems like every day you're getting stitches. You better be more careful. When I get home, I'm thinking about buying a new drum set so we can really find out how good we are. I still have the drum sticks that were sent to me and have really learned a lot of new beats and made up some of my own. Every once in awhile, I put on a show for the guys and play on tin cans. So be good and try and stay out of trouble.*

*Marsha... Well, I heard you've become a pretty good driver. I hope you get your license in the near future. When you do, be careful; and don't take after me. Remember the speeding ticket and the accident with the good old Mustang? Let this be an example for you to drive safely. Maybe when I buy my new car, I'll let you drive it; but it might be difficult with the big engine and 4-speed.*

*Cheryl... Well, I received a letter from Bobby the other day and wrote him yesterday. There can't be too much worry with him, as war games ain't quite as dangerous as the "War Games" (huh!) I'm participating in. I hope you like your new job as the money ($$) sounds real good.*

*Mama and Dad... Well, I've also enclosed one dollar that we use over here. It's not gook money but a military payment certificate (MPC).*

*I want you to draw $25 out of my bank account and give each of the kids $5 and you people $10. Make sure you do it!!!! The reason is for GP (General Principles). They use that expression a lot over here.*

*I should know in about a week when I'll be going on R&R. When I find out, I'll have you send me most of my money. Then I'll start saving again. I say you only live once, so I'll probably spend every last penny.*

*Well, got to go for now; but I'll write later.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

**MEAL, COMBAT, INDIVIDUAL**
**BEEF, W/Spiced Sauce**
**B-1A UNIT**

I had enclosed the cardboard flap from the box my breakfast had come in. We were back to eating C-rations. We were reunited with all our gear, plus a whole load of goodies. We were in heaven, like pigs in stink. The resupply was heartening, but at the same time, some of us shared the thought of being fattened up for the kill. Maybe this was why I had written such an extensive letter.

_____

It was also around this time that I heard a rumor. We were only a day behind the enemy said to be one thousand strong.

**Letter # 36**

*16 Feb 69*

*Dear Family,*

*Well, I've finally found a chance to write. I've received a lot of mail in the past week but haven't received the magazines you said you mailed.*

*Well, I've finally got a chance to rest. Mike Company has moved to Hill 508 where there is a huge artillery battery. But check this out, there are twelve men from Mike Company, plus 16 from Lima Company on top of Hill 1081. We are the only ones up here. The NVA can't touch us because of the way the mountain is. The only way you can get up here is by chopper. Here's a drawing of the mountain. We are where the "X" is.*

*Well, R&R comes out in 5 days. Sure hope I get one so I can sleep for awhile.*

*We are supposed to go into An Hoa pretty soon, but they've been saying that for months.*

*Well, got to go for now, but at least you know I'm still alive.*

*Love,*

*Paul*

*PS Haven't received the "Quincy Sun" for about a month.*

**—Between the Lines—**

Nine days had passed since I had written my last letter. I do not know why so much time had gone by. I remember some of the things which happened during this period of time, but I am not sure if they would have kept me from writing.

———

There was good and bad. One good thing—I no longer was not the radioman. The physical load on my back had been lessened. Another good thing—we crossed the Son Vu Gia twice without anyone drowning. The bad thing—without the responsibility of carrying the radio anymore, I now had to take turns with the others in walking point.

———

We were starting to get new guys into the company. New guys meant I was moving up the *totem pole*. I had asked if I could pass the radio off to one of the guys with less time in country than I. The answer was yes, followed by, "O'Connell, you'll be walking point."

When it was my turn to walk point, I led the way for the entire company during our force-march back up Highway 14—a distance close to seven miles—without getting myself, or anyone else killed.

But before this had happened, we had still been traveling south on Highway 14. I think we were still in pursuit of the one thousand strong enemy force. Although I was moving up the totem pole, no way was I privy to what we were really doing, and I had no idea how high up the chain of command someone had to be to gain the knowledge of our objectives. My job simply was to keep my eyes and ears open, and like Gunny, keep my nose working.

_____

We traveled the highway during the day. At dusk we climbed up into the jungle covered foothills to spend the night. This gave us cover and an advantage in elevation over the enemy who hopefully would have trouble climbing their way up to our night defensive perimeter. We did this day/night thing for days on end.

Our progress down the trail was now much slower. We had been reunited with our heavy packs. We no longer were traveling light.

One day the word was passed that we were going to cross the Son Vu Gia, or in Marine Corps jargon, the blue-line—a line depicted on the map designating a river.

A small patrol had been sent forward and discovered an old dam which no longer was capable of holding back water. The dam must have been built by the French, for it was built with concrete. The dam went from shore to shore—maybe a distance of fifty feet. The waterway in the middle of the damn was missing the wooden planks which would have been inserted to control the flow of the river. The planks were nowhere to be found.

The width of the waterway was just a little more than anyone could jump. The river, being restricted in its flow, with great velocity, flowed through the opening, then dropped in elevation about five feet—the falling waters forming a turbulent pool. If one was unfortunate to fall into the pool, he would have been unable to escape the turbulence, which in a strange way had a sucking effect, pulling one back towards the dam and downward, where one would most likely drown while desperately trying to escape.

_____

The word was passed that we would cross the river by walking on top of the dam which was a few feet in thickness. To get over the opening, a decision was made to cut and fall a tree into the river, then float the tree towards the dam, and into position so that the river's current kept it nestled up against the concrete in such a way that it would allow passage along the top of the log. Thus the log would become a floating bridge, allowing a safe passage over the dam's void.

We possessed neither hand nor chainsaws, so all we had to use were machetes. Marines took turns hacking away with their machetes at a tree chosen for its diameter and length which hopefully would be a perfect fit for the opening.

Det-Cord could have been used—wrapped around the tree trunk and detonated to bring the tree down without any of us having to expel physical energy—but this was ruled out—we were trying to be as quiet as possible because we were operating somewhat within the guidelines of noise discipline. Not strict, absolute quiet—because the metallic pings from the machetes hacking the tree were filling the silence—but enough adherence to keep us from talking out loud. Anything said to one another was in a whisper, or in a low tone of voice.

In less time than I had estimated in my mind—maybe thirty minutes, maybe an hour—I watched the tree begin to kilter, then gain momentum, and with a loud snap the tree came crashing down upon the river's bank. Next, the limbs and branches were hacked away turning the tree into a log with slight nubs.

The current was minimal at the river's edge. There was less chance of being swept away by the river while in the waters close to shore. Also, being close to shore meant one would have a better chance of ducking for cover, back into the trees and vegetation, if one had come under fire from

the enemy. But the log, sooner or later, would have to be pushed out into more open waters to float the log because it was too heavy to lift and carry.

There were more than enough volunteers to help move the log. The chore seemed to bring out the pent-up emotions in many marines.

At first, the log had to be rolled and pushed—muscled with legs driving hard—across the high-river mark, over fist-size river rock—round ones encountered at first—requiring brute strength, then over flatter rocks which required less effort, as the flat rocks had been worn down by a million years of water flowing over them.

Muscling the log over the rocks was a good job for former high school football players—the stocky ones, the well built guys you would not want staring you down from the opposite side of the scrimmage line. Guys who would have liked nothing better than to have flattened their opponent. These also were the guys one would not want getting their bare hands on you, if you were deemed to be their enemy, because they easily could have pummeled you to death.

I never had been a football player. I was a one hundred-thirty pound, *skinny as rail* kid. I was the one most likely to lose a hand-to-hand battle. But here in Vietnam, my goal was to never let the enemy get close. Instead, I would blow his ass away with my M-16 before he ever got a chance to lay a hand on me. Thus, instead of being called on for my muscle, I was one of those marines manning a position along our defensive perimeter surrounding the river crossing. My job had been to keep an eye out for the enemy.

---

As the log was pushed into deeper waters, it began to float. I watched this from my position as I split my attention between looking for the enemy and watching those in the river. I was hoping none of them were swept away, as they now were moving into swifter currents.

The log no longer had to be pushed. Instead, the log had to be kept from being carried away by the current. Marines were now positioned on the downstream side of the log to try and keep it under control.

The depth of the water was waist deep—or even deeper on some of the shorter, but stockier marines—but deeper waters would be needed. No one had taken into consideration that the log had more of a tendency to sink than float. The log floated more like an iceberg, only showing an eighth of its existence.

Fortunately, not much more than chest-deep waters was needed to float the log.

As the log drew nearer the dam, the marines had to get out from the space between the log and the dam, or else be pinned. Some of the marines moved their way down the log in the direction of the river's edge—into less turbulent waters—while a couple chose to submerge and swim under the log and come up safely on the other side.

Miraculously, the log had been maneuvered into position without anyone drowning.

All that needed to be done now was to slide the log along the dam without it being drawn through the open waterway where the velocity of the passing waters was increased ten-fold.

The strongest-of-strong marines were called upon, because, except for the two marines positioned at the end to push the log towards the opening, the other marines along the length of the log were only going to have a minimal effect on the log's forward movement.

The marines working alongside the log used most of their strength to ease the pressure between the log and the concrete. Without their efforts, the two marines pushing from the end would not have been able to overcome the friction between the log and the gritty, pitted, concrete.

At this point, *noise discipline* was broken by the obscenities coming from those marines trying to work against the laws of physics. “Fucking pull the log away from the dam!”

“We are trying!”

“Well, fucking try harder!”

All of this bravado provided motivation, for slowly but surely the log was slid into position, but not without dramatics at the end.

As the end of the log was pushed into the waters being squeezed through the open waterway, the force of the water began to turn the log, trying to suck it through the opening which would have made all of our efforts useless. The problem was that as the log began its surprise turn, the other end—in an opposite reaction—pulled away from the dam. Except for one adrenaline-charged marine who continued to push the log forward in hopes of spanning the waterway before the log was taken away, all of the others drove with whatever strength they could muster to force the log back, hard against the damn. When the furthest end finally passed through the waters flowing through the waterway and was pinned to the concrete on the other side of the opening, a few cheers went up from those of us on the shore—that is until Sergeant Thompson bellowed out, “Knock it the fuck off!”

There still were difficulties to be overcome. Because of the way the log floated low in the water, and because of the increased velocity of the water through the opening, some water flowed rapidly over the log—the water coming up to the top of the boots—enough to force one off balance, and if so, down into the turbulent pool below the dam. If this happened, your name might be added to those who had already drowned in the Son Vu Gia.

———

Sometimes in my mind I was a weakling in stature. I was feeling this way as I watched others cross the log while I awaited my turn.

Some marines blessed themselves before beginning to cross which triggered a memory of kids blessing themselves before stepping into the batter’s box during a Little League baseball game.

Seeing the perceived-brave balk at chancing fate, then having trouble keeping their balance—well, whatever courage I had within me was dwindling. I was scared to death, but did not say it, and yet, it had to be painted all over my face. When my turn came, I simply went forward as if someone or something was nudging me.

The first part of the crossing was relatively easy, even with my heavy pack on my back and rifle in hand. I had to traverse the permanent portion of the dam—the portion constructed of concrete—to get to the log.

The top of the dam was close to a foot in width, but strangely enough, keeping my head down to watch where my feet were going, and hearing the water streaming through the waterway, the top of the dam seemed to diminish in width.

“Don’t look down. Keep your fucking head and eyes focused straight ahead—and whatever you do, don’t stop.” This was coming from Sergeant Thompson who had been the first one across, who was now yelling out words of encouragement to those who seemed to need it.

As I stepped down from the top of the dam to the log about two feet lower, and off to the right by about forty-five degrees, the log was barely visible because of the water flowing over it, Sergeant Thompson yelled out, “O’Connell! What the fuck did I tell you? Don’t look down!”

I had not realized that my head was drooped until I heard the Sergeant’s voice. I straightened up —and although I could feel the current wrapping around my ankles—I took two quick steps along the log, and then the one step back up to the height of the permanent concrete, and as I did, I grabbed onto the outstretched hand of a fellow marine positioned to provide a feeling of security, insuring balance.

After moving across the rest of the dam and stepping foot onto what was considered the other side of the river, I came upon Sergeant Thompson who greeted me with a slap on my back. He said to me, “I knew you’d make it marine. I fucking knew you had it in you.”

All my fears and worries were lifted at that moment as I registered this thought in my mind—*I have made it to the other side.*

———

After just one day of patrolling the other side of the river, the word was passed that we were going to cross the river once more to access Highway 14 again. This brought on some grumbling amongst the weary troops who could not believe that they had crossed the river, only to be told that they were going to cross it again. For those of us who populated the lower portions of the totem pole, we were without reasons why, which fed our discontentment, allowing it to mushroom.

When Sergeant Thompson had finally heard enough of the grievous rhetoric, especially when someone cried out, “Fuck the apple; fuck the Corps,” he pinned that guy face first, up against a tree, then said, “You’re job isn’t to question orders. It’s to carry them out, even if you don’t understand what the fuck it is that we are trying to do.” He also added, “Don’t ever badmouth *my* Marine Corps again. Understood?”

The silence stood for yes.

———

The second crossing was easier. A narrow part of the river was chosen. A marine from Hawaii, with a rope tied around his waist and the other end held by brute marines on the shore, swam across the river like no one else in the company could have. It seemed he went at least a hundred yards upstream of where I stood and dove in, and when he made the opposite shore, he was directly across from me. The river’s current had pulled him that quickly downstream.

The rope the marine had tied around his waist was now removed by him, and he knotted it around a tree on his side of the river. Then on our side, after pulling the rope tight, the same thing was done—the rope being wrapped around a tree a dozen times, and then knotted off.

Now, with the rope suspended over the river and secured on both ends, just like we were taught in boot camp, we monkey-like slid our way along the rope, successfully crossing the river once more without anyone drowning.

———

The day came when I got my chance to shine.

The word had been passed down that we were going to head back up Highway 14 in a northerly direction. The plan called for a very quick pace. This way, with our speed and *element of surprise*, maybe the enemy would have less of a chance to set up an ambush to kill those in the point element.

First Platoon was picked to be the lead platoon. The first squad was picked to be the lead squad. Fire-Team, 1-Alpha—the fire-team I was a member of—was picked to be the lead unit, and I volunteered to lead the way, to be the pointman.

When I piped up that I would walk point, or that I was at least interested in doing so, I remember Sergeant Thompson looking strangely at me. Then he moved in real close and stared me in the eyes. I did not know what he was looking for, but I stared back without blinking, although I had to keep myself from flinching as my mind recalled the beating he had given me when I had been falsely accused of sleeping on watch.

After about ten seconds had gone by, Sergeant Thompson said to me, "You ain't walked point before."

"No Sarge, I've been carrying the radio for months."

"So what makes you think you can walk point if you've never done it?"

"I don't know Sarge. It just seems like everyone else has had the chance."

With his palms turned up and an expression of bewilderment, he said, "What kind of fucking answer is that? Because everyone else has done it? What the fuck—if everyone else died, would you have too also?"

I did not know if Sergeant Thompson was waiting for a reply, but after a few seconds had passed, I said, "Sarge, I don't know what I'm thinking. I'll do whatever I'm told."

"Good then, you're my pointman."

Right there and then I felt lifted, elevated to a new height. And like many times in Vietnam, when I felt I had done my job, or received praise from a higher-up—especially from Sergeant Thompson—I wished my father was with me to see that I was doing a good job.

———

Maybe others did not think the way I did, but I wanted to be a good pointman—I wanted to be just like Freeman. He had discovered the enemy base camp before anyone could be killed. He was the one with the eagle eyes, and could move slowly, stealth like with patience. Would I be able to do the same thing? Would I measure up?

I did not get to do the exact thing as Freeman. I was not in the thick jungle dimly lit beneath a triple canopy of green. I was not trying to be sneaky. No, I was more like out in the open, and this was not going to be a step-by-step venture. No, this was going to be quick. My exact orders were, "O'Connell, go as fast as you can go without running."

———

Walking point meant others would learn my name, because as they dragged their asses while trying to keep up within the column, sometimes they would complain to the guy in front of them. “Who's on the fucking point? He’s killing us.”

“O'Connell.”

“Who the fuck is that?”

“I don’t know—some dude from first platoon.”

“Damn, I’ll kick his ass when I get my hands on him.”

———

The marines in the column, stretched out behind me, struggled to keep up. The further back you were, the quicker you had to move to keep up with the guy in front. I had been in that position many times myself, but despite the complaints of the others, my orders remained the same. In fact, sometimes Sergeant Thompson, who was not too far behind me, would catch up and say, “Keep up the pace.” This gave me a chance to ask him how I was doing.

“You're doing fine—just don’t let it go to your fucking head.”

———

I moved bravely that day. I figured if it had been my day to die, so be it, as long as I did not feel a thing. I did not want to die screaming like The Judge.

Actually, I had moved so fast that I did not have time to think about anything. After I got up to speed, I was like a long distance runner cherishing the affects of endorphins flowing through my body. If I had died on this day, I would have died feeling high, on my second wind, one hell of a proud marine.

———

The more than seven mile force march ended with the entire company safely on top of Hill 508, also known as LZ Maxwell. Besides being a helicopter landing zone, LZ Maxwell was also a firebase with a Marine Corps artillery battery assigned to it. The artillery battery had been providing artillery fire for the rifle companies, including Mike Company, which had been roaming the jungle covered mountains for the last two months.

———

We were hungry, thirsty, and tired when we arrived at LZ Maxwell. I remember how we ate like savages and drank canteens of water as if we were drunks on a binge. We did not even take the time to heat the C-rations. We ate them cold.

The artillerymen watched us eat and brought us more C-rations after we had wolfed down the first ones. It was not too often that we were actually waited on, but if you had asked us grunts, we would have told you that we damn well deserved it.

We had not had the taste of the good life in some time—the good life, as in the luxury of sleeping inside a sandbagged bunker with a reinforced roof overhead—the protection of concertina wire around the entire defensive perimeter—more than enough fresh water to drink, which did not have the nasty taste of halazone, the water having been delivered from An Hoa by helicopter where it had been distilled first. Even better than this, there were C-rations galore, and even mail and packages. This all added up to heaven.

Some of us had commented how artillerymen seemed to have it made, but a few of them told us they worked hard at their job. They told how they fired missions day and night. They talked about how their eardrums would be damaged for life. One of them handed me an artillery-round. He said, "Here, feel how heavy this is." I took on about half the weight of it as he did not transfer the round completely to me, and it was a good thing because I would have dropped it. The artilleryman said, "Fucking heavy, huh?"

I said, "Sure as hell is."

The artilleryman continued, "After we fire all night, we have to pick up the brass-casings. That takes half a morning. And on top of that, the gooks mortar us all the time. We've even had them try and get through the wire. One night we had to lower the barrel on one of our guns down to zero elevation. Fire pointblank to stop a sapper attack. There was a shitload of them that night. They were hell-bent on destroying our guns."

One of us grunts replied, "Anyone get fucking killed here?"

"You mean gooks?" the artilleryman said.

"No, I mean marines."

"No."

"Then you've had it made, like as in Disneyland."

Nothing else was said. The conversation was dropped.

---

A decision made by Sergeant Thompson the day after we had arrived at LZ Maxwell would spare me from the hell Mike Company was going to endure over the next seventeen days, and in my mind, his decision led to the reason why I am still here on earth.

Sergeant Thompson told me, Dick Reed, and Donnie Connors to pack our gear and head up to the LZ where we would board a helicopter which was going to fly us up to Parker Pen Relay. We were to leave Mike Company behind and temporarily be assigned to a platoon of marines from Lima Company, a platoon that was undermanned. To effectively provide security for Parker Pen Relay—a radio relay station on top of Hill 1081—three extra marines were needed.

I do not know why Sergeant Thompson picked me as one of the three. I did not know whether this assignment was some sort of a *shit job*. But how could it have been? Reed was a real good friend of his.

But hadn't Sergeant Thompson kicked my ass all over the mountain the night he thought I had fallen asleep on watch, or thrown my Thanksgiving dinner to the ground? Could this be payback? Or maybe it was a reward for walking point up Highway 14 without getting anyone killed. I never asked him why, and he never offered an explanation.

There was no scene from a Hollywood movie, like Sergeant Thompson shaking my hand or putting his arm around me to say goodbye—not even the slightest hint of a smile just before I boarded the helicopter, but I must tell you, I have never forgotten the moment, this being the last time I would ever see Sergeant Thompson again.

---

I had drawn an archaic diagram of a mountain depicting sheer cliffs, and a flat top. I also drew an 'X' where my new home was to be, right on the edge of a cliff. I wanted my family to feel the security I had within me, thinking that no way could the enemy get to us on top of such a steep mountain.

**Letter # 37**

*18 Feb 69*

*Dear everybody!!*

*Well, today I received the newspaper about the snow storm. I wish I could have been there. It's really starting to get hot over here, but being up on this hill, it really gets cold at night.*

*Last night was Tet eve. To the Vietnamese it's like New Year's eve. They get drunk and smoke pot, then go out and raise hell. I haven't heard if anybody got hit last night, but we could see all the villages lit up.*

*Today, we got resupplied. We got C-rations, fruit juices, candy, beer & soda, eggs, potatoes, chocolate milk, onions, catsup, cigarettes, and writing gear. Tomorrow we are getting sleeping jackets which are actually Banlon shirts, so we are pretty well set.*

*I was wondering if you could send me a transistor radio. It doesn't have to be anything too expensive. They have station AFVN, Armed Forces Vietnam, and they play pretty good music. Plus, send some extra batteries as they are hard to get over here. I want you to buy it with my money.*

*Well people, got to go hard boil some eggs for tonight. I'll write tomorrow.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I now had been in the Marine Corps for an entire year. February 18th had marked the day, but I did not mention it in my letter. I must not have given it any thought.

———

We called our new home, "Table Top," because the top of Hill 1081 was naturally flat. It was like Mother Nature had sliced away the top of the mountain with a very sharp knife, but then let trees and vegetation—not a jungle because we were too high above sea level to sustain one—to grow forth.

We were not the first marines to man Table Top. Units from the Third Marine Division had been dropped here months earlier by helicopter to clear a large area for an LZ, sometimes known as LZ Dagger. They also had built reinforced sandbagged bunkers positioned along the edge of the cliffs, and one double-walled, sandbagged bunker with a reinforced roof of heavy wooden timbers covered with a triple layer of sandbags. This bunker was occupied by *communication experts*. These experts and their sophisticated equipment were code named, "Parker Pen Relay."

The original marines had worked hard. The LZ was vast in area, larger than five or six normal size landing zones. Not only was it large enough for helicopters to land, but large enough to stage supplies. Maybe marines participating in Operation Taylor Common had received supplies from here. I did not know because there was no one to ask. The original marines had gone back north to their principle area of operation—the DMZ.

The LZ had been cleared of all vegetation. All that remained was stubble left from what had been trees and bushes—a reminder that vegetation had existed before the Marine Corps had arrived. There also was evidence of vegetation because the communication bunker was partially hidden in a small parcel of brush and trees purposely left to stand. Maybe the thought was that the enemy would have trouble finding the bunker in the vegetation, but this seemed impossible to imagine because no one would be able to scale the sheer cliffs anyway.

The fortified position I was assigned to had been built close to the edge of a cliff. I think it faced south or southwest. The sun shined down upon my face during the day if I laid on top of the bunker.

If a compass had been issued to me, I would have known the exact azimuth I was looking down on while on watch, but a compass was not issued to everyone, and one did not seem needed, at least not for patrolling as we were freed from patrols. Really, there was nowhere to go. All directions of travel led to the same thing—a severe drop-off because of the sheer cliffs.

The furthest I traveled was to the LZ, maybe fifty yards away, and the outhouse—the shitter. I had not sat down during a bowel movement in over two months. To do so was a reason to feel good.

I also used to walk in the opposite direction of the LZ to take an occasional peek inside the communication bunker of Parker Pen Relay, but I was never invited in, and the marines at the doorway were never too talkative. Things seemed real secretive around there.

In addition to the communication bunker, there also was a three legged communications tower steadied by guy-wires anchored in the ground. The tower appeared to be about ten feet taller than the tallest tree. Attached to the tower were all sorts of radio antennas and wires leading back to the bunker.

Even though I never felt wanted around the communications bunker, I passed by it almost every day when I went to visit some of the marines of Lima Company to play Hearts with a few of the guys. Their bunkers were further right of the one I manned with Reed and Connors.

---

Often, Table Top had blue sky and a bright sun shining down upon it, while the mountains at the lower elevations below us were cloud covered. Many resupply helicopters dropped their external loads of ammunition and supplies at our LZ when they could not deliver the supplies to the "socked-in" units below. We got the supplies instead of them being taken back to An Hoa. It seemed like we had enough food and ammo to supply an army.

Table Top was more than three thousand feet in elevation above sea-level—higher than the mosquitoes wanted to fly, thus mosquito repellent was not needed. I relished the reprieve from the constant harassment of the mosquitoes and the chemical odor of repellent doused on my skin.

On Table Top, it got chilly at night. I had grown used to the warmer temperatures and humidity found at the lower elevations. To stay warm from the predawn chill, I used to curl into a ball and wrap myself with my quilted poncho liner.

_____

The radio reception was remarkable up on Table Top, thus, because a few other marines had cheap transistor radios which were able to receive AFVN (Arm Forces Radio Vietnam) broadcast from Monkey Mountain—located in Da Nang—I wanted my own. I was into rock and roll music. It seemed that those who had transistor radios were always listening to country, or when the rock and roll was being broadcast they would turn their radios off to save their batteries.

_____

We had so many eggs we hardboiled them by the dozens. I even poached a few in my canteen cup, and used a steel helmet as a frying pan to cook a few eggs *over-easy*. To go along with the eggs, I also cooked home-fried potatoes in which I added diced onion. I used my helmet as a skillet. We doused everything we ate with ketchup, for we had an endless supply of it.

We had so many eggs, we actually had an egg fight one afternoon.

**Letter # 38**

*19 Feb 69*

*Dear everybody!!!!*

*I'm in a pretty good mood today as I've finally got an R&R. The two choices that came up were Okinawa and Hawaii. I took Hawaii. Everybody says even if you're not married, you can have a lot of fun there. Plus, after four months in country, I'd go almost anywhere. You can't even imagine the strain this war puts on ya.*

*This is what you'll have to do for me. I want you to send $400 of my money to me by a money order that has to be obtained in a post office so I can cash it in An Hoa. My R&R is from March 25-31, so I want you to mail the money on the 12th of March. I'll come out of the field about the 21st of March and go into Da Nang about the 23rd. I figure if you send the money order the 12th, I should have it by the 18th.*

*I won't be sending money home this month as I'll put that check towards R&R also. That will give me about $540. It might seem crazy to spend all this money, but look at it this way, when will I ever get a chance to go to Hawaii, plus, anybody who's been through what a Marine goes through deserves to go somewhere and have a good time.*

*I'll write tomorrow.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

My father wrote back to me regarding my money. He went on and on about how I had to be careful with it—how people would be out to steal my money, or how I could lose it. I heard his harping as if he was standing right beside me—as if I was a kid.

**Letter # 39**

*23 Feb 69*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*I'm sure glad I'm still on Hill 1081. Last night, the NVA started their Tet offensive. They hit An Hoa, and we heard over the radio that the enemy made it across the runway and blew up an ammo dump. They also hit the main part of Mike Company and also Kilo, Lima, and India. We heard they hit Da Nang and Saigon. So, if you read anything in the newspaper about those things, don't worry, as I wasn't involved. I'm still in perfect health and unscratched.*

*Well, got to go for now.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The rumors circulating around Table Top were extensive. Although I was never able to set foot inside Parker Pen Relay, there was a marine who said he was allowed in. This marine claimed to be from Las Vegas. In fact, we nicknamed him, Vegas.

Vegas said he had been born with a deck of playing cards in his hands. He could shuffle and deal a deck of cards like I had never seen before. He could shuffle them using one hand, and while the cards shuffled, with the other hand, pull out the Ace of Spades. He also did other sleight-of-hand tricks like make an M-16 round disappear in midair right before your eyes.

Vegas was attracted to Parker Pen Relay like metal drawn to a magnet. He constantly was walking by the doorway of the communication bunker trying to get a peek inside, or to maybe get "The Word." The one time I went over to the bunker with him and asked one of the marines what actually went on inside, the marine just simply said, "Communications."

Maybe Vegas did have an in. He seemed to keep us up-to-date with a constant flow of information which sounded believable, but would become suspect when we would ask him where he got his information, because he would always answer, "Parker Pen Relay." When someone said to him, "Why would those radio nerds tell you anything? You're just another lowly grunt, just like us," he would say in return, "Because they sense my intelligence."

Vegas just smiled when someone said back to him, "If you're so fucking intelligent, what are you doing here in Vietnam?"

Later in the day when I was sitting alone with Vegas, he said to me, "Want to know some things about Parker Pen Relay?"

"Sure."

"Well, they relay messages."

"What do you mean?"

“Just what I said—they relay messages from here to there and beyond.”

“What kind of messages?”

“Military intelligence.”

“Like what?”

“Ah, I can’t say. I’m sworn to secrecy.”

It was at this point that I said to Vegas, “You’re full of shit. You’re making this crap up.”

“Like what? Making what up?”

“That you know what’s going on.”

“I don’t make anything up—I always tell the truth.”

“If you always tell the truth, then really tell me something.”

“Okay, Parker Pen Relay is located on the highest mountain in Vietnam. The radio reception here is superb. Military information flows from the DMZ to the Delta via that bunker you can’t get into. Oh, and another thing, the personnel working the radios—they are not marines, nor military. They are CIA.”

Vegas had me hooked at first. What he had told me sounded logical, but when I asked him how he knew all these things, and he told me he too was CIA, I looked him in the eye and said, “Fuck if you are. If you were CIA you’d never be telling me.”

With that said I began to walk away. As I did, Vegas said, “I was only fucking with you, O’Connell. I’m not CIA—but then again, maybe I am.”

I did not believe that Vegas was CIA, but some of what he told us turned out to be true. The night I saw a distant glow in the sky—an aurora of pulsating light that expressed shock waves radiating out from the earth—I did not know it was the ammo dump at An Hoa blowing up until Vegas said so. And he also said what we were seeing was fifteen miles away. Later on when I checked a map, I found the distance to be true.

When someone said, “How the hell did that happen?” Vegas piped up, “The gooks got through the wire and were able to get across the runway. They threw satchel-charges into the ammo dump.”

No more questions were asked.

Through him we also heard that Mike Company and the other three companies that were part of the 3rd battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, had been heavily mortared throughout the night. Vegas also added that some of the companies sustained a ground attack. When someone asked him if there had been any casualties, he said he wasn’t privy to that information.

———

Reed, Connors, and I knew that Mike Company had been attacked. We had been able to tune our PRC-25 radio to the company frequency and listen in. Throughout the night we heard situation reports over the radio pertaining to the mortar and rocket attacks. Explosions could be heard in the background during the radio transmissions. Reports of injuries were heard also, but no calls for medevacs.

**Letter # 40**

*26 Feb 69*

*Hi everybody!!!*

*Ya probably all wondering why you haven't heard from me. Well, as you've probably heard, the gooks have been hitting all allied bases; so this kind of keeps the choppers out of the sky. Plus, we have been fogged in up here on Hill 1081.*

*Well, Mike Company on Hill 508, has been under heavy mortar and ground attacks for the last four days. Every time a chopper tries to get in there, the gooks mortar the LZ. The gooks have hit every Marine unit in this area except for us up here. Like I said before, we are up too high for mortars, rockets, and etc. So don't worry.*

*I haven't received any mail in the last 9 days; but, when things cool off, they'll get it out to us. Right now there are air strikes going on down in the valley. The gooks are actually only 500 yards away down in the valley.*

*Yesterday, we all sat on the cliff and watched Mike Company on Hill 508 get mortared. They have run about 17 air strikes in the last three days, and the gooks are still down there. The bombs from the jets make holes about 100x100x100. I can't figure why they haven't got rid of the gooks, but maybe they haven't hit the right place.*

*I've only got about 3 weeks before I go to Hawaii. I can't wait because every night one of my buddies tells me of all the fun he had and the places to go.*

*Right now, I'm in need of a bad haircut as it's over my ears by about a half inch. It's almost like old civilian times. They'll make me cut it before I leave for R&R. I also got athletes feet on the right foot. The itching is driving me crazy, but all I can do for it is put foot powder on it. Other than that and being a little bit dirty, I'm in excellent condition.*

*Got to be signing off for now, but I'll write later on. May God bless you all!*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Call Sharon, and read her this letter as I haven't time to write. Tell her I love her!*

**—Between the Lines—**

I have no idea why I did not have the time to write Sharon. Was I tired? Maybe I did not have it in me to tell the same story twice—or was it that I could not come up with anything else to say. But why did my mother have to be the one to tell Sharon that I loved her?

———

I have no recollection of what Sharon wrote in her letters to me. Those memories are gone but not forgotten. Is that profound? Can you have a memory that has vanished, but not forgotten?

The only thing I ever recall Sharon writing, was, “If I was there with you, I'd help you paint your rifle pink with flowers.”

I did not know the circumstances surrounding the friendship ring when my sister delivered it to Sharon for me. I did not know she accepted it while sitting beside her new boyfriend.

Had she ever mentioned the ring to me? Did it fit? Did she love it? Or did she just wear it as a piece of jewelry, or wear it at all? I'll be honest with you right now—I felt the love which Sharon and I had shared in the past was slipping away at this point. It was like, "Mom, please change Sharon's mind for me."

***Letter # 41***

*28 Feb 69*

*Dear everybody!!*

*Well, received all my mail yesterday and it took me about an hour to read it. I received the magazine, the package, and letters running from Feb 8th to, I think, the 21st. Plus, I finally received another "Quincy Sun" and my March Playboy.*

*I took that roll of film today. There's pictures of me, and the guy with the short reddish hair is Dick Reed from Boxford, Iowa, and the other guy is Donnie Connors from Wisconsin. He's my squad leader. Then there is a picture of our "house" and one of a 106 millimeter recoilless rifle. I thought Tommy might like that. Then I got one of LZ Dagger to show you how the Marines clear an area of land for choppers. Then there is one looking towards home where I want to be.*

*The booze was great. Send some more. When I go to Hawaii, I think all I'll drink is daiquiri (I can't spell it) and whiskey sours.*

*I wrote Steve today. I hope I hear from him. Plus I just wrote Ma & Grandpa a little letter. I'm gonna send the film home today, but in a different envelope.*

*A little about what's going on here... Mike Company on Hill 508 hasn't been getting hit as heavy but still gets a few mortars every day. Lima Company, which is part of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, is surrounded by a battalion of VC. Kilo Company has moved towards Lima company but about an hour ago got hit so hard that they had to pull back. Actually, they retreated, but in the Marines, they don't like using that word. So, I don't know what's going to happen now. But I really don't care because I'm not down there. In another 25 days, they can do all the fighting they want.*

*Well, got to go for now, but at least in 25 days I'll be able to call home. I can't wait.*

*Well, bye for now.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The war was all around us. Vegas was keeping us up to date. Whether he was just spreading rumors or not, the information sounded true. Off and on, I personally could hear the battles in the distance—the sound of thousand pound bombs detonating while the jets that had dropped the ordnance screamed, rocketed by their afterburners at full throttle, up into the heavens.

**# 42**

**Received by my mother**
**on Sunday morning**
**March 8, 1969**

## Western Union Telegram

**SY WAO22 CB XV GOVT PDB=**

**WASHINGTON DC 8 1020P EST=**

**MR AND MRS CORNELIUS OCONNELL, DONT DLR BTWN 10PM AND 6AM LOCAL TIME DONT PHONE**

**CHECK DLY CHGS ABOVE 75CTS=**

**353 FRANKLIN ST QUINCY MASS=**

**REPORT OF MINOR INJURY: THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON PRIVATE FIRST CLASS PAUL E O'CONNELL USMC WAS INJURED 3 MARCH 1969 IN QUANG NAM PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. HE SUSTAINED A SUPERFICIAL FRAGMENTATION WOUND TO THE LEFT FLANK FROM A HOSTILE EXPLOSIVE DEVICE WHILE ON AN OPERATION. HE WAS TREATED IN THE FIELD AND RETURNED TO DUTY. HIS CONDITION AND PROGNOSIS WERE EXCELLENT. IT IS HOPED THAT HE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH YOU SOON INFORMING YOU OF HIS WELFARE. HIS MAILING ADDRESS REMAINS THE SAME= WILLIAM J VAN RYZIN USMC LTGEN ACTING COMMANDANT OF THE USMC=**

**—Between the Lines—**

On March 8th my parents received the above telegram stating that I had been *injured* on March 3rd.

The next day—March 9th—they received Letter # 41. They had hoped for a letter from me telling them of my welfare, but Letter # 41 had no mention of my injuries because it had been written three days before I was wounded. My parents would not get a letter from me explaining my injuries, and that I was safe and sound, until March 13th. This would mean five days of worry above and beyond the worry they had already endured.

———

One day while I was having a cup of coffee and a piece of pie with my mother—sometime in 1996—I told her about finding the telegram pertaining to when I had gotten wounded. I told her that I had found the telegram in with the letters I had written.

At first she did not know what I was talking about. “A telegram?”

“Yes Ma, the one you received when I was wounded in Vietnam.”

“There was a telegram?”

“I have it at home.”

For a few seconds my mother sat and tapped her fingers lightly on the dining room table. The tapping may have been involuntary.

Without any coaxing on my part, my mother began, “I heard the doorbell ring. I figured it was the mailman signaling that he had a letter from you. He had started doing this not long after you had left for Vietnam. He had told your father that he too had a son in Vietnam, and knew how important it was to get a letter from him.”

After a pause, she continued, “While I was walking to the door, I thought to myself, *the mailman is early.* He was like clockwork—one fifteen in the afternoon.

While going to the door I realized it couldn’t be the mailman anyway because it was Sunday. Mailmen don’t work Sundays. Then it hit me—you were dead.”

I remember that at this point in the conversation, I regretted that I had opened up the door to my mother’s past, as her eyes began to water.

My mother rested a hand on top of one of mine which was resting on the dining room table.

“Just before I turned the doorknob, the doorbell rang again. When I opened the door, a gentleman in a dark brown uniform—I thought he was a chauffeur—asked me if I was Misses Cornelius O’Connell. When I told him I was, he handed me a telegram.”

“Did he say anything else, Ma?”

“He just said, ‘I have a telegram for Mister and Misses Cornelius O’Connell.”

“You got to be kidding, Ma. That was it?”

“Paul, I really don’t remember. It was a long time ago.”

“I know it was—we don’t need to keep talking about this.”

My mother sat for a few more seconds, then got up and went to the kitchen. She came back with more coffee and the whole pie, but I said one piece was enough.

“Do you know what the Western Union guy said to me when I asked him if you were dead? He said, *I don’t know anything, Misses O’Connell. I just deliver telegrams. I don’t get to read them.*”

My mother told me how her hands shook so badly that she actually dropped the telegram. She said that the Western Union guy had to pick it up for her and place it firmly back in her hands.

My mother said that she could not force herself to open the envelope—not without my father.

She said my father was on duty at the fire station, so she called him. She told him that she had just received a telegram and couldn't open it, or did not want to open it without him.

“Then what happened, “I said. “Did he come home?”

“Yes, the fire chief drove him home.”

“Ma, why the fire chief?”

“Because your father was too upset to drive.”

“But he didn’t know what was in the telegram.”

“No, but we assumed you were dead.”

I told my mother that I thought the Marine Corps would have sent an officer and a Chaplin to the house if I had been killed, “And they probably would have been in an official car.”

“I don’t know,” she said, “It was a long time ago.”

My mother told me that when my father got home, the two of them read the telegram together.

“And what did you think?”

She said, “I don’t remember, but we sat for days reading your letters while we waited to hear from you.”

---

I still have the telegram. It is in the shoebox with the other letters. The teletype—bold, black ink, block letters—is still glued to the yellow paper.

I still remember the conversation I had with my mother back in 1996.

She died in 2002.

Rest in peace, Ma.

**Letter # 43**

*5 Mar 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well things in Vietnam are hell. I might as well tell ya the news now. Two nights ago, at about 6:00 a.m., two gooks started towards our position. Me and Reed from Iowa forced the first one back down the mountain, but by the time the second one went back down, he had thrown a chicom, and I just got a small piece of shrapnel in my left side. Lucky it went in and out. But there's no worry, as I didn't even have to be medevaced. The corpsman put in a few stitches and put me on light duty. I at least got a purple heart for it. But I don't want you to worry because it ain't a bad wound. I'll still be in Hawaii from the 25-31 of March.*

*Actually, I'm pretty lucky being on Hill 1081, as two days ago Mike Company moved off of Hill 508 to Hill 322; and, so far, they have lost 5 people plus a scout dog and have 10 wounded that can't get out because the gooks have guns firing every time a medevac chopper tries to come in. One of the dead was a Lieutenant who had been in country 3 weeks. So, as you can see, Tet is really bad over here.*

*Well, got to go for now but will write later. Please don't worry about me because I'm actually lucky not being with the main body of Mike Company.*

*Call Sharon for me, and tell her the news, and tell her I'm still in fine condition. I hope I'm doing the right thing by telling you I got hit, but I guess if you found out by other sources, you'd be worried and mad.*

*Well, got to sign off for now.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. 20 days before I talk to you all again*.

**—Between the Lines—**

Table Top was not as secure as some of us thought.

In the predawn hour—the day before I was wounded—two enemy soldiers—sappers—snuck up to the fortified position manned by Vegas and two other marines. A Chinese-communist hand grenade—a chicom—was tossed and detonated just as Vegas reacted by rolling away onto his side. Although wounded, getting his back peppered by shrapnel, he would live to tell more stories, maybe one about how two enemy soldiers had scaled a steep cliff thought to be impossible to climb, and how the enemy raised all sorts of havoc until they were mowed down by his M-16 fire.

———

I had been wrapped in my poncho liner, asleep in my poncho hooch, when I heard an explosion. For a second or two I did not know where I was, or what was happening; I had been dreaming of Sharon. The dream ended when I heard a scream, "Corpsman Up*!*"

There were several more explosions mixed with two bursts of M-16, then silence. I remember an odor of gunpowder, plus a slight haze filtered down to the fortified position Reed, Donnie Connors, and I were manning. We were two positions left of where the attack was taking place.

Over the radio someone was reporting that there were sappers inside the perimeter. I remember how I thought this was absurd—how could sappers or anyone else have scaled the cliffs?

We were ordered to stay in our fortifications and reminded that the enemy could come from any direction.

The next words were, "Two gooks. Confirmed kills."

As the sky began to brighten, the word was passed for everyone to fan out from their positions to try and secure the perimeter. Several times on the radio we were reminded that there might be enemy soldiers amongst us. In the confusion I heard someone say, "Well is there, or is there not gooks inside the perimeter." Someone said there was, while someone else said there might be.

Being curious to find out what had actually happened, I volunteered to work my way towards where the sounds of the fighting had come from. Along the way, I came upon one of the marines from the position beside. We met halfway. The first thing I asked him was, "Who got hit?" He said he didn't know for sure, but he had heard it was Vegas.

I said, "Did he get fucked up?"

"I don't know, and like I told ya, I don't even know if it was Vegas."

———

As the sun rose, rested on the horizon to the east, we all got *on line*, thus forming a line abreast of one another which stretched across the mountain. We searched the entire topside, all accept Vegas. He had in fact been the one who had been wounded. When I asked someone how bad off

he was, someone said, “Just got himself a whole bunch of shrapnel in the back, but he’s a lot better off than the two gooks he blew away.”

After having walked all over the entire mountain, Table Top had been declared secure. Those of us not on watch were free to roam—free to pick up and spread rumors once more, but we were paying close attention to our surroundings now that we knew we were vulnerable.

I walked my way over to where Vegas’ position was. When I got over there, I saw him standing without his shirt on. He was showing off his wounds and bragging about his kills. “I never felt a thing. Oh, maybe a little sting, but the gooks sure felt something, and even learned a lesson—*don’t screw with Vegas*.”

His wounds were practically bloodless BB wounds. I could make out the pieces of shrapnel just below the surface of the skin. They looked like oversized blackheads. The corpsman said, “Vegas, I'll pluck the shrapnel from you,” but Vegas said, “No way in hell Doc, I'm getting medevaced out of here for good. This makes my third Purple Heart.”

Just outside the entrance to Vegas' fortified position laid the two dead soldiers—two gooks. Astonishing to me, they were barefoot, dressed only in black pajamas, and their skin had been rubbed with mud, maybe to eliminate their lack of sunshine whiteness.

They had come with only a wicker basket—like a picnic basket—full of chicoms. They had no rifles and no knives. I remember looking at the two dead soldiers and thinking, *how the hell did they ever climb the mountain, and do it without boots?*

I cannot recall seeing exactly why they died—the cause of death—but Vegas had claimed the kills. He said he had shot them dead. No one disputed him.

I do know that one of the corpsmen with us was interested in the cause of death, for he performed something like an autopsy on one of them, on the older, larger one—the one Vegas said had to be Chinese.

When Vegas came out with his Chinese statement, someone said, “What the fuck are you talking about?—Chinese?—we‘re not fighting the Chinese.”

Vegas’ reply was, “You might not think we are, but the Chinese, the Russians, the Cubans, North Korea—all of them being communist, they are fighting us tooth and nail.”

“How do you know this? How do you know he’s Chinese?”

Vegas said, “It’s easy. Look how big he is. He is like a Buddha.”

Vegas finished with, “You won’t find any Vietnamese close to his size—plus, I know because of my intelligence.”

———

The bodies were dragged to a small clearing. One of the corpsman had said to whoever was in charge, “Is it all right if I open him up. I plan on going to medical school when I get out of the service.”

What I witnessed was not desecration or mutilation—at least not to me—but something one might have observed in a classroom. I did not watch the scalpel delicately slice open the abdomen section with a feeling of revenge or hatred within my heart. No, I was simply a curious kid.

A few of us watched. Some of what I was seeing was not new to me. I recalled the innards of the dead Vietnamese girl back at the enemy base camp. Also, what I was seeing looked similar to what I had seen in books back in high school, or during a class field trip to the Museum of Science in Boston.

The only words I remember today came from the corpsman, “Well, there's what it's all about. See that lump—that's a cancerous tumor. He was going to die anyway.”

I took a peek inside and stared where the tip of the scalpel was pointed, but I did not see anything that indicated what would have been death in the near future. I had no idea what cancer looked like.

———

We cremated the bodies. What else could we have done?

I remember someone said, “Why not throw them back over the cliff.” Why we did not is beyond me.

We did try to dig a grave, but we hit rock within the first few shovelfuls of dirt. So with the bodies already beginning to smell, the word was passed to gather a few wooden pallets from the LZ and bring them to a small clearing which had been chosen as the place of cremation—downwind so we did not have to smell the burning flesh.

The pallets were stacked maybe five high, but not too high because the two bodies needed to be laid on top. Those marines called upon to do the lifting did not want to overexert themselves.

With the bodies lying side-by-side on top of the stack, diesel fuel was poured. It flowed from top to bottom and was allowed to soak in.

I walked back to my fortification before the fire was started. Maybe it was my turn to stand watch. I'm not certain. Maybe I just did not have the stomach to watch bodies go up in flames. Maybe it had to do with my father being a firefighter. Whatever it was, I had the sense to walk away.

For maybe thirty minutes I could see through some trees the thick column of black smoke billowing up into the sky. I thought about Indians sending signals. I wondered who else could see the smoke.

Later in the day, I did take a walk back to the smoldering pyre. The fire had not been intense enough. Poking out of the ashes were two pelvic bones.

———

I think it best to pay homage to the dead, regardless of who they were, or what they believed.

Their beliefs were strong enough to die for.

**In Remembrance of**

**Two Enemy Soldiers**

**Killed in Action**

**March 2, 1969**

———

I was wounded the next day—March 3, 1969.

I had been on watch, sitting inside the fortification, when all of sudden M-16 fire broke out to my right. I figured the rifle fire to have come from down near Vegas' position.

Upon hearing the fire, Reed and Connors, in one swift movement, unwrapped themselves from their warm poncho liners, grabbed their rifles, and ran for cover inside our assigned bunker.

The radios came alive with reports of sappers inside the perimeter, just like the night before.

No one owned up to being the shooter at first, but then it became known over the radio that it had been Vegas who had fired his weapon. When he was asked if he could confirm any kills, he replied over the radio, "Negative." When he was asked how many he had seen, he said, "Not sure." When he was asked if he had definitely seen movement, there was no answer at first. When the question was repeated to him over the radio, he said, "I think so, but I'm not certain." So there was a question to whether there really were enemy soldiers moving amongst us.

I remember illumination coming to life overhead. All it did was surround us with a jungle of imaginary figures sneaking about—shadows from illumination floating down to earth, swaying back and forth beneath parachutes.

Then I saw it. Right there to my front. Movement!

I opened fire. My aim was perfect. Eighteen rounds of full-automatic M-16. And what did I have to show for it—nothing but a shadow that had vanished.

Had I really seen the enemy, or had I been fooled like I think all of us had been on this morning?

I had been in frenzy, out of my mind with fear, when I had opened fire. I had heard screaming, and was not sure if it had come from within me, but my throat was sore and the screams had been louder than the sound of my M-16.

As I was removing the empty magazine from my rifle and about to jam the next one in, I heard Donnie Connors yelling for me to cease fire. He had to yell it three times.

When Donnie asked me what I had been shooting at I said, "Gooks! Fucking gooks! Didn't you see them?"

Donnie told me he had not seen a thing, despite looking right straight at where I had aimed. He said to me, "You're fucking crazy. You're nothing more than jumpy from last night. All you're seeing is shadows."

I looked again at where I had fired, where I thought I had seen the movement. Something caught my eye again, so this time I fired a pop-up flare into the sky to light up the area to my front, but the flare hit a tree branch overhead about twenty feet in the air. The projectile's trajectory was now changed. The projectile was earthbound, flying straight for me. At the same exact moment, there was the sound of an explosion in the direction of Vegas' position and rifle fire. And also at this split second, I saw the silhouette of someone who looked small like a Vietnamese person.

Without hesitation I opened fire, and as I did I felt something slice my side. I imagined a knife—very sharp. Then I felt heat that grew intense to the point that I thought someone was holding the head of a red-hot tip of a cigar hard against my skin. And when I felt wetness, I ran out of my mind screaming, "Ma—Ma—Ma!"

I heard Donnie Connors yelling, “O'Connell, where are going? Get the fuck down!” but I could not stop myself from running, even though I knew he was right. I had the voice of Marine Corps training sending a message to me from one side of my brain, and on the other side, the voice of a panicked child telling him to run to his mother, for she could make everything better.

As I ran, I changed from calling out for my mother to calling out for the corpsman; “Corpsman up! Corpsman up! Corpsman up!”

The corpsman did not have to come to me, for I ran for him. I ran towards his voice which also was yelling for me to get down.

When I got to him, in one movement, I twisted my torso, pulled up my shirt, and said, “Doc, I’m hit. Am I going to die?”

When the corpsman shined the red-tinted beam from his flashlight down upon my wound, when he said, “O’Connell, are you shitting me, that’s nothing but a flesh wound,” I wanted to take back every word that had come forth from my mouth, and every action and display of fear I had exhibited, because I was instantly overcome with the feeling of being a sissy.

Although I had learned that I was not going to die, I did not know how I was going to live with my human frailties. I did not want to face Donnie Connors and Reed for fear of being called something less than a man.

For a split second, I would have rather been dead.

———

The corpsman had taped a bandage over my wound. The physical pain miraculously had been taken away with the words, “Nothing but a flesh wound.”

When I got back to Donnie and Reed, I just stood before them, shaking my head side-to-side in disbelief, having no idea why I had acted the way I had. I did not know what to say.

I remember Reed saying, “Man, I thought you were a goner.” When he moved to hug me, I put my hands up to protect myself from the potential pain of having him rub up against my wound, or from not knowing how to accept his compassion.

———

Neither Reed nor Donnie Connors ever said a word to me about how I had reacted. The only thing I remember was Donnie saying that he thought I had been wounded by the projectile from the pop-up flare after it had hit the tree and come rocketing back towards me. In return I said, “You don’t think someone shot me, or that a chicom exploded?”

“I don’t know what to think,” he said, “but you’ve earned yourself a Purple Heart.”

———

A search of Table Top at first light turned up no sign of the enemy, or any evidence that he had visited us the night before. I searched high and low for a body, a trail of blood, even one little speck to prove that I had actually shot at something living, but I found nothing but the shadow of doubt.

When I went down to see Vegas, he seemed to be withdrawn. I heard that someone had gotten all over his case for shooting at nothing. Vegas took the blame for the entire fiasco.

———

Someone once asked me if I had any regrets in my life. Without having to give the question any thought, I said, "Yes—one. When I got wounded in Vietnam, I wish I had not cried out, 'Ma!' Instead, I wish I had acted more like John Wayne. That's my regret."

———

Below Hill 1081, beyond the distance of my weapon, Mike Company had met their match.

Reed, Donnie Connors, and I, sat around the radio we had tuned to Mike Company's frequency. We could hear the rifle fire coming through the handset and could not do one damn thing about it. We knew men were being wounded and killed, but we did not know their names, for if we had we might have tried to join them—joined the battle, tried to save our comrades—but we could not.

The three of us, stuck on Table Top, sat guilt-ridden while our friends below died.

**Letter # 44**

*10 Mar 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I guess it was a real surprise for you to get a call from me. Actually, the reason I called was to make sure you got my letter about sending the money. It's really great that you can make a telephone call to the other side of the world. I was in An Hoa when I called. The military won't let ya tell what ya doing, where you are or discuss any wounds or injuries.*

*The company has gone back out to the bush, but I couldn't go because of my wound. It's healing slowly but surely but by the time my R&R comes, it should be as good as new. When I come home, I should have a good collection of medals, as Mike Company won the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) for Operation Taylor Common, plus my Purple Heart and the two Vietnamese medals everyone gets. And the National Defense ribbon. Not bad for a boot.*

*Well, got to go for now. I can't wait to call you from Hawaii. Oh, yea! The packages were great, send more!*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was back in An Hoa after more than eighty-five days in the jungle. It felt strange to make a phone call to home. I heard my mother's voice, but there was a lot of static, and most of what she seemed to say was, "What? I don't understand. You want me to say, '*Over*?"

"Ma, when you are done speaking, you have to say '*Over*' so the marine listening in can throw a switch which will then let me hear you. Over."

"What do you mean?"

I could not tell her what I meant because she had not said, *"Over."* The radio operator could not tell when to throw the switch. Thus, a five minute call from the war front to my home back in the world, and four of it was wasted in the "*Over*" fiasco.

It did not matter anyway, because the radio operator was listening and would have censored most of what I would have said if I had been able to tell the truth. How would I have fit eighty-five days into a five minute phone call when I haven't been able to fit the eighty five days into the last forty-four years?

---

Reed, Donnie Connors, and I were reunited with Mike Company, or what was left of it. The three of us had been flown from Hill 1081 back to An Hoa around March 6th with the rest of the personnel from Table Top. Before leaving, the supplies on the LZ were either lifted out by helicopter, or destroyed on site. I was not able to help out on the LZ because the corpsman didn't want me twisting and turning my body. He had taped over my wound in hopes he could keep it from getting infected. I did help in destroying some ammunition—I sat on the edge of a cliff and threw hand grenades over the side after pulling the pin. The grenades fell to earth for four seconds, then boomed somewhere out of sight, down below me. This was exhilarating at first—maybe for the first dozen grenades—but when I was brought case after case, getting rid of the grenades became a boring chore which went on for hours.

---

Back in An Hoa, we got the bad news. David Johnston, Ron Christianson, Joe Freeman, Dennis Merryman and Sergeant Thompson—all members of the 1st platoon—had been killed. I can still see Reed sitting in the company office, sitting in a chair beside the first sergeant's desk. The first sergeant is telling Reed the names of those who had been killed. Reed is crying his eyes out, sobbing so hard that all he can do is lay his head upon the first sergeant's desk.

I stood and watched this from the doorway of the company office. I did not know what to do, how to act, and nothing inside my head was guiding me.

All I did was stare at Dick Reed and feel lost, sad, confused, numb, blank, and sorry. So sorry for Reed's lose. Yes, Reed had been with these guys a lot longer than I. He had fought the enemy with them going all the way back to June. He had witnessed Sergeant Thompson's heroics first hand, drank Black and White scotch with Joe Freeman, wrestled with Davey Johnston who was much skinnier than him, but wiry, so much so that he could get Reed down by twisting him in circles until he got dizzy.

I actually envied their friendship. I can still feel what they had shared with one another when I look at a group picture of them all—Reed, Connors, Johnston, Christianson, Freeman, Merryman, and Sergeant Thompson. There was one guy holding a jug of hard stuff, the rest with a beer in hand. Freeman and Sergeant Thompson were with cigars sticking out the side of their mouths and showing all sorts of smiles and cockiness. I know the picture because I was not in it—I had been the new guy handed the camera to shoot the picture.

I now wish that another picture had been taken, that someone had taken the camera from me and said, "O'Connell, get in there with the guys—and smile."

This picture I am fantasizing about was never taken, and never will be.

---

The news of their deaths was hard enough, but to hear that Christianson, Merryman, and Sergeant Thompson's bodies were left behind in the jungle was disturbing to say the least. When I heard this part, I became obsessed with needing to know everything that had transpired.

The marine who told me the most was new to Mike Company. He had arrived in-country sometime during the end of January, just before we made the southbound hump down Highway 14. His last name was Hillshire.

Both of us were on light duty. I was waiting for my wound to heal. I was going to the battalion aid station every morning to get my dressing changed. Hillshire was on light duty because he had developed large boils on his back which had to be lanced. His bandages were the size of mine. Neither one of us could carry a pack on our backs for the straps would have rubbed right where our wounds were located.

I wonder if I drove Hillshire crazy having him go over and over what had happened. It was like, the more he told me, the more questions I came up with. I felt it was safe asking Hillshire for information, for his newness kept him from telling me to shut up. Not that I was a hound, but it seemed like any conversation we had which was not about the guys getting killed, did not hold my attention for too long. In a short time I would find a way to steer the conversation back to their deaths.

Hillshire told me what follows, but not all at once. It took a week of bunker watch with him to piece this account together.

Hillshire had been a part of a patrol which had been sent out on March 2nd to check out an area not too far from LZ Maxwell. One of the objectives was to recon Hill 322. Hillshire said the March 2nd patrol felt eerie. He said they did not come upon the enemy, but said the patrol had seen fortified positions and what he described as a fenced in area. He said he was told that it was a cemetery, and that there were bodies buried there, wrapped in our white-silk parachutes. I asked, “You saw this?”

“No, but I heard about it. I was some distance from the cemetery. I was security.”

The next day a patrol was sent back to Hill 322. From what I heard, Christianson was on the point when the enemy opened fire. He was hit along with Johnston who was the squad leader. They both were killed instantly. When the enemy fire broke out, other marines scampered forward to help. Joe Freeman was moving from tree to tree when he was shot dead. A marine by the name of Flynn recovered Freeman's body and carried it away from the fire. Flynn was a black marine, strong and mighty. He would have had to have been, because Joe Freeman was a strong and mighty marine himself—heavy to carry.

A battle ensued to recover Christianson and Johnston's bodies. Johnston's Body was recovered, but Christianson's was not. The enemy fire coming from the reinforced bunkers, which were built into the sides of the hill, covered every avenue of approach there was to Christianson's body.

Many attempts were made to get to him, and every means of support was called for. There was artillery, airstrikes, mortars—even tear gas—but nothing deterred the enemy from keeping the marines from recovering one of their own.

Marine Corps pride and honor was on the line, and the enemy knew it. The battle was not about defeating communism now, but about getting Christianson's body back, for the Marine Corps never left their dead behind.

The battle had become so dangerous, that instead of marines being ordered into battle, volunteers were being asked for to try and get Christianson's body. Hillshire told me some of the guys from

1st platoon were cutting a deck of cards to see who would go. I asked Hillshire if he had cut the deck. He said he had not participated. He said only a few did. I have wondered whether I would have volunteered, or even participated in cutting the deck.

One way or another, on March 5, 1969, Sergeant Thompson and Dennis Merryman made an attempt to get Christianson's body. They were killed instantly. For whatever reason, Mike Company called it quits leaving their dead behind.

I could not understand how this could be. It had been pounded into my head at Parris Island that we never left our dead behind. I had swallowed it hook, line and sinker. I had heard that there were no ifs, ands, or buts.

Whatever the reason had been back then to have retreated was unknown to me, and even if I had been given a sound explanation, I do not think I could have accepted it, for to have done so would have required me to question all that I had learned at Parris Island.

_____

Ronald Duntz, a marine walking point for the company during the retreat back to LZ Maxwell, was killed in an ambush.

_____

Thank God that someone with some sense recognized the situation for what it was and decided we would take our chances on another day to recover the bodies.

**In Remembrance of**

**Lance Corporal**

**Ronald F. Christianson**

**Killed in Action**

**March 3, 1969**

**—**

**Corporal**

**David A. Johnston**

**Killed in Action**

**March 3, 1969**

**—**

**Lance Corporal**

**Joseph L. Freeman**

**Killed in Action**

**March 3, 1969**

**—**

**Lance Corporal**

**Dennis G. Merryman**

**Killed in Action**

**March 5, 1969**

**—**

**Sergeant**

**Leslie D. Thompson**

**Killed in Action**

**March 5, 1969**

**—**

**Private First Class**

**Ronald D. Duntz**

**Killed in Action**

**March 6, 1969**

**Letter # 45**

*13 Mar 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I received the $400 yesterday and have already cashed them here in An Hoa. I probably won't be going out to the field until after R&R, but I don't know where I'd be better off because An Hoa gets rocketed every night.*

*Let me tell you a little about the phone call. First of all, I called from what they call a MARS station and was in An Hoa at the time. It was about 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon. I don't know what day it was, but let's say the 9th in RVN; then it was the 9th in Boston, too. But you were only one hour into the day, and we were 14 hours into the day. The time difference is 13 hours from Vietnam. I hope you know what I mean.*

*I received another Quincy Sun.*

*I'll be taking a lot of pictures on R&R, and I want you to develop them out of my money. Don't send them back, but start a photo album for me. I would like to see the roll of film you sent me, then I'll send them home.*

*Well, only 12 days before Hawaii. I'll call the first thing. Well, got to go for now. Please don't worry about my wound, OK?*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

*PS Tell the kids I'll send them something from Hawaii.*

**—Between the Lines—**

“Watch out for your money!”

These had been my father's words jumping right from his letter, right into my brain, but I guess I was not comprehending or understanding that my father knew what he was talking about.

I cashed the money orders and now had five hundred, forty dollars in my pocket—the four hundred sent to me from home, and the one hundred, forty dollars in salary for the month of February. But before I even left An Hoa I went on a spending spree. First, I bought some marijuana and beer for a few buddies of mine, and of course for myself too. Then I bought a 38-calibar pistol from some marine I did not even know. He had said it was the kind of pistol the helicopter pilots carried and it came with a holster, but no ammunition. Although I had no use for the pistol, I spent one hundred, twenty dollars for it. That's what drinking beer and smoking marijuana got me.

The next day on bunker watch—sitting with the pistol in my hand—I decided to count my money. I was down to four hundred dollars—twenty dollar of it spent on the beer, pot, a case of soda, and some junk food. I could feel my father breathing down my neck.

The next day I saw the same marine I had bought the pistol from just as he was about to disappear into a bunker. He was carrying a case of beer on his shoulder.

“Can I get my money back? I don't need the pistol.”

He laughed. “The pistol is yours. All sales are final.”

When I told him I was going on R&R and needed the money, he said, “What's that got to do with me?” He then told me to sell the pistol to someone else.

“Who am I going to sell it to? Why don’t you simply take it back and return my money?”

“Because I’m broke. Do you think this beer was free?”

When I asked him a second time, and even a third time for my money back, he told me he did not even know who I was or what I was talking about. “What's this pistol shit you're bothering me with?”

If I had been drinking and had bullets for the pistol, I would have jammed it hard against the side of his head and said, “Give me my fucking money!” but I had not started drinking yet.

I contemplated following him down into the bunker until I heard a voice coming from down inside it. “Hey Mac, you need help out there?” I heard other voices too.

When I realized this guy had backup down in the bunker, I decided to let the matter drop, but I did give some thought of coming back later with a tear-gas canister which I could have thrown down into the bunker and gassed their asses out of there, but my mind turned out to be more under the influence of marijuana—mellow—than rambunctious under the control of alcohol.

The next day, after getting off bunker duty, I did get to drinking. I was with some guys new in-country who had not been to the field yet. We were sucking down warm beers when I felt the chance to get rid of the pistol I said I had for sale. I told the new guys that everyone carried a sidearm out in the bush, and this was their chance to get one. One of them said, “If everyone has a sidearm out in the bush, why didn’t they issue one to us? Why are you selling yours?”

“They ran out of them,” I said. “This one used to belong to a buddy of mine who was killed last week. I'm going to send the money to his family back home.”

One of the new guys took the bait, but not before his buddy talked me down to sixty dollars. He had driven a hard bargain, plus I was hard up for cash. I had tried to get what I had paid for the pistol, but his buddy had said, “Sixty dollars—take it or leave it.” And although I tried for one-twenty, then one hundred, then eighty—when the new guys all started to get up and leave, I said sixty was good. So now I was only down eighty dollars—twenty for the marijuana and beer, including some junk food too, and the sixty dollars for a pistol I no longer owned.

I wish it ended there, but when I finally had gotten to Da Nang, I went to China Beach for a few hours, and bought a few beers. And while I was sitting at a tiki bar, an American in civilian clothes came and sat beside me. He bought me a few drinks. We got talking. It ended up that he was a salesman, sanctioned by our government to sell bibles, or so he said.

“What better gift to send to your parents than a bible,” he said to my under-the-influence mind.

There went another sixty dollars. Now I was out one hundred and forty big ones. I had worked the month of February for nothing.

---

Mike Company had gone back out to the bush while I was back in the *rear with the gear* being subjected to enemy rocket attacks almost every day. The first few days, the attacks seemed to follow a schedule. The enemy was firing rockets into An Hoa just about the time marines were lining up for noon chow at the mess hall. The marines in line had to scramble for cover at the first screeching sounds of rockets freight-training through the air.

There was a suspicion that someone inside An Hoa was doing the targeting. Could it have been only a coincidence that the rockets came when marines were grouped together?

There were Vietnamese who worked inside the An Hoa Combat Base. Some of them worked in the PX cutting hair; some filled sandbags for a penny a bag. Some even were house maids to those permanently assigned to a job in the rear. So there was a chance that the targeting could have been an inside job.

After the second day of rocket attacks at noon time, the mess hall was ordered closed until further notice. I ate C-rations in a bunker instead of a hot meal in the mess hall.

Time was either spent in a bunker below grade, or very close to the entrance of one. Marines were ordered to have their flack-jacket and helmet on any time they were out in the open, and there would be no hanging around in groups, and three or more marines together constituted a group.

I specifically remember one particular rocket attack. The barrage came crashing into An Hoa sometime in the morning. I had been talking with the mail clerk. We probably had been talking about Sergeant Thompson, Christianson, and Merryman—how their bodies were still lying out there in the jungle—that was unless the enemy had done something to them, maybe cremated them like we had cremated their dead.

At the first sounds of rockets we scampered down into an underground bunker located beneath the mailroom. The rockets impacted close to us. The ground rumbled. There were probably five or six rockets in the barrage. They detonated almost simultaneously so it was impossible for me

to keep count. Sometimes there was a single barrage. Sometimes there were two or three—the barrages a few minutes apart—but without a set pattern. It was difficult to tell the difference between a lull, and the end of an attack.

While I was down in the bunker with the mail clerk and a few other marines who had found safe refuge with us, I found I was lying on a magazine. I pulled it from beneath me. There was just enough light filtering down into the bunker from a fluorescent light fixture in the mailroom above that I could make out the magazine to be a Playboy. The gorgeous girl on the cover caught my eye. So did the mailing label. It took me a few seconds to register in my mind that my name was on it. When it hit me that the damn mail clerk had kept my Playboys for himself, instead of sending it out to me in the jungle—that he was the reason I had told my parents I had not received my Playboy—I went ballistic.

"You motherfucker. You piece of shit. I should fuck you up."

I threw the Playboy in his face and followed it up with a charging fist to his head. The other marines jumped in to break up the fight. They had no idea why I had gone on the attack. When one of the guys asked me why I had flipped out, I said, "Because that rear echelon mother fucker stole my Playboy."

The guy said, "That sounds like a good enough reason to me to put an ass-whipping on anyone."

**# 46**

**Received by my mother on**

**March 27, 1969**

## Western Union Telegram

**69 MAR 27 PR HWAO34 INTL FR HONOLULU 21 27 247A HST VIARCA=**

**MRS SHIRLEY OCONNELL=353 FRANKLIN ST QUINCY MASS=**

**RUNNING LOW WIRE 150 DOLLARS C/O ALOHA SURF HOTEL 444 KANEKAPOLIE ST=**

**PAUL OCONNELL=**

**—Between the Lines—**

This was the next piece of correspondence my parents received from me. It was a call for help. I was flat broke in Hawaii after only a few days.

———

By the last day of my R&R, I was actually looking forward to my return to Vietnam, where I seemed to know what the rules were, and how to live by them. I was mentally exhausted from screwing up in Hawaii

What happened to the rest and recuperation I was supposed to have enjoyed?

---

On the way to Hawaii, the jetliner made a scheduled fuel-stop in Guam. I got off the plane with the rest of the servicemen and was quickly shuffled onto a bus that had windows which were painted black so passengers could not see out. Someone said there were B-52 bombers parked on the tarmac that the government did not want us to see. I thought to myself, *what am I—the enemy?*

The bus brought us to a single-story, cinderblock terminal. Inside the terminal was a liquor store managed by the US Air Force. We were told we could buy five fifths of hard-liquor at a real cheap price. Even though I preferred beer over the hard stuff, I bought my allowance of booze. I figured I could bring it back to some of the guys in Mike Company. I also figured I could buy five more fifths on my way back to Vietnam, but with no money in my wallet on the return trip, I was unable to do so.

---

When I arrived in Hawaii, myself and one other guy were the only ones not met by a wife or a girlfriend. I felt like the entire world was kissing and hugging—all except me.

I could have stayed at Fort DeRussy located right on Waikiki Beach, but I shied away from anything with the word *fort* in it. I did not want to sleep in a barracks.

A woman working at the R&R reception center told me Fort DeRussy was not what it sounded like. She said that although I would have to stay in a barracks because I was alone, I would be free to come and go as I pleased. Even though I would have saved a lot of money, I still wanted to be as far away from the military as possible.

Instead of Fort DeRussy, I chose to stay at the Aloha Surf Hotel, located several blocks from the beach, yet close to the International Market Place. The hotel had been suggested to me by the same woman at the reception center who had tried, but yet failed to convince me that Fort DeRussy was the way to go.

I got myself over to the Aloha Surf. After checking into my room which was on the upper floors, maybe five or six stories up, I called my parents. I do not remember exactly what we talked about—probably my injury and to stay in a hole and hide, but I do know that my father said, "Even if you don't do anything else, go and visit the Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor." As for my mother, "If I was in Hawaii, I'd go and see Don Ho. I love his song, "Tiny Bubbles."

I told my father I had plans to take a tour of Pearl Harbor, and I told my mother I'd try and see Don Ho, although I had never heard of him or the song my mother mentioned.

Because I got involved in other things, I did not get to either Pearl Harbor or the Don Ho show. I never told my parents—I did not want to disappoint them.

---

I wanted to shed my uniform, so I got directions to where I could buy some civilian clothes. A girl working in the lobby suggested the Ala Moana Shopping Mall.

I remember inside the shopping center were manmade waterfalls, pristine pools stocked with colorful koi, tropical plants and trees, and exotic birds, which to me seemed free to fly away, but they did not. It was like a jungle in Vietnam, but not really the kind I was used to. This one, in

the frame of mind I was in possession of, seemed peaceful, yet I doubt I was free from the thoughts of the enemy.

I bought a bathing suit, a pair of dungarees, several tee-shirts, and a pair of sandals like Jesus Christ wore. I also bought underwear, even though I had debated whether to spend the money on them or not, for I had not worn underwear in almost five months. Underwear and a sweaty crotch made for a painful chafe from humping in the heat.

I remember walking out of the store with my new civilian clothes on. I could not throw away my uniform because I had to fly back to Vietnam wearing it, so I stuffed the uniform into a shopping bag.

On the way back to the hotel, I came upon a car rental place. I stopped to look at the cars. The cars were so shiny and clean, and most of them were sporty convertibles. A gentleman who worked at the agency came over to me and said, “Would you like to rent a one?” I told him I probably would, but that I had no license. “You physically have no license, or you don't know how to drive?”

“I had a license, but I'm on R&R from Vietnam where most of the stuff in your wallet rots when it gets wet.”

“So you have a license—you just don't have one in your possession?”

“Yes.”

“That's no problem—I can rent you a car if show me your military ID.”

I asked the gentleman what would happen if I got stopped by the police. He said, “Just tell them what you told me. Tell them you’re on R&R. Mention the Vietnam thing. The cops are pretty lenient around here, especially with you young guys.”

I did not plan to rent a car, and I was not sure whether I could afford it or not, but as easy as just signing my name to a contract I did not even read, I drove out of the lot in a red TR-4 convertible with the top down, with just enough hair on my head to feel it blowing around.

I was in seventh-heaven shifting the manual transmission. I popped the clutch to burn rubber in first gear—a hole-shot. Got a chirp in second, speed shifted into third, and then redlined the tachometer before shifting into top gear. When I downshifted it was like I had put the brakes on —and no seatbelts—if my left straight-arm had collapsed, I would have bumped my head dead-smack into the windshield.

The next thing of importance was to find a place that would serve me alcohol. I was only eighteen and the drinking age was twenty. Before I left An Hoa I had asked the first sergeant if he would make me up an ID card with a phony birth date showing that I was twenty years of age. He did, but with the stipulation that I would give it back to him upon my return from R&R.

I went to the International Market Place in Waikiki where I found a small, open-air bar. I pulled up a stool and ordered a beer. The female bartender looked at me and shook her head. “No way, unless you have a valid ID.”

I produced my ID. There was no picture where one should have been—just my name, rank, and serial number, plus the falsified date of birth showing I was twenty.

When she said, “Twenty?—I don’t think so,” I went into the whole litany about Vietnam and how I was on R&R. How my regular ID had rotted in my wallet, and how the first sergeant had to make me up a temporary ID card, but that he didn't have a camera to take my picture.

“You've been in Vietnam?”

“Yes since October.”

“You look too young to be in Vietnam. How old are you?”

“I'm twenty,” I said.

“You don't look a day over fifteen.”

“I'm twenty mam—and I'm on R&R— and I’m recovering from being shot.”

Sensing she was not going to budge, I pulled up my shirt and showed her my wound which was still slightly scabbed over.

She looked at me and just shook her head. After a few seconds she put a beer in front of me and said, “It's on the house.”

I returned to this bar every day for a beer or two. Every day the first one was free.

———

On one of the days, the bartender had asked me how my wound was coming along, so I pulled up my shirt to show her. The saltwater of Waikiki had worked miracles on the wound. The scab had fallen off, and the new pink skin was looking good and healthy.

———

I discovered a nightclub that featured live music and dancing. The name of the club was, The Merry Monarch. I had the same trouble trying to get into this club—too young looking—but after the same litany about Vietnam and such—but without showing my wound—the doorman allowed me in.

The band sounded a lot like Sly and the Family Stone, and also covered a lot of songs by Jimi Hendrix. The music was good and gave me the urge to dance, but I was without courage to ask someone, that is until I got a few beers in me. Once I got the courage in my bloodstream, I danced all night, almost exclusively with a girl who said she was an airline stewardess.

We danced to almost every song—the fast ones, and the slow. I found comfort in the dance. I felt Sharon in my arms.

I fell in love with the airline stewardess after the first dance—after the first smile—after she said it was sad for her to think I was going back to Vietnam.

After last call, I drove her in my convertible to where she was staying—a hotel on the beach. To look over at the passenger seat and see a girl sitting there was like a dream. In fact, the entire night seemed like a fantasy that I did not want to end, unless it ended in bed with her.

I tried—I asked her if I could come up to her room, but she said no. She told me it had been a great night and even kissed me on the lips, but the answer did not change.

I asked her if I'd see her at the club again, maybe the next night. Although she said yes, I never saw or heard from this girl again, despite I had given her my address, but she would provide me with love filled fantasies for the rest of my time in Vietnam.

———

I returned the next night to the Merry Monarch with the hopes of dancing the night away with the airline stewardess, but when she did not show up I began to drink a lot of beer. There were sailors in uniform who were on liberty. Their ship was tied-up at Pearl Harbor. When I told them I was on R&R from Vietnam, they bought me a beer. They bought me several beers. Paying them back, I bought the table a round of drinks, and then another round before they told me to put my money away.

There were three girls sitting alone at a table. They smiled at me which led to dancing. One by one I danced with all three. I also bought them drinks. I also paid one of them for some love.

I was pretty much drunk when one of the girls—the one who seemed older than the other two—asked me if she could come to my hotel to share some time with me. Of course I said yes.

She then asked me what I could afford to spend. I did not understand what she meant at first—didn't she want to be with me because she liked me?

I thought she had enjoyed dancing and all the drinks I had bought, but much to my surprise she was a prostitute. But it didn't matter—I could not find the way to say no.

The girl drove with me to my hotel. Her mini-skirt rode up showing her thighs off. When we got up to my room the negotiations began. I do not know what price we settled on, but I do know that the more I wanted, the more it cost me—and I wanted it all.

I woke in the morning, or maybe it was the afternoon. I found my wallet on the dresser. It was empty. There was not one single dollar to be found. The only money I had left to my name was the crinkled up bills in my pant pockets, and some spare change—just enough money to wire home for more. In addition to this, two of the five bottles of liquor were missing.

———

**RUNNING LOW WIRE 150 DOLLARS C/O ALOHA SURF HOTEL 444 KANEKAPOLIE ST=**

I did not give it any thought that my parents would be receiving their second telegraph over a period of twenty days. I wonder if they thought I had been wounded again, but probably not as they knew I was in Hawaii.

———

The money came to me via Western Union. The one hundred, fifty dollars did not come from my bank account because I was broke at home too. The money must have been my father's, and I would figure today that one hundred, fifty dollars was more than a week's salary back then.

Along with the money was a message, "**CALL HOME IMMEDIATELY!**" I did not make the call. No way was I going to let my father harp all over me.

I felt like a loser. I felt just like I did when I used to get suspended from school. I felt like a fuck up and really lost. Here I was, eighteen years old, just out of the jungles of Vietnam, without one single coping skill except to hide or shoot it dead.

I would not call, and I even let more than a week go by before I wrote home again. Actually, from this point on, I would write less and less to my family. Guilt and remorse had set in.

I must have been insane, because after I got my new supply of money, I went right back to the Merry Monarch. The three girls were sitting at the same exact table. I walked straight over to the one I had been with the night before and said, "You fucking ripped me off! You owe me money and two bottles of booze!"

I could not believe it when she insinuated that I actually owed her money, and also couldn't believe my ears when she added, "You gave me the bottles—I didn't steal them."

She went on to tell me that she had been more than generous with me, and if I had not fallen asleep I would have enjoyed myself even more.

A bouncer came over to the table. He must have sensed the tension. I thought about telling him how I had gotten ripped off—that the three girls were prostitutes—but when the bouncer said to the older girl, "Sylvia, is there a problem," and she replied, "Just some old business being discussed," I knew that anything I might say was going to fall on deaf ears, plus I simmered down a little when the younger of the three touched my hand and softly held it.

I got myself drunk and danced several times with the younger girl. While dancing slow—can you believe it—I asked her if she wanted to come back to my room. She said yes, and up to my room it was.

I woke with seventy-five dollars in my wallet, and only one bottle of liquor left on the dresser. This time, I must have given the bottles away because this girl did not seem like the kind to steal. I found her to be respectable.

I do not know how much the girl had charged me for her love, but I remember she gave me a discount because her brother was a marine in Vietnam, or so she said so.

———

One afternoon after drinking a few beers at the tiki bar, I decided I would try and buy some marijuana from the long-haired hippies hanging out at the International Market Place. I figured if anyone knew where I could get some pot, it would be one of them. My perceived notion turned out to be true.

It was not too long before I was driving all over Maui in my TR-4, but with the roof and windows up. My passenger was a hippie straight out of Hollywood—long hair, bandana, tie dye tee-shirt, and bell-bottom jeans—and we were smoking a joint and did not want to lose any smoke to the outside.

After I got a buzz, I pulled over to the side of the road and put the top down along with the windows. Driving along the beaches on the north shore of Maui while buzzed was fun at first—that is until we stopped along the way to relieve ourselves. When I walked in off the road I found myself in a jungle. I immediately was overcome with fear and anxiety, along with paranoia. Back then I thought it was the marijuana that had made me feel the way I did, but I found out later on in life that it was the jungle.

———

While in Hawaii I called Sharon from a phone booth overlooking the beach. The conversation did not go good. All we did in the beginning was bicker over who-owed-who a letter which

ended with me saying angrily, “Do you understand I was in a fucking jungle? That there wasn’t a mailbox on every corner!”

Next, the conversation had been about how she was seeing other guys. Sharon was the one to bring it up. Maybe she had figured my sister had said something to me about the friendship ring, but she had not.

The talk about other guys got me mad, so I told her all about the girls I was with in Hawaii. Of course I didn't tell her I was paying for my love.

The phone call ended when I heard the operator say, “For an additional three minutes, please deposit one dollar and fifty cents.”

I either did not have any more change, or I knew there was no reason to waste another cent on a lost cause.

I heard the operator repeat the request for more money. I even heard Sharon say, “Are you still there?” But I said nothing in return. I just listened to Sharon breathing while I waited for the click of the phone.

The line had become disconnected.

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On my last day in Hawaii I overslept which meant I was late getting the car back to the rental agency. This resulted in a substantial late-charge.

I tried to get out of paying it by telling the agent I was headed back to Vietnam, and that I was close to being broke. “A contract's a contract. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

After forking over the extra money for my tardiness, I had pennies left in my pocket and still owed the hotel money. When I went to check out of the hotel, the girl at the counter told me I owed close to one hundred dollars. Now I was sunk.

I tried the Vietnam sympathy thing on her, but all that did was get me a one-on-one meeting with the manager. With him, I brought up Vietnam again, and even pointed to my wound, but there was not going to be any mercy, at least not in the form of being relieved of my financial responsibilities. What we did agree on was that when I got back to Vietnam and got paid, I would send some money every month to the hotel until my bill was covered. I was honest enough to write my correct address in Vietnam on a piece of paper. I also gave him the name of my commanding officer.

The next time I got paid in Vietnam, I sent twenty dollars to the hotel. But the following month, instead of sending more money, I had a buddy of mine write a letter to the manager. “I am sorry to inform you, but Paul O'Connell was killed in action.”

I never heard another thing from the Aloha Surf Hotel. In 1996 I vacationed in Hawaii and thought about finding the hotel and straightening out my debt. I actually found the hotel which was still in business, but I did not go through with the payment. I figured they would have looked at me like I was half crazy if I had handed someone at the reception counter eighty dollars and said, “Here’s the money I owe you from twenty-five years ago.”

Instead, I walked down to the beach at Waikiki, where earlier in the day I had seen several homeless Vietnam veterans—bums some would say— panhandling for spare change. I walked

over to one of them and dropped a twenty dollar bill into his can. I then said, “Welcome home brother. Share the money with your friends.”

I really don’t know why, but I felt relieved of my debt.

———

When I got back to An Hoa, the first thing the First Sergeant said to me was, “Do you have the ID for me?”

What a good memory he had. I had hoped he had forgotten, as I would have had a phony ID for when I got home.

Not even a fifth of hard liquor persuaded him when I made like I was putting the ID back into my wallet, although the bottle was for giving me the ID in the first place.

After the First Sergeant thanked me for the booze, he said to me, “So how was your R&R? Did someone meet you Hawaii?”

“Yes, my girlfriend from back home.”

“Wow, that must have been nice.”

“It sure was.”

I had lied to deny my pain—to try and get my mind right for the bush once more.

**Letter # 47**

*8 Apr 69*

*Hi Everybody!!!*

*Sorry I haven't written since I got back from R&R, but I haven't had a chance. I haven't had a chance to send home the gifts either, so they are in my sea bag right now. I got my Purple Heart today and that is also in my sea bag.*

*When I got back, they made me a fire-team leader, which puts me in charge of three other guys, but they've only been here one month, which makes them a risk to my life, as they don't know too much. But, after a few fire fights, and I beat on their heads a little, they'll straighten up. That's the only way to break in new boots. You could say I'm getting hard.*

*Enclosed is a few more pictures. Hope you enjoy them. Well, got to go. Oh! Yea, I had the car in Boston. Pay the ticket out of my money. Sorry.*

*Love Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

There were no gifts for anyone. I had blown five hundred and forty dollars and had nothing to show for it but guilt and shame, and I believe these feelings were the reasons why I was not writing as much, yet my parents remained faithful with their daily letter to me, regardless of how hard it must have been.

In one of the letters I received shortly after returning from Hawaii, my father had asked me if I had gotten a parking ticket in Boston.

“Yup, it was me.”

While home on leave, not too many days before I was leaving for Vietnam, I had borrowed my father's car and driven to Boston with a couple of friends to try and buy some marijuana from the hippies who hung out at the Commons. I had parked the car on Beacon Street without putting any money in the meter.

When we got back to the car there was a parking ticket tucked under the windshield wiper. I remember looking at the ticket, holding it up to my face so I could read it, then tearing it into pieces and throwing it into the wind. I remember one of my friends said, “Why’d you do that?”

“Why? Because what are they going to do if I don't pay? Shave my head and send me to Vietnam?”

It took the City of Boston six months, but they caught up with me, or I mean my father, because he was the rightful owner of the vehicle. Not only did he have to pay for the parking violation, he also had to pay a fine for being overdue. I think the five dollar parking ticket turned into a twenty dollar fine.

I do not know if my parents ever used my money to pay for my screw-up.

———

On my first day back to the bush, I had to be medevaced by helicopter back to An Hoa simply because I was out of shape. I had not humped a pack in close to two months, not since walking point up on Highway 14—back when I shined.

Besides being out of shape, I was packing a cassette player I had bought in Hawaii, and three cassette tapes. I might have bought the cassette player and tapes back at the Ala Moana Shopping Mall when I had bought the civilian clothes—civilian clothes I simply left on a chair up in my hotel room. Maybe the housemaid took them home for her teenage sons, if she had any.

Regardless of where and when I bought the cassette player and the three tapes—The Doors, The Beatles’ Magical Mystery Tour, and the Best of Bobbie Gentry because I loved the way she sang the song, “Ode to Billie Joe”—when the corpsman saw the nonessential equipment which had added additional weight to my pack, he said to me, “If Sergeant Thompson was still alive, and he saw what you had in your pack, he’d have kicked your ass all over the place.”

I could not disagree with the corpsman because I knew he had been right.

———

The hump I had been expected to make was not a long one in distance, but did require climbing to the top of Hill 198 which overlooked the An Hoa Combat Base. There was always a platoon of marines positioned on the top of this hill, for if the enemy occupied it they would have had an advantageous spot to fire mortars and rockets into An Hoa.

I can say it was searing hot this day, and that I had sweated out every ounce of fluid I had in my body. I was not even one quarter of the way up the hill, and my canteens were emptied as I tried to rehab my body.

There was nothing I could do. My pack felt like a million pounds on my back, and my legs were like rubber. I had to sit down or else I was going to faint. Once I sat, I physically could not get myself up, and even when a few marines got me to my feet, when they let go of me, I collapsed to the ground.

Lieutenant Pelham who had been my platoon commander since December, but who expertly had delegated his authority to Sergeant Thompson, who in turn had kept guys like me on the ball, said, “O’Connell, if we rest a bit, do you think you will be able to continue?”

I told him I did not think so. I said, “Sir, it’s not that I’m tired or something. It’s just that I’m hot. I’m burning up. I can’t pull myself together. I’m sorry sir.”

A medevac was called for, and I was flown back to the battalion aid station in An Hoa where an IV fed me the fluids which would bring me back to reasonably good health.

**Letter # 48**

*24 Apr 69*

*Dear everybody!!!*

*Well, sorry I haven't written; but we've been busy working around the An Hoa area. It seems the gooks have flooded the area with booby traps, but I've been lucky enough not to hit one. We had 2 KIA and 6 WIA on two booby traps.*

*Right now I'm a squad leader, so I have two fire-teams, plus a machine-gun team, under me. This isn't a bad job, as I only have to carry my personal gear, plus maps and compass. Plus, I don't stand watch at night. But then again, I'm responsible for these men's lives and what they do.*

*This job will only last up until the 30th; then I'm getting transferred to a CAP unit (stands for Combined Action Platoon). It's 100% better than what I've been doing, as you live in a compound with thick bunkers around you. I'll go to school in Da Nang to learn some Vietnamese language. This will last from 2 to 3 weeks, then I get my assignment. I don't know what my address will be, but I'll try and send it by radiogram. So, stop writing Mike Company as of this letter.*

*Well, I really dug them pictures of Cheryl and Mama. Send me a whole roll of film of the whole family, plus the house and stuff. OK?*

*I still haven't had a chance to send the stuff from Hawaii, but I'll do it as soon as possible.*

*Well, got to go and will probably get to write more often in Da Nang.*

*Love ya all,*

*Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

It seemed that all it took for me to become a squad leader was to stay alive. Longevity was my key attribute. Longevity was mostly a reward for being lucky.

———

I do not remember the names of the dead. I do know one of them was a very popular Kit Carson Scout. Maybe he had been the same Kit Carson Scout who had traveled with us during Operation Taylor Common.

———

Booby-traps were the weapon of choice for the VC. During the day, the VC hunkered down inside underground bunkers where they manufactured booby-traps using our dud mortar and artillery rounds. Sometimes they did not even have to make a booby-trap—all they had to do was have the woman or children, sympathetic to the VC's cause, pick up our accidently dropped fragmentation grenades, or the ones intentionally discarded by those who were tired of being weighted down—disgruntle marines who gave no thought to the consequences of their selfish actions. There also were the grenades bought on the black-market, and the ones handed over to the enemy by a few treasonous ARVN soldiers whose true beliefs were unknown to the Americans.

At night the VC would come out of hiding and seed the area with booby-traps—areas they believed we might travel through, or particular trails we had used more than once, a bad practice or habit which could get marines killed.

It was always suspected that the woman and children of the village who observed our daily routines were the ones who informed the VC of our actions. This allowed the VC to be very good at predicting where we might step next.

———

Mike Company had not experienced booby-traps in some time. We had not seen a single Vietnamese civilian the entire time we had spent in the jungle during Operation Taylor Common, but now we had to get used to operating in and around the populous where the VC were able to blend in.

One day we had been patrolling through a village outside the An Hoa Combat Base. We were rummaging through the huts and "fragging" bunkers, thinking the enemy might be in hiding. The Vietnamese civilians were not cooperating with us—not giving us information about the VC. They constantly said, "No VC," or "VC, dee-dee," meaning the VC had fled. Whether they had or not, someone was planting booby-traps everywhere.

On this one particular day, Blight—a member of my squad, and sort of a new guy—went off into a thicket of bamboo. He was poking around for things he probably would not have noticed as signs of the enemy. I did not actually see him, but I knew where he was by where the sound of his voice came from, and I also knew things were not good. I had heard Blight say, "Oh fuck!"

Blight had tripped a booby-trap. He had felt a wire go taut against his shin, then slacken. All he could do was wait the millisecond of time for the explosion to occur—not even enough time to pray—but no explosion came. The pull of the wire had activated the primer which was attached to a mortar round. The primer had done nothing but fizzle and gave off a wisp of white smoke. The mortar round had failed to explode. Blight's life was spared.

When Blight came out of the thicket and walked towards me, for I most certainly was not going to move towards him—one booby-trap, one casualty was the rule—I was staring at a marine who had turned ghost white and was walking with the palms of his hands pressed together, placed

against his lips indicating the act of prayer, while his rifle was at sling-arms. When Blight got to me he kept his hands to his lips and gently shook his head indicating disbelief. It took him some time to say anything, and when he did he mumbled, “God was with me. It could not have been anything else.”

After those words, Blight remained quiet the rest of the day.

_____

One day after searching a village for an hour or so, we humped our way through the rice paddies to get out to Liberty Road where we were scheduled to meet a small convoy of trucks. We were being resupplied with C-rations and fragmentation grenades. We had used up all of our frags, having tossed them into every bunker we could find in the village we had searched. The bunkers had been fragged after their occupants complied with our orders to come out—woman and children coming out exclaiming they were not VC, or in the other case, fragged when no one appeared about twenty seconds after we had shouted a fair warning down into the dark.

In addition to the supplies, some new guys—their first time ever in the bush—were brought out to us. One of the guys was assigned to my squad. After a brief introduction in which he told me his name and where he was from, I told him I would record his information in a little notebook I was carrying which had the name, rank, and serial number of every member of my squad, plus their rifle number. But because the word had been passed that we were going to move out ASAP, I decided writing down his information would have to wait until the next time we stopped to rest.

So without haste, we hefted our packs and took our initial steps from the road into an area of vegetation that came up to about the top of the boot.

BOOM!

The detonation of a booby trap.

The new guy in my squad is hit. His left arm ends at the elbow. He is without a forearm, wrist or hand. Human anatomy dangles from the stump along with spurting blood, but a brave, quick thinking marine, without any regard for his own safety, removes his own belt from around his waist and applies a tight tourniquet around the new guy’s bicep. The flow of blood is cutoff—a life is saved.

Another guy was also hit. I remember he was to the left of the new guy. When I saw him, he was down on the ground lying on his side, writhing with pain with both of his hands wrapped tightly around his right thigh. The leg of his trouser is showing a slight stain which I assumed to be blood.

Several marines moved cautiously towards him. They were not too keen on going into the weed where more booby traps might have been planted to kill unsuspecting rescuers. But after one or two marines made it to him without getting themselves blown to pieces, the pace of a few more guys quickened, thus it ended up that the wounded marines were carried to the middle of Liberty Road where it felt safe for the corpsmen to treat the wounds.

It was obvious that the new guy needed the tourniquet around the bicep, but to my eye, I could not understand the frantic hurry of the corpsman who was cinching tight a tourniquet around the injured leg of the other wounded marine—not until I saw his leg filling like a water-balloon, but instead of water it was blood.

The corpsman working on him said to me quietly so the wounded marine could not hear what was being said, “He’s bleeding out internally. It may be his femoral artery. He’s actually more fucked up than the other guy. I hope the tourniquet holds.”

When the wounded marine asked the corpsman, “How am I doing, Doc?” he answered him, “You’re doing fine, you’ll be going home.” Hopefully this had not been a lie.

The wounded were actually fortunate in a way for two reason— one being that the corpsmen had just been resupplied with saline which could be administered intravenously, and two, a *Huey gunship* had been providing aerial coverage for our resupply convoy and was directly overhead when the booby-trap had exploded.

Because I had never seen a Huey gunship transport medevacs before—it was not their normal responsibilities—they usually provided air-support for the CH-46s on the ground being loaded with wounded marines—I knew the actions of the Huey pilots were not in the original game plan, but definitely welcomed.

Inside me, it felt so good to see the Huey come swooping down and flare to a landing in the middle of the road. I remember the sight brought tears to my eyes. The scene was like a Hollywood movie. Someone had come to help the good guys.

I can still see the two wounded marines being led to the helicopter by a group of other marines, of which two of them were holding the IV bottles in the air—the IV lines leading down to the wounded being fed the much needed saline as they shuffled along to keep up, not wanting the IV lines to be pulled out.

After the wounded were placed inside the helicopter, snuggled between the two door gunners—one on each side of the Huey—it lifted and hovered about five feet off the ground, sending a cloud of dust out in all directions. Then the nose dropped slightly and the Huey was piloted forward in this attitude for about fifty yards, right down the middle of Liberty Road to minimize the chances of taking ground-fire from the enemy. With airspeed built up, the helicopter was then maneuvered into a climb and headed east to Da Nang.

I do not recall ever hearing how the wounded made out, but this was not unusual. I would see many marines medevaced and never hear the outcome, but I have wondered about these two marines many times in my life.

I’m thinking of them right now.

———

The word had been passed around that marines were being sought to fill positions in various CAP units. I put my name in and thought for sure I would be one of those picked because of my seniority within Mike Company, but my seniority worked against me.

“O'Connell, you’re not going anywhere. We need your experience right here in Mike Company.”

So the only thing that happened was that my mail got all fouled up for awhile.

**Letter # 49**

*9 May 69*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Sorry you haven't heard from me in such a long time, but things have been hell.*

*I don't mean to make you worry. You must bear with me.*

*Well, I heard about Tommy's little accident. He'll never learn.*

*I'm still waiting for my transfer, and the last word I got was that it should be in soon.*

*Well, I've got some interesting news for you. Three days ago, I won the Bronze*

*Star, which is two away from the Medal of Honor. Well, let me tell you about it.*

*Well, at 3:30 a.m. on the 5th, Mike Company and Bravo 1/5 moved into the Phu Duc area of An Hoa and surrounded a company of the 5th Viet Cong Regt. At about 6:00 a.m., we moved out; and I was about 20 yards from a bunker when a VC started running until I put an automatic burst up his back and head. Here is where I won it. I saw another one run for a stream, so I chased him but couldn't find him until he came up for air right at my feet; so I kind of did him, too. Then me and another guy got in the water and captured 4 VC and one VC nurse. So there you have it.*

*Well, got to go for now but you might as well keep writing until my transfer comes in.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Despite the fact I was still getting letters on a daily basis from my mother and father—yet sometimes the news was not too comforting—the amount of letters they were receiving from me were few and far between. If Hawaii was supposed to have given me rest and recuperation, I had missed the boat somewhere. Plus, I was not getting mail from Sharon, or if I was, the news was not good.

_____

May 5, 1969 was the greatest day I ever experienced in the United States Marine Corps. On this date we lived up to the motto of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines—Get Some!

We kicked fucking ass.

_____

During the late afternoon of May 4th, the word was passed that Mike Company was going to participate in an operation called Muskogee Meadows. The company was to operate in conjunction with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines.

Sometime after dark Mike Company moved towards a village suspected of being occupied by an undisclosed number of VC, most likely mingled in with the woman and children. Gunny had said the VC were probably looking for a little R&R. He said, "You know, a *one-nighter* to lift their spirits—like we all know it does."

The word was that we were going to surround one half of the village while Bravo Company surrounded the other half.

I had been told many times about villages being infested with the enemy, and we would surround the village at night, and then move in the next day to find only women and children. I figured

this was going to be another one of those fruitless excursions which had a way of leaving me feeling frustrated by not being able to catch up to the enemy, especially as the wounds from exploding booby-traps, spread upon the countryside by the VC, continued to mount.

Other than during training back in the states, I had never camouflaged my face until Operation Muskogee Meadows. Having no actual grease paint, we used mud and the carbon we got from breaking apart used up PRC-25 radio batteries which had a large carbon content.

We rubbed the mud and carbon on our faces, and the back of our neck and hands. We also made sure our shirt sleeves were rolled all the way down to our wrists and buttoned. Also the top button of the shirt was fastened, thus hopefully there would be no reflection from our skin to give ourselves away to the VC.

We changed location several times during the night in case the enemy had learned of our presence. One time we even moved in the opposite direction of our objective to keep the enemy from knowing our real intentions.

Our final move was around 0300hrs. We circled back around into position behind the protection of a paddy dike. Supposedly the village was to our front, but in the dark we could not see it. In the dark, all we could see was nothing.

There was no illumination in the sky this night. There would be no shadows to spook our weary eyes. Weary, as our sleep had been at a minimum.

The predawn light to our rear was waking a brand new day for us and the Vietnamese in the village, as the scene before our eyes slowly began to brighten. Into view came the edge of the paddy dike, then a rice paddy with the slightest hint of reflection from a puddle or two. The rice paddy grew even larger than it had first appeared. Finally there was the silhouette of a tree line with a few distinguishable palm trees taller than the bamboo, and then the idyllic village itself with its small groups of huts.

Just before the invasion began, a single-engine, prop-driven airplane, was heard circling the area —a scout plane equipped with loudspeakers which allowed psychological rhetoric to be amplified down upon the enemy. The Vietnamese language bombarding the village was foreign to my ears, but whatever the message was, human figures—black-clad—popped up into view in the village. The figures were running all about, even into one another.

The village was a scene of chaos, panic, people disturbed by what they had heard coming from the sky above. For some of those who were running, they would have been so much better off if they had simply sat themselves down and waited with their hands high in the air indicating surrender, for their hopeless flee did nothing but declare them guilty, and the sentence was death.

A lone figure clad in black pajamas and a conical shaped hat which he was trying with one hand to keep from flying off his head, was running on a paddy dike straight for us. The poor soul was without the knowledge that an entire company of marines were in hiding, and every one of their weapons were expertly trained on his upper torso and head, taking into account he was a moving target. Everyone was just waiting for the order to open fire.

When the order was given, the volley of fire lasted but a split second as the enemy's body was practically obliterated. Those slow on the trigger had nothing to shoot at. The enemy had dropped out of the picture that fast.

Immediately after the order to cease fire had been given, an order I only heard once while I was in Vietnam bellowed out. “Charge!”

Up and over the paddy dike we went. We were in a frontal assault. It was imperative to keep abreast of the marine to either side of one another, but it was difficult as we slogged through the mud of the rice paddy. Several marines stopped briefly to look at the body which had just been killed, but the order was to keep moving.

As we came up out of the rice paddy and began our move over dry ground, we had to slow our pace to keep an eye out for where we were stepping, as booby-traps were a good possibility here. We could only hope we were not being sucked into a mine field.

From behind an earthen mound to my left front, but directly to the front of a marine by the last name of Malloy who had been in Vietnam for about a month, a black-clad figure popped up and broke into a run, trying to flee in a straight line. Zigzagging would have given him a chance of escaping.

From about twenty yards away Malloy took aim at the fleeing figure. A single shot from Malloy’s rifle dropped the black-clad figure in its tracks. Although it was hard to tell if the figure had dropped into hiding, or if he had been hit, a marine to the left of Malloy yelled out with excitement, “You got him—you just blew his fucking head off.”

I had not seen what this excited marine had seen, but I wanted to see if he actually knew what he was talking about, so I charged towards where I suspected the body to be. Splayed out, face down on the ground, was a black-clad body that I wanted to imagine had moved, or at least twitched—anything to have given me a reason to fire my weapon.

Seeing none, but with adrenaline coursing through my body, I opened fire anyway just for the hell of it. I emptied a magazine of M-16 with one automatic burst into the body, firing from head to toe while I screamed out like a wild banshee. When Malloy came up to me, I said to him, “The kill is still yours. I was just making sure he was dead.”

Malloy just nodded his head slightly.

Sometime later he told a friend of his that he did not want credit for the kill. He said he did not want it hanging over his head for the rest of his life. By the looks of what I had written in my letter, it looks like I had no qualms with being the killer.

———

The rest of the morning was spent searching the village while the Kit Carsons forcefully questioned every single person in the village. The villagers were all considered to be VC and herded together, guarded by blackened faced marines who had not yet taken the time to wipe their faces clean.

Every once in awhile I could hear an outburst of Vietnamese language being screamed into the faces of the VC or VC sympathizers. There also was pushing, shoving, and arms being twisted by the Kit Carsons—Vietnamese against Vietnamese, divided by ideology or fear of the other side.

While we were taking a break in the village, I looked out across a small rice paddy and saw two or three figures dressed in black trying to sneak away, scooting through a thicket of bamboo.

They disappeared from sight, but then another figure appeared, and this one also scampered into the thicket before disappearing.

The Lieutenant had seen this movement also and decided that we would go check things out.

We grabbed our fighting gear and off we went, making a mad dash across the flooded paddy. I remember getting tangled in my own feet and going down face first into the flooded rice paddy. When I got up and started running again, I started laughing. I was left feeling like a kid playing football in the mud. I actually was exhilarated by the feeling.

When we got up to the thicket we discovered there was a small pond which we had not seen before as our sight had been blocked by bamboo trees and knee high grass. I moved to the edge of the pond and looked down, and beneath the water's surface I saw a mop of black hair. I simply lowered my weapon, and without any thought I fired from the hip, dead smack center into the target. To my astonishment, a body was propelled straight up out of the water as if the body had been shot out of a cannon. The body was alive, unscathed, gasping for air. From practically a point-blank distance, I had missed my target completely.

Still in awe and mad at myself for having missed, and without thinking, I jumped into the pond while another marine kept his rifle aimed dead center at the enemy's head.

There was no struggle from the enemy. He felt scrawny in my clutches. I could easily have squeezed him to death or pushed his puny little head beneath the water's surface to drown him.

I got my arm between his legs and pushed up hard against his crotch to drive him out of the pond. He rolled over the edge and came to rest at the feet of another marine who pinned him to the ground with one foot pressing down hard against his chest, and just in case the enemy thought about trying to resist, the marine kept his M-16 aimed between his eyes.

When I got out of the pond, for someone had extended their hand to help me out, I said I could not believe I had missed a pointblank target. I kept saying, "How the fuck did I miss—how?" Lieutenant Pelham told me to forget about it, "We have things to do. We'll talk about it later. We need to find the other gooks."

A few of us started to probe around the edge of pond, which in some parts the surface of the water was clogged with lily-pads. There also were white and purple flowers. There also were two Asian faces looking straight up to heaven. The nose and mouth of each were just far enough out of the water to allow breaths of air to reach their lungs.

As I said to myself, *this time I'm not going to miss, I'll rupture your fucking balls and eardrums*, I took a grenade from my belt, and just before I pulled the pin and dropped it into the pond, I heard Lieutenant Pelham yell, "O'Connell! Don't! We need prisoners!"

I was not happy about it, but I reattached the grenade to my belt.

Several of us marines got down into the water to collar the two I had seen. The one I had my arms around in a bear-hug was somewhat squirmy, so I increased the pressure of my hold. At this point I could sense a woman's breast in my clutch, but I could not comprehend this at first.

I yelled out, "Hey, this one's got tits!"

Then when I grabbed the crotch area and did not feel the testicles that I had planned on squeezing to death, I realized I really did have a woman in my arms. Realizing this I yelled again, "Damn, this one's a broad!"

Knowing I had a woman in my grasp, I loosened my hold out of instinct until I realized she was trying to squirm herself free. It did not take much strength on my part to convince her to surrender. She too could have been squeezed to death or easily drowned.

While all this was going on at the pond, other marines from the 1st platoon were flushing more VC from the bamboo thickets nearby. A few chicoms were thrown by the enemy but detonated in a weak manner, or even harmlessly fizzled out. For every chicom thrown, there followed a burst of M-16 resulting in several dead Viet Cong. With all of this commotion going on, Lieutenant Pelham was trying to reestablish control. He was yelling out, “Cease fire! Cease fire! God damn it, cease fire. We’ve been ordered to take prisoners!”

Besides the three VC pulled from the pond, Lieutenant Pelham had been able to save the lives of two other enemy soldiers, adding up to a total of five POWs—four males and one female who was rumored to be a nurse, while one of those forcefully dragged from the thicket was said to be a high ranking VC officer in charge of a cadre operating throughout the An Hoa basin.

———

We never rehashed a battle when we lost, but having won, we gloated over this day as dusk crept upon us—while we ate C-rations and drank instance coffee from canteen cups.

One of the marines who had participated in the battle said to me, “O'Connell, how the fuck did you ever miss that gook?”

“Beats me—I had him dead.”

The Lieutenant joined the conversation, “If you had stayed in high school, you might have learned something about the refraction of light through water.”

“You mean sir, like what I saw wasn't really where I thought it was.”

“Yes, sort of.”

Later on in life I studied about the refraction of light, how light bends at a slant through an interface between two materials. I also researched the possibility of a bullet deflecting off the water's surface. The deflection could have caused the bullets to miss their target. But I also have thought that maybe I intentionally missed, but I'll tell you right now, when I was back at the water's edge, no way was I trying to do anything but blow the enemy away.

———

The next day I was told by Lieutenant Pelham that I was being recommended for a Bronze Star. He had said that the actions of the 1st platoon had not gone unnoticed. A major in the scout-plane overhead had watched the entire skirmish at the pond and had passed the word to award medals to the marines who had fought well. I felt inside that I was one of those the major had noticed. I was full of pride, and I had expressed it in the letter to my family.

**Letter # 50**

*21 May 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well it's me again. I'm sitting on top of Hill 198 waiting for the gooks to rocket An Hoa. I'm in charge of 9 people, and we are supposed to keep our eyes open for rocket flashes. Then I get on the radio and call in artillery on the position.*

*Right now I'm the most experienced man in the 1st platoon as all my buddies have jobs in the rear. They will be going home soon.*

*Oh!!! It's not PFC anymore. I'm now Lance Corporal O'Connell. Pretty good! I made it the other day. I'm enclosing the certificate plus my Purple Heart certificate. They are pretty dirty, but who cares. The Bronze Star ceremony should be before I come home. These things take time. Well, I've been receiving all the mail you've been sending. It takes a little longer, but I still get it.*

*I might as well tell you that me and Sharon are through. The impression she gives me is that she's too busy with some other guy so she can't write too much. So I wrote her and told her where to go. At least I can say I didn't receive a Dear John. I don't care anyway because, do you remember the girl I met on R&R who worked for TWA? Well, I got a package from her a few days ago. I write her when I can. When I come home on leave, I'm going to visit her; and I want to bring her home so you people can meet her. She's out of this world. Well, can't think of much more to say. I'll write when I can.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

On May 10, 1969, I came so close to dying that the feeling of God came to me in an epiphany.

_____

Mike Company was back to providing security along Liberty Road. On this morning, Reed and I were scheduled to have the day off. We probably had plans to take a swim in Alligator Lake and sleep away the afternoon. I might have even thought about writing a few letters.

The marines not having the day off were headed out to provide road security. They had boarded a truck and gone on their way. In less than a minute's time, there was a loud boom, and when I looked towards the direction of the sound I saw a plume of reddish brown- black smoke rising up beyond the crest of the road the truck had just traveled over.

I knew a booby-trap had been detonated.

Reed and I, along with Lieutenant Pelham, and his replacement, Lieutenant Wilson—who was going to take over the 1st platoon, or just had before the road security detail had climbed aboard the truck—jumped into a jeep and headed for the smoke. When we crested the hill, I could see the truck about fifty yards beyond where the explosion had occurred. The marines who had been on the truck were walking back to the scene, all except Smith and Murphy. They were the ones who had lost their lives.

We were constantly told, "Never setup in the same place twice." This was pretty simple to me—I had been on road security many times—but to the new guys, the advice given was forgotten sometimes, or the word simply was not heeded, or their way was easier, less strenuous, seemed hassle free.

Road security in May was very hot. There was no shade, or the only shade came from a temporary shelter made out of a green-rubber-poncho. Two items were needed besides the poncho to make the shelter—strong string, like parachute-chord, and poles, preferably bamboo.

The parachute-chord was not hard to find. There were parachutes from the illumination flares all over the countryside. The cord could be cut from the silk parachutes, and it was easily kept in a pack. As for the bamboo poles, they were harder to come by when you were not near a village or a thicket of bamboo, which was the case when one was out along Liberty Road. But somehow, Smith and Murphy had gotten their hands on a few bamboo poles and had made a very sturdy shelter the day before. The bamboo poles had been perfect—so perfect that they hid them in some short scrub with the intentions of going back to them the next day to build another fine shelter.

BOOM!

Never setup in the same place twice—or else.

Smith and Murphy had jumped down from the back of the truck to man the first position along the road. Yesterday they had also manned this one.

In this position, they had hidden their bamboo poles used the day before in some light brush, in the same place they had left about fourteen hours earlier. Someone—most likely a few Vietnamese kids, because they used to come and visit the marines on road security—they used to try and sell us cans of soda they had most likely stolen from us in the beginning—must of observed Smith and Murphy's actions before the two of them had secured their watch at dusk the day before. They had to have been seen hiding those bamboo poles.

Regardless of how the VC had learned about the bamboo poles, whether it was the kids who had squealed, or maybe an actual VC soldier who had observed the scene the day before, the bamboo poles and the surrounding area were booby-trapped during the night. Someone had played a hunch that the poles would be an attraction to a few returning marines, and they had been right.

Smith and Murphy jumped down from the truck and walked into the brush for their poles—and the rest is history written on the Vietnam Wall.

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I wish I had not seen the remains. There was nothing attached to anything. We put one shredded pile of gore on top of one green-rubber-poncho, and the other pile on another.

Reed grabbed one end of the first poncho liner with the remains in it, while I grabbed the other end. We did not recognize who we were carrying.

We began our move to the road, not more than five or ten yards of terrain to cover. I was in the lead, having to walk backwards, shuffling my feet more than lifting them.

I do not know what made me stop and freeze, but I did. As I looked straight down, right between my feet was a trip-wire attached to a mortar round. I knew right then and there what the presence of God felt like.

"Reed! Stop!"

We both were looking down now. I could see my jungle boots, one on either side of the wire. I had miraculously stepped over the wire with one foot which I had picked up instead of shuffled. Taking a step had allowed me to clear the wire without tripping the booby-trap.

I have no other vision or recollection of how I got my next step over the wire, and how Reed accomplished the same, but somehow we managed to get the remains out to the road.

———

Reed and I did not get our day off. We had to replace Smith and Murphy out on road security. I was not happy about it—I had been looking forward to a free day—but I kept my feelings to myself. I said nothing. Actually, neither Reed nor I spoke to one another the rest of the day while we sat on an outcropping of stone across the road from where I had almost been killed.

The rest of the day felt like a drug-induced numbness. Even today I cannot recall the feelings that I was pushing down inside. They are that well buried. Yet I can see Reed and me sitting beside one another, looking towards the north, staring into the An Hoa basin.

I thought about Murphy who one day had showed me some scars he had from when he was a kid. He and his family had been trapped inside their burning house, and he was able to save his younger brother, but not without suffering severe burns himself which were evident around his earlobes, forearms and hands. It had taken him some time to recover, and I remember he said that getting into the Marine Corps was like a dream come true. I remember saying to myself, "How the fuck can any of this be part of a dream coming true. How can any of it."

———

I did not pray on this day, but within the numbness was a feeling of a presence which I came to believe was God—not a God in any bible or one I had learned about from the lips of a minister, but one that just was.

Now one might doubt this or think I have gone off on some sort of tangent, but in my heart and soul I have not, nor do I care if you think so.

Although I was to fear death for the rest of my time in Vietnam, and maybe up until a few years ago, I believe I will come to meet the power of God I met the day Smith and Murphy were killed, the day my life was spared—the day that will live forever in my heart.

———

Sometime during the afternoon while Reed and I stared off into space, a small contingent of Marine Corps engineers swept the area where the dying had taken place. Three more unexploded booby traps were found.

I can still tremble inside thinking about it.

———

Hill 198 was a mile or two west of An Hoa. The Son Thu Bon looped around the base of the hill in a very tranquil manner. The panoramic view of the An Hoa basin to the east did not look like a battlefield, although the reason for being on top of this hill was to try and spot the enemy rocket sites in the mountains off to the west.

On this particular day, my squad and I were manning Hill 198 when An Hoa was hit by a barrage of 122mm rockets fired by the enemy. I heard the enemy's guns, but by the time the sound had

registered in my mind, the sound was nothing more than a distant memory. I immediately scanned the mountains with my binoculars, but I saw nothing that I was looking for which would have been smoke seeping up through the jungle cover.

When I looked in the direction of An Hoa, I saw the dust rising up from where the individual points of impact were within the combat base.

Over the radio was a demand for the grid coordinates of the rocket site. “Negative sighting,” I said.

“Do you have a suspected rocket site?”

“Negative—negative rocket site.”

Whoever I had been talking to on the radio was not going to take no for an answer. “Report a rocket site—now!”

To satisfy the demand of the voice, I scanned the mountains once more, then looked at my map and came up with a random set of grid coordinates where nothing had come from. I called these coordinates in as a suspected enemy rocket site. A few minutes later, I heard a single boom, faint like, of artillery fire. To the west, close to where the grid coordinates I had called in, the smoke from a white-phosphorus (Willey Peter) marker round came up out the jungle. The marker round had been right on target.

Being satisfied with the mark, I said over the radio, “Fire for effect.”

I watched through my binoculars a barrage of high-explosive rounds tear apart a small area of a very vast jungle. When the last round exploded, the voice on the radio asked for a report. I told him that the rounds had hit the target and that there had been undetermined damage to the suspected rocket site. I had also been asked if there had been any secondary explosions. “Negative,” I said.

With all of this said, I figured someone back in An Hoa must have felt satisfied thinking they had retaliated against the enemy gunners—maybe even thought we were winning the war—although I knew we had done nothing more than kill a few trees.

———

I had been in Vietnam for seven months when I was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal. I also had become the most experienced enlisted man in the 1st Platoon. I found this frightening. I did not feel like I was experienced enough to be a squad leader, or to be counted on, or responsible for the safety of the less experienced marines under me. To simply put it, I did not think of myself as a Sergeant Thompson, or the others who had died on Hill 332. I did not know if I would ever be able to measure up to my idols.

———

The more experienced marines in my platoon, the ones with only a few months left on their tour of duty, had recently been assigned jobs in the rear. Reed became the aide to the Battalion Sergeant Major. Donnie Connors went on mess duty in An Hoa, and another marine was assigned to a CAP unit. His assignment made me mad. I was the one who had deserved the transfer out of the bush, but the reward for my experience was to be given more chances to gain even more experience—but I began to feel the growing doom of being killed in doing so.

_____

I had declared that Sharon and I were done. I always thought she had been the one to end it, but when I reread this letter in 1996, I realized I might have been the one who had called it quits. I sure wanted my parents to think so, and I wanted my parents to think I was fine with the breakup, because I had a new girlfriend—the airline stewardess—who was nothing more than a fantasy—a battle dressing for an enormous wound to my heart.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Herbert B. Murphy**

**Killed in Action**

**May 10, 1969**

**—**

**Private First Class**

**Ronny Smith**

**Killed in Action**

**May 10, 1969**

**Letter # 51**

*23 May 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well, as I write you, I find myself in the same compound I was in the night before we left for Hill 500 and Operation Taylor Common. That was back on around December 8th.*

*This time, we are going on an operation to three different areas around the southern part of Da Nang. The three areas are Dodge City, Go Noi Island, and the Arizona Territory. Right now, they are said to be the hottest combat zones in Vietnam. So I hope God will be with me. So far, I've had good luck, but I'm starting to get scared with only about 5 months left before I come home. I'll be lucky if I don't get hit again. But if I do, don't worry as the Marines and Navy take good care of us wounded.*

*I see Mama got a telephone call from Sharon the other day. Well, the reason I left her is because she's been going out with some guy by the name of Keith. Plus, the last time she wrote, she told me, quote, "It's been so beautiful out, I haven't had time to write." She always adds a remark like this, and it makes me mad and gives me the impression I'm just being a fool keeping her. So, if she calls again, tell her to go to hell and not to wait for any letters from me because there's no way in the world I'll write her. But like I said, me and this girl from New York are getting pretty close.*

*Well, got to go for now. I'll write tomorrow; and, if Sharon calls again, tell her not to bother calling anymore. And, if you don't, I'll write and tell her myself.*

*Love, Paul*

*P.S. Have Marsha send me a picture, as there's a buddy of mine who wants to write her. Okay?*

**—Between the Lines—**

On May 23, 1969, Corporal Gary L. Hisle died in the NSA Hospital in Da Nang. Gary had been wounded by an exploding booby-trap, roughly fifty days before he succumbed to his wounds—wounds so severe, the chance was never taken to evacuate Gary to Japan. I had heard it said that he would have never endured the flight.

———

I felt I was losing my mind and had no idea what I was doing when I wrote Sharon a letter of good-bye. I could not get the sight of Smith and Murphy out of my head, and I saw trip-wires in my sleep. I had no one to tell, and would not have known what to have said anyway. It has only taken forty-four years to face the fact that I had been haunted by the gruesome deaths of Smith and Murphy, and my near death experience. It would not have mattered whatever Sharon wrote—I was saying good-bye without even knowing why.

———

I had a good feeling being back in the compound, but I also found myself wondering if Sergeant Thompson, Dave Johnston, Joe Freeman, Christianson, or Dennis Merryman had given it any thought back in December that they would die in Vietnam. I myself had felt very confident back then about surviving, or at least more confident than I was when I wrote this letter in May stating that I was headed to Go Noi Island in the very near future.

———

Reed and Joe Freeman used to talk about Go Noi Island, and not in a peaceful way. They said the place was infested with VC and hardcore NVA, and they said there were booby-traps galore.

Joe Freeman used to say the enemy was so brazen on Go Noi Island, that he had actually witnessed NVA soldiers firing AKs at our jets—actually standing tall while firing away like they were invincible.

Reed and Joe Freeman had survived a stint on Go Noi Island in June of 1968, when they had been new in-country. Now it was supposed to be my turn to venture there.

———

A few nights before we were to leave the compound for Go Noi Island, I was able to scrounge up a few cases of beer from a U.S. Army unit which was operating out of An Hoa. The Army seemed to have all sorts of beer. The idea that the Army always had it made—that is what a lot of us grunts thought—was reinforced by the fact that the beer was cold.

I got drunk drinking the beer. My drunken stupor turned into a crying jag laced with anger. I went into a rant about Sharon “fucking me over,” leaving me for some other guy. When someone told me that no girl was worth losing your mind over, I went off on a tangent about Sergeant Thompson and Freeman and the rest of those who had been killed—how the Marine Corps didn't give a fuck about anyone. They could care less who died.

I had grown so loud that the Captain heard me. He walked over to where I was holding court. He asked me what I was talking about. I said to him. “No way in hell am I going to Go Noi Island. No way in hell are you going to get the chance to get me killed.”

I went on and on and finally said, “I'm not going to the bush again. You're not going to get a chance to leave me behind.”

The Captain had some sympathy for me. He said he too felt bad about Sergeant Thompson and the others, but told me that the bodies which had been left behind on March 5th had been recovered. He said, “Didn’t you know this? We take care of our dead and wounded.”

I had not known that the Captain, along with several other members of Mike Company, and a team of marines from a recon unit, had gone back to Hill 322 while I had been in Hawaii. They had recovered the bodies of Sergeant Thompson, Dennis Merryman and Ron Christianson, bodies that were found in the same exact positions they had dropped dead into, and their weapons and gear, all of it left untouched.

Although I heard the Captain saying over and over that the dead had been taken care of, my drunken state of mind could not find its way to making sense. When the Captain told me to lie down and sleep it off, “You’ll feel better in the morning,” I heard myself say with anger, “No fucking way will I feel better, sir!”

With that I heard his voice telling the corpsman to get me some rest. I felt my trousers being pulled down. I felt the pinch of a needle go into the cheek of my ass, and I fell asleep. In the morning I woke groggy. Lieutenant Wilson and a corpsman were standing over me. The lieutenant asked, “O'Connell, how are you feeling?”

I answered, “Sir, I'm not going to the bush.”

**In Remembrance Of**

**Corporal**

**Gary L. Hisle**

**Died From Combat Wounds**

**May 23, 1969**

**Letter # 52**

*28 May 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*How's everything going back at home? Good I hope. I'm not going to be able to write too often as we are now on Operation Pipestone Canyon. I think that's what they are calling it. Right now, we've been sweeping Go Noi Island and have taken many casualties, but I haven't even got scratched. Not bad. Our lieutenant got hit yesterday and so did my buddy who was going to write Marsha, but he'll be back. He gave me his radio and camera.*

*Well, I got a letter from Steve Coates, and he sounds like he is doing okay.*

*I was going to write longer, but the chopper will be down in a minute. Will write later. I'm hurried.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

My refusal to go back into the bush lasted only a few hours. I had gotten myself up on my feet despite a vicious hangover from too many beers and whatever drug the corpsman had injected into me. I actually was very subdued, and other than saying I was not going to the bush, I stayed quiet, but still determined to keep my word.

To try and shake off the lingering hangover, I took myself to Alligator Lake for a swim. Lieutenant Wilson was there. Before he even got to say a word, I said, "Sir, I am not changing my mind. I'm not going to the bush." He told me to give my refusal a real good thought. He said the Captain would have me sent to the brig in Da Nang if I continued to refuse.

"Sir, I don't care. I'd rather go to the brig than to be killed in the bush."

I then reminded the lieutenant that he himself, being new to Vietnam, had no idea how I felt.

"Sir, every time I look to the west, up into the mountains, all I see in my mind are three marines dead on a trail, left behind." And I added, "What about all that crap they fed me on Parris Island? 'We leave no one behind.' It was all bullshit if you ask me."

The Lieutenant reiterated that the Captain also felt badly about the losses Mike Company had suffered, but that he felt closure knowing the bodies had been recovered and sent safely back home. "And you too will feel closure also, if you give it some time."

The words from Lieutenant Wilson meant nothing to me as they bounced off my hardened, eighteen year old eardrums.

The Lieutenant continued to work on my mind. He said I was needed. "There is not a lot of experience in the company right now. Some of the men are very new, and I need a squad leader like you to show them the way—to keep them alive. Come on O'Connell, give the new men a chance. Didn't Sergeant Thompson do that for you? You don't think for a second that you would have survived without his help, do you? You owe it to yourself, and to the Marine Corps, to change your mind."

Inspired once more, I surrendered. I would go to the bush.

———

On May 25th, Mike Company climbed aboard trucks and was transported along Liberty Road from An Hoa to Liberty Bridge. The company would stage along the banks of Son Thu Bon until full darkness had set in. I think the order to saddle up was passed down to us just after midnight.

We were traveling on foot—single file—keeping as much distance between each other as possible. I was barely able to see the image of the marine I was following—proper spacing—thus, if he had unfortunately tripped a booby-trap, maybe I would be spared injury by the buffer maintained between us.

For some, it was difficult to keep the proper distance. No one wanted to be alone in the dark, but getting bunched up could be deadly. The new guys seemed to be the ones to lose sense of their

distance. It was my job to remind them to keep the proper distance between one another. Every once in awhile I would step away from the file and watch my squad as they passed by. If my squad members were too close to one another, I would whisper in their ear, “Spread it out.” When the last member of my squad would pass by, I would hustle back into position behind my first fire-team.

Mike Company’s movement was very slow, and although we walked for hours, we probably had not traveled even a mile. Around 0330hrs someone near the point tripped a booby-trap, and at the same time there was a burst of AK-fire which sent purple tracers into the air—probably a warning from the enemy to his comrades that the Americans were coming.

The word was passed for a platoon to secure an LZ, as the wounded marine—just one marine injured—needed to be medevaced. The rest of the company was to sit and stay alert, maintaining single file—marines alternately facing outboard—one facing portside, the next, starboard. This was continued right down the line to the last guy in the company formation.

It seemed like the helicopter took forever to arrive. It was very hard to keep from dozing off during the wait. At first, I moved up and down the file making sure my squad was staying awake, but after awhile, I grew tired of doing this, and sat my ass down like the rest of my squad and fought off sleep.

Finally a helicopter could be heard in the distance, then closer and closer. Then the sounds of the rotors changed and I could tell the helicopter was coming to a hover, then a landing. By the sounds coming from the LZ, the helicopter seemed to stay on the ground for only a few seconds, and then was gone. The entire medevac was accomplished without any interference from the enemy, but they definitely had to know we had arrived.

With the medevac accomplished, we moved out again—all except for one. A combat engineer who was considered to be attached to Mike Company—not permanently assigned—most likely had not gotten the word to move out after the medevac had been completed. There was speculation that he may have fallen asleep and was not woken when we moved out again, or maybe the enemy had overpowered him in silence. Regardless, he would be missing the next day, and not found for more than another.

———

Go Noi Island was only an island in the wet season, when the Son Thu Bon would flood its banks, the river being fed by the monsoon rains which produced an overabundance of runoff from the mountain streams west of An Hoa. The river during the wet season would split east of Liberty Bridge and then join together again further downstream in the direction of the South China Sea. The land in between was Go Noi Island.

In the dry season, the southern fork of the Son Thu Bon was a dried up riverbed of loose packed white sand which would be our avenue of approach onto Go Noi Island which was rice paddies no longer tilled, fields of sugarcane, tree-lines, and bamboo hut villages sparsely populated with women and children sympathetic to the VC cause.

———

The vast riverbed was to be crossed to gain a foothold on Go Noi Island. The crossing was made after the sun had come up over the horizon because we had been slowed down by the booby-trap

a few hours earlier. The maneuver would have been safer if it had been conducted just before dawn.

My squad and the rest of the company were spread along the edge of the expanse of white sand. We were just inside the bamboo thicket that marked the wet season, high waterline.

Just before the crossing began, the tree-line on the opposite shore of the dried river bed was bombarded with our 60mm mortars, rounds from our M-79 grenade launchers, and raked with M-60 machinegun fire while Marine Corps gunships flew overhead. We were trying to draw fire from the enemy, but when there was none, the assault across the sand began.

I had no idea what to expect. The dry riverbed seemed like a million miles wide. If one was caught in the middle—out in the open—it seemed to me that there would be no chance of survival.

I watched and was ready to provide cover fire into the distant tree-line as the initial fire-team of marines broke out of the thicket and ran their asses off, zigzagging their way towards the edge of Go Noi Island. As they ran, I thought to myself, *Go you motherfuckers, go! Don't stop now!*

The first team of marines made it safely across, but one could not assume the next team would be as fortunate—maybe the enemy was trying to suck us in, let a few more marines cross so that our forces would be divided, forced to fend for themselves, trapped so that a new war would have to be fought for the reasons of never leaving anyone behind.

By the time it was my turn to make the mad dash across the open terrain, more than three-quarters of the company had safely made it to Go Noi Island. I should have felt safe, but I still ran and zigzagged as if I was being shot at. I actually felt like a World War II marine assaulting a Japanese beachhead. I felt excited, and filled with unexpressed joy in my heart upon my safe arrival.

After our successful crossing of the dried river bed, we moved through the bamboo tree-line and into a field of sugarcane. The stalks were taller than anyone in Mike Company and made a great place to hide from the enemy, and for the enemy to hide from us. Although the heat was stifling in the thick of the cane field, and void of any air flow, no complaints were muttered when the word was passed to ground our gear in the sweet smell of sugar.

We laid low for awhile as we took turns sleeping. One marine in each fire-team stayed awake, or did the best he could while he listened for the rustling sounds of the sugar cane stalks which could be the sounds of an approaching enemy. When hunger overpowered our exhaustion, some of us ate C-rations. Almost no one took the time to heat up the food. After eating our breakfast—or was it our lunch, or did it matter what the meal was labeled—the food in our stomachs acted like a sedative, and off to sleep we went once more.

In the late afternoon we were on the move again. We traversed through the fields of sugarcane, where to keep visual contact with the marine one was following meant staying a closer distance than what was considered safe, but sometimes—especially when the course being followed was straight—the distance between one another could be lengthened to a safer one because an easy to follow path—sugarcane stalks having been trampled by the marines up front—was created. This allowed for an increase in visibility.

There were advantages to traveling through the sugarcane. Again, we were out of sight from the enemy, and two, the sugar cane root, after the bark was stripped, could be sucked on providing a

sweet sugary treat. But then there was also a disadvantage—the chance of stumbling upon VC soldiers manning fighting positions—known as spider-holes—in which the enemy could pop up from, take a quick shot, then drop back down out of sight. A way of picking us off, one by one.

We made it through the sugarcane field alive, although we suffered cuts on our arms and hands from the knife like sugarcane stalks. The wounds stood a good chance of becoming infected because of a lack of personal hygiene. The cuts to our arms could have been prevented if we had rolled down our sleeves, but it was just too damn hot to do so.

After the sugar cane fields came open areas which once were actively used for growing rice, but the paddies seemed more like sandlots now. I could tell they once were rice paddies by the paddy dikes which dissected the lots into half-size football field parcels of land. I often wondered what the history was of some of the areas I saw, but I would have to stop my wandering mind because I had to stay alert for the signs of the enemy.

Late in the afternoon, something caught my eye in a tree-line to my front. What I saw was blue and white—something checkered in color which stood out after seeing nothing but the predominately black clothing of the Vietnamese for months on end. I doubted it was a Vietnamese person dressed in such colors.

After I trained my binoculars on the sight, I realized what I was looking at was fabric of some sort hanging from a clothesline. Although I was certain I had not seen a person, I still got on the radio and reported that I had the possibility of VC in the tree-line.

The grid coordinates of the target were requested by the 60mm mortar team. After orientating my map and compass, I reported what I had calculated to be the correct coordinates, but just before the barrage of mortars was fired, someone on the radio was yelling, “Check fire—check fire!” Someone had double checked the information I had given and determined that my calculations had been off—in fact, if the mortars had been fired, they would most likely have fallen on my own location.

When Lieutenant Wilson came up to my location, he asked me to point out where I had seen the movement. When I pointed to it, he peered through my binoculars at the location and said, “Looks like laundry, but it could be an enemy signal to their buddies. Let's figure the grid out anyway. Better to be safe than sorry.”

The two of us concurred while looking at my map, and a new set of coordinates were calculated and transmitted to the mortar team. A barrage of mortar fire obliterated the blue and white checkered cloth. About a half-hour later my squad was ordered forward to check out the targeted area. We found shreds of cloth still wrapped around a length of clothesline. There was no figuring to why the cloth had been there, but maybe the Lieutenant had been correct. Maybe it was the enemy’s way of passing a message. Regardless, the clothesline would come in handy when it was time to erect a rubber poncho hooch.

———

I felt embarrassed about miscalculating the grid coordinates. I did not like screwing up, especially in front of the new guys. I wanted to be considered someone who was squared away. Trying to fill Sergeant Thompson’s boots was proving to be very difficult.

———

Just after dusk we moved back into the sugarcane field to spend the night. Although we would not be able to see the enemy until he was right on top of us, the chances were pretty good that he would have trouble sneaking up on our positions. Hopefully we would be able to hear him rustling through the stalks of cane.

The night proved to be uneventful, thus, on the morning of May 27th, dawn was met by marines a little less fatigued than the day before.

Just after the sun had fully risen, the company moved out. My squad was on-line walking towards a tree-line in which there was an occupied village nestled inside. Woman and children could be seen moving about, and it almost seemed like the children were waiting to greet us in a friendly way. Some were waving, but were they waving hello, or goodbye?

BOOM!

Brown-gray cloud...

John Kirchner is blown straight up into the air. He's end-over-end, and his flight strikes me as being part of a stunt show. To my left, Dawson—a tough marine, a former college football player from Pennsylvania—he is looking me straight in the eye while he spits out teeth and blood and talks at the same time. He has a pinhole stream of blood spurting like mad from a wound in the side of his jaw. The pressure is so strong that the blood is pumping out of his body like from a pinhole in a garden hose, keeping pace with his accelerating pulse.

Guys are running for John as if they think that he can be saved, but he cannot be saved—in fact, he cannot even be found at first. At the same time, as I am sensing that John is gone, Dawson is accusing me of sucker punching him. “Did you just fucking hit me?”

“No man, you're wounded. You're fucking bleeding.” My spoken words ended there, but my thoughts continued—*you're fucking bleeding to death*.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Corpsman up!” The scream replaced my first scream of the morning, which had been, “John!” but the scream for John was a hopeless one, and I felt sick to my stomach thinking the scream, “Corpsman up!” for Dawson was going to be one of hopelessness too.

I could not find the way to help Dawson other than to yell for help. He was bleeding to death before my eyes, and despite my battlefield training, fear and panic had rendered me useless. In all the milliseconds which were passing me by, all I could do was watch Dawson die, and I could not even stand to do that. All I did was spin myself in circles and circles, looking for an answer as if there was one to be found in the blurry world around me.

I was not the answer to Dawson's problem, but the corpsman who charged forward was. Before my eyes, he unwrapped a battle-dressing and pressed it hard against Dawson's jaw. Immediately, I felt like a fool. I could have done the same thing—applied direct pressure over the wound and saved Dawson a whole lot of blood—that is if I had not panicked.

Dawson did not die, even though he had died in my mind while I was spinning like a top. Although his blood soaked through the first battle-dressing, the next one added to the first one, stopped the flow. It seemed like a miracle how simply pressing against a wound could save a life.

Dawson was now another guy I wished I could have been. He took his wound with a grin. He actually seemed to smile. Maybe it was just the way he acted in shock, but he did not cry for his mother.

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John was dead. It did not matter how many times I yelled out his name while he flew through space—he was dead. I see John flying through the air every time I see stuntmen in a stunt show —every time I see a clown shot from a cannon under the big top—but John's flight was not a pretty one.

When we finally found his body, it was gruesome. We only knew it was John, for he was the only one missing amongst us.

John's remains were gathered and placed on a green rubber poncho and carried over to where Dawson was being treated.

Despite Dawson's loss of blood, when we tried to help him to his feet, he pushed us away and rose up on his own. He growled, “Leave me alone, I’m fine.”

While all this was going on, the village people had been watching from a distance—from the other side of the trees. There was no waving now. The villagers looked nervously at mute, angry, marines who were no longer interested in winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese we supposedly had come to help.

Before we moved through the tree-line and into the village, I pointed my weapon at a Vietnamese girl and yelled out “La di,” Vietnamese slang for, “Come here.” The words reinforced with my M-16 aimed at her head, and my loud, pissed-off tone of voice, meant, “You! Get the fuck over here now, before I blow your fucking ass away!”

When she hesitated and looked like she might run from me, I gave her a chance to live. “La di motherfucker! Don't test me!” When she saw my thumb flick the safety off, she then began to walk slowly towards me. When I pulled the butt end of the rifle stock against my shoulder and took aim, she quickened her pace.

The girl was probably in her early teens. I wanted her because she going to walk point for us whether she wanted to or not. When she was within arm distance of me, I physically spun her around and stuck the barrel of my rifle hard between her shoulder blades. “Walk you fucker! Walk!” Whether she knew what the word *walk* meant or not, prodding her along with the tip of my rifle made my point. She started to move as ordered.

I watched every step she took. Where she placed a foot down, I placed a foot down. I was wagering that she would not trip a booby-trap intentionally. I also was wagering that she knew where every booby-trap was hidden. I figured she had planted a few herself.

As I followed the girl step-for-step down a narrow footpath made by little Vietnamese feet over hundreds of years, she suddenly stepped to the left, veering off of the worn path. I too stepped where she had.

I did not see what made her deviate or why she had quickened her pace, but then it registered in my mind—she had side-stepped a booby-trap. I turned quickly and yelled to the Lieutenant who was the next marine in line. “Sir, booby-trap! Booby-trap!”

I was physically signaling frantically with my hands and arms for Lieutenant Wilson to come my way, but he did not pick up my signal in time.

BOOM!

I could not believe my eyes. The whole object of having the girl walk point for us had been to keep from blowing a booby-trap, yet we still had blown one.

Marines cautiously moved towards the lieutenant, hoping not to trip a booby-trap of their own. The corpsman came slowly and began to rip and cutaway clothing from the Lieutenant and his radioman who also was hit. I saw the corpsman wiping blood from their skin so he could identify the extent of their wounds.

The girl then came into my focus of thought again. I turned. She was walking away very quickly, not quite running. I took aim at her back. “La di—la di bitch!” She saved her own life for the second time—the first time by sidestepping the booby-trap she knew was there, and the second time by stopping dead in her tracks because I had shouldered my weapon, closed my left eye so my right eye got a good sight picture of her head through my rifle sights, and had taken up the slack in the trigger. Only the slightest of pressure in my trigger finger would have been needed to take her down.

After letting her off the hook, I watched every step she took in walking back towards me. When she got up to me I knocked her to the ground and jammed the tip of my rifle barrel hard against the back of her head. The tip of the flash-suppressor fit nicely into the base of her skull. Now she knew I meant business for she was on her knees chanting something singy-song—praying I assumed. Her reactions were making me feel very powerful. Despite her pleas, I kept up the pressure to the back of her head with my weapon.

I had no idea what was running through the mind of the Vietnamese girl, and I cannot remember what had been racing through my own, but whatever my thoughts were, they had been strong enough to overpower my instinctual hate and anger, for I did not shoot her dead. But to keep my squad members from thinking I was weak, I kicked her to the ground. She curled into a ball just like I had the morning Sergeant Thompson had beat me when I had been falsely accused of doing something I had not. Yes, the Vietnamese girl and I had something in common—the instinct of self-preservation.

Lieutenant Wilson and his radioman, Edson, were very lucky. The booby-trap they had been wounded by was nothing compared to the one John Kirchner had tripped, figured to be a 155mm artillery-round. The lieutenant had probably tripped a homemade booby-trap, maybe nothing more than small pebbles propelled through midair by an insufficient amount of explosives.

Their wounds were not severe—they could walk—but troublesome enough that the two of them would have to be medevaced.

With the girl yanked back up onto her feet—with all of us looking pretty ragged—we slowly began our trek through a tree-line and into a village. The girl was on the point. I followed right on her tail, sporadically prodding her along with my weapon, poking her either in the back of her head, or between the shoulder blades. Following behind us were a few marines still fit for battle, followed by the walking wounded—Lieutenant Wilson, Edson; and Dawson, who was with a smile, or maybe grimaces of pain.

Behind the wounded was a three-man fire-team of marines, then the four marines—one on each corner of a green rubber poncho—carrying the remains of John Kirchner. And lastly, *Tail End Charlie*—slang for the last marine in the column who was said to be bringing up the rear.

When we got into the village, I kicked the girl in the small of her back to indicate I was through with her. Her services were no longer needed. The force of my kick had propelled her into a hut where she almost stumbled into an open-pit fire.

There were woman and children in the hut. They were whimpering the same singy-song words the girl had been whimpering when she thought I was going to kill her.

I was consumed with fear and anger as I felt drawn into the hut. The woman and children cowered in the corner. They were nothing more than a target for the ultimate release of emotions built up inside me. All I had to do was pull the trigger. But then another idea came to me—before killing them, I would scald them with a kettle of boiling water which was being heated over the fire. I would pour the scalding water over the heads of the wretched children.

With my right arm cradling my M-16—keeping it right on target—and my left hand going for the kettle, I was stopped by a pistol barrel pressed hard against my temple. "O'Connell, do something stupid and it will be the last thing you ever do." It was the voice of Captain Burns, the voice of sound reasoning, the voice I needed to hear because I never really wanted to shoot anyone in this situation—not women and children—but my mind had been made up, and I did not possess inside me a way out. If it had not been for Captain Burns and his forceful intervention, I would have acted upon the most fateful decision of my entire life.

Captain Burns found the way to pat me on the back. While doing so he said, "O'Connell, things will work their way out. You'll see."

I remember I said nothing, but I felt like I had been given a drug which drained all the tension from my body. In the silence I heard Captain Burns' voice, "Now get out of here and join back up with the rest of your squad. They need you."

And I heard what sounded like my own voice, "Yes, sir."

———

One platoon of marines had herded every Vietnamese person they could find in the huts and had them sit on their haunches, They were clustered together just outside of the village. They had been ordered to remain quiet, although some whimpering was heard off and on which was being tolerated by marines who were more sullen than angry now.

Another platoon secured an LZ not too far from where the women and children were being held—maybe the enemy would refrain from mortaring the LZ seeing that their kin were being held captive very close to where the helicopter was expected to land.

As for First Platoon, we were to carry John's body and help our two wounded members navigate their way across the LZ when the helicopter arrived.

My squad, or what was left of it—for John was dead and Dawson wounded—carried the rubber poncho slung with John's body in it. I was one of four handling the weight, positioned up near the head. I was surprised that I actually could make out John's face—so it definitely had been him, but the expression of awe frozen on what could have been seen as a mask—was evidence of shock in his last millisecond of life.

The walk to the LZ was a solemn procession. I remember Lieutenant Wilson—although wounded—helping to carry John's body, at least having a hand touching the poncho while he walked with us. I also remember the Lieutenant looking at me and saying, “This is bad—this is real bad.”

I remember sweat and tears—neither distinguishable from one another—running down my cheeks. The feeling had made me aware of the grime on my face. I also thought of how I had watched Reed cry back when he had been able to lay his head upon a desk. I did not have the luxury—I was on the battlefield. I had to be strong and provide a good example for the new guys.

Just before the helicopter arrived, I swapped trousers at the edge of the LZ with Dawson, for both knees of mine were torn, and the seam in the crotch area was pulling apart. His trousers were in much better shape than mine.

Dawson had been the one to suggest the swap. “O’Connell, those trousers of yours are pretty ragged looking. Why not take mine—that is if you don’t mind a little blood and the sweat of my balls.”

I guess I had no qualms about Dawson’s blood or sweat, because right there in broad daylight we removed our boots, pulled our trousers off which revealed that neither one of us was wearing underwear, made the trade, and got redressed. I thought of Dawson’s trousers as being new—at least they felt like they were in the knees and crotch area.

———

John's body was loaded onto the helicopter. I stood and stared as it lifted away from the earth. The dust from the rotor-wash dirtied my face with fresh filth from the earth and covered the tracks of my tears.

———

The combat engineer had been missing for more than a day. The rumor was that he had fallen asleep during the medevac in the wee hours of May 26th, and when we moved out again, he was not with us. His absence had gone unnoticed until the afternoon of the 27th when his expertise was being called upon to destroy a five-hundred pound bomb which had been dropped by one of our jets, but had not exploded.

On May 28th, close to two days after the combat engineer had last been seen or accounted for, his body was found in the bottom of a bomb crater. He had been skinned alive—that was the rumor.

I never saw the body, I was just going by what I had heard, and what I had heard made me actually feel my own skin being stripped away.

My thoughts were gruesome, and right there and then I made up my mind that I would go down fighting instead of allowing myself to ever be captured.

Later on in life I sat with a Marine lieutenant who had discovered the combat engineer's body. When I had asked him if it was true—had he been skinned alive?—the Lieutenant said, “I don't know about the *alive* part, but the skin was missing from his arms and hands. Between the mud on his face, and the missing skin, I couldn't even tell that the marine was a Negro, or that he was in fact the person we had been looking for. It had been nothing but an assumption.”

The Marine lieutenant had been unable to determine if he had found the body of Private First Class Calvin E. Cooper.

_____

Later in the day, on May 28th, one of the other platoons was on patrol when a booby-trap was blown. Marines were wounded and the call for a corpsman was yelled out, "*Corpsman up!"* A corpsman made a mad dash towards the wounded with no regards for his own safety—just the way the enemy had figured—and as the fearless corpsman scrambled to the scene... BOOM!

Booby-traps unfortunately were coming in two's and three's, and the lesson was a hard one to learn.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**John W. Kirchner**

**Killed in Action**

**May 27, 1969**

**—**

**Private First Class**

**Calvin E. Cooper**

**Killed in Action**

**May 28, 1969**

**—**

**Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class**

**Chris M. Pyle**

**Killed in Action**

**May 28, 1969**

**Letter # 53**

*30 May 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well, got a chance to write again. The gooks haven't given us much chance to put our heads up, but today we have a cease fire because of Buddha's birthday. I hope they obey the cease fire for awhile.*

*I'm sorry the last letter I wrote was so short, but I had to have it on that chopper to get it out.*

*Well, the temperature has been pretty hot over here the last few weeks. Would you believe about 95 in the shade and about 110-115 degrees in the sun? After awhile you learn to live with it.*

*I forgot all about Cheryl's birthday, so, take out $10 and buy her something, okay?*

*The rumor is, 5th Marines will be leaving Vietnam in July and either go to Okinawa or California. That would be great and mean I only would have a month and a half left in Vietnam. But like I said, it's only a rumor.*

*Well, Tommy and Marsha should be out of school pretty soon. I bet they are looking forward to it, but Mom and Dad ain't.*

*Well, I can't think of anything more to say except, don't worry and be good.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The temperature was rising higher and higher everyday as the month of May came to an end. There really was no way to tell exactly how hot it got—the only thermometer we had was an oral thermometer the corpsman possessed to check our body temperature, and it seemed if one's body temperature was not above one hundred and one, then you were deemed to be healthy.

The actual air temperature did not matter, it was only a number, but I do remember it was hot enough that the corpsman kept the thermometer inside one of his water-filled canteens to keep the heat of the day from bursting the thermometer.

What coolness there was at 0300hrs—as in feeling comfortable wearing a utility-shirt with the sleeves rolled down—quickly led to tee-shirts and rolled up trousers at the first glint of sunshine. Whatever required physical effort not accomplished by 1100hrs was put off, and did not get done until after 1700hrs. The peak hours of sunlight—the scorching hours—were spent motionless, trying not to breathe through your nose, because the hot air seared your nostrils. But to breathe through your mouth left one with a parched throat, demanding water which always seemed in short supply. Yes, even for hardened Marines the daylight hours were too hot to move about.

———

*The Fifth Marines are leaving Vietnam in July. We will be going to either Okinawa or California*.

I knew it was only a rumor, but it sure was worth a wish.

———

My father must have reminded me that my sister Cheryl's birthday had been on May 28th, or maybe somehow I remembered it on my own. Anyway, I did not want her to go without a present from me.

**Letter # 54**

*03 June 69*

*Temperature 95 0830 Tuesday*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well how's everything back home? I hope everything is fine. From my temperature report, you can see we are really in the heat. By 1:00 this afternoon, it should be about 105-110 degrees, plus the humidity is up to about 80%. The heat really gets to you.*

*Well we've been sitting along the same river for the last 3 days and got 7 more to do. We are acting as a blocking force as the 7th Marines sweep the gooks up towards us.*

*Well got to go for now, but just wanted to let you know I'm doing fine. Only 5 1/2 months left.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Mike Company was entrenched, manning a string of fighting holes along the western banks of the Son Thu Bon. The riverbank was about ten feet above water level.

One morning some of us went for a swim in front of my fighting hole. While swimming, I submerged and swam underwater through some weeds so I could sneak up on a friend of mine from South Boston, Joe Maher. When I got within arm's reach of him, I grabbed his ankle with my hand—I'm lucky to be alive. When I came up for air, I was staring right down the barrel of Joe's forty-five caliber pistol aimed straight between my eyes. He yelled out, "You fucking idiot, I nearly killed you." He then grabbed my head and pushed it beneath the surface of the water. When I came up I said, "It was only a joke—why get all pissed off?"

"Why?—because you don't know how close I came to pulling the trigger because I thought you were a fucking gook."

With that said, he pushed my head back under the water, and then walked away shaking his own head in disgust.

Later on in the day I tried to apologize to Joe for getting him so mad. He told me to leave him alone, that he was still upset—pissed off—and did not want anything to do with me. I said to him, "What if I give you my peaches and pound cake."

He said, "Listen to me once more. I nearly killed you. Now leave me the fuck alone."

I turned and walked away, but by the end of the day, my friend had come down to my fighting hole where we shared a canteen cup of coffee, and the cherished peaches and pound cake from one of my C-ration meals.

**Letter # 55**

*05 June 69*

*Dear Mom, Dad, Tommy and Marsha,*

*Received 2 letters from you on the 30th and 31st of May. Well, it sounds like summer has come to Quincy, finally. In a way I'd like to see a little bit of snow. Today wasn't too bad, it was only 102.*

*Well, we are still sitting on the river waiting for gooks. Today we killed an NVA officer and a NVA girl. They were in the act of, "you know what;" but, after you see your buddies killed, you get revenge anyway we can. We also burned a village down and killed about 20 pigs. Plus, somehow, a little kid got in the way of a round. Tough shit!*

*I just wrote Cheryl and Bobby. Plus I got a letter from Dwight and told him he could come up and see you people and maybe you could show him some of my pictures. Okay?*

*Let me tell you about my other girl. She's from the Bronx in New York and works for TWA Airlines. She's a ticket agent and has blond hair, 5'3", and blue eyes. She's out of this world and is something Daddy, Grandpa, Gus, and Arthur would whistle at as she went by, like they use to do when Annie walked by on Utica Street. Oh, her name is Lynn White. When I come home, she's going to fly up to see me, and I'll probably fly down to New York while I'm on leave. Well got to go for now, but will write later.*

*Love you all, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was not involved in the killing of the NVA officer and what some were calling his girlfriend. Not that it would have bothered me at the time to have been the one to have killed them.

———

The story I heard told was that Third Platoon had discovered an enemy officer and a girl hiding in a hole. The hole was covered by a piece of bamboo matting which was concealed by a layer of sand spread upon it.

The patrol had stopped for a break. One of the marines resting—while he was sitting on his butt day dreaming—noticed a fist-sized sink hole forming in the sand. The sand was disappearing as if one was looking at an hour-glass from above. When the marine rose up and came to stand over the site, he saw a hole about the width of his little finger; the sand was seeping into it. He knelt down and pawed at the hole which exposed a rigid bamboo mat which he figured was covering a hole, maybe even a tunnel entrance. Just as he turned to get the attention of one of the other guys in the platoon, he heard a whisper coming from beneath the mat. Now he caught the attention of a few marines by waving and hand signaled them to come over to where he was. Pointing his finger, he was able to indicate something in the sand. When one of the marines came up to the hole, he whispered in his ear, "I hear someone down there. Ssssh—listen."

The marine nodded his head, indicating he too could hear something. He breathed in and out of his mouth in an animated kind of way to indicate he had heard the breathing.

In silence, three or four marines conferred like mimes and came up with the decision to fire their M-16s down into the hole. Without ever taking a peak into the cave, the marines opened fire with their weapons.

I do not know if it was true of not, but the rumor was that the Vietnamese male pulled from the hole had been an NVA officer, and the girl dragged out—well, the word was she had been his girlfriend, and they had been caught in the act of making love. When I asked the guy who was

telling me the story, “How the hell does anyone know that?” he said, “Because they were nude—what else could they have been doing.”

So with that bit of information, I sent the rumor all the way to the other side of the world in a letter to my mother and father, my sisters Cheryl and Marsha, and my brother Tommy.

———

We moved into a village which was occupied by women and children, chickens and pigs. The women and children were declared VC sympathizers—the livestock was declared sympathizers too.

The woman and children were prodded out of their huts and sent on their way, to wherever that way might be—probably deeper into hatred for us Americans.

The huts were set aflame, first filling with a brownish-yellow smoke—the fire having been started under a lower eave using small pieces of C-4 as an accelerant, initially touched off by Zippo lighters. Then whoosh, the smoke turns into a ball of flame, and the huts became one giant inferno—like a firestorm creating its own wind.

I helped burn the village and had no problem with my conscience in doing so. The only problem I did have was the excessive thirst brought on by the heat of the fire—I ended up gulping down all of my water.

I also had no problem in killing the pigs either, as long as I shot them in the head and they died quickly. What I did not like was seeing some of the pigs being kicked to death by a few marines ridding themselves of some pent-up emotions.

I did not stop them from their ghoulish rampage. I just tried not to look or listen. The more they kicked, the more the pigs squealed, the quicker I shot.

I killed way more than those using their feet. In a strange way, I was a godsend for the pigs. I was saving them from a prolonged misery—but they still were dying without the killer feeling any qualms.

———

I did not see a child shot or injured, but I heard a story about one getting in the way of a round. The child had been hit inadvertently by a stray round while we were killing his pigs, and although I have sympathy for the child today, years ago—back in the war—I thought just as I had written—tough shit.

———

I simply have to accept the past as I see it, and hope I am never driven to the point of madness again.

———

The imaginary battle-dressing covering my broken heart was getting larger and larger as the pain grew stronger. The more pain I felt from the loss of Sharon, the more imagination I used to quench my thirst for her. The girl I met in Hawaii now had a name, a home, and a knock-out body everyone would appreciate by whistling when I brought her around to show her off.

**Letter # 56**

*09 June 69*

*98 degrees 10:30 am*

*Dear family,*

*Well things are still the same here but the nights are a little different, as 2 nights ago, we got overrun. My squad managed to hold the gooks off, but the 3rd platoon didn't have the same luck and lost 11 guys. When the sun came up, we had 2 bodies; and we figure the gooks dragged away many. I am now the owner of an NVA belt.*

*There's a chance that I might be put up for Corporal, meritoriously. Right now, we don't have any Corporals in the bush. I hope so because that would mean more money.*

*Well we've been out on this operation 15 days now. I figure about another 30, and it should be over.*

*Got to go for now, but at least you know I'm safe.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Mike Company, on the 6th of June, moved along the Son Thu Bon in an easterly direction to take up positions along what was known as The Berm. The berm was built up to the height of ten feet above rice paddies—paddies no longer cultivated. The area, as far as the eye could see, was devoid of humane existence. Where civility might have once prevailed, the land now was infested with a well-concealed enemy living in underground bunkers, bunkers reinforced by steel rails and heavy wooden railroad ties stripped ages ago from the rail beds, part of what the marines referred to as The Old French Railroad which once ran along the top of the berm.

All of this area was feared. There were many stories about marines *hitting the shit* or *getting the shit kicked out of them* near the berm. In fact, the acreage—thousands of acres to the east of the berm—was systematically being plowed under by huge Marine Corps and Navy Seabee bulldozers in an attempt to destroy the bunkers, hopefully making it hard for the enemy to exist in the eastern part of the An Hoa basin.

The company movement had started just after first light in an attempt to beat the heat of the day. Although the berm was less than two miles away, it took seven hours to make our objective. Thus, despite our early start, almost four hours of the trek was in temperatures nearing one hundred degrees. Not just because of the heat was the pace slow, but also because of the fear of booby traps, or coming upon an enemy concealed in spider holes. Over the last few days the enemy had started to use a tactic where he would get in between two patrolling units moving parallel to one another, pop up from spider holes, then spray AK at both patrols. In no time at all, the marine units would be shooting at one another while the enemy was safely below the surface of the earth, probably having a good laugh for themselves. The firefights between friendly units always took a few minutes to sort out. Although it was easy to tell the sounds made by an M-16,

there was always the thought that the enemy might have captured some of our rifles and were using them against us.

I was exhausted when I arrived at the berm around noon, and glad we had made it without tripping any booby-traps or making contact with the enemy. Thankfully we did not have to dig fighting holes as there were fighting holes already dug into the top of the berm—fighting holes probably dug by marines at least three years earlier.

Just after arriving at the berm, my squad patrolled the area to the front of our three fighting holes assigned to us. We did not venture too far for the area was reported to be heavily booby trapped. Actually, we only went out far enough to set up claymore mines. The wire used to carry the electrical charge from the detonator to the blasting cap was one hundred feet in length, so I know we did not go any further than that distance.

When we climbed back up the berm, each of the three teams in my squad built makeshift shelters to shield themselves from the sun. The green rubber ponchos used for shade were giving off a rubbery odor as the ponchos were superheated by the direct sunlight. The ponchos were hot to touch, and it almost seemed possible to easily have poked a finger through the heated rubber.

At dusk, the word was passed—transmitted over the radio personally by Captain Burns—for everyone to roll their shirtsleeves down, cover any bare skin with bug juice—mosquito repellant—and settle down for the night. "Let's stay alert, and most importantly, let's get some."

Some guys hated when Captain Burns used to say the *get some* part, including myself. I figured that while we were trying to get some, the enemy was trying to get some too, and it seemed to me, regardless of how many of them we killed, we could never kill enough to make up for the loss of even one marine.

As dusk departed, giving way to dark, we began our nighttime routine—one man awake on watch, two men down, dead asleep.

The night was broken into two hour periods of being on watch. I had the second watch. I slept from 1930-2130hrs while the first man on watch kept his eyes open. After two hours of sleep, it was my turn to keep my eyes open from 2130-2330hrs while the other two guys slept. Then I was relieved of duty and closed my eyes for four hours, which felt like less than fifteen minutes. At 0330 hrs I was gently shaken awake by a marine who anxiously wanted to get off watch so he could crash hopefully for the next three or four hours.

I remember being so tired that I consciously thought of closing my eyes, but talked myself out of it, or tried to.

My eyes had closed without warning. My chin had dropped along with my head in a nod. I hardly drew any breath at all. Then I startled myself awake. Maybe something below the level of consciousness had come to me, and yet when I would scan the area to my front and see nothing out of place, the battle to keep from falling asleep would begin once more.

———

Thank God for the moon and the lack of camouflage on the cheek bones of an enemy soldier, for if the night had been moonless, or if the enemy had simply rubbed dirt, or any form of camouflage upon his cheek bones, I might not be here today.

Call it luck, or God standing watch with me—call it what you may—but the fact of the matter is that I woke, and as I stared out into my area of responsibility, one simple beam of moonlight—mystical in nature—gleamed directly into my eyes. The moonbeam was a reflection off of something to my front, below the berm, maybe forty-five degrees below the horizon where the sun would rise in the morning.

At first I did not know what the moonlight was shining down upon. I was mesmerized, full of curiosity which had squelched any fatigue I had been feeling in my mind and body. As I tried to work out things in my brain, the reflection suddenly was no more, and as I almost let the memory of the beam slip away, it reappeared, but about a foot to the left of where I had first seen it. Then something registered in my brain—I have movement to my fron*t*!

What I was seeing started out as a faint spot of light, then a cheekbone, then a nose and the side of a face, a hand and an arm, part of a leg, and finally a crawl. I was watching someone—a human—crawling perpendicular to my line of sight, sneaking right to left, and without knowledge that I was readying myself to end a life.

The two other marines I was teamed up with were sleeping near the hole, but more than an arm's distance away. It would have been safer with the three of us in the hole doing the shooting, but I did not want to make a sound or any unnecessary moves to wake them. I did not want to give away my position.

With the butt of my weapon nestled against the inside of my right shoulder and the safety thumbed off, I stood tall in the hole so I could have a clear view of the enemy below. I took aim over the top of the rifle barrel, just as I had been trained to fire in the dark. I drew in a deep breath, and then let half of it seep out slowly—naturally. I then fired and was immediately blinded by the muzzle flash—five flashes of light which coincided with the five times that I had squeezed the trigger.

The world came to life with enemy tracers flying over my head and above the other marines positioned up and down the berm. All hell was breaking loose. The enemy had come to fight.

Everyone was awake now. The radio was overflowing with questions. The Captain wanted an explanation regarding my burst of fire, for I had not taken the time to report the movement which was the prescribed protocol to be followed, if possible.

I reported to the captain that there had been movement in front of my hole. He acknowledged my message. On the radio I heard other positions reporting movement. In the background I heard grenades exploding. I heard other explosions too. The enemy was throwing chicoms at some of the positions on the berm. I also heard someone calling for a corpsman.

I kept looking down to where I had last seen the enemy soldier. I could not make out a body. Even with light from our illumination rounds now flooding the battlefield, there were no signs of what I had fired at, but I knew what I had seen and I knew it was human.

I knew in my mind I had aimed the best that I could have, but maybe I had missed my target.

There was a stand of trees about a hundred yards just right of center of my hole. I could clearly make out figures moving back and forth in the trees. I reported my sightings over the radio and requested permission to open fire. I was told to have someone fire a LAW—Light-Antitank-Weapon—if possible. One of the marines in my squad readied the rocket, took aim, and fired. It was hard to tell how close the impact had been to the trees, but the round had come up short. The

cloud from the explosion obscured the view of the trees, but the cloud was not hiding our position. Red, green and purple tracers—AK tracer rounds—snapped over my head. The muzzle flash from the LAW must have given our position away.

The rounds passed high, but I was not taking any chances of getting hit. I got down in my hole—we all did—and stayed down until the AK-fire stopped. When I resurfaced, I took a peek again where I had fired. There now was another enemy soldier in the same place, or was it the first soldier and he was moving again? Regardless, I got on the radio and said, "Movement to the front—I'm throwing *fastballs*." I pointed out the movement to the two marines I was with, and the three of us tossed grenades and ducked for cover.

I remember when I poked my head back up, all I could see was the earth's dust, along with the aroma of the detonated fragmentation grenades which had met my nostrils. As the cloud slowly dissipated, I saw the shapes of humans appearing, then disappearing, then back in sight, but then gone once more. I was watching two or three enemy soldiers maneuvering forward.

We threw more grenades. The grenades were what I should have used in the very beginning; I would not have given my position away with the muzzle flash from my M-16, but I had been on my own with no one to confer with, and without much time to think.

The grenades brought another cloud. We waited the cloud out. When this cloud dissipated, the three of us could still see figures moving about.

Were we seeing things?

I heard a sound which reminded me of a horseshoe when it lands hard in the pit. I had heard about the enemy we were fighting. It was said that they were hardcore—just as hard as us. Like us, they hated to leave their dead behind.

The sound was a grappling hook thrown by the enemy, hoping the body or bodies could be hooked, allowing for the snagged body to be dragged back to the dedicated enemy. I heard the sounds of the grappling hook several times. My best guess was that they were coming up empty-handed in their attempts to recover their dead.

Next, more than a handful of figures, maneuvering in a disciplined military fashion—run, zigzag, drop, run, zigzag, drop—were making a move once more towards our position. The handful became teams of three, and the teams seemed to become many. I radioed, "They're charging us!"

The three of us tossed every grenade we had left, and we also detonated every claymore mine we had setup earlier in the day. I felt rage overcoming my body. Maybe this is what it felt like to fight right to the end, although such thoughts had no time to rise to the surface of my mind in the thick of battle.

The radio waves were now jammed with all sorts of demands and people wanting to know this and that—"Do you copy? Do you understand? Say again? What is going on out there? Report—report, damn it!"

And there was the one message I have never forgotten—the message from the Captain himself—"O'Connell, you better have bodies in front of your hole in the morning. Do you copy?"

"Roger, I Copy."

No way was I ever going to allow the enemy to recover their dead, for I knew where the Captain was coming from—I knew what he was insinuating. He was figuring I had gone mad—berserk—that I had lost my discipline.

I prayed that I would discover dead bodies in the morning.

———

The battle ended just before first light. After the barrage of grenades and the detonation of the claymore mines, the enemy seemed to have given up and vanished. As the light grew, and the battlefield of the last few hours began to come into view, I focused on the exact spot I had taken aim at earlier. Damn, there was nothing there but clumps of earth looking as if someone had turned the land over with a hoe.

I felt nauseated at the thoughts of having failed.

The Captain came up to my hole. I pointed to where I thought the bodies, or at least one body should have been. I said to the Captain, "Right there sir—I fired right there."

The Captain looked towards where I was pointing and said, "Well, take a few guys with you and check things out."

My squad and I, along with a corpsman, grabbed our weapons and slid down the berm. Even this much closer, I could not make out a body. I was even more nauseous with dread now knowing Captain Burns would be disgusted with me if there was not a body to be found. But then I saw a beautiful sight before my eyes—not one, but two dead enemy soldiers. Two confirmed kills.

As I stared at the bodies, I was amazed at how they looked no different than the ground they laid upon. They were pretty much covered with dirt tossed onto them by the grenades which had thrown up showers of earthen debris. When I saw this sight, I began to understand why I had not been able to make out their bodies.

Just as I turned to look back towards the berm, I saw the eye of one of the bodies move. Although one eye was missing, and the other eye was out of kilter—practically hanging out of its socket—this eye had blinked, and had blinked more than once.

Now the corpsman was on his knees trying to get a sense of life. He had turned his head to one side and lowered his ear to listen for a heartbeat. He felt the wrist for a pulse. Without saying anything to us, he stood and turned to look back at the berm. I did not hear a word said, I just saw hand gestures back and forth between the corpsman and the Captain. Next I heard a pistol shot followed by someone saying, "Not much else we could have done. He was fucked."

What I did next was without thought. I turned and said out loud for the world to hear, especially Captain Burns, "Sir, Lance Corporal O'Connell reporting two, foot-on-chest kills!" And as the world looked down upon me, I placed my foot on the chest of one of the enemy soldiers and pressured down. A slight wheeze could be heard escaping from the body. I repeated this ritual with the second body, the one that had been dead from the beginning. I did not hear any air come forth from this one.

———

The battle had not been one-sided. Mike Company had taken casualties. Further down the berm the enemy had overrun several of our positions. I heard that my friend, Ed Pralicz, had been wounded when a chicom had exploded in his hole. I never found out whether it was true or not,

but I heard he had lost a foot, but later someone else said, “No, he just got his feet all fucked up. He still had them when he was put upon the helicopter.”

_____

I never saw Ed Pralicz again, but I know that he died from Agent Orange forty years after the war.

Another marine, Corporal Stuart Tyson, was fatally wounded on the berm. He would be awarded a Silver Star, posthumously

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I would strip a leather belt from the trousers of one of the dead. The belt was military with the North Vietnamese red star in the middle of the brass belt buckle—a prize possession that I wore for the next three weeks, at first, proudly to proclaim my confirmed kills, but later only because it was what I was wearing.

When I got back to An Hoa, I sold the belt to the mail clerk for a cold case of beer. He probably still has the belt and tells people some made-up story of how he killed all sorts of gooks, and had the belt to prove it. As for me, I was glad to have had the cold case of beer, but when the beers were gone, they were gone.

_____

The next day at dusk, just after Captain Burns had given his nightly spiel about settling in for the night and *getting some*, he surprised me by coming to my fighting hole. I thought maybe I had done something wrong. I felt like the Captain was my father and I was in for a browbeating—but why? Did the Captain have a problem with me standing on the dead enemy's chest? If he had, surely he had not expressed it, for he had been the one who had yelled out, “Hoorah! Get Some!”

I most certainly had interpreted that as a sign of approval.

Maybe the Captain had heard my complaining when the Sergeant had ordered my squad to bury the two dead soldiers. I thought someone else should have buried them. Why did my guys have to dig the grave in the heat? Yes, I pissed and moaned about it because I thought there should have been some reward for the kills, but we still dug the grave—sort of shallow—rolled the bodies in, and covered them over with dirt. We even made two small crosses out of bamboo and stuck them in the ground, declaring the dead soldiers to be Christians, regardless of whether they wanted to be or not.

Anyway, Captain Burns sat down beside me and said, “I just want to tell you something marine, you did a great job last night. You should be proud of yourself. I'm going to put you in for a Meritorious Combat Promotion. You’re going to be a Corporal.”

_____

I've had people in my lifetime ask me if I ever killed someone. Without hesitation, ninety-nine percent of the time I say yes. Usually the next thing they ask me is how it felt. I tell them about Captain Burns coming to my hole, and how unusual it was for a Marine Corps Captain to visit an individual marine for a little chat—very unusual in a strict chain-of-command organization. I then go on to say, “If you don't know, or don't remember, I was expelled from high school because I was a juvenile delinquent. When I climbed out of bed on the morning of my last day of

school, I did not know that it would be my last day for having pushed a teacher around. So in a roundabout way, I just told you I was a *screw up*, and it takes a lot not to feel like one."

So how did I feel about killing someone? I felt like I had gotten an 'A' on my report card. I felt proud, and I still have fond memories of Captain Burns coming to my fighting hole to tell me I was going to be meritoriously promoted because of my actions under fire."

**In Remembrance of**

**Corporal**

**Stuart H. Tyson**

**Killed in Action**

**June 7, 1969**

**—**

**Two Enemy Soldiers**

**Killed in Action**

**June 7, 1969**

**Letter # 57**

*11 June 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well just finished swimming in the river we are set up near. We had a lot of fun down there, as there is a blown-up bridge that we've been jumping off.*

*Well the rumor is that Nixon is going to pull the 5th Marine Regiment out of Vietnam and back to Okinawa. This should be by the end of August.*

*The "Big People" who run this war have changed the operation, and word is that we are going back to An Hoa in about 3-5 days. I sure am glad because this has been a bad operation.*

*Well got to go for now but will write later on. I'm safe and sound and still going strong.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

There used to be a trestle bridge which crossed the Son Thu Bon as part of the French rail system, but the bridge had been blown apart in the middle—presumably by the VC—sometime in the past. But although I wondered when this destruction had happened, I did not know. Neither did anyone else. Regardless, the midsections of the bridge had been demolished.

Back home, one would have called it an eye-sore, but in Vietnam, it was just another part of the landscape.

My fighting hole on the berm was three holes down from the beginning of the bridge—probably ninety yards away. Every once in awhile I would look at the bridge and get the idea of jumping from it into the river below, just for fun. The way the bridge had collapsed, the upper parts of the trestles could be climbed because the geometric angles of the upper trusses had been reduced by the downward angle of the ruined bridge. The thoughts of jumping from the bridge led me to thinking about home.

Despite the fact my father would have kicked my ass all over the house if he knew that I used to swim in the granite quarries, I spent many hours swimming the quarries with my buddies. Fathers—especially those who served on the fire department—did not want their kids in the quarries because, back home where I grew up, at least one kid each summer would drown in one of them. The victim might have jumped from the edge of the quarry and hit a ledge on the way down, or hit an unseen ledge beneath the water's surface, or simply hit the water at a weird angle, resulting in the wind being knocked out of their lungs. In that situation, one would sink straight to the bottom like a rock, sometimes to the depths of a hundred feet or more. My father knew, because part of his duties as a firefighter was to help recover the bodies of teenage kids who had drowned. The firefighters would *drag the quarry* with grappling hooks, sometimes getting lucky snagging the body, sometimes not. If the body could not be grappled, then the quarry would have to be drained. My father had experienced all of this, including I bet, seeing the image of his own son in the bottom of a pumped out quarry, every time he saw the face of a dead kid.

So when I finally did jump from the bridge, and Captain Burns went all sorts of nuts, I thought of my father when the Captain yelled at me. "O'Connell, what the hell are you thinking? You had no idea how deep the water was. There could have been steel rods below the surface. Get your damn ass out of the water and get back to your hole before you foolishly get yourself killed."

As he turned to walk away, he shook his head and mumbled under his breath, "Damn kids."

———

I was raised along the water—water-front property. Even if it was in a housing project, it was still considered water-front.

Along the shore where I was raised, there were clam flats loaded with an overabundance of clams—steamers. As a youngster I used to like digging a few clams using a spoon borrowed from my mother's kitchen—a spoon, which when I brought it back to her stained with mud, she would exclaim it to be one of her good ones, as in, "The next time ask before you take one—and take an old one."

The clams I brought home, my mother would steam in a pot until the clamshells opened. After she spooned them from the water, we would scoop the clam bodies out of the shells using our fingers. Before downing the clams, they would be dipped in drawn butter. The clams were simply wonderful.

Now at the edge of the Son Thu Bon I discovered clams. They were no way comparable to the size of the clams back home, but I had a feeling they would do.

I dug a few dozen clams—clams the size of my thumbnail compared to clams an inch or two in diameter back home. Although the clams were freshwater ones and tiny, I went through the same steps I had learned from my mother.

I put the clams in my canteen cup half full of water and brought it to a boil. I watched for the shells to open. When they did, I ladled them with a plastic C-ration spoon out of the water and placed them on a piece of cardboard which served as a plate. I then shucked the clam from the shell and placed it into my mouth. I savored each and every one. As small as they were, and even without drawn butter, the taste was heavenly and took me home in my mind for a few short minutes.

I dug more clams along the Son Thu Bon and steamed them for a buddy of mine who was from Oklahoma. He had never seen or heard of a clam flat, or a steamer, or steamed clams, but when I cooked them for him and he got the taste, he said he would have to come to my hometown someday for some real steamers. I said to him that it sounded good, that we would get together when we got home from Vietnam.

Fortunately I can say we both survived, yet I am still waiting on my friend to come and share in a feast of clams.

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A day or two after the battle along the berm, a resupply helicopter landed, and out from the rear of it came Lieutenant Wilson and Edson, his radioman. Their wounds from the booby-trap had healed, and now they were back with the company.

Some new guys scrambled from the helicopter right behind the Lieutenant. It was their first moments in the bush. I could not believe it when one of the new guys walked right up to me and said, “Head, how are you doing?”

In disbelief I said, “Head? What are you talking about?”

“Head—isn’t that your nickname?”

“In high school it was—but how the fuck do you know that?”

“I’m Marshall—Mike Marshall. We were in math together—room 208.”

“Math?—208?—Wait a minute, you’re talking about fucking Quincy High?”

“Yea, I’m Mike Marshall, we went to Quincy High together. You sat right behind me in math.”

“Now I remember—Mike Marshall. How the fuck have you been—and what the hell are you doing here?”

I had gone to high school with Mike Marshall. Although I had not chummed with him, I knew who he was, and once in awhile we might have talked before the class started. Oh, and another thing, I remember serving detention together after school with him. Two juvenile delinquents, who back then had no idea they would meet up in Vietnam—worst than that, out in the bush infested with VC.

What surprised me the most with Marshall was when he had called me “Head.” Head was my nickname in high school—actually it dated back to junior high days. A friend of mine one day said, “Hey, know what, you have a big head. Your head is so much bigger than your skinny ass body.”

Just like that, the name had stuck.

I did not like the nickname, but I was not physically tough enough to stop people from calling me Head instead of Paul.

I had not heard my nickname or even given any thought to Head in more than nine months—not since I had been home on leave. No one in the Marine Corps had known me as Head, that is, not until Marshall had arrived, who I told not to use my nickname again, but he had not listened. He said, "Okay Head."

"Fucking Marshall, call me that one more time and I'll kick your ass."

With that said, he apologized to me. He said that he did not know I was serious. "It's just that you use to screw around all the time in school. I thought you were only joking when you told me not to call you by your nickname. Again, sorry."

———

Marshall and I sat on the edge of my fighting hole and talked about Quincy and Quincy High. I even told him how I had steamed some clams the day before and how it had made me feel like I was back home, and I pointed out the bridge to him and said I had, 'jumped the bridge' just like I would have said to him back home, 'I jumped the quarries.' But Marshall wanted to hear about Vietnam more than he wanted to reminisce about Quincy.

"What's it like here?"

"Here?—Here?—it's fucking bad. You can die here. We got our asses overrun the other night, and there's all sorts of booby-traps and fucking gooks everywhere. Man, you got to learn your shit real quick or you'll be dead."

With that said, Marshall sat quiet. I might have given him more food-for-thought than he needed; but he was the one who had asked. I had been happy just talking about Quincy High and back home in the world.

———

Marshall was assigned to the Third Platoon. I watched as he picked up his gear and headed further down the berm to where the Third Platoon was positioned. I did not realize that I would not see him again until I got back to Quincy.

———

I was on watch the first night Marshall was in the bush. I was wide awake, well rested from the enjoyable day of swimming and fun, and having had the chance to talk with Marshall about Quincy.

Sometime during my watch I heard a radio transmission. I heard the Third Platoon Commander trying to contact the LP. "Mike-three-alpha. Mike-three-alpha. Mike-three. Radio check, over."

There should have been the sound of two clicks as the handset was keyed twice—a silent acknowledgement from the LP—but there was not any such thing. The lack of acknowledgement was not out of the ordinary—maybe mike-three-alpha's radio volume had been inadvertently turned down too low. Too much volume, and the enemy would have heard the English being spoken, and have known where the LP was hiding.

The radio check was transmitted again—and again—but still there had been nothing but silence.

Were they sleeping? Had the enemy crept up on them and slit their throats?

It was unusual to hear the Captain's voice requesting the *radio check*—something which should have been routine—but it was his voice which had replaced the Third Platoon Commander's on

the radio. I sort of knew there was trouble now. I could hear it in the Captain's tone of voice—he was angry.

After the Captain made repeated attempts to raise the LP on the radio, I heard him order the 60mm mortar team to fire a round of illumination out over the area where the LP was reported to be positioned. To me, I was thinking that the Captain was assuming the marines on the LP were asleep.

The illumination lit up the sky and should have awakened the marines if they had been asleep, but still there had been no response from them.

Next I heard the Captain order one round of HE—high explosives—to be fired at a distance of one hundred yards, short of the position of the LP—that is if they had setup where they had said they had, but it turned out the LP had not gone out as far as they had reported.

The round came crashing down, and when it did, the radio came to life.

"Mike, Mike, Mike. This is Mike-three-alpha! We're hit! We have gooks—we have gooks all around us. Chicoms. We need a corpsman!"

Part of this was true. The three man team had been hit and in need of a corpsman, but it had not been because of the enemy or a chicom being thrown at them. Instead, it was the results of the mortar round exploding that had been intended to wake them—if indeed they had been asleep, or if their radio had been dead or malfunctioning. Regardless, the three of them were wounded.

A patrol was sent out to the LP to assist the marines. Not too long after the patrol reached the site, I heard the request for three emergency medevacs. At the first hint of daylight I heard a helicopter coming to take the wounded away. The medevac was swift and was conducted without any surprises.

In the morning I heard rumor that one of the guys wounded was on his first night in the bush. Someone said the guys were probably asleep. Someone else said it probably was the new guy. I piped up, "What the are you talking about. Do you forget what being new was? Who dares fall asleep on his first night in the bush? Damn, how do you fall asleep when you're scared shit?

Someone else said, "The Captain should never have fired a mortar round at them."

I piped up again, "They should have been where they said they were. They never would have gotten hit if they went where they were ordered."

"O'Connell, who ever goes where they're told to go?"

Those words were the truth. How many times had an LP been ordered to a position two hundred yards out front of the lines, when in fact, you only went out half the distance—almost always.

Even before I took a walk down the berm—even knowing Marshall was not the only new guy on his first night in the bush—I knew I was going to hear that he was one of the wounded. It was just a gut feeling, but it turned out to be the truth.

I knew someone in the Third Platoon who had gone out on the patrol to assist the wounded. He verified my intuitional thoughts—Marshall had been the new guy who had gotten wounded along with the two other marines.

"How bad was he?" I asked.

“Fucked up in the face—lots of blood—but I think he was okay. But who knows. One of the other guys was really fucked. His stomach was blown to shit.”

“Were they asleep?”

“No one knows. What the hell were we going to do—jump all over their shit while they’re bleeding to death? Only they know the truth.”

———

Five months later I was back in Quincy at a McDonald’s. I heard someone call out, “O’Connell.”

It sounded strange to me because I was Head again. I looked to see who had yelled out my name, and there stood Mike Marshall. He said to me, “You made it.”

“Ya, I made it. Here I am in one piece. How about yourself?”

“I’m in one piece, too.”

Then I noticed the scars. “Is that what happened to you—your face—did you get hit in the face?”

“No, I had an auto accident. I went through the windshield.”

It seemed strange to me, but the conversation ended on that point. Marshall shook my hand and just walked away. I have never seen or heard from him since. I do not even know if he still exists, but I wonder if he really had gone through a windshield, or had he been ashamed to admit how he had been wounded—or, was he the one who had fallen asleep on watch.

Over the years I have looked up a lot of guys I served with, but I have never made an attempt to find Marshall. I just think I might be the last person he would want to see. He might have trouble continuing to believe the windshield story.

**Letter # 58**

*19 June 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Received the package from you and Ma and Grandpa's, too, on the 12th. They came in handy, as after eating C-rations for awhile, stateside chow comes in real nice. I'm 19 now, but after being over here, I feel 25. I sure hope that next year I can be home for my birthday.*

*Once again, my hair is over my ears, plus, because of the hot, direct sun, my hair is pure blonde.*

*Well, we are still on this operation and tomorrow we are suppose to get choppered up to Alligator Lake for a vacation. Ha! They have made sightings of 300-500 gooks there, so we ought to have our work cut out for us.*

*Well got to go for now.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Thank Ma and Grandpa*

**—Between the Lines—**

I had lived long enough to see my nineteenth birthday—June 18th. My parents had sent me a small, canned, pound-cake, and a can of frosting, and one birthday candle. I frosted the cake and lit the candle. Then I blew the flame out.

I have no memory of anyone singing, or whether anyone else celebrated my birthday with me. Actually, the only birthday celebration I remember in Vietnam was the birthday of the Marine Corps, celebrated on November tenth.

**Letter # 59**

*9 July 69*

*Dear family!!!*

*Sorry I haven't written lately. I was wondering if you were notified of me going to the hospital for battle fatigue or combat stress. Well, I'm out of the hospital now and back with the company.*

*We just came back from a 48-hour R&R at China Beach, Da Nang, and had a good time. You could have all you wanted to drink, and I put away 2 cases of beer. I was really feeling good.*

*Well, I'm going on R&R again. It's for Japan, but I'm going to try and change it to Bangkok. It's from the 30th of July-August 6th. So between the 15th and 18th, send me $250. I'm going to make this an inexpensive trip.*

*Well you talk about the heat. Today is cool out; it's only 105. I am tanned completely all over. I weigh 150 lbs., and I am 70" tall. So I really haven't lost too much weight.*

*Well got to go but will try and write tomorrow.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. I'll try and write more often. Sorry.*

*PPS. I'm in good condition.*

*PPPS. Only about 120 days left.*

**—Between the Lines—**

I tried to squeeze three weeks of my life into fifteen sentences—the same three weeks I have lived with ever since. I had not written a letter to anyone in that period of time. The letter I finally wrote was written because the Captain made me write it.

The Marine Corps had been notified by the American Red Cross that my parents had not heard from me since June 19th. Out of desperation, my parents had sought help from them. The word was passed down through the chain of command, and when it arrived at the Captain's desk, he ordered me to come to the company office—for some reason we were in An Hoa at the time.

Captain Burns was sitting at his desk waiting for me. "What has gotten into you? Sit your damn ass down at this desk and write your parents a letter right now!"

I knew this day would come, and had dreaded every moment of it.

"Sir, what should I write? I can't think of what I should say."

“Damn it O’Connell, tell them your fine. Tell them about the Company R&R. Stop making them worry.”

When I began to write, Captain Burns said, “What gets into you?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Whatever it is, get rid of it. You’re a good marine—you just have to get your shit together.”

“Yes sir.”

———

What was I thinking? I'll tell you what I was thinking—I was a coward who had been to the *nuthouse* and I did not want my parents to know. I did not want them to know I had holed myself up in a cave, refused to fight, and because of it, a good marine by the name of Terry Householder had died in my place. Who would want the world to know they had gone crazy, gone mad, and had disgraced the Marine Corps uniform—certainly not I.

First off, the night after the battle on the berm, the night after I had killed the two enemy soldiers, I had a panic attack while on watch. Shear panic had wrapped me up like a mummy and I wanted out. In my head I heard, “You are going to die tonight, for if you can kill, you can be killed. You’re death is coming.”

I was on watch, supposed to be quiet, and yet I was going to scream at the top of my lungs, “Help me!” To keep from screaming, I held my breath. Now I could not breathe.

I gasped for air and ended up hyperventilating, and my heart pounded as if I had been running. Then I heard my mother’s voice. She was yelling at me, her belligerent son, “Keep it up and I’ll have to take you to see a doctor. There's something wrong with you.”

I was awake with insomnia but not alert to my surroundings as I found myself slumped, curled in a ball, in the bottom of my fighting hole.

I remember I began to pray, although I had never prayed in my life before, or at least not in a sincere way.

My praying resulted in me getting back up on my feet in the fighting hole, but instead of looking out upon the terrain, I stared skyward. A thought came to me—“if a shooting star does not appear before I count to ten, then I shall not die in Vietnam.”

I began to count, one—two—three—four... all the way to ten.

I counted slowly. Wouldn’t one have figured I would have counted as quickly as possible, maybe even skipped a number or two? But I did not, for I did not want to cheat death, so I counted slow expecting to see a sky full of shooting stars. But each and every star in my vision stayed in its place, and thus I did not die that night.

Searching the sky once a night for shooting stars while I was on watch became my savior, but I kept this ritual to myself for fear of someone finding out about it—I did not want to be ridiculed.

Not even the psychiatrist or Chaplain, whom I would get a chance to speak with in Da Nang, would learn of my savior—most certainly not the Chaplin whose savior was Jesus Christ, who at times I doubted. Where had Christ been during the killing?

———

Every morning I went to see the corpsman. I would say to him, “I can't get the thoughts about dying out of my mind. I'm fucking scared Doc. Is this normal? Is there anything you can give me for it? Don't you think I should be in the rear? Come on Doc, what the fuck is wrong me?”

“O'Connell, you're tired—just like the rest of us.”

“But Doc, I'm more than tired, I'm fucking nuts. I can't keep this shit up.”

“What shit?”

“This fucking war shit.”

“Listen O'Connell, you're tired and a little hyper.”

“Hyper?”

“Yes, hyper.”

“Is this normal?”

“Well, it isn't abnormal, not out here in the bush.”

“But it's not normal either, right Doc?”

“Nothing's normal out here O’Connell. Things are just the way they are. When we get to the rear you'll feel normal again.”

“So I'm not normal, right?”

“Oh man, you are driving yourself crazy and taking me long, too”.

“Doc, that's what I'm saying—we’re all going crazy.”

“O'Connell—damn—I'll talk to the Lieutenant for you, okay?”

“You're going to tell him I need a job in the rear, right?

“I'll tell him you think you’re going crazy, but he's going to want to know what I really think, and what I really think is that you are tired.”

I stayed tired. I was supposed to feel tired, but I was supposed to feel good about being tired too because the entire company was tired. So I was supposed to feel a connection to everyone else—a common bond—camaraderie—because we were all in the shit together. But I felt no connection to the others. I felt senselessness, hopeless, scared, and a fear of dying.

———

I overheard some whispers from guys in my squad, “He's losing it—losing his nerve. I hope he doesn't get someone killed.”

The guys were referring to me.

Yes, I was losing my nerve and continued to try and get that point through to the corpsman.

“Doc, do you think I'm fucking crazy?”

“O'Connell, not you again. Stop yourself—please stop yourself. You are starting to affect the others.”

———

Mike Company was going to be on the move again. I had heard rumors of an intelligence report which contained information such as there were three hundred or more enemy soldiers traveling through a valley to the south of us at the same time—0300hrs—every night. The enemy movement had been detected by electronic surveillance equipment monitored by a marine reconnaissance unit. Mike Company was going to be sent to confront the enemy.

At first, the word was that we were going to be inserted into the valley by helicopters, but then the word changed—we were going to hump instead.

The movement had us following the berm in a southerly direction for some period of time. The pace was not grueling or with urgency, but one which was steady on a very hot afternoon.

When we came to a point where the berm turned to the east—towards the direction of the South China Sea—we turned west, leaving the berm behind.

The terrain we now were venturing through was terraced, uncultivated rice paddies and tree-lines of bamboo. The land had been farmed in the past, but how long ago was just a thought for a few seconds in my mind.

There were no people. I assumed the villagers had sometime in the past been forced to move after their huts had been burnt to the ground. With the absence of farmers, the rice paddies laid to waste, denying the enemy a source of food.

I assumed we were trying not to draw any attention to ourselves as there were no scout or observation planes overhead, and no Huey gunships or artillery fire prepping the area ahead of us.

The wasted land had come to an end as we continued our travels westbound through what was now a pristine valley—I say pristine because I remember there was not one single bomb crater—old or new—or any splintered trees, nor a set of tank-tracks or the remnants of a burnt-out village. In fact, I remember thinking we might have been the first military forces to have ventured through this valley, or it felt like that. The presence of wild flowers—shades of yellows, purples and white—had mixed perfectly with the endorphin high I was experiencing as I walked with a rhythm to my step.

BOOM!

The explosion jarred me back to reality. In my mind the colorful flowers disappeared, along with any rhythm I had developed. I was off kilter once more.

Fortunately, the exploding booby-trap had been more noise than shrapnel. The booby-trap tripped by the pointman caused more a peppering of his ass than anything else. I recall when I walked by the wounded marine—while the corpsman was attending to him—the marine was lying on his stomach, giggling while the corpsman wiped the cheeks of his ass with something that reminded me of mercurochrome.

The wound was declared minor—not requiring a medevac—because the sounds of a medevac helicopter might have given a warning of our approach to the enemy who probably knew we were headed in his direction anyway, having heard the detonation of the booby-trap.

At first I thought we were already in the valley the enemy was rumored to pass through, but the word was passed that the valley we were headed for was over the ridgeline to our left, to the south.

The word was passed that we were going to climb to the top of the ridge, and then maneuver down the other side so as to slip into the valley. The movement would be conducted under the cover of darkness.

Temporarily taking respite at the base of the foothills we were going to traverse, we spent the evening hiding out, resting in preparation for what we thought could be a long night.

Around midnight, the company, in single file, began its move. My squad was at the tail end of the column.

The movement was uneventful until my squad crested the ridgeline and we began our descent into the valley. It was at this time that I heard a scuffle coming from the rear of the column. The sounds were of pushing and shoving mixed with voices—English at first, then a spurt of Vietnamese, then a single rifle shot.

When the rifle fired, everyone dropped.

What the hell was going on? The Captain wanted to know, the Lieutenant wanted to know, and I also wanted to know.

I was not keen on getting myself up off the ground for at this point I had not determined who had fired the shot, or why. The word was filtering down the column that a gook had been following us, and that the gook had bumped into the tail end man. I was simply told, “He blew him away.”

“What do you mean—who blew who away?”

I assumed the tail-end marine had blown away the gook I had heard mentioned—otherwise I would have heard a call for the corpsman.

The concern of the Captain was that somebody's rifle had been off safe, and whoever the marine was, he had accidently squeezed the trigger of his weapon. There was a good chance that the sound of the rifle shot had given our position away. If so, someone was in trouble. But when I got to the end of the column, there proudly stood the tail end marine with his foot on the chest of a dead Vietnamese. I felt the same pride the tail end marine felt as I radioed the report, “We have one, foot-on-chest kill.”

The Captain’s voice came in a whisper through the radio handset, “Roger, next time kill quietly.”

The dead body was that of an elderly male who looked reverent, like he could have been the elder of some village. He had a Fu Manchu, and the inside of his conical shaped hat had an oriental design hand-painted upon it which reminded me of a Chinese calendar. He had carried no weapon. He had been totally unarmed.

I remember being intrigued by what I had seen with the help of my flash light, and would have liked to have searched the body more, but the word was passed down the chain-of-command that we were moving out once again.

The trek down into the valley was not strenuous, but very wearing. We were not following a worn path per say, and the footing—small stones and rocks—and knee-high scrub brush had us walking like drunks who seemed to wander right and left without any sense of direction except down with the pull of gravity, and a gut feeling.

It had become easy to lose eye contact with the marine one was following, which for some, resulted in the panicky feeling of being lost and all alone in the dark—thus noise discipline was occasionally broken.

“Hey... Hey... Slow up. Where the fuck are you? Come on man, I can’t see.”

Then a reply in the dark. “Here—over here.”

“What way?”

“This way—to your left.”

“Left?”

“Left—your fucking left.”

To bring back some sense of noise discipline, I remember having to move forward, stumbling to get to the two of them so I could whisper a few stern words, “Shut the fuck up.”

When we came out of the scrub and the terrain flattened out, we found ourselves in a very dark place. There was no illumination—neither natural nor manmade—except for the stars, and I was glad I had not been counting them, because there had been all sorts of shooting stars in the sky this night.

All of Mike Company was going to lay in ambush in hopes the enemy would keep their nightly schedule. It was difficult to see anything in the dark and very hard to decide where to set up.

We were getting weary and just wanted to lie down anywhere. I'm afraid to say, my squad, broken into fire-teams, joined the rest of the platoon in simply lying down without giving much thought to our surroundings. We would not know until first light that we had set up out in the open with nothing to conceal us or afford us cover if we had been taken under fire. But if I had been in charge, this would not have kept me from springing an ambush upon an unsuspecting enemy, but the orders from the Lieutenant—the one with the say—had deterred any such action.

It seemed like no sooner had I lain down on the ground and fallen asleep on my side, that my radioman was shaking me awake. He held the palm of one of his hands over my mouth to keep me from talking while he shook my shoulder with his other.

I fought his hand off for a second. I could not figure out whose palm it was over my mouth—nor the reason why—for I had been in a dream, in my own bed back at home with Sharon snuggled up beside me.

I knew Sharon was all a dream when I looked up and did not see the crack that ran across the ceiling in my bedroom back in the world. I also knew it had been a dream when I got a whiff of my radioman’s palm that smelled decrepit.

Angrily, having come to my senses, or better yet, being brought back to Vietnam, I whispered to my radioman, “What the fuck do you want?”

In a whisper he said, “There's movement. The Lieutenant has movement. They're coming right at him.”

“Who’s coming?”

“The gooks.”

Now I really woke. God's magic potion—adrenaline—filled my veins and roared into my brain quicker than any intravenously fed drug ever could.

“Get everyone up.”

“They're up, but the Lieutenant says not to fire.”

“Not to fire? Why?”

“I don't know.”

Now I too could see the movement with my own two eyes. About twenty-five yards to my front—silhouetted by just enough light from the stars—I could make out conical shaped heads, upper torsos, and large packs riding high on their backs—a human mule-train. The figures were bunched together. They had no concerns about tripping booby-traps for they were the ones who planted them, and not on their own paths.

I got on the radio, “Mike-1-Actual. We have movement to our front—two-five-meters, over.”

“Hold fire,” the Lieutenant said.

I quickly came back with, “Movement continues. Permission to open fire, over”

“Negative—Negative. Hold your fire.”

Why was the Lieutenant having us hold back? Had he not remembered how many times we had been out on ambush, waiting for the elusive enemy who in fact, over the last eight months had not shown up as expected? For me, eight months of frustration.

Now I could actually hear the sounds of feet slapping down on a board—probably a wooden plank laid across a small ditch—an assumption on my part—but the sound was real, and the sound became a beat, and the beat became steady, and I began to count: One—two—three—four—five—six.

“Mike-1-Actual, my kill zone is full—please advise.”

“Hold your fire. I say again—hold your fire.”

“Roger, holding fire.”

Outwardly perturbed, I acknowledged the Lieutenant’s order, although it took all that I had mentally to obey.

With all of that, I slipped into a silent pout and begin to count again, picking up where I had left off, keeping the beat of the feet upon the board—the beat that kept up with my pent up, inner emotions.

I remember handing the handset back to my radioman and rolling back onto my side. I let the rhythm of the beat lull me back to sleep where I hoped to find my way back to my own bed and the warmth of Sharon.

I woke at first light staring into space, and not at the crack in my bedroom ceiling, and not smelling the scent of Sharon’s hair, but just my own filth. Then I thought about the night before—the gooks we had let go. I could have easily written that part of the evening off as a bad dream as it just did not seem real, but when it did become reality, I realized we had blown an ambush, and thus, the enemy column had passed safely through the valley and presumably up into the Que Son Mountains—or simply put, the Que Sons.

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The Lieutenant called for his squad leaders. The three of us reported to him.

“Sir, why didn't we open up?” I asked.

“There were too many of them,” the Lieutenant answered.

“But sir, we had the element-of-surprise. We would have established fire-superiority.”

“As I said, there were too many of them.”

“Sir, we knew there'd be a shit load of them. You even said so yesterday.”

The Lieutenant looked frustrated. One of the other squad leaders spoke, “O'Connell, where my squad was set up, if you had opened fire we would have been screwed. The gooks were right there, no more than ten feet in front of us. We couldn’t even use the radio. In fact, I turned the fucking thing off.”

I countered with the following, “You never heard of element-of-surprise—fire-superiority?”

“That's textbook stuff. It doesn't mean anything. Most textbook stuff will get you killed, and you know it.”

Angry sarcasm surfaced from me. “You're right, it's all fucking textbook. Shame on me for thinking otherwise. I should have known better. I should have learned this when they left Thompson and the others in the mountains. ‘Oh, we never leave anyone behind.’ Fuck if we don’t! So everything we learned at Parris Island is bullshit. Well fuck it all!”

There was a moment of silence with a lot of tension in the air. I did not want to hit anyone, but my fists were clenched.

The corpsman came over to me, “O’Connell, you got to cool it. I was with these guys in the bushes. We had nothing to hide behind. We didn't even dare blink. That's how close the gooks were. Half of us would be dead now if we had opened up.”

I shook my head in disgust. “Fucking unbelievable—a perfect ambush and we didn't have the balls to open fire.”

“Fuck you, O’Connell.” It was the third squad leader getting his two cents in. “What the fuck was your squad going to hide behind? You were out in the open, just like the rest of us. You think you could have killed all sorts of gooks—some kind of Chesty Puller, huh? But know what, you would have been dead in the morning along with Doc and the fucking rest of us. Yea, we blew it, but we all blew it together—so fuck-off.”

“Enough!” the Lieutenant boomed, “The decisions were mine to make. I did what I thought was right. I still say there were too many of them, but there’s always tomorrow.”

I could have let the conversation end right there but I didn’t. “Sir, with all due respect, in this place there’s not always another tomorrow.”

“O'Connell! Enough! The decision wasn't yours! It—was—mine! Now get out of my sight and get your ass back to your squad.”

I had no trouble understanding who had been in charge of the ambush, but later in the morning when the valley came to life with helicopters ferrying in S-2 intelligence personnel, I found

myself getting really angry when a major from S-2 asked me a few questions about the night before.

“Did you see the enemy?'

“Yes sir.”

“Yes will be suffice—we don't need the 'sir' out here in the bush.”

I nodded that I understood.

“How many were there?

“At least two hundred.”

I told the major about hearing the sound of feet on the board—the board I went and looked at in the morning after the rowel with the Lieutenant and the other squad leaders. The board had spanned a narrow gap in a paddy dike, and was well-worn.

“So, two hundred?” the major asked.

“Maybe even more—some had passed before I started to count.”

“So you saw this many?”

“Sir, I didn't *see* that many, I heard that many. I heard the footsteps. I counted every time I heard the plank being stepped upon.

“Marine, I do not need the 'sir'.” The major was showing signs of being annoyed, but not anymore annoyed than I.

He continued, “So you are assuming that every single enemy stepped on the plank?”

“I guess I assumed that. But this morning I looked at the board. It was too long to be stepped over, and too short to have been stepped on twice by the same gook. Again, I didn't see—I heard.”

Next came my angry part.

“So tell me marine, why didn't you open fire?”

“Why didn't I open fire? Why—didn't—I—open—fire? Sir, I was given orders not to.”

“So you didn't open fire and hundreds of gooks escaped. Is that correct?”

“Negative. That’s not correct.”

“Well marine, you didn't fire, did you?”

“I didn't fire because I was given a direct order not to. It was not my decision to make. Had I been in charge, I would have opened fire, but it wasn't my call, sir. With all due respect, I do not find it appropriate that I am being asked questions which should be asked of Lieutenant Wilson, and I resent being accused of letting the gooks escape. If I could have, I would have killed every last one of them.”

The major slightly nodded a few times and then dismissed me. No one asked me anymore questions from that moment on.

———

By midmorning, the quiet we had brought into the valley the night before was replaced by the sounds of helicopters and observation planes flying up and down the valley. I had to assume they provided a constant reminder to the enemy that their avenue of travel was no longer a secret.

Rumors now were floating around that Mike Company was going to move into the Que Sons—follow the same trail the enemy had used to escape the night before. Not that there were many who sided with me, but the rumor had brought on a lot of grumbling about having to chase down the enemy. One marine said, “I thought Nixon was pulling us out. Aren’t we supposed to be going to Okinawa? What the fuck gives!”

I fueled the fire; “If we had killed them all last night, we’d be headed back to An Hoa right now,” and I finished with, “Fuck Nixon—he hasn’t an inkling of what goes on over here, and he doesn’t really care.”

I asked Lieutenant Wilson if it was true about us going into the mountains. He said, “I don't know, but we have orders for tonight. After dark, your squad is going to set up an ambush along the trail the enemy used last night, and I'm going out with you. This time we will ‘get some’.”

“Sir, no offense, but the gooks aren't stupid. They know we are here now. Half the Marine Corps is here. Look in the air and listen. Can we make any more of a ruckus?”

I looked to the sky and pointed at Huey gunships and re-supply helicopters—rotors thumping, the blades changing pitch as the helicopters banked and circled to get a good look down into the jungle—a jungle as thick as the ones I had trekked about during Operation Taylor Common.

“Sir, how many men are going on this ambush?”

“Myself, your squad, and a gun team. What’s that add up to?”

“Thirteen,” I said.

Then I asked him a question, “Sir, why my squad?”

“Because your squad is the best. They have more experience than the others, plus the Captain specifically chose you and your squad. He has confidence in you.”

“Well, I wish he didn't, sir. It doesn't seem to get me much. I try to get a job in the rear, and I get the shit about being too experienced not to be in the bush. What kind of reward is that?”

“O'Connell, please don't argue with me. We have orders, and you know our job is to carry them out, so brief your squad. Get them fed and rested, and be ready to move out just before dark.”

“Yes sir.”

I still felt it was ridiculous to think the enemy would return, but I had no choice. I was still into following orders.

There was more complaining from my squad about having to go out on the ambush. They even accused me of volunteering my squad for the task. Someone said we got stuck with the ambush because of my big mouth.

“Fuck you guys—no way did I volunteer for anything—and if you think I have a big mouth, then shut it the fuck up for me. We have orders, and whether we like it or not, our job is to carry them out’.”

One of the guys in my squad came out with a classic Marine Corps adage, “Eat the apple—fuck the Corps.”

I said in return, “Whatever, just be ready to move at dark.”

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Having an officer go out on an ambush was strange. In all the times I had been on an ambush, I had never had an officer come along, and very seldom did a machine gun team come along either. Most of the time it was a squad—nine men—but tonight there were thirteen of us. At least the watches would not be long. We could divide the ten hours of dark into twelve watches—make it thirteen—the Lieutenant had volunteered to stand a watch also as he had volunteered to take the first one.

As planned, we moved out at the last hint of dusk. We had scoped out a perfect ambush site during the day—a tree-line where the heavily traveled trail passed straight through—the same trail the enemy had used the night before.

I was still wondering whether I was the only one who thought the ambush was utterly stupid. What I had running through my mind was that the enemy had been long gone and finished using this valley as a supply route. I traded off my thoughts of stupidity with the thoughts of having a quiet night, and the chance to get a lot of sleep.

We did get lots of sleep. The night had been quiet, except ten minutes into Lieutenant Wilson’s watch I heard snoring. It was the Lieutenant. He had fallen asleep on watch. The radio handset was resting on his chest. I could hear someone calling us for a radio check. I tapped the Lieutenant on his shoulder as I answered the test. The Lieutenant opened his eyes and in a quizzical way asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing sir, it’s just that you fell asleep. I could hear you snoring.”

“Me? Snoring? It wasn’t me.”

“Sir, whatever—let me stand the watch. I think you can use a good night’s rest.” The Lieutenant rolled onto his side and peacefully surrendered to his fatigue without a whimper.

Other than a few mosquitoes on the attack, the night had proven to be quiet. I had gotten a good night’s sleep. I woke refreshed for the first time in ages.

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The next day, Mike Company patrolled into the base of the Que Sons. We traveled the same trail the enemy had used less than thirty hours earlier. Although we could not rule out the trail being booby-trapped, there was a good chance it was not, seeing the enemy used it themselves.

It was not long before the trail left the valley floor and we began our ascent into the mountains, leaving me feeling like I was on Operation Taylor Common again. The trail felt the same as it led us into the jungle where the sunlight disappeared, not able to penetrate the triple-thick canopy of green overhead.

About an hour into the jungle we found ourselves amongst caves, reinforced bunkers, and bamboo huts—another enemy base camp perfectly situated along a small stream flowing through a mountain draw.

We searched the camp, and I remember finding stainless steel bedpans, surgical instruments, and bandages. A few of the bandages had been used, as they were stained with dried blood.

Some of the bandages were ours. We discovered cases of US military bandages which maybe had been stolen or bought on the black market. We also found a small, hand-cranked, electric generator manufactured in Russia and a field radio produced in China, and surer than hell, I discovered life in a cave.

I had been rummaging through a hut which was now considered to be part of an NVA field hospital when the entrance to a cave caught my eye. I knelt down to take a peek inside with my red-tinted flash light, and damn, just inside maybe three feet, I saw the gleam from an eerie looking set of eyes, and then another set. The eyes did not follow my beam left or right, but they did blink, and when I moved the beam around, I was able to determine there were in fact two bodies—motionless—lying on their sides.

Gunny was just outside the cave when I yelled out, "There's gooks inside here. They look sick or something. Maybe even dead."

"What do you mean?" Gunny said, "Are they dead or alive? They have to be one or the other, but preferably dead."

"No, they're not dead, but they're not moving either."

"Well, take them out then."

"Take them out? I can't fit inside the cave. Shit, it looks tighter than hell in there. I'd need a hand."

Gunny replied, "I don't mean drag them out, I mean, *take them out*."

I looked up and saw a forty-five. Gunny was handing me his pistol."Go ahead, get it over with."

I looked at the Gunny in bewilderment. Did he really want me to shoot these two gooks that seemed defenseless, unable to move?

"Well, can't you do it, marine?"

Before I could say one way or another, he said, "Give me the fucking pistol." He took the pistol from my hand and pushed me aside.

"Give me your flashlight."

I handed Gunny my flashlight, then I saw him disappear into the mouth of the cave.

Boom—Boom. Two shots fired.

When the Gunny came out, he looked at me and said, "You are one lucky dude. Didn't you see they were holding chicoms?"

"Not when I saw them."

"You didn't have your eyes open. Fucking lucky you didn't get your ass blown away, or better yet, mine either. Next time, fucking tell me they're armed."

"But Gunny, they weren't"

"But marine, oh yes they were."

Maybe they had been armed. Maybe I had missed the chicoms, but I thought for sure their hands were held in prayer when I saw them, but I felt comfort thinking they had both been holding chicoms and could have easily killed me and Gunny. I tried to believe that Gunny had all the right in the world to kill those two men, for if he had not, maybe they would have killed us.

What did it matter anyway, they were dead. And did it matter who killed them? I supposed not, but to the Gunny it mattered, for he knew I could not kill the innocent, and I knew it too.

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Some of the company moved through the base camp and continued to follow the trail. I heard a burst of AK-fire. I skittered about scrambling for cover. My radioman was yelling, "The fire's nowhere near us. It's up near the point. Settle down."

I had never acted like that under fire before, not scared and panicky like. And to have my radioman who had not been in Vietnam for all too long—to have him tell me to settle down, well, that set me back mentally. I remember that exact moment—it's when I lost my self-esteem as a marine.

The AK fire had not even been close to me. The rounds had not come in my direction, although I would have sworn they had snapped right over my head. As I lifted myself up off the ground, I began to feel foolish in front of my squad, for I felt that in no way had I demonstrated bravery to them.

I monitored some radio transmissions. The pointman was dead and another marine was wounded. There was no battle—no return fire on our part. We were back to having the enemy pick us off, one man at a time.

Orders were passed. We were going to form a defensive perimeter around the base camp and settle in for the night. My defensive position overlooked a small clearing in the jungle which afforded an opening in the jungle canopy, just large enough for a jungle-penetrator to be lowered to earth so that the dead marine's body and the wounded marine could be lifted out of the jungle.

Just before dusk the wounded marine walked over to me. He was going to wait at my position for the medevac helicopter to arrive. I got to talking with him for a few minutes. Despite having an AK bullet lodged in his arm near the bicep, he was not in any pain.

"The wound, it doesn't hurt"? I asked.

"Not really, it just feels like a bump—do you want to see?"

He rolled his sleeve up and as he began to take off the gauze covering his wound, I said, "Don't unwrap it. I don't need to see the wound. I believe you that it doesn't hurt."

He showed me the wound anyway. The wound appeared to be nothing more than a bump like he had said, but with all sorts of black-and-blue. I could actually see the bullet just beneath the skin. With the lack of pain, I started to think how lucky this guy was to be getting out of the bush. I found myself wishing for the same kind of wound, but I did not think there were many like his—an AK round hitting at such a slow velocity that it had barely made it beneath the skin—a freak occurrence. Someone said that the round that had killed the other marine was the same round lodged in this marine's arm.

The dead marine's body was brought to the clearing. The body was wrapped in a green rubber poncho. The only parts of him visible to my eyes were his boots and ankles. His ankles were

crossed and tied together. There was a medevac tag attached to his bootlace. I was glad I was not the dead marine, but the thought that it could have easily been me lodged itself in my brain.

I could hear the helicopter coming from a distance with the rotor sounds growing louder and louder. The wounded marine started to make his way to the clearing. A few marines went with him. They would help steady the jungle penetrator as it reached the ground.

Just as the helicopter arrived over the clearing AK-fire broke out. The helicopter was receiving the brunt of the repeated blasts, but not knowing this for sure, I was flat on my belly, taking no chance of being hit. The thoughts of taking a wound in my arm had disappeared—I was not feeling lucky.

The helicopter did not stay around. With the AK-fire continuing at a steady rate, the sounds of the helicopter's engines revving-up grew in intensity as it struggled to gain altitude, and then grew softer as it flew away. I heard a rumor that one of the crew had been killed, but I never knew for certain.

With quiet descending over the jungle, a patrol was sent into the area where the AK-fire was suspected to have come from. The enemy was gone, but brass shell-casings—AK type—were strewn all over the jungle floor, indicating more than one enemy soldier had been doing the firing.

The marine with the bullet in his arm would have to spend another night in the jungle along with the body of the dead marine. The dead marine's body would remain in the clearing, in full view of my fighting hole. I found myself staring at his crossed ankles, boots, and the tag attached to the bootlace throughout my watch. I wondered what was written on the tag. I wondered who the dead marine was. I did not know him and made no attempt to learn his name.

The next morning, a squad of marines was positioned where the brass shell-casings had been found. Another attempt was to be made at medevacing the dead and the marine with the bullet still in his arm. I had talked with him in the morning. His wound was starting to bother him. He had told me that a corpsman had said that infection was starting to set in.

A helicopter arrived at our location and was positioned over the clearing. The jungle-penetrator was lowered through the hole in the canopy. A few marines steadied the jungle-penetrator and loaded the wounded marine into it. The jungle-penetrator—with the wounded marine safely encapsulated inside—was hoisted up and into the helicopter. The jungle-penetrator was then lowered again, the dead marine placed inside, and as the penetrator was being hoisted up, AK-fire broke out, forcing the helicopter to lift and escape with the penetrator dangling by the guideline outside of the helicopter.

The enemy was firing from a position not too far from where the squad of marines sent out for protection were located, but although the marines heard the AK fire, they could not pinpoint the exact location of where the gunfire was coming from, not without getting up from their own safe position and moving forward. A couple of them did stand and took a few steps, but immediately received a burst of AK which put them back on the ground in search of cover. Before M-16 fire could be returned, the enemy disappeared in a blur of movement. Some of the squad said they had seen one enemy soldier, while another member said he had seen three or four. Regardless of how many there had been, the squad of marines had been lucky—not one of them had been hit.

The squad made their way safely back into the company perimeter without further incident, but other patrols sent down various trails leading out of the base camp—including the trail which

had led us there in the first place—were ambushed. It seemed the enemy had us trapped inside the camp. Worse than that, an observation plane overhead had reported that they could see that the enemy was closing in on us.

The word was passed to take cover—get inside the caves—for close air-support was on the way and the bombs were going to be dropped closer than what was considered to be a safe distance from where we were located.

I found a cave not too far from my fighting hole. I crawled inside. I was the first marine to crawl into the cave. A few more marines followed me inside, and then more on top of that. Every time someone else entered the cave, I was forced deeper and deeper inside until I could go no further.

The entrance to the cave had become blocked by the last few marines who had entered, and what little light had been finding its way into the cave was no longer there. Total darkness encompassed all.

I could not hear the roar of the jets or the bombs exploding. I was insulated from the sounds by the bodies packed tight against each other, yet I could feel the concussions through every bone in my body as my back was literally up against the wall.

The entire cave quaked and debris sprinkled down from the ceiling with every earth shattering detonation. There was an array of concern expressed by those of us in the cave—cursing, swearing, and even a ripple of panic, as someone wanted out. “Fuck this, I’ll take my chances outside. No way am I going to be buried alive.”

But the next set of bombs—closer than the first—changed his mind.

More bombs detonated. The cave rumbled. More debris cracked loose from the ceiling. Those struck by the larger pieces of debris became the loudest to yell out for mercy

The next bombs to fall—closer than anyone could have imagined—had those marines who had been just inside the entrance of the cave trying to scoot deeper inside, resulting in a very slow, but forceful chain reaction. I was squished even harder up against the wall.

The next detonations felt like the entire cave was lifted and then slammed back to earth. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that we laid upon a vein of ledge connected to the point of impact.

Someone said a prayer. “Fucking God almighty, please stop this.”

Pinned up against the wall, I surrendered and felt peace. I had come to accept death. The cave would collapse and I would suffocate. So be it.

There was one last detonation that had someone uttering, “Mother fucker.” With this detonation my moment of serenity had vanished, as once again I did not want to die.

There now was silence in the cave. Maybe the bombing was over. Someone thought this because I heard one of the marines say, “Thank you God.”

I became aware of the warmth of our bodies pressed up against one another. I felt togetherness, peace and harmony. I felt good, as if the war had ended. I was alive—or was I.

Then I heard a voice in the dark, “Are they done? Anyone know if it’s safe to go out?” Then another voice, “How will we know if it’s safe? O’Connell, is it safe?”

I did not answer or even move.

“Hey, O’Connell, can we go out now? O’Connell—O’Connell, are you in here?”

I broke my silence. “I’m in here,” I said in a monotone.

“Can we go out?”

“I don’t know.”

“Man, if you don’t know, then who does?”

“The Lieutenant,” I said.

A different marine said, “The Lieutenant isn’t here, you are. Aren’t you in charge?”

“No.”

I do not remember how the marines knew to leave the cave, but one by one they crawled out, and as they did a little more light found its way inside—just enough light for me to see my hand in front of my face. Finally, as the last marine exited, I found myself all alone with my back still up against the wall.

I felt I could have left the cave whenever I wanted to, that I was playing a game in my mind which I could have ended at any given moment, yet it was not a part of my will.

“O'Connell, are you still in there?”

I said nothing. The game of staying put was starting to intrigue me. How long could I carry this on.

“Are you in there? It's safe to come out.”

I did not recognize the voice, but I heard the same voice outside the cave say something else. “Sir, I don’t know if O’Connell is in there or not.”

A red-tinted beam from a flashlight shone into the cave, the light sweeping back and forth, flashing over me several times until it found my face.

I covered my eyes after the initial beam of red light had blinded me.

“There you are,” the voice said, almost as if the sound had come from the light beam. “What are you doing? Are you coming out or not?”

“Not.”

I had answered without hesitation, though the voice sounded different than mine, as if someone inside me had answered instead of I.

The word echoed throughout my mind—not, not, not—as if it was a mantra.

I heard the voice outside say, “Sir, he says he isn't coming out.”

The light upon my face disappeared, along with whoever it was that had belonged to the voice outside the cave.

The cave was dark once more because my vision had been impaired by the flashlight’s beam that had been shining into my eyes. I felt relaxed in my space. My new world was small and manageable. I did not want to leave this place of peace. I did not want to leave the cave and return to the maelstrom.

The red beam of light was upon me again. Lieutenant Wilson now possessed the light.

“O'Connell, are you okay?”

“Oh, I'm fine sir.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Just sitting in peace.”

“I need you out here. We need to scout in front of our positions. The Captain needs to make an assessment of the air strikes.”

“I'm not coming out sir.”

“I said lets go. The Captain is waiting on a report from me.”

“Sir, let him wait, I'm not coming out.”

I was firm in what I was saying.

“O'Connell, are you refusing?”

“Correct, sir.”

“You don't want me to give you a direct order, do you?

I remained silent. I slipped deeper into my mind. I felt that there was no life to be lived outside of the cave.

“Damn it, I'm giving you a direct order. O'Connell, report to me front and center. Do it now!”

“Sir, I'm giving you a direct answer—no.”

“Fuck!” the Lieutenant said mixed with anger and frustration.

I then heard the Lieutenant say to someone, “Get me the corpsman, right now!”

Not much time passed before I heard, “O'Connell, come on out, I need to check you.” It was the corpsman’s voice without a flashlight.

“Why,” I answered.

“Because I'm concerned about you—everyone is.”

“No one is concerned about me.”

The corpsman replied, “No, you’re wrong—there's a real concern.”

“Sorry, but I'm not coming out.”

The corpsman then said. “What are you going to do, spend the rest of your life in there?”

“If I want to,” I replied.

“O'Connell, come on—stop fucking around.”

“I'm not fucking around. I'm dead serious. No way am I coming out.”

I then heard the corpsman tell Lieutenant Wilson that he also had been unable to persuade me. In reply to the corpsman, I heard the Lieutenant say, “Then leave him in there.”

After that, no one bothered me in the cave which had grown very dark. I could only see my hands in front of me if I brought them up to my nose so close that I could feel the electricity from my spirit upon my face.

I fell asleep, and when I woke I had neither sense of time, or any knowledge of where I was.

I began to shiver for I was cold, and became aware of being thirsty. Hunger reminded me that I still existed. I also needed to relieve myself.

When I began to replay my refusal to come out of the cave in my mind, I hoped it had been a dream, but however it is that the mind returns to reality, I came to the point of fear knowing I had not been dreaming.

I needed to leave the cave for I had to urinate—I did not want to do it in my place of habitation.

I groped with my hands. I had no sense of direction. My hands rubbed along a jagged wall of rock which felt damp. I ran my hands along the undulations, first to the left, then back to the right, in hope of finding a way out.

I was shivering worse than ever now and about to wet myself. I could not allow that to happen. I could not give in.

Keeping my left hand in constant contact with the wall, I kept from getting turned around by moving in one direction—forward. In following the outer perimeter of the cave, I finally came to the opening and crawled my way out.

Although the jungle was dark, my eyes were used to the much darker cave, thus I had marginal vision as I tried to get my bearings. I did not have to venture too far before I made out Lieutenant Wilson's facial features—high cheekbones, a bushy brow, the need of a shave, and beady eyes. He was sitting with his back up against a tree and clutching the handset—he was on radio watch. His blank stare and silence made me feel invisible. No words were passed between us.

I found a tree to urinate behind, and when I finished I listened for the sound of the small stream which flowed through the base camp. I followed the sound which brought me to the stream where I knelt, cupped my hands, and drank several handfuls of water without any thoughts of cleanliness. I then came upon a flat rock—a slab—and laid myself down to sleep.

Morning came. I was treated as if nothing had happened the day before—as if life was going to go on without skipping a beat.

While I was eating C-ration food to satisfy my hunger, Lieutenant Wilson came over to where I was sitting. "O'Connell, your squad has the point today, the point for the entire Company. We're headed back to An Hoa. We move out in three-zero minutes. Get your guys fed and check their gear. I want everything tight. No rattles. Strict noise discipline."

"Sir, I don't have a squad."

Lieutenant Wilson came closer to me so that when he knelt down, his face was in mine. "Goddamn, I'm fucking sick and tired of your shit! Now get up on your feet and get your squad fed!

"I can't do it, sir."

The Lieutenant backed away. "I shouldn't have to ask you why—but why?

"Because I don't want to die."

“Christ, who does,” he said.

“I don't know sir, but I certainly don't want to.”

The Lieutenant closed his eyes and brought his hands held together up to where the fingertips touched his mouth. His head lowered slightly. He may have been praying. I was staring at him, but when he lifted his head and opened his eyes, I could not look him in the eye.

“I don't know what to do with you,” the Lieutenant said.

The Lieutenant walked away from me. I heard him call for Terry Householder, one of the other squad leaders. I heard the Lieutenant give him the same orders that had been given to me, plus I heard the Lieutenant say to him, “We will be traveling the trail which goes west towards An Hoa.

Hearing this, thoughts raced through my mind. “The trail heading west? Has someone lost their mind? The enemy has that trail covered. Have they forgotten the enemy’s ambush from yesterday?”

I had come very close to changing my mind, practically a breath away from telling the Lieutenant I had come to my senses—that I would lead my squad again—but when I heard we were going up the same trail as the day before, my mind remained firm. The decision in my head was finalized. I was not going up any trail just to die.

I have lived with this decision ever since because what I decided not to do—what I refused to do—Terry Householder did instead.

Terry was killed in his first few steps taken down the trail which traveled west towards An Hoa. I knew in my heart when I heard the burst of AK-fire and the horrific scream, “Corpsman up!” that it was Terry Householder who had been hit, even though I had no concrete reason to feel this.

In about the time it took for the word to filter down the column to where I was at the end of the platoon, I heard someone use the word, “Goner.” Then after a frame of time which seemed like my lifetime had passed, I heard my expectations put into words, “It’s Householder—he’s dead.”

From the time of my refusal to lead my squad up the trail, to the moment I heard the official word of Terry Householder’s death, I knew in mind something bad was going to happen that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Terry Householder’s death has been that something.

I live everyday thinking he died in my place. On good days, Terry lives deep in my subconscious. On bad days, he is right on the surface of my mind. As I write these words at this very moment, Terry sits with me. I hope his spirit is forgiving, for I am eternally sorry for his death in which I feel I played a part in. But if I had been the one to die, would Terry be sitting here writing about me, asking for forgiveness?

———

I had been pinned to the ground by fear, although in my mind I could see myself charging forward, leading my men in the pursuit of the enemy, passing by Terry who looked up at me and said with a smile, “get some,” and yet it was only a delusional thought on my part—an attempt to bury the harsh reality I staunchly believed, the thought that Terry Householder had died instead of me because I was a coward, one who had been afraid to die.

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I never saw Terry's body. I wanted to, but I could not find the nerve to walk to where he was being kept.

I did ask someone, "Where did Terry get hit?" In fact, I asked several guys, but it seemed like no one wanted to talk with me, or maybe they simply did not feel like talking to anyone at all.

I had to depend on rumors. The rumor I heard was that Terry had taken a round through his trouser's back pocket. Supposedly the trajectory of the bullet somehow was direct to the heart; I did not need to know anymore.

The rest of the day was a blur to me. We—the company—settled back into the base camp. I went to talk with Lieutenant Wilson. I told him I was sorry about Terry Householder's death and that I was ready to assume my duties as a squad leader again. He told me he had officially relieved me of my duties.

"Why, sir?

"Why? You have the balls to ask me why?

"Yes, sir—I do, sir. I need to know what you want me to do."

He said, "I want you to do nothing."

I continued to die inside the rest of the day, and into the night. I was left alone and to myself. I volunteered to stand a radio watch, but the Lieutenant told me, "Don't bother."

The next morning, I heard the word being passed that we were going to try and hack our way through the jungle instead of using the trails that most likely were still being covered by the enemy laying in ambush.

With the point element hacking through the thick jungle with machetes, making it difficult for the enemy to interdict our travel because we were now avoiding their worn trails, we set course on an azimuth aimed at An Hoa.

Before we had moved out I had asked the Lieutenant where he wanted me positioned in the column.

"O'Connell, fall-in where ever you want—I don't care."

I was left to mope along the freshly cut path feeling all alone. The speed of the column—movement no faster than the machete hacking marines could move—no faster than the travel of those carrying Terry Householder's body—added to my listless attitude.

The thickness of the jungle vegetation saved our lives. The only way the enemy could have gotten to us was to have hacked their own way through the jungle to intercept our route of escape. They could have followed us, but our rear was being covered by Huey gunships and an observation plane. When we were a safe distance from the base camp, jets dropped thousand-pound bombs down upon the camp and the trails leading out of it to keep the enemy at bay.

Sometime in the afternoon we came out of the jungle and into Antenna Valley, another uninhabited valley which once was rich with rice, but now lay to waste by the ravages of war.

I had heard this area was called Antenna Valley because at one time there had been a battle in the valley between an NVA unit and a company of Marines. It was said that every radioman—radio antennas sticking up into the air, marking targets for the enemy—were either killed or wounded.

We spent the night in Antenna Valley, but before dark had set in, resupplies had been brought to us by helicopter, and when the helicopter was emptied, Terry Householder's body was loaded onboard. In my mind, it should have been my dead body that they should have been handling.

In the morning, before we moved out, the word was passed that there were open billets to be filled for R&R. I said to the Lieutenant, "Sir, I'd like to go. I can use a rest." He made like he had not even heard me. I saw the Captain off in the distance and went running over to him, "Sir, I hear there are openings for R&Rs. I want to go, sir—can I go?"

"O'Connell, how can I let you out of the country in the condition you are in?

"Sir, I'm okay. Look at me. I snapped out of it. Can I go, please?"

"No, now get back to your squad."

"I have no squad."

"Then get back to where you came from."

I watched as a helicopter came to pick up the two marines lucky enough to be going on R&R. As the helicopter's engine's revved up to speed and the thump of the rotor blades increased, I yelled into the dust and wind, "Fuck you! Fuck you all!"

We humped back into An Hoa. If a helicopter could find its way out to pick up a couple of marines for R&R, then why was it a few helicopters could not have flown us back instead of us busting our ass for the rest of the day, force-marching to An Hoa?

I complained to myself under my breath. Even if I had complained out loud, my grumblings would have fallen on deaf ears. I had become a non-entity.

I had not been back in An Hoa but a few minutes when I started screaming, slammed a magazine into my M-16, loaded a round into the chamber, thumbed the safety off, pointed the weapon straight into the air, and fired. The tent emptied quickly. Guys were scrambling for cover or running as fast and as far away from me as they could. It had taken all that I had inside me to have kept from putting the tip of the barrel into my mouth, for I was troubled in how to stop my madness. I did not want to live, nor did I want to die. But out of shame, I kept my intentions to myself.

I laid my weapon down. I then laid myself down on a cot and rolled onto my side, placing my hands under my head as a pillow and closed my eyes. I expected someone to roust me to my feet and pound some sense into my head. Sergeant Thompson would have done this—he would have grabbed me by the collar, pulled me to my feet and beat some sense into me. But he was dead.

The sternest someone got with me was when Lieutenant Wilson said, "O'Connell, standup—stand on your own two feet."

The Lieutenant and the corpsman had come to the tent. They had heard the rifle fire. There were not many in Mike Company who had not heard the shot, but the Lieutenant and the corpsman were the only two who had come forward to help me. It seemed the others were afraid.

I rolled out of the cot and stood. The Corpsman asked me if I was all done acting out. Sullenly I told him I was. He then walked me to the Battalion Aid Station without either of us initiating a conversation.

When we got to the aid station he had me sit in a waiting area. He then walked down a hallway and disappeared into an office. There were other marines waiting where I was. They were bandaged and most likely waiting to have their physical wounds attended to—wounds to be cleaned and re-bandaged with new dressings—wounds most likely honorably received while doing battle.

A few marines were talking to one another but not with me.

“What unit you with?

“Kilo Company.”

“You get hit?”

“Yea, just a little piece of shrapnel, but it got infected. I've been coming here for a few days to get my wound cleaned out. Maybe I'll stay out of the bush for a few more days.”

I was hoping no one spoke to me, but no luck. One of the guys said, “What unit are you with?

“Mike Company,” I said.

“Wow, Medevac Mike. You guys always seem to be in the shit.”

“Seems that way,” I replied.

“You get fucked up?”

“Yea, back in March,” I replied

“Damn, you’re still getting checked?”

“Yes, I had a flesh wound which had gotten infected. Whenever I'm in the rear they like to check it. You know how it is here, even a fucking mosquito bite can get infected and kill.”

“I hear you loud and clear—nothing seems to heal.”

There was no way that I was going to tell these marines that I was waiting to see a shrink. I knew they would have considered me a non-hacker.

———

The corpsman came and got me. I followed him down the hall and into an office. Sitting behind a desk was a naval officer dressed in a set of starched-camouflage-utilities. He introduced himself as a doctor, but he never stated what kind of doctor he was.

“What is your name and rank, marine?”

“Sir, Lance Corporal O'Connell.”

“And your first and middle name?”

“Paul Edward, sir.”

“Date of birth?”

“June 18, 1950.”

“You just had a birthday?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you know how old you are?”

With a moment of hesitation I said, “Nineteen.”

“And do you know what year it is while we are sitting here?”

This question had me thinking that there was trick involved, but I answered it anyway. “1969.”

The doctor then looked at a note on his desk and said, “I see you have been in Vietnam since October. Let me think—eight months. Have you been on R&R?”

“Yes sir, I went to Hawaii in March.”

“Did someone meet you there?”

“Yes sir, my girlfriend.”

I had lied—and I lied also when he asked me if I had thoughts about harming myself, but I did not lie when he asked me if I could continue fighting; “Sir, I am done fighting.”

The doctor looked down at his notes and then back to me. “Do you understand the consequences if you refuse to fight?”

“Sir, do you understand the consequences if I do fight?”

The doctor looked over at the corpsman. They sent and received messages by facial expressions.

“So marine, are you refusing to fight?”

“I'm just refusing to go back to the bush.”

“That's refusing to fight—no?”

“No sir, I just want a job in the rear like all my buddies have gotten. They haven't refused to fight. In fact they did more than their share of fighting and were rewarded for it.”

“Well, jobs in the rear are out of my realm,” the doctor said.

He looked at his notes again and then said, “Marine, refusing to go to bush carries some severe consequences. What I'm going to do is send you to Da Nang for a few days of rest. This will give you some time to think about what you really want to do.”

“So sir, you’re talking about an R&R.?”

“No marine, I'm talking about a few days of observation at 1st Medical Battalion.”

Not much else was said after that.

The doctor dismissed me. He had said the corpsman would make the arrangements to get me to Da Nang.

I went back to the waiting room while the corpsman talked logistics with a yeoman. One of the marines who was in the waiting room when I came out asked, “How did you make out. Are you healing?”

“Somewhat.”

“Going back to the bush?” he asked.

With a lack of enthusiasm I said, “Not yet, I'm going to Da Nang.”

“Hey, don't act so sad, Da Nang sounds pretty good to me, unless you’re dying. Damn, you're not dying I hope.”

“No, I’m not dying. I just need to get x-rays taken.”

“Well, x-rays first, then get yourself laid. You look like you could use a little.”

“I think you’re right,” I said in agreement

“And a few beers too,” he said.

“Oh, I plan on lots of beer.”

The corpsman led me outside to the Battalion Aid LZ. Just before I sat on a bench which was shaded from the sun by a sheet of corrugated tin overhead, he said, “I have to put this on you?”

It was a medevac tag. A string was attached to one part of it. The corpsman tied the string to one of my belt loops.

“What's with the tag?”

“It's a medevac tag.”

“I know what it is, but why do I need it?”

“Because you are being medevaced—we can't have you medevaced without a tag.”

I turned the tag so I could read it. It stated, “Priority?—Routine; Reason for evacuation?—Psychiatric.”

I wanted to rip the ticket off right then and there.

After reading the tag I said, “This is bullshit. You’re fucking with me. Typical Marine Corps harassment.”

“I told you, it's a medevac tag. You can't board the helicopter without it.”

“I know what the tag is, but what's this psychiatric shit?”

“It's the reason you are being medevaced—a psychiatric evaluation. Haven't you said you thought you were going crazy? Didn't you fire your weapon? The doctor wants you to be evaluated.”

“Hey, I thought you said I'd feel better when I got back to the rear—didn't you?”

“You would have if you had just let it happen.”

“Let it happen? Fuck letting it happen. I’m here in the rear and I feel fucking worse. All I need is a job back here in An Hoa and all of this shit in my head will go away. Why the fuck can't anyone see this?”

“Firing your weapon changed things. There's a fear you might harm someone, or even yourself.”

With a sarcastic laugh, I said, “You're kidding me. All I had to do was fire my weapon like a madman and none of the last month would have happened. If I had known this I would have gone fucking nuts the night you ripped my trousers off me and shot my ass up with drugs. Know what? You can all go fuck yourself.”

The helicopter arrived. The back ramp lowered and I walked in. I would be the only passenger.

The crew chief took a look at the medevac tag. He had raised his sunshield so he could read it. He said nothing to me, just pointed to where he wanted me to sit, and then pulled the shield back down over his face. He looked like a spaceman to me. Not being able to see his face, only able to see my reflection in his shield, I could only imagine what he was thinking. “Coward—shit-bird—puke—non-hacker—one of the ten-percent—the ten-percent who will never get the message, and undeservedly survive while getting others fucking killed.”

Words I had personally heard at Parris Island to label those unfit to be called a Marine.

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I don't recall my arrival at 1st Med other than no one came running with a stretcher to carry me off the helicopter as if I was a wounded hero. I walked off by myself.

Somehow I ended up in a quonset hut, but I do not remember how. I was assigned a bed to sleep upon—a mattress on bed-spring—clean sheets and a pillow.

One of the corpsman working the ward said, “I hope you're not allergic to chicken feathers, because all of our pillows are stuffed with them.”

A chicken-feather pillow for a chicken—that is how I had heard it.

I continued to feel humiliated. If the object was for the Marine Corps to humiliate me, it was working. But maybe I was just suffering from self-persecution.

The ward I was assigned to was divided by steel bars like in a jail. Three-quarters of the ward was on my side. One quarter of the ward was on the other. I assumed the patients on the other side of the bars were locked up, but I was not sure. Maybe we all were under lock and key, some simply being crazier than others.

I do not remember leaving the ward except to see the psychiatrist and chaplain. Actually, I do not recall leaving for any reason at all, not even to eat at the mess hall, or to take a shower, but I ate somewhere because when I was discharged I felt well nourished, and I must have showered because I was clean.

I slept a lot while at 1st Med. It seemed like I was allowed to sleep whenever I felt like it. There seemed to be no pressure put on me, yet there was no interaction between myself and anyone else, not even the corpsmen working in the ward. I felt like I was being babysat.

Finally, the time came for one of the corpsman to speak to me. He had seen me staring in disbelief at a marine on the other side, behind the bars.

The corpsman had said, “You are not like him, he is crazy. You’re not. A few days of rest and you'll be up and running again. As for him, he’s gone beyond.”

I had turned away from a crazy who had been standing at the head of his bed while he masturbated—ejaculated onto his pillow.

If he was crazy, I was so glad I was not. If he was crazy, then I could not understand what crazy was.

The next day I met with a psychiatrist. He asked me questions, although I cannot remember what they were. All I remember telling him was that I was afraid of dying, and that I needed a job in the rear. His reply was, “I'll arrange for you to speak with a chaplain.”

I stood before the chaplain. He had the markings of a naval officer on one collar, and a Christian priest or minister on the other. I was of no religion, so I didn't know if he was a priest or a minister—or military—so I took the safe road. I called him “Sir.”

“Marine, take a seat—please. How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine, sir.”

“We can do without the formalities if you choose. I want you to relax and feel at peace.”

If I was not going to address the chaplain as “sir”, then how was I to address him?

“Sir, I'm lost. What do I call you?

“Friend, clergyman, minister—one you can share the love of Christ with.”

I was still lost. Although my dog tag read “Presbyterian”, I had never been to church. I take that back—once I went down the street to the church closest to home because my mother had sent me. I actually went with my brother and sisters, but not my parents. I had never seen them go to church or pray.

I remember how I had to stand and introduce myself in front of the congregation. When I said my name—Paul O'Connell—I heard a guy whisper to a lady beside him, “O'Connell? I think he's lost. He belongs down the street.” Down the street was Saint John's, a Catholic church. I did not know that no one could be anymore Irish-Catholic than someone with the last name of O'Connell. Although I had not understood the whisper, I sensed it was not a greeting with opened arms.

So the only reason my dog tags read “Presbyterian” was because the drill instructor at Parris Island had barked out, “When asked what your religion of preference is for the purpose of marking your dog tags, I better not hear atheist, for there are no atheist in a foxhole. If one doesn’t have a religion, damn it, invent one.”

I did not have to invent one, but I did have to lie that I was a Presbyterian so that I did not have to be abused by the drill instructor.

———

“Son, what can the Lord do to help you?”

“Can he help get me a job in the rear?” I said in a matter of fact way.

“Why do you want a job in the rear?”

“Because I don't want to go back out to the bush again.”

“And why not”?

“Because I don't want to die.”

“Son, no one wants to die, but this is where Jesus comes in to play. He is our savior. Believe in him for he believes in you. He loves you. His love is infinite. Maybe if we pray together the Lord’s love and infinite wisdom will descend upon us. Would you pray with me?”

“I will pray if it’s for a job in the rear.”

I do not know if the Lord’s love and infinite wisdom was what transformed the chaplain back into a military officer, but I was no longer lost to which insignia on his collar I was to focus on.

“Son, if every marine who was afraid of dying was given a job in the rear, who do you think would fight this war?”

“Sir, I don't know, but may I be excused?”

“Yes. Go in love and serve the Lord.”

I wanted to go in love to serve mashed potatoes in a mess hall.

———

It was back to the psychiatrist. He asked me how I felt—was I rested.

Yes, I was feeling rested, but I was also frustrated by his remark after I asked him about a job in the rear. “Marine, it is not up to me to give someone a job in the rear. I think the rest and recuperation has done you well, but what I will do for you is recommend you go on R&R. A few days out of the country will be the frosting on the cake.”

“What cake, sir?”

“I'm just saying, cake. It's a figure of speech. I was relating your treatment to cake, and the final phase of treatment would be a little fun and relaxation out of the country.”

In a sarcastic manner I said, “So no job in the rear, but I go on R&R and fuck my brains out. Then I return to the bush which should be a piece of cake.” Then I too added, “Just a figure of speech—no?”

I got to sleep one more night in a comfortable bed. The next morning I was discharged without an explanation other than being told I had been treated for *Combat Stress* or *Battle Fatigue.*

I decided to get a jump on “a little fun and relaxation.” I would hitch a ride to China Beach, although I had no idea in what direction to travel.

I stuck my thumb out and a jeep driven by a guy in the Air Force picked me up. He asked me where I was headed. I said, “China Beach.”

He said he was only going as far as the Da Nang airfield, “But I'll drop you off at a bus-stop. The bus to China Beach runs pretty regular—like every fifteen minutes.”

“What does the bus say?”

“Buses don't talk,” he said with a smile, “but I know what you mean. The front of the bus will say, 'China Beach'.”

“I thought buses didn't talk.”

“Right,” he said, “they don't.”

He dropped me off at a corner where there was a sign which read, “Military Bus Stop.” An air force-blue colored school bus with no glass in the windows—but wire mesh covering the open area to keep enemy explosive charges from being thrown inside the bus—pulled up. I climbed onboard and sat with my back hard against the seat. Although looking through the wire mesh broke the scenery into a thousand pieces, the sights seemed wholesome to me. I felt peace, and the peace was leading to a feeling of horniness as the bus passed a street corner where Vietnamese girls appeared to be soliciting sex, or at least I read this into the friendly wave they gave me, and what else could I think as they had blown me a kiss.

I thought about getting off the bus at the next stop and walking back to the girls, but the bus traveled a lot further than I was willing to walk. But when the bus came to the next stop—to pick up a serviceman who actually was hitchhiking—I was enticed off the bus by the sweet smile of a Vietnamese girl in a chiffon-yellow, traditional, Vietnamese dress.

As I stepped to the ground, the bus driver—an American serviceman—said, “Hey marine, you can't get off here. This isn't an approved stop. This area is off-limits. Get your ass back on the bus.”

The bus driver had only stopped along the way to pick up the hitchhiker, not to let anyone off.

I was not getting back on, and even if I had wanted to, I would have had to fight off the Vietnamese girl—the one dressed in chiffon-yellow. She had my hand and was pulling me into an alleyway, into a maze of concrete-block structures.

At first I had been lost in lustful thoughts, but the further she took me, and with such a firm grip for such a petite girl, the more I felt I might be headed towards trouble—that I might even get myself killed.

I heard the toot of the bus’s horn signaling my last chance to get back onboard, and then the rev of the engine as the bus started to leave without me. I assumed I was safe from the driver—but was I safe in the hands of chiffon-yellow?

I was spooked in the maze. There were Vietnamese soldiers in uniform which I hoped were ARVN—I did not see any red stars on their belts.

They smiled. I saw flashes of gold fillings and gold caps, and there was beer being drank, but it was Vietnamese beer, what I knew to be called Tiger Piss.

“Hey G.I., you want beer? You want pot? You want boom-boom?”

I wanted all three, but not in this maze of confusion—not while I was feeling outnumbered.

Chiffon-yellow led me deeper into the maze. She sensed my resistance. I stopped and said, “VC?”

“No VC,” she replied

I drew my hand across my throat like an imaginary knife. “VC crocodile G.I.”

“No VC. No crocodile G.I.”

She took my hand again and said, “La di”—come.

I let her pull me further. We finally got to where she was taking me—a main room with smaller rooms off of it. Each room with a bamboo curtain providing a flimsy form of privacy.

Chiffon-yellow said, “Boom-Boom,” and several young girls aged eighteen or so, came out of the rooms. They presented themselves to me with smiles, handshakes and bows. They said, “G.I. number one—VC number ten.”

Then I heard, “G.I. want boom-boom? Me number one boom-boom.”

I looked towards Chiffon-yellow and asked for further assurance. “No VC?”

“No VC. No worry, G.I. Boom-boom very good. You have boom-boom with one of my sisters. She take worry away.”

Chiffon-yellow was right. The boom-boom—while it lasted—had indeed taken all my worries away.

_____

I climbed aboard a blue bus that had stopped to pick me up when I had stuck my thumb out. Thankfully the bus driver was not the same one from before.

As I sat down, the driver spoke to me. “What are you doing here marine? This area is off-limits. You're lucky you didn't disappear. Hope you used a rubber. All sorts of clap in there.”

“I didn't need one,” I said, “I didn't get laid.”

“Marine, with that smile on your face, who do you think you're bullshitting. Everyone gets laid in there. Some of the best ass in town. It's just so damn scary, that’s all.”

The bus driver was right—it had been scary—but at the same time, exciting too. Maybe—just maybe—I was coming back to life.

_____

I found my way to 1st Marine Division Headquarters located at Hill 327. I tried to get a lift by helicopter back to An Hoa, but the last flight of the day had already departed. I would be spending the night in Da Nang.

I was able to find an empty cot in a tent provided for marines in transit, and a small enlisted men’s club. Although I was broke—spent my last five dollars on boom-boom—I managed to get drunk when I befriended some marines at the bar who had just arrived in Vietnam that morning. They too were on their way to An Hoa to join the 5th Marines.

They hung onto every word I said as I told them all sorts of war stories, but of course, nothing about just having been discharged from a mental ward. Fortunately for me, the feeling of camaraderie flowed, and so did the beer they bought for me. “Don't worry about being broke—the beers are on us,” they said.

The next morning I woke hung-over, but actually looking forward to getting back to An Hoa. Despite the hangover, I felt a sense of importance as I told the new guys what to expect upon their arrival in An Hoa. One of the new guys thought we would be arriving under fire and had the same concern every new guy had, “How do we defend ourselves? We have no weapons.”

“Look, I don't have a weapon either.”

“Why not?” one of the new guys asked.

“Because I can't be trusted with one,”

The new guys did not catch the humor at first—I had said this with a smile—but then they chuckled with me. I was continuing towards feeling healthy. I felt I was ready to be trusted with a weapon again.

The twenty-minute helicopter ride to An Hoa was uneventful, but one would not have sensed it looking at the worried looks on the new guys’ faces. They reacted to every air-pocket bump and change in rotor sounds. They seemed to look out the window for a short time, then at me, hoping to see some assurance that things were okay. Once or twice I gave them a thumbs up.

When we landed in An Hoa, the artillery batteries were firing. I watched the new guys flinching with every boom, unable to distinguish out-going from in-coming. Almost every marine experienced this upon their arrival in An Hoa, not knowing whether to run for cover or shit yourself right where you stood.

“That’s out-going. Don't worry, everything’s fine,” I said.

Then I pointed them in the direction of the 5th Marine Regimental Headquarters, thanked them for the beers they had bought me the night before, and watched them head out.

I wondered how long they might last.

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I got back to the company area to find the company preparing to move out, but not out on a combat operation. They were headed for a forty-eight hour stand-down. The company was going to Stack Arms where they would have a chance to eat and drink all you wanted, a chance to sleep on a mattress, no having to stand watches, swimming in the South China Sea—a time of fun and frolic. There was just one problem, I did not know if I was going to be included in the trip.

Lieutenant Wilson welcomed me back. He said I looked rested, but that he had to check with the Captain to see if I was going to travel with the company.

Some of the guys who were on light-duty were being left behind, especially if they were receiving daily medical treatment at the battalion aid station. “Sir, I'm not on light-duty. I've been cleared. I am without restrictions.”

The Lieutenant smiled at me, then said, “Let me go see the Captain. Get your gear ready just in case he says yes.”

I was so happy when the Lieutenant returned with good news.

“The Captain says you’re in. Plus he said something else—you have your squad again. Welcome home.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I was reunited with my squad. They were happy to see me, and I was happy to see them in return.

As they were readying their gear for the trip to Stack Arms in Da Nang, someone said, “Man, I can't wait to get all fucked up.” Someone else said, “Why wait, we can start right now.” He pulled a vial of pills from his pocket and said, “Start with these.”

“What are they?” someone asked.

“French Number Tens,” the marine with the pills replied.

“No, what are they really called?”

“Seconal.”

“Are they good?”

“Real good.”

The marine asking the questions opened his hand and was given two pills. He downed them with a swig of water from his canteen. The marine who owned the pills downed two also. A third

marine was offered some. He took them in hand, and he too swallowed them with a few sips of water.

Then it was my turn to be offered pills. “I have more, O'Connell. Any interest?”

“French number tens? Seconal? Never heard of them, but sure, I'll have two if that's what everyone else is taking.”

I put the two pills in my mouth and washed them down with a swig of water.

When the word was passed to move out, we were told we needed to hurry to get to the convoy of trucks, but of course, when we got to the staging area we waited, and then waited some more in the hot sun to board the trucks. Some of the guys in the company were complaining about the heat, but I was not one of those grumbling because the pills had kicked in.

The downer effect was comforting. Two pills probably would have been enough, but I wanted more—just my nature. If two are nice, then three must be heaven.

I asked the marine with the vial if he had anymore of those French Number Tens.

“Yea, who wants some? Is he cool? We don't want everybody knowing we’re fucked-up on drugs, especially the officers and the good’ole boys from down south. You know, the whiskey drinkers”

“No problem, the pills are for me,” I said.

He replied, “No way. Two are enough.”

“I'll pay you for them.”

“No man, it's not about the money. Two more will fuck you all up. I mean really fuck you up.”

“I thought that's what we’re trying to do.”

I then claimed that the first two pills had not done anything to me.

“Give them time.”

“Listen, I'll settle for one. How's that?”

He shook his head, but dug into his pocket, pulled out the vial, secretively took one pill out, and pressed it into the palm of my left hand. He then said, “I'm not responsible if you die.”

In a flat monotone voice I replied, “No one’s responsible if I die. If I die, then I’m dead. No simpler than that.”

I swallowed the pill without any water.

When one does not have to stand, or has not stood in some time, he does not have a clue that he cannot balance himself. This is what happened to me. This is what an overdose of Seconal did.

After what was a bumpy, dusty, hour and a half truck ride to Da Nang—but I never felt a thing within my drugged mind—we arrived at our destination—Stack Arms. As for me, I had no idea where my arrival point was, or whether we were there or not. I had lost all sense of time and movement.

When it was time to off-load from the truck I could not stand on my own two feet. I was legless. Somehow the guys in my squad unloaded me and then propped me up—one marine under each arm.

The Captain had called for a company formation. A part of me wanted to piss and moan about having to stand in the sun—piss and moan because I felt like we were being fucked with—but my mind was so mellow that I said nothing. I was at peace with the angry side of my brain.

Even when two marines received Bronze Stars for their bravery demonstrated during Operation Muskogee Meadows, I did not react to the hurt and pain inside my body, even when I heard their citations read aloud, even when I realized their actions seemed less brave than mine. No, none of it mattered for the Seconal had taken care of the conscious level, but in the subconscious, the self-perceived shun pained me severely. And just before the overdose of Seconal took full effect, I heard my inner voice say, "Fuck it—fuck it all."

I slept for the next sixteen hours. When I woke I was lying on top of a bed with a pillow under my head. Was I still in the nut ward?

If I was, I had visitors, for standing over me were a few members of my squad. They smiled. I smiled back. One of them said, "You made it. You made it, man."

I got myself up from the bed. I got myself a beer, a hotdog, a cheeseburger, French Fries, and a place to lounge on the beach. I body surfed perfect waves. Every ride was exhilarating.

I laid in the sun. I tasted the salt on my lips.

I drank more beer, ate more hotdogs, cheeseburgers, steaks, baked beans, ice cream, fruit, cake, and brownies.

I ate like I had never eaten before. Yes, life was good, and I was refreshed once more, ready to fight again, maybe even die, if it was to be. If it was in the stars.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Charles F. Tyson**

**Killed in Action**

**June 21, 1969**

**—**

**Lance Corporal**

**Terry A. Householder**

**Killed in Action**

**June 23, 1969**

**Letter # 60**

*July 10, 1969*

*Dear family,*

*Well, it's another hot one. It's already 100 degrees and it's only 9:00am. I forgot to tell you, but I tried to call you on the 5th between 9:30-10:15am, your time, but there was no answer. Oh well, I'll try some other day.*

*I want you to give both Tommy and Marsha $5 each for their birthday. I forget their dates, but I think as long as they get their money they won't care.*

*Well got to get ready for a patrol, but as long as you get a letter you know I'm alive.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. I still receive the Quincy Sun and Playboy*

**—Between the Lines—**

My father was back to asking me if I was still getting the Quincy Sun and the Playboy magazine. The company mail-clerk knew better than to keep them from me. I was enjoying the reading and looking at the pictures. The Playboy held my attention a little bit more than the Quincy Sun.

**Letter # 61**

*July 12, 1969*

*Dear family!!!*

*Well, I'm back in An Hoa as I came down with an "Infection" and had to have shots of penicillin. It seems I'm allergic to penicillin so I got pretty sick, but I'm feeling pretty good now. No worry!*

*Well we are supposed to be going on a pretty good size operation in the Arizona area which is pretty bad.*

*Well in two weeks I get ready for R&R. This friend of mine just came back from Australia and said it was great. So now I don't know where to go. Now I've got to choose from Australia, Bangkok, or Japan. Do you have any suggestions?*

*Did you receive the pictures of me serving chow on Go Noi Island? Maybe you can send one to Cheryl and Bobby.*

*Did you see the Life Magazine with the pictures of those killed on Memorial Day weekend? Well, 3 of them were with Mike Company. And one was in my squad. He tripped a booby trap. His name was John Kirschner. The other two were Lance Corporal Cooper and HMN Pyle. Pyle treated me when I got hit. Plus I also knew Jimmy Hickey from Quincy. I was surprised to hear he got killed.*

*If you haven't sent me the money orders yet, send me $300 instead of $250. That's Postal Money Orders! Thanks.*

*I'll try and write tomorrow.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

Funny, I was ashamed to tell my family about my head problems, but I had no qualms in telling them about the infection I had developed. Maybe I wanted them to know the good part of having this infection—I was back in the rear, safe from the perils of the bush—and although I had mentioned the shots of penicillin and getting pretty sick, I had failed to tell them how much my ass was killing me, and how I had thought I might never walk again.

I had started to have a burning sensation while urinating. I had been taught in training that this was a classic symptom of gonorrhea. Besides learning about the symptoms, I had also been instructed on using protection—always use a condom. There was something else I had learned—when you caught it, you were sent to the rear for treatment. I knew a few guys who had gotten a couple of days out of the bush because they felt like they were pissing napalm. Now it was my turn for a few days in the rear.

I told the corpsman I felt like I was pissing fire. In return he asked me, "Did you get laid lately?"

"Yes, in Da Nang."

"You were one of those guys who got caught in the whorehouse when we were at Stack Arms?"

"No, I wasn't one of them. But I did get laid in Da Nang right after I got out of the hospital."

A few marines had snuck out of Stack Arms and had found their way to a whorehouse which had been deemed off-limits. Before they were fully satisfied, the military police raided the place. The marines were escorted back to Stack Arms and paraded in front of the Captain. For punishment, he took away their drinking privileges—all except the gunnery sergeant's, who ironically had led the foray. Rank had its privileges.

The corpsman continued with me. "I supposed you used a condom?"

"Of course, you don't think I'm that crazy, do you?"

"One never knows, but I know this, if you had used a condom, it's highly unlikely you'd have gonorrhea, but if you're like the others who just happened to get laid—spur of the moment—I'd say you were lying."

I chuckled, "Okay, I didn't use one."

I was sent to the battalion aid station in An Hoa. I tested positive for gonorrhea. A corpsman asked me some of the same questions the company corpsman had asked, including the one, "Did you use protection?"

I mumbled, "Well..."

The corpsman cut me off, "You either did or you didn't. Your corpsman indicates on your medevac tag that you didn't use one. Did he lie?"

"No, he didn't lie—I didn't use one. But I would have except I couldn't find a drugstore."

There were now two corpsmen in the examination room with me. There was a privacy curtain, but it was left open so that the marines in the waiting area could see in. I did not know it yet, but I was going to be used as an example.

I was told, “Drop your trousers.” My trousers fell to my ankles. “Now bend over and hold onto the gurney.”

Each corpsman was brandishing a syringe full of penicillin. They smiled in an evil way as they disappeared behind me. I felt the spot on each cheek of my ass where the needles would be going as I felt the coolness of the alcohol-swipe sterilizing the point of entry.

Stab!

There was no kindness—no trying to ease the pain—not when there was a lesson to be taught.

The corpsmen injected the thick penicillin into the cheeks of my ass as fast as they could. They had a great chuckle for themselves. One corpsman said to the other, “That should fix him.” Then one of them said to me, “How’s that feel marine?”

Wise guy me was done laughing. I was in severe pain. I felt faint and sweaty. My knees practically buckled.

“Doesn’t feel good,” I said with a grimace.

“It’s not supposed to feel good. Next time you’ll use a condom.”

My ass was sore, and my hip joints were growing stiff and numb. I said to the corpsmen, “Is it supposed to hurt this bad? I’m tightening up. I can hardly feel my legs, and I’m not sure they are going to work for me.”

“You’ll be fine—walk it off. Oh, one other thing, you be back here tomorrow. We get to do it again.”

Despite the pain, I wanted to wipe the damn smile from corpsmen’s faces. I wanted to kick their asses, but I could not because mine was killing me.

I asked for a ride back to the company area. “Walk. The walk will do you good,” one of the corpsman said.

I walked back to the company area. Actually my right leg walked while my left leg practically dragged behind. When the first sergeant saw me coming, he said, “Damn, what happened to you?”

“I’ve been fucked over by the Navy,” I replied

“How—what do you mean?”

“They filled my ass with penicillin, but I swear they screwed up. You can see I can’t walk.”

The first sergeant laughed, “So you did have the clap.”

“It’s not funny Sarge, they fucked me up.”

“You could get more fucked up, O’Connell” the First Sergeant said. “You could get court-martialed. You’re government property, and the government doesn’t like when its property gets damaged.”

“It’s damaged all right, and they can blame the Navy. They’re the ones who fucked my leg up.”

“No, you’re the one who fucked it up by fucking up your dick, and because you did, the company is short a good squad leader. You’re lucky, for if you were not liked around here, you’d

be headed for a court-martial for not using a rubber. Now get yourself down to the tents and get some rest."

As I walked to the tents, I began to realize I had been at fault—I should have used a condom.

I spent the rest of the day lying face down on a cot, for I could not tolerate any pressure on the cheeks of my ass, not even the pressure of lying on my side. At first, a corporal in charge of light-duty marines said I was to be part of a work party assigned to filling sandbags, but I told him that the First Sergeant had given me the rest of the day off. The Corporal said to me, "You got the day off because of the clap? You are one lucky son-of-a-bitch. Well, tonight you have bunker watch."

I was assigned to a bunker which was positioned along the outermost edge of the defensive perimeter surrounding the An Hoa Combat Base. What should have been a five or ten minute walk from the company area to the bunker turned into a thirty minute struggle. Although it had felt good to lie around all afternoon, the lack of movement had allowed my left hip to freeze up. It seemed that I could not even mentally remember how to make my left leg work. I tried to explain my dilemma to the corporal in charge, but all he said was, "Suck it up marine. You had your break today while the rest of the slackers were filling sandbags. Get your gear and get out to your bunker."

Actually, two other marines headed out to the bunkers helped me. One carried my weapon and sleeping gear while the other supported me under my left shoulder to ease the pain in my hip.

The marine carrying my gear went on ahead, leaving myself and the other marine to walk across the runway with the speed not much more than that of a turtle. If a plane had ever come in for a landing, I doubt we would have been able to clear the runway in time.

I spent a night of pain in the bunker. When I was not on watch I laid on the hard ground, belly-side down, and hoped for my leg to feel better in the morning.

When morning came, I felt sick knowing I had to report back to the corpsmen for a second round of shots. I could not comprehend how I was going to be able to stand the pain of more penicillin in my ass, plus, how was I going to get myself to the battalion aid station.

Fortunately I got a jeep ride from the mid-point of the airstrip. An air-traffic controller had observed me and the same marine from yesterday who still had to help me walk across the airstrip. The controller sent a jeep and driver out to us. When I told the driver what my problem was, he offered to drive me to the aid station. I accepted the ride.

The corpsmen were waiting for me. "How's it going, marine?"

"Not good. You fucking guys have fucked me up."

One of them said, "Hey, calm down. No one has done anything to you."

"Then why can't I walk!"

A Navy doctor came into the examination room. He wanted to know what the commotion was all about. I told him about my leg and how I could hardly walk from the front door of the aid station to the room—a mere twenty feet. I told him I wanted to make a formal complaint about the way the corpsmen had treated me the day before. How they thought it was all a big joke. How they pushed—not eased—the penicillin into the cheeks of my ass.

The doctor brought up the matter of having sex without using protection. He raised the issue of being court-martialed.

“Court-martial me then. At least I’ll get my chance to tell someone how I was treated.”

The doctor examined me. He had me take a few steps for him. He asked me to do a few deep-knee-bends. I couldn’t do them. He then looked at the two corpsmen, then back at me. “I’ll tell you what—we will say you are allergic to penicillin. We will note this in your medical records.”

He then said to the corpsmen, “Make an entry in the Lance Corporal’s file—Allergy/Penicillin.”

With my new allergy, I was spared any further shots. I was given antibiotics in pill-form. I thought how much easier it would have been if I had been given pills in the beginning, but what lesson would I have learned.

Today, whenever I go to the doctor and the nurse asks, “Do you have any allergies,” I think about Vietnam and how I couldn’t walk. And I also wonder if I’m really allergic to penicillin, or had the doctor been covering the corpsmen’s asses.

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Someone in Mike Company received the June 27, 1969, issue of *Life Magazine*. Featured in the magazine was a piece titled—*One Week’s Dead in Vietnam*. On the front-cover was a picture of a serviceman who had been killed in Vietnam sometime during the week of May 27th through June 3rd, which included Memorial Day weekend. Inside the magazine were the names and pictures of the two-hundred and forty-two American servicemen who had been killed in Vietnam during the fore mentioned time period. Included were the names and pictures of John Kirchner, Chris Pyle, and Calvin Cooper—all killed during Operation Pipestone Canyon. As I looked through the magazine, I also saw the name and picture of a friend I had gone to high school with —James P. Hickey. He had been killed-in-action on May 27, 1969. I had drank beer with Jimmy and some other school pals back when we used to drink in the woods along an abandoned railroad track. Little did we know where life was going to take us.

When I arrived back home, I learned that Jimmy Hickey had been killed no more than a mile from where I stood at the moment of his death. We had both been in the same hell together and did not know it.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**James P. Hickey**

**Killed in Action**

**May 27, 1969**

**Letter # 62**

*July 15, 1969*

*Dear family!!!*

*How's everything been with my favorite people? I hope this letter finds you all in good health.*

*Well today I'm standing day bunkers around the perimeter of An Hoa. You just sit here from 8:00am until 6:00pm looking through a set of field glasses, looking for "Charlie" setting up booby traps and etc.*

*Well An Hoa hasn't had any rockets in a long time. I think the war has slowed down a lot compared to when I first came.*

*Well, a year ago I was at Montfort Point and motor transport. I think time has really gone by fast. In 60 days it will be a year since I left home for California and Vietnam.*

*Thanks for the postcard of Paragon Park. It really makes you feel bad or homesick.*

*About how many pictures do I have of over here now? I'm going to try and take a lot on my R&R. I'll get some of them developed there and send the rest home.*

*They say the warrant is in for Corporal and if this is the truth, I've got a pretty good chance of making Sergeant if I stay in the bush, but I'm hoping for a job in the rear. Pray for me.*

*I just thought I'd tell you how "An Hoa" is pronounced. It's Anne Wah. Okay?*

*Well got to go for now.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. Got another Quincy Sun*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was still in the rear at An Hoa. After a day or so, the pain in my ass and the tightness in my left hip had diminished, and I was feeling good once more. Standing bunker watch during the day was better than being assigned to filling sandbags to reconstruct deteriorating or bomb-damaged bunkers.

Most of the time was spent looking through binoculars at a village which was maybe two hundred yards away. The land between the bunker and the village—no-man's land—was desolate—once rich with rice—but now barren, plowed under by Seabee bulldozers.

For the enemy to have carried out a ground attack against An Hoa, the two hundred yards of open space would have needed to be crossed. And to have successfully accomplished this, three strands of concertina wire, which encompassed the entire combat base, would needed to have been dealt with. The enemy might have been successful in getting through the defenses under the cover of darkness, but they did not stand a chance in the daylight, for if they gave it a try they would have been picked-off in no-man's land by guys like me standing daytime bunker-watch.

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Paragon Park was an amusement park south of Boston located at Nantasket Beach. Paragon Park featured a roller-coaster and a Tunnel of Love.

There was foolish pride in being kicked out of Paragon Park for riding the roller-coaster—no hands, standing up—if you were with your high school buddies. A police officer would be waiting for you when the ride ended, and he would toss you out of the park after saying, "...And don't come back."

There were peaceful times spent at the park too, like when I visited there with my mother and father, and my brother and two sisters.

Paragon Park was in no way comparable to Disneyland, but to us kids on our annual family trip, it sure felt like it. We would ride all day, eat hamburgers and hotdogs and French fries and drink milkshakes, and have hot-fudge sundaes for dessert.

Paragon Park was also where Sharon and I spent many hours together. I remember how we had wished the Tunnel of Love had been miles longer so that the ride could have gone on for hours, instead of just two minutes.

**Letter # 63**

*July 17, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*It is no longer Lance Corporal, but instead, Corporal O'Connell. I got promoted again. Ain't that great? It was a meritorious promotion. I was a Lance Corporal for less than 3 months. The way I'm going I could come home a sergeant. That would be great.*

*Well things over here are still the same, but at least they are not rocketing An Hoa. Today the temperature is about 95 and it's only 8:30am. Well, I'm going on R&R in 13 days and will be leaving the bush in 9 days for it. Well can't think of much more to say except, take care and may God bless you all.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. I'd love some more booze!!!*

**—Between the Lines—**

"O'Connell! Front and center!"

This had been the voice of the First Sergeant calling me forward to stand before the Commanding Officer of Mike Company—Captain Burns.

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The entire Company was in formation, and I was standing staunch at the position of attention before the Captain. He read from an official document proclaiming my Meritorious Combat Promotion to the rank of Corporal. I felt so proud of myself and almost cried. I was glad I did not have to speak while in front of the company, for if I had spoken, my watering eyes would have turned into tears of joy.

After the formation was dismissed, Lieutenant Wilson congratulated me. He said he was happy for me, although he did say, "I thought the Captain was going to squash your promotion after the troubles you had up in the mountains."

I too was sort of confused with the promotion, for I still harbored feelings of guilt over the death of Terry Householder—feelings related to the thought that Terry Householder had died in my place because I had acted like a coward—but these feelings were pushed aside on this

memorable day as I celebrated my promotion with my fellow marines—a celebration that had called for a lot of beer.

**Letter # 64**

*August 2, 1969*

*Dear family,*

*Well, I'm back in Vietnam. I always feel bad when I come back. I did receive the $50 with no problems. I made out all right as I came back with $20. I had a great time and the rest was really good for me. I stayed with a girl by the name of Bium. She lived in Bangkok and showed me all around. I hope to go back there someday to see her. We were always eating Thai food which was really great. I did my share of drinking as usual. I'm going to enclose a few pictures of mine. I want to save the rest and show them to the guys.*

*Well I should be going back out tomorrow. The company is out in the mountains and has been getting hit pretty hard.*

*Well, I heard from Cheryl today and also from a girl in Quincy, and the one I met on my first R&R.*

*I finally wrote Sharon again, but haven't heard from her. Maybe she isn't going to write. Does she ever call home? Tell me. I'm always thinking of her. Maybe it's because I have less than 100 days. Why don't you call her and fill her in on what's happening.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

My parents had gone almost another two weeks without getting a letter from me, although they did get to hear my voice—I had called them from Bangkok. I cannot recall what was said but I needed money again—fifty dollars. I must have run low as I had to pay for a hotel room, civilian clothes, female companionship, a taxi driver/tour guide, booze, food, and marijuana.

I actually had been scheduled to go to Japan for R&R, but a few days before leaving I found out that two marines from my platoon were going to Bangkok for R&R—Gaither, and another marine we called King Rat, who was a machine gunner. King Rat was from Gary, Indiana. I have no idea where Gaither was from, but I do know he survived Vietnam because I would see him back in the states five months later at Camp Lejeune. And why someone would be called King Rat has slipped my mind.

When I got to the R&R Center in Da Nang, I asked a marine who coordinated the R&Rs if I could go to Bangkok instead of Japan. I told him that a couple of buddies from my platoon were headed there and that I wanted to join them. He said I could if there were open seats on the airplane. He checked some paperwork on his desk. He then told me I was all set.

I do not think the flight from Da Nang to Bangkok was much more than an hour. I remember just before we landed that the stewardesses served each serviceman on the plane a hot towel to wipe their hands and face.

When we landed and were taken to the R&R center in Bangkok, we were served cold draft-beer, and given cold towels to wipe our sweaty foreheads, for the temperatures in August were very hot.

It was at the R&R center that we were introduced to Thai men who were tour guide/taxi drivers. We were encouraged to hire one for the five day visit. Gaither, King Rat, and I decided we would share a tour guide/taxi driver, and so for sixty dollars, or twenty dollars apiece, we hired a middle-aged gentleman—Richard—to be our guide. After we paid him he had us pick a hotel to stay at. Although there were representatives from the many hotels in Bangkok at the R&R center trying to entice us with their sales pitch, we picked a hotel that Richard had suggested—The Majestic.

Richard then asked if we wanted to sign up for a formal tour, such as a trip to the Bridge Over the River Kwai, or the Floating Market, and if so, this would have been the time to have done this as there were representatives from various tour companies selling tours.

Gaither, King Rat, and I looked at each other and decided we had no interest in going out into the jungle to see the *River Kwai* or any floating market. We were only interested in women, booze, drugs, and getting out of our uniforms and into civilian clothes. We told Richard this, thus, off we went to our first stop—a men's clothing store.

Inside the store Richard took us to, we were greeted by both male and female sales people. While the guys measured our waist and leg-length, the Thai girls served us cold beers and freely let our eyes stare at their beautiful cleavage and mini-skirt clad bodies. They had beautiful large eyes, beautiful smiles, bright white teeth, and great smelling perfume.

I came out of the clothes store with several Banlon shirts, jeans, a belt, and sandals. I ended up with love beads too, but I am not sure whether I got them at this store or whether someone else in my travels gave them to me.

Richard said the next stop would be our hotel, but we told him we wanted some marijuana if possible. Richard was able to buy us marijuana without even getting out of the cab he was driving us around in. He bought while we were stopped at a traffic-light without any hassle at all.

The marijuana came pre-rolled and looked just like an American cigarette. There were twenty joints in a pack which would have easily passed for a pack of menthol Kools.

We lit-up right there in the cab despite Richard telling us it was illegal to smoke in public. I remember saying to him, "Illegal? Who says so? We're Americans here from Vietnam. We do what we want to do."

Thus began a five day, drug induced high, mixed with sex and booze, meant to cleanse our minds and souls, and lift our spirits to the skies.

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The hotel was three stories tall. We each had our own room. My room was either on the second or third floor and looked down upon a swimming pool below. Even with a large picture window, the room seemed dark because of dark paneling on the walls, and because I had the drapes closed most of the time. I had a desire to hide.

I thought Richard was going to take us out to a nightclub to meet some girls, but instead, he brought some girls to us.

There had been a knock on my door. When I opened it, there stood Richard and three Thai girls. Two of them were short in height, and although not fat, they were heavier than the third girl who was tall and slim and had beautiful eyes and a great smile. It was love at first sight.

Richard indicated to me that he had brought the three girls to meet Gaither, Phillips and I. He had the three of us in the hallway, outside our rooms, to meet the girls. I don't remember how it actually happened but I got to choose Bium—the girl who was tall and slim, who had caught my eye at first glance.

Bium and I went straight to bed where we spent hours—not all sex either—as I would doze in and out from being high on marijuana, and relaxed from the love making, Although I practically begged Bium to smoke some marijuana with me, she declined the entire time I was with her—she said the one time she had tried it in her life, she was left feeling scared, enough that she never wanted to try it again. She actually frowned upon the smoking of marijuana, for she remarked that Americans smoked it too much. She also said we drank way more than we needed to.

I ended up being with Bium for my five days of R&R. I paid her sixty dollars which was the agreed price. She was very kind to me—kinder to me than I was to her. Although I did stay with her for the entire time I was in Bangkok, by about the third night, I wanted to go to a nightclub and look at different girls. I was growing tired of Bium's occasional remarks about my excessive drinking and smoking. I remember her accusing me of being like most Americans she had been with—Americans not satisfied with just one girl. She called this flitting around, "Butterflying." Yes, I would have butterflied, but I did not have the money to do so

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Again, my father had warned me to watch out for people trying to take my money. It had happened in Hawaii, and when I woke the first morning in Bangkok to see Bium going out the door, I thought of my father and what he had said, and thought, there goes my sixty bucks, as the door closed behind her.

I remember muttering something like, "I hope you choke on the money."

Then I laid back and drifted off once more. Sometime later—a few hours later—I woke to find the room bright with light pouring in through the picture window, and Bium standing over me with a beautiful smile. Bium had pulled back the drapes covering the window, and I swear it was the brightest light I had seen in some time.

Bium said she was going to run me a hot bath, and that she had clothes for me to wear. I asked her what she meant, and she said she had clothes at home that would fit me, and that she had brought them with her. I looked up, and in her hands she had a pair of blue jeans and a jersey. I asked her where she got them. She told me how other Americans who had been to Bangkok on R&R before me, had left them behind instead of taking them back to Vietnam. I wondered how she knew what size we all were, but then again, we were all about the same—skinny.

Bium filled the bath tub with water that was so hot I could hardly stand in the tub, let alone sit. I thought back to when I was little, how my father would run a bath for my brother Tommy and I. How we would be in tears because the water was so hot, my father yelling at us to sit so we could get it over with.

When I was finally able to sit, Bium knelt beside the tub and began to wash my body in a way that was nothing like just trying to get it over with.

I tried to coax her into the tub with me, but she resisted, saying there would be time for that later. She told me to lie back. She said it was more important that I allowed her to wash me. She told me it was my R&R, not hers—that I was to let myself go, and to relax.

There were millions of bubbles, the soapiest water I had seen in ages. I could not have told you the last time I had been in a bathtub.

Bium spent some time just washing my face with a soft cloth. My complexion was not too good—I had teenage acne—but when she was finished, my face felt cleaner than it had ever been. Any pimples, any scabs, all were gone.

How old was Bium? I think about this on occasion. Not that her age meant anything back then, but I do think she was older than I—and wiser—and very good at what she did. She was just what the chaplain or psychiatrist had prescribed. She was true rest and relaxation.

Plainly, she knew better than I because she had done all of this R&R stuff for years. Bium must have been with hundreds of American servicemen, scrubbing and soothing them so they could return to the war in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam—return refreshed and rearing to go.

One morning Bium took me home with her. I do not really know why or what it had been all about, but we ventured away from Bangkok, but not too far. I can see her pointing across a small rice paddy, at a cement-block house with a corrugated, tin-clad roof. To get to her house we had to cross the flooded paddy by walking—balancing—our way over an elevated, two-by-six wooden walkway. The walkway was springy. The bridge had never been constructed with the thought of Americans in mind—not their weight, or that they might be hung-over from a bout of drinking the night before.

The crossing was a challenge for me as the thoughts of losing my balance and falling into the muddy paddy passed through my brain, but to follow Bium as she traversed the wooden planks, as if she could have done it blindfolded, her confidence flowed back to me.

After we successfully crossed the paddies and entered her home, Bium introduced me to her mother. Out of respect, we bowed to one another. Bium also introduced me to her sister who also had an American serviceman with her who was on R&R. He and I shook hands, but we did not mention Vietnam at all—we only asked one another where our homes were back in the world.

He is the only person I have ever met from Butte, Montana.

I have no other recollections of conversation while in Bium's home, but there seemed to be no shame in the fact that Bium and her sister were prostitutes.

Bium would have loved to have visited the floating market or the River Kwai—she had told me so. She said she could not understand why so many Americans came to Bangkok and did nothing but drink and smoke marijuana, and seemed to care less whether they ever left their room. I remember she said there was so much to be seen in her country.

One night she took me to the movies to see Beach Blanket Bingo. It was in English with subtitles in Thai. Gaither and Phillips were dragged to the movie too by their girlfriends. The three of us were so bored. I think I slept through most of the movie and couldn't get out of the theater fast enough when the movie ended. What I wanted was to drink and go to a nightclub. I think it was on the night of the movie that I actually had a spat with Bium, and she brought up the butterfly thing.

One night at a nightclub, I played the drums with a local Thai band. I drummed to Light My Fire. It felt good to play the drums and to be able to show off a little for Bium, as if I had to really win her over.

My father would have flipped out if he had seen me freely giving my money to a girl. When Bium and I would go out to a night club, I would hand my money over to her. It was normal for American servicemen to let the Thai girls handle the exchange of money because it was said that American servicemen, often drunk or high on dope, were thought to be careless with their own money. We were thought to be big tippers, or confused by the exchange rate. Thus the girlfriend handled the funds. I trusted Bium—she did not gyp me one single penny.

As for why I needed an additional fifty dollars, I have no recollection. Maybe it was an overabundance of Thai food, excessive drinking, or more marijuana than I could afford. Whatever the reason, I had thoroughly enjoyed my time in Bangkok, and felt sad about leaving as the reality of returning to Vietnam seeped back into my psyche.

I kissed Bium for the last time—goodbye Bium—and gave her the clothes I had bought, the clothes I would have no need for in Vietnam.

Maybe the next serviceman Bium recuperated would fit into them.

———

When I arrived back at An Hoa, I learned that the company was still participating in Operation Durham Peak, an operation being conducted in the Que Sons. Actually, I had participated in the first week of Operation Durham Peak before I had left for R&R. This was the first combat operation I had been on since my trip to the nut house. I had felt good during this week, except for when I took my squad out on patrol and the pointman brought us to a halt. He said he had seen several enemy soldiers turn, run, and then disappear into the jungle cover.

By radio I had reported the sightings to Lieutenant Cranch, who was now our new company commander—Captain Burns had rotated home the day after he had promoted me to corporal.

I had requested permission to recon by fire—spray the jungle to our front with M-60 machinegun fire. Being granted permission, the machinegun team fired a belt of ammunition into the jungle. After waiting a minute or so to see if there would be any reaction to our firing by the enemy—there was none—I had the patrol gingerly continue forward, deeper into the jungle, not knowing whether the pointman had actually seen the enemy in the first place or not, for no one else could verify that they had seen anything. All I could do was take the pointman's word for it.

When we returned from the patrol which had been abbreviated because of our supposed sighting of the enemy, several of the marines in my squad were questioned by Lieutenant Wilson and Lieutenant Cranch to whether or not my squad had actually seen the enemy, or had I fabricated this report so the patrol would be called back in. When I heard about the questioning, which had been conducted behind my back, I immediately stormed after Lieutenant Wilson. "Sir, what is this shit. Why wasn't I asked questions about the patrol? Why go behind my back? It seems like you don't trust me."

"O'Connell, first of all, who do you think you are talking to in that tone of voice? And secondly, Lieutenant Cranch, who you have not met, takes his job very seriously, and he expects others to do the same."

“Sir, I apologize for the tone of my voice, but I feel a personal injustice when I hear that both you and the new company commander suspect I manufactured the enemy sighting so we could stop the patrol and return back to the perimeter. Well, the suspicions are false and without proof or reason. The pointman said he saw the enemy. I was only reacting to what he had reported to me. I feel my credibility and integrity are being questioned, and with all due respect—again—I find it to be a great injustice.”

With that said, Lieutenant Wilson managed a nervous smile, but he wasn’t looking at me, he was looking over my shoulder at the new company commander—Lieutenant John Cranch—who was coming up behind me.

Lieutenant Cranch was a very large man, both in height and girth, and my first impression of him left me thinking that he might just knock me to the ground and stomp on my chest. I mean, besides his size, his looks—beady eyes, a block chin, the neck of a turtle which was all muscle, topped off by a Marine Corps, high-and-tight haircut—well let me tell you, this man was to be feared.

“Lieutenant Wilson, what is this discussion about—and who is this marine?”

“Lieutenant Cranch, this is Corporal O’Connell.”

Lieutenant Cranch stared me down, and then said, “Corporal O’Connell. Did I hear right? You feel an injustice has been done to you?”

“Not exactly sir, it’s just that I feel left out the loop.”

“Well, O’Connell, I don’t expect you or anyone else to feel anything when they are—how did you put it?—left out of the loop. What I expect from you, and everyone else, is to follow orders and perform your duties as prescribed by me to you. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“One other thing O’Connell, where are you from?”

“Massachusetts, sir.”

Lieutenant Cranch replied, “Now who would have ever guessed that.” He followed with, “Park my car in Harvard Yard.”

I remember my face was still in a grimace for I had not ruled out further stern words.

“Where in Massachusetts?”

“Quincy—near Boston, sir.”

“I know where Quincy is,” Lieutenant Cranch said. “I’m from Millbury, just outside of Worcester.”

“Yes sir—I’ve heard of it.”

“Good.”

With that exchange of words finished, Lieutenant Cranch dismissed me. From a distance I could see him and Lieutenant Wilson conversing with one another. I could not tell what they were talking about, but from their mannerisms—military bearing—the conversation struck me as something official, or at least Lieutenant Wilson did not seem to be at ease. But over time, I

learned that no one was at ease when talking with Lieutenant Cranch. He was staunch Marine Corps, except for the one time he had asked me where I was from.

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When I arrived back at An Hoa from R&R, I had gone straight to the Company office to show off my Bangkok pictures, especially the one of me and Bium, but there was not a lot of interest shown by the office personnel. Their attention was on the sounds coming from a radio. Mike Company was in heavy contact with an NVA force bent on fighting instead of just their usual, hit-and-run tactics.

The company clerk did take a quick peek of the pictures, made a comment about how she—Bium—looked good. Then he handed the pictures back to me. I put them in my pocket, and then listened to the radio with the others.

I could make out Lieutenant Cranch's voice, and also the voice of Lieutenant Wilson. Their voices were controlled, but I could feel a sense of urgency in their words. In fact I could hear deep concern in everyone's voices, including the squad-leaders' and fire-team leaders as they reported their successes or failures against the enemy. With every radio transmission we were hearing back at the company office, we could hear explosions, machinegun fire, small arms, and then a call for a corpsman in the background.

Not much time passed after the call for the corpsman was made, that we heard the request for an emergency medevac. Those of us in the company office now knew someone had been severely wounded, and when the request was downgraded to a routine medevac, we knew the marine had succumbed to his wounds.

I left the company office after figuring that someone had been killed. Mike Company had not lost anyone since Terry Householder's death—no one in over a month—but this latest death had practically removed any thoughts of love and peace I had brought back with me from Bangkok.

I made my way to the company tents and laid myself down on a cot. I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach, some for the dead marine, but mostly for me, because I knew I was headed back into the bush—into the thick of battle.

Later on, when I stopped by the company office to hear if there had been any further news from Mike Company, I was told that Lieutenant Cranch's radioman was dead. He had been the emergency medevac, downgraded to routine. He had taken an AK round in the chest—a sucking chest wound—and battled to stay alive, but like most sucking chest wounds, the struggle was prolonged and painful for all to watch, knowing that without a miracle, death was most often the final outcome .

I would learn the name of the marine the next day as I sat waiting for a helicopter to take me back out to the bush. The marine was from Maine. My mother's people had been from Maine also. Although where he was from, and where my mother's people were from was not even close to one another, I had felt a connection to this marine the few times we had spoken, simply because of the word Maine, and what it conjured up—home.

———

Oh how I had wished Bium had been Sharon. Oh how I had wished that any girl in my mind—real or imaginary—had been her. Thoughts of Sharon were rising back to the surface. Thoughts such as, please Sharon—please write me.

**In Remembrance of**

**Private First Class**

**Roland H. Nadeau**

**Killed in Action**

**August 2, 1969**

**Letter # 65**

*August 4, 1969*

*Dear Family !!!*

*Well, I'm enclosing the rest of my R&R "flicks" in this letter. I hope you enjoy them. I have written on the back of them.*

*Well, received two letters from you today and you said the family was going to Canobie Lake. I hope you all have a good time which you should.*

*I haven't gone out to the field since R&R and I'm pretty glad as yesterday the company had 16 WIA and 2 KIA. Things haven't cooled down at all over here.*

*Well got to go but I hope you enjoy the pictures.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I had enclosed pictures of King Rat, Gaither, and myself with the girls from Bangkok. One of the Polaroid pictures was the six of us sitting in a restaurant where we had been eating Thai food. King Rat, Gaither, and I were wearing sunglasses. I was in a Banlon shirt and had love beads around my neck. Another picture was of me standing with Bium. She was wearing a white poker-dot on blue, pant suit. You could see her height in the picture. She was just a few inches shorter than I who had one arm around her waist. And in my other hand a cigarette. There was another picture of just Bium standing with a swimming pool in the background.

———

Canobie Lake was an amusement park in New Hampshire. As far back as I can remember, I recall going there every summer for a day of fun. My grandparents on my mother's side, along with my aunts, uncles, and cousins, would go once a year for a family outing. I always had a great time.

We would get to the park around 1130am and have a picnic lunch. The gates to the amusements would not open until noon, but when they did, we could hear the sound of the roller coaster making a test run. My brother, sisters, and cousins would get so excited knowing the park had opened that we would stop eating, despite being told that no one was going anywhere until they had finished their meal. Believing our parents, we would gobble down the rest of our food so we would be allowed to ride.

---

I spent August 4, 1969, waiting for a helicopter to take me back out to Mike Company. The day before had been spent at the LZ also, but because of the continued fighting between Mike Company and the NVA, I had been unable to get a helicopter back to the bush—helicopters were not able to land because of heavy enemy fire opposing any such action.

The next day had turned out the same way. Because of intense firefights, helicopters were unable to fly reinforcements—which I was to be a part of—out to the Company. But my day had still been spent at the LZ, as there had been hope—a chance—that the firefights might have ceased long enough to have gotten the reinforcements on the ground. But no luck—or bad luck for the Company—and good luck for me.

---

I was now into the third day of listening to radio transmissions coming from Mike Company—three straight days of fighting, trying to outmaneuver an NVA force entrenched on the top of a mountain, thought by both sides to be worth dying for.

I heard a radio transmission from Lieutenant Cranch to Lieutenant Wilson, something about trying to outflank the enemy. I could hear explosions and intense rifle file in the background every time a message came over the radio. I would learn later on that the flanking movement had been successful and was the reason the NVA were driven from the mountaintop, leaving some of their dead behind.

When the dead were searched, someone found some North Vietnamese paper currency in the pocket of one of the dead. Years later—because a former marine from Mike Company posted the currency on the internet—I learned that right after the paper currency had been taken from the dead body, it was passed around to be autographed by members of the First Platoon.

I recognized a lot of the names. When I saw the bill with all the signatures, I felt the same disconnect I had felt during the two days I had spent at the LZ while I had listened to the battle Mike Company had been fighting. Back then, I had felt that time was passing me by—even though the time passing might have been the time of my death if a helicopter had gotten me out to the fight.

---

It was a good thing that I had not gone back to the bush, for I had been coming down with malaria. During the afternoon, while waiting around the LZ, my eyes had suddenly started to hurt. My eyes felt like they were popping out of my head. Along with this, I could hardly hold my head up, and was starting to have cold-sweats. Before long, my body ached all over.

I asked one of the marines in charge of the LZ if he really thought a helicopter was going to get me out to the bush. He said the word was that a helicopter was still expected to arrive, and not to leave the area. I found some shade, lay upon the dusty ground, curled into a ball, and rocked myself to sleep.

A number of helicopters did land at the LZ, and when they did, I would raise my head while looking in the direction of the marine in charge, and he would look back at me and just shake his head, side to side, signaling me that the helicopter on the LZ was not one going out to Mike Company. There had been no reason to speak because no one could have heard me over the noise

of the helicopters, plus I was wearing down from the effects of malaria. I had no strength for words.

By early evening I was finally told that I could leave the LZ. I practically crawled myself back to the tents where I crashed down upon a cot—the first one I came to.

I was dying. Death could not have felt any worse than my aching body did. Death would have been a relief.

By the next morning, I could hardly get myself up on my own two feet, but I found the strength to struggle my way to the company office where the First Sergeant took one look at me and said, "You better get to sick call."

I think someone drove me to the battalion aid station—no way would I have made it on my own. I knew the corpsman that was treating me. He had been with Mike Company the previous fall when I had been a new guy. He said, "Mike Company is back in the shit, I hear."

All I could manage was a slight lift of my head—and a nod.

Then the corpsman said, "I know you're feeling like crap."

This time, I couldn't even muster a nod, or even move my lips.

I was told I had malaria. Arrangements were made for me to be medevaced to Da Nang—1st Med—by helicopter.

I have no recollection of the flight to Da Nang. I must have been totally out of it.

**In Remembrance of**

**Corporal**

**Lawrence A. Hayes**

**Killed in Action**

**August 3, 1969**

**—**

**Private First Class**

**James W. Blake**

**Killed in Action**

**August 3, 1969**

**Letter # 66**

*August 10, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well guess what? I'm back in the hospital in Da Nang with malaria. I had a temp of 104.2 so the corpsman in An Hoa sent me to the hospital. I'm feeling pretty lousy and my whole body aches all over.*

*I won't receive any mail while I'm here but I'll be able to write. I'll be here from 7-14 days.*

*I ain't been able to eat or drink anything.*

*I'll write later on when I'm feeling a little bit better.*

*Call Sharon and tell her I didn't receive a letter but it's probably in An Hoa.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

On August 5th, the stretcher I felt I was dying on was carried from the medevac helicopter to triage at 1st Med. A lot of what happened in the first few days is forgotten, or remembered as nothing more than small snippets of memory. I do remember lying on the stretcher in the triage area. There were other marines in this area lying on stretchers too. The stretchers were about waist-high off the floor, and the handles of the stretchers rested on wooden saw-horses.

I heard more than I saw. I saw only what I could see peripherally. I had no strength to move my head, and even the slightest eye movement hurt.

I heard a few moans and groans coming from the left and right. From the little I could see, I was surprised there had not been louder screams of pain, or maybe the wounds were more blood than anything else. Or maybe the wounded were sedated with morphine. What I do remember is that their wounds were worse than mine.

The moaning and groaning marines—the battlefield wounded deemed to be more in need of medical attention than I—were briskly sent onto more advanced medical treatment, most likely to life saving surgery.

The triage area was cold—air-conditioned—and an electric-fan was setup so that a stream of cold air blew directly on me adding to the coolness, but none of these measures had any effect on my fever-fed sweat.

A thermometer had been slipped under my tongue. I heard a voice say, "Don't eat it marine."

In whatever amount of time the thermometer had been left in my mouth, the mercury had shot up to one hundred and four degrees.

I heard a corpsman say something about packing someone in ice. I wondered if they meant me. I had heard of guys being packed in ice to lower their body temperature.

I tried to prepare myself for what I imagined to be very painful—packed in ice—but fortunately that "someone" they had referred to was someone else.

Pills were slipped into my mouth and a small cup of water was put to my lips by a corpsman who said, "Swallow."

I was then left to myself in triage to shiver and sweat, and for some strange reason, I had a blanket over me.

I fell into a deep sleep, not to wake until I felt the stretcher moving with me still on it. I was the last of the sick and wounded to be triaged. It really did not matter to me whether I had been first or last, what mattered most was that I was being moved, and my final destination felt like

heaven. I was back in a bed—a mattress, clean sheets, a pillow, and a blanket which I pulled all the way up to the bottom of my chin.

I felt the cool air-conditioned air. I blinked a few times. My eyes closed. I dozed. I slept.

I am not certain how long I slept, or when I was forced out of bed. Had it been the next morning, or had I lost a day to sleep?

I had been coaxed out of bed, given clean military pajamas to change into, and pointed in the direction of the mess hall. On a shaky pair of legs, and a bed weary body, I got myself to the mess hall and into the chow-line where I grabbed a metal tray and shuffled sideways in front of the food being served by marines on mess duty.

A scoop of scrambled eggs, three pieces of bacon, and two slices of toast were flopped onto my tray. The weight of the food on the tray tested the limits of my strength. A mere half pound felt like twenty.

I managed to shuffle my way over to a table where I sat at a bench with other marines who were not looking for conversation, just like I was not. Even sitting, I felt faint, mostly from hunger.

I put one forkful of scrambled eggs into my mouth and chewed with what little pressure was needed to safely swallow the eggs without choking. My stomach never accepted the food, not for one second. The eggs were puked up immediately after they had touched my stomach.

I left the mess on the floor, trying to move as fast as I could for fear of vomiting even more. My initial burst of energy was used up even before I fell through the doors of the mess hall. I do not remember who they were, but two guys grabbed me under my arms and brought me back to the air-conditioned malaria ward where I slept some more.

Over the next few days I would be treated with quinine—in pill form—and other medications. I did not know what I was being given, but between the pills and hours-on-hours of sleep, I had gained enough strength to at least write home, and enough strength to know I still wanted Sharon.

**Letter # 67**

*August 12, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*Well, I feel a little bit better so I thought I'd try and write. The doctors have been giving me four types of pills plus a shot to cure me of malaria. I can eat a little bit but I am still very weak. My temp has gone down but my stomach is unsettled.*

*I'm in an air-conditioned ward and get to sleep on a mattress. That's pretty good. I watch TV all the time and read funny books.*

*I should feel better in a few more days. I figure I'll be out of here on the 20th and then will go to An Hoa for 7 days of light duty. That will leave me with about 75 days to do. I hope I can stay in the rear for them but I doubt it. Usually you come in the rear 30 days early.*

*Daddy's birthday is coming up so I want you to buy him a quart bottle of "7". OK? That's from the sick marine. Happy birthday.*

*Oh, by the way, I watched "Combat" last night and really got a laugh out of it. It was the first time I seen it since I've been in combat.*

*Well, got to go. No need worrying 'cause I'm doing fine.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

My father's birthday had been approaching. He was born on August 28th. I had figured a bottle of Seagram's 7 would have been a nice present for him, seeing he liked drinking his 'pills' while writing letters to me in Vietnam.

_____

I watched the television show, Combat, from my bed in the malaria ward. As a kid, I had been raised on Combat. I used to like the thrill and excitement of watching the shooting and those being shot at. The TV death and dying had taught children how to act as they died or were painfully wounded. The kids I played with in the neighborhood would take what we learned from Combat—take it into the woods, buck-up sides, and fight each other with toy guns bought at a Child World toy store. It was exciting to feel wounded, to writhe in imaginary pain, and maybe even have a few last words to say before dying.

No one died on television the way they died in real life. Unfortunately, I had learned this firsthand.

**Letter # 68**

*August 13, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*Another day is here. I'm starting to feel a lot better but get tired very fast. My temp is down but my stomach still is fuzzy feeling inside.*

*Yesterday I went to the USO show which had a folk group from Ohio. They were pretty good. Last night I watched TV and seen "Red Skelton Hour" and Perry Mason.*

*Ain't got nothing to do today. The TV comes on at 1:00. I just wrote Sharon a few lines. I might drop Dwight a few. Me and him still write. Not bad. Well, 88 days and counting.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I remember the folk group playing, Leaving on a Jet Plane. I was left feeling heartsick. Why did every USO group think they had to play that song? Why leave us in pain?

_____

Let me tell you about Dwight and I, and how my friendship with him might have affected my relationship with Sharon.

Dwight and I were known to drink a few beers and smoke a lot of marijuana—and LSD was not out of the question either.

One Sunday morning while I was home on leave, just before I was headed to Vietnam, Dwight came by my house to see what I was up to. I told him I was going out with Sharon. He asked me if I had time for a coffee. At first I told him no, but then thought about it more—I wasn't picking up Sharon until the early part of the afternoon.

While we drank our coffee, he asked me if I wanted to take a ride into Boston—he wanted to buy some marijuana. I reminded him I was meeting Sharon, and because of this I was going to pass, but he talked me into going with him. On the way to Boston, Dwight lit up a joint. He passed it to me, but once again I brought up Sharon. "Dwight, I don't want to smoke. I don't want to get all fucked up."

"Come on man. A few hits. How fucked up can you get on that."

I thought to myself, "Go ahead, what's a few hits going to do. You'll be straightened out by noon —one o'clock at the latest."

When we got into Boston, Dwight parked his car, and we walked over to the Commons where hippie looking teens and college students were hanging out. Dwight knew he could score some marijuana from the hippies.

He bought an ounce which he would split into smaller amounts—nickel bags—making his money back and keeping a few bags for himself.

The same hippie who had sold Dwight the marijuana asked if we were interested in some acid—LSD. While Dwight was nodding his head, yes, I was shaking my head, no. Dwight's yes won out despite my objection. "I have a date with Sharon."

We bought the LSD, and without me putting up any fight, I swallowed the acid on the spot. The hallucinatory trip—a trip which did not include Sharon—began just after noontime and lasted until 10:00pm. I remember hanging out at the Commons for what seemed like a timeless eternity. The hippies—the ones with the long hair and full-beards—turned into stuffed animals that could talk before my eyes. They kept offering me their hair. "Where's your hair? Have some of our hair." They thought I needed theirs because my hair was so short. A Marine Corps high-and-tight haircut looked pretty strange on Boston Common in the late summer of 1968.

Sharon did not come to mind again until I got home at 10:00pm. I had not even gotten inside the living room when my mother started yelling at me, "Where the hell have you been? Sharon waited all day for you. She had a surprise party all planned. Her entire family was there waiting for you. What are we going to do with you?"

"Ma, I know what you're going to do with me. You're going to wave goodbye to me when I leave for Vietnam."

---

I sit here forty-four years later and realize I had never written this part of my story before. Sometimes I wonder why Sharon ever left me, and then when I write this part of my life, it seems pretty simple to me—I was a loser.

---

I did see Sharon the day before I left for Vietnam. I did not tell her that I had taken LSD or had been smoking marijuana. What I did tell her was a lie—that I had decided to have a few beers with the guys at the bowling alley, and ended up getting drunk, and passed out. When she asked me who these guys were, and I started by saying Dwight, she cut me off. "That's enough. I don't need to know anymore. I hate that kid."

I now know that the times I had asked my mother to call Sharon for me was because I never got through to Sharon again after I missed the surprise party, and I was always hoping that my mother could.

**Letter # 69**

*August 16, 1969*

*Dear family,*

*Sorry I didn't write yesterday but I was tired. I'm still in the hospital. I feel normal again but I won't let them know it. That way I can probably lay around here a while longer. When you're not sick this place ain't too bad. I'm still taking pills for malaria but it's just about left my system.*

*I've been watching TV at night and last night saw, "The Monkees," "Dean Martin Show," and some western. I think there's a ball game on this afternoon. I hope so. Tomorrow the college all-stars are playing the Jets. That's gonna be on TV.*

*Yesterday a guy from Mike Company brought me up two letters written on the 5th and 6th.*

*We had two visitors in the ward yesterday. One was George Gobel, some show biz person and Major General O.R. Simpson, CG 1st MAR DIV. He really is an old fart.*

*Well, enclosed are 6 post cards of Vietnam. Hope you like them.*

*Well, got to be going for now.*

*Love ya all, Paul*

*PS 86 and counting*

**—Between the Lines—**

Every day spent at 1st Med was another day the enemy was not getting a chance to kill me. My odds of survival were so much better here than out in the bush.

———

Major General Ormond R. Simpson was the commanding officer of Parris Island when I was there going through boot camp. He now was the Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division. He did not come to the malaria ward to pin a purple heart on my pillow—he came to find out if I had been taking my malaria pills. I told him, "Yes sir. I never miss, sir." The truth was that I had only taken my malaria medication once, and because of the pills, I had ended up with a severe case of diarrhea. I had diarrhea quite often without even taking the malaria pills, so why would I want to have it even more often. Plus, contracting malaria was a way to get out of the bush.

When I was up in the mountains—Operation Durham Peak—I remember having a mosquito on my forearm. I specifically remember watching it suck blood from my body. I also remember seeing white spots on the mosquito's legs. A marine had told me that mosquitoes with white spots on its legs were the ones carrying malaria—maybe this was true. I had made no attempt to stop the mosquito from having a feast, and if Major General Ormond R. Simpson could have proven this, I would have been dragged out of bed and court-martialed on the spot.

———

I still have the postcards. The scenery captured in them made Vietnam look so pleasant—pictures of lush green rice paddies, tree lines of palms intermingled with thatched huts, and not one bomb crater.

**Letter # 70**

*August 17, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I've been in the hospital 8 days today and I have no idea when I'm getting out. I don't really want to leave cause life is pretty good here. I've been eating some good food and drinking cold soda.*

*Last night they had a USO show. It was some rock group from Singapore and they had two girls with them who took off everything. It's a wild thing to see because there were 300 girl hungry marines there. After that I came back to the ward and watched Jackie Gleason. He was in one of his old "Honeymooners" show with Art Carney. Jackie Gleason is still as funny as ever. Then I watched "Star Trek" which was pretty good.*

*Today I watched the Jets play the all-stars. It was a pretty good game plus I watched some golf. Tonight I think I'll go up to the movie. I don't know what's playing but it really don't matter.*

*Well, got to think about finishing up this letter. I can't wait to get home and have a family party. I dreamed about it last night.*

*Well, got to go but don't worry about me cause I'm safe and alive.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I remember the USO show but the girls did not take everything off. They most likely did not remove anything. They did wear miniskirts and they had very nice bodies, and they danced like go-go girls. Of course the horny marines got all excited. I did.

**Letter # 71**

*August 18, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I've been transferred to Ward C. It's the same as Ward L but it isn't air-conditioned. This is so you can get used to the heat again. It's only been running 85-90 which isn't too bad compared to the 115 back in May and June. I think I'll be getting discharged in about three days. When I do I'm gonna go up to "Freedom Hill." There they got a PX, bowling alley, movie theater and USO. That's where Bob Hope comes during Christmas.*

*Well last night I went to the movie and saw "Dr. Doolittle." It was something like a musical. Plus I drank two beers. They tasted good. Then I came back and watched "Disneyland" and Bonanza" on TV. Then I went to bed. I've been going to bed at 10:00 and getting up at 7:00. Then I sleep from 10:00 to noon. Then from 2:00 to 4:30. So you can see I'm not doing too bad.*

*Well I've got to be going for today but I'll write tomorrow. I'll be going to the movie tonight and drinking some beer. Be careful and please don't worry about me. I've only got 84 days left.*

*May God bless.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was transferred to a non-air-conditioned ward. Slowly, the good times were coming to an end. The movies, the nightly television shows, the comfortable mattress, and the cold beers were all going to be a thing of the past.

_____

During one of my last days at 1st Med, I was coming from the mess hall and walking back to the ward. It was warm out so I decided to take a short cut through a ward that was air-conditioned. The sign over the door read, Intensive Care. I didn't understand what intensive care meant. What a shock I got when I opened the door and looked inside. All I saw were tubes and IV bags, and bodies wrapped in gauze, and arms missing, and guys with no legs, and a priest giving someone their last rights—a sight I shall never forget.

**Letter # 72**

*August 25, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*Received a letter you wrote on the 17th today. I am back in An Hoa. I've been here since the 23rd. I think I've got to go back to the bush tomorrow. The company is out in the Arizona which is booby trapped.*

*Well I've got rid of the malaria and I feel good again. My appetite is back to normal. I put away three chicken breasts and 3 beers tonight. Not bad.*

*I had to get a ride on a truck convoy to get to An Hoa. It's a pretty rough ride. I've got blisters on my ass.*

*Well monsoons will be here soon. I hate monsoons cause all it does is rain and it makes me just miserable. The temperature is still up around 95 every day. I hope it starts to cool off soon.*

*Mama tells me Sharon has called and she says that Sharon has written me and is waiting to hear from me. Well I've written her 3 times and still I haven't heard from her. Give her a call and see if she is using the right address. OK?*

*I hope me and her will be able to get together again when I get home.*

*Well, got to be going for now but I'll try and write tomorrow.*

*Be good and may God bless you all!*

*Love, Paul*

*77 days left*

**—Between the Lines—**

I had been in An Hoa for a few days and somehow was avoiding the bush, or more specifically, the Arizona Territory, commonly referred to as The Arizona—as infamous as Go Noi Island. The Arizona was another place I had heard tales about from those who had been there before. But the tales were old now. Those having told me of the notorious NVA and VC—how they dominated the Arizona—were long gone now, either dead or gone home wounded, or fortunate enough to have survived their year in Vietnam and rotated home. There were not too many marines in the last category. My friend, Dick Reed, he was one of the fortunate. He had left Vietnam in July. He was the last marine to tell me firsthand stories about the Arizona. His stories had scared the hell of me. Now I was going to learn firsthand what the Arizona was all about.

The Arizona, similar to Go Noi Island, was populated by farmers—woman and children, minus males older than fourteen. The population was known to be very sympathetic towards the VC which meant our enemies were farmers by day, and VC by night, which meant heavily booby-trapped areas—booby-traps meant to deny American forces access to areas where caches of weapons and explosives were stored. In addition to the VC, the Arizona was known to be home to NVA units always trying to establish an avenue of approach to Da Nang.

———

Instead of flying back to An Hoa, I decided to bum a ride with the daily convoy going from Da Nang to An Hoa. I wanted to experience traveling in a motorized convoy.

The convoy staged just below Freedom Hill. There were many trucks in the convoy along with some tanks which would lead the way. Other tanks were interspersed throughout the convoy's length. Overhead, Huey gunships provided air-support. All-in-all I had heard that traveling by convoy was relatively safe. This sounded good to me. I was looking for a scenic trip after being cooped up at 1st Med.

In the staging area I asked a truck driver if I could ride with him to An Hoa. He told me I could and welcomed a marine who could handle an M-16, but warned me that riding with him wasn't going to be comfortable. He was driving a tractor unit without a trailer; "We will be riding 'bobcat'," he said. He told me that when a tractor unit wasn't hooked to a trailer, the ride was rough—bumpy. I thought, how bumpy can it be?

The ride was horrendous. I felt every bump in the road, and the bumps were many. Most of the trip was over dirt roads, especially the portion from Liberty Bridge to An Hoa. The road—

Liberty Road—although it was hard packed laterite—had many ruts and potholes which had a great effect on how the truck rode.

Besides the constant ass thumping ride, the red laterite dust from the road filled the inside of the cab. When I arrived safely back in An Hoa, the first thing I did was blow my nose—red-laterite snot—and massage my sore ass.

**Letter # 73**

*August 29, 1969*

*Dear family,*

*Well I thought I'd write you people. We are set up on a little hill in the Arizona Territory.*

*I received a letter from you yesterday, plus one from a girl in Quincy, and one from Ma and Grandpa with $2 in it.*

*The temperature is still pretty hot (95-100 degrees) and it's awful humid. All we've been doing is running ambushes and patrols.*

*We should be on this operation for about another 20 days.*

*Oh, good news. On September 1st, I'll be sending home a check for $470. I think that is almost two months pay. My base pay is $216, plus $65 combat pay and $9 over-seas pay which comes to $290. That ain't too bad! But when I get home, I'll only make $216. When I joined up, I was only making $95.*

*Well, for breakfast this morning, I had toast with peanut butter and grape jam. They brought out bread with yesterday's resupply, plus hamburgers. So we had a cookout.*

*Well time to go, but I'll write later. Okay?*

*Be good and may God bless!*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

I was back in the bush. The gunnery sergeant welcomed me just after the helicopter that had flown me out to the company had lifted away. “O’Connell, you’re damn lucky you got your ass out to the bush. You were up for court-martial if you hadn’t shown up today.”

“I had malaria. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You should have been here yesterday.”

“Gunny, again, I’m here. What do you want me to do?

“I want you to get your head and ass wired together.” Gruff old bastard, the Gunny was.

I better have gotten my head and ass wired together, for I was only to survive the Arizona if I kept a keen sense of my surroundings—stayed focused—not only in my mind, but focused on the actual ground before me. Booby-traps were abundant in the Arizona.

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The day after I returned to the bush, Mike Company—along with the rest of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines—was on the move. We were advancing further northwest into the Arizona where the foothills began—foothills gently rising up from the valley floor. Traveling further west, the foothills become mountains. If we ventured into the mountains, we would be back in the thick of things again, right where we had left off at the end of Operation Taylor Common.

As usual, the day was hot and humid. The battalion was traveling in a single file column. Each man was spread enough distance from the one to his front, and the one to his rear, so that if a booby-trap was detonated, only the unlucky soul tripping it would have been killed or wounded. Once again, the human tendency to get close to one another, to bunch up, had to be overridden by squad-leaders yelling out to their troops, "Spread it out!—Spread it the fuck out!" These words could not be stressed enough.

The column was stretched a long distance. Where my squad and I were positioned—we were a good distance from the point element—we did not see or hear the detonation of the booby-trap which had claimed the leg of a Marine Corps Major, but the word had been passed to step it up. Mike Company was ordered to move forward—advance through the marine unit in front of them. The Major had been in this lead unit

As my squad moved along, we passed marines who were taking a break. They were sitting on the ground, leaning back against their packs as if their packs were the back of a sofa. Most of them were smoking a cigarette. Here and there, marines were sipping water from canteens too. Not much was said, but I remember someone saying something like "Hey, who are you guys with?"

One of my guys answered, "Mike Company."

"Go get them Mike, get some, but be very careful. That up ahead is a Major. Booby-traps here in the Arizona don't care about race, creed, nor color—and most certainly don't care about rank either. Anyone can trip a booby-trap and get blown to shit out here."

We continued moving through the marines still resting on the ground. After a few more minutes of movement, we came upon several marines bunched together—one stooped over, one on his knees, and a couple more just standing around. All of them were looking at the same thing on the ground. I was wondering why they were not on the ground resting, and wondering what they were looking at. Then I saw it.

The sight was bizarre. Before my eyes was part of a leg—from midway up the shin down to the sole of a jungle-boot. The leg could have been surgically removed. The cut was that clean. It didn't registrar in my mind right away, but I was staring at a lost leg—lost to the blast of a booby-trap. Although the leg did not have Major written on it, it turned out to be the leg of a Marine Corp Major assigned to a job in the rear. Someone said they had heard that the Major had come out to the bush so he could qualify for a Combat Action Ribbon. I have to wonder, did he want to be this qualified.

The leg looked yellowish—waxy. I remember how the new-green, military issue sock looked—neatly pulled a few inches up the shin from the top of the boot, and the boot itself still had the factory shine to it. It was hard to believe that this leg had actually been blown off someone. I could have easily been looking at the leg of a mannequin, or a Hollywood prop

The memory of the major's leg has lasted a lot longer than the actual occurrence, for I had never stopped. I had only slowed down, peered, but kept on going. I wanted to keep looking, even walk backwards maybe, but I had to keep an eye open for trip wires.

This part of the experience—not stopping, thinking to myself, oh well, shit happens—seems just as bizarre as the leg being so cleanly severed from the Major. It was like life continued without skipping a beat regardless of what was going on around me.

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The Arizona was living up to its name. The Indians—VC and NVA—were everywhere. We seemed to be in contact with them quite often. One point of contact came a few hours after the Major had tripped the booby-trap.

Vietnamese dressed in black pajamas were seen running through a tree line estimated to be five hundred meters to our front. Anybody in black pajamas running in the Arizona was considered to be the enemy. Lieutenant Cranch, instead of requesting a marker round—a white phosphorous Willie Peter round—to be fired, and making corrections calculated from the white smoke rising up from the point of detonation—the usual procedure—he went straight to a request for high explosive rounds. He did not want to give a warning to the enemy that an artillery barrage was coming. No marker round—no warning—just the full effect.

So we all heard the distant booms of the artillery firing from An Hoa and waited for the barrage to hopefully detonate in the tree line were the unsuspecting enemy dwelled, but the rounds were off target, and the enemy jumped up, ran, and quickly disappeared from sight. They knew the next barrage was going to be on target, which it was, but too late.

A sweep of the area was conducted. The enemy had in fact fled the area, but there were trench-lines and fighting holes throughout the tree-line, a sign that if the enemy had decided to stay and fight, we would have been in for a stiff battle.

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Several hours after Lieutenant Cranch's attempt to bomb the VC without giving them a warning, several figures in black pajamas were seen milling about in another tree-line. They were not running, but were acting suspicious.

The First Platoon was sent to check out the situation. My squad was on the point. As we came into the tree line, the figures dressed in black pajamas began to run from us, and quickly they became the supposed enemy.

I fired several bursts of M16 at the fleeing black pajamas. The figures dropped from my sight, having disappeared into a thicket of bamboo. My squad and I rushed the thicket expecting to see dead bodies, but there were none. Damn, I thought there would have been at least one, or at least a trail of blood, but there was nothing—no evidence that I had hit anyone with my shots.

But the pursuit continued. I was fully recovered from my combat-stress, gonorrhea/penicillin reaction, and my bout with malaria. I was back to feeling gung ho again with a *Get Some* attitude.

We now had a spotter plane with a forward observer supporting us overhead. The plane was a piper-cub—slow flying, single-engine, propeller-driven. The plane carried no armament except for smoke canisters that the pilot dropped out of an open window—the smoke canister used to

mark targets for the jets high in the sky. So high that they seemed non-existent at the moment the piper-cub pilot had dropped a smoke canister into a group of huts where he had last seen our fleeing black pajamas take refuge.

The forward observer gave us progressive directions towards the huts. He said we would see the smoke from the canister. When I saw where the smoke was rising from in relation to where I stood—when I calculated the distance and took into consideration that the forward observer had called for a sortie of jets, I began to lose my gung-ho spirit. We were not a safe distance from the marked target.

Lieutenant Wilson yelled out for all to hear, "Get down and cover! Air strikes are on the way!"

I yelled back to him, "Sir, we are way too close! Call them off!"

"Too late O'Connell, the jets are coming!"

So there we were, a platoon of marines clawing at the bottom of a shallow ditch, trying to get even deeper, waiting to experience what the enemy must have experienced knowing that a fighter jet was on final approach to a bomb drop.

Although Lieutenant Wilson had said that the jet was on the way, I heard nothing; I did not give any thought that the roar of the jet would not come until the jet dropped its bombs and the pilot had pulled back on the stick, and then kicked in the after-burners.

There was a slight whistle which was lost to memory when several five-hundred pound bombs went BA-BOOM, and the world turned into an ear-ringing concussion of sound waves, shrapnel flying over our protected positions in the ditch, clods of earth falling, and my body in pain from the force of the ground-wave which had traveled beneath me, and through me, jarring my bones.

I lifted my head. I waited to hear the call for a corpsman, but there was not one. No one had been hit.

I yelled to the lieutenant. "Sir, we need to pull back. I'm not kidding. We are too fucking close."

But again, "Down and cover! Jets on the way!"

I was scared to death, yet there was nothing I could do but try and stay low and get the most protection out of my steel helmet as possible, wishing I could have crawled inside it.

There was another moment of silence, then the scream of the jet, a slight whistle, followed by BA-BOOM, and another ear-ringing concussion, shrapnel-whizz cutting through the air, more clods of earth falling, bones jarred even more, and somehow, no one was hit.

Two more bomb-runs were conducted. Thank God the jets had run out of ordnance.

With the bombing finished, Lieutenant Wilson stood, smiled, and said, "That wasn't so bad, was it?" I just stood and shook my head, not in disgust, but more in amazement, thinking about what we all had just survived. As I did many times in Vietnam, I wondered what my father would have said about me if he had seen firsthand what I had just endured.

Where the huts once stood was now nothing more than smoking earth—smoke filtering up through the newly formed fissures. Despite the complete devastation, lying half buried beneath the freshly blown-up earth were two dead bodies, butchered and mangled, but with just enough black clothing still attached to them for us to claim foot-on-chest kills. When this information

was transmitted to the forward observer in the piper-cub, he said, “Copy—two confirmed kills. Now stand by for the show.”

What a sight to see a jetfighter coming straight at you, treetop level, doing not one, but two victory rolls. Despite the speed of the jet, I could see the actual face of the fighter-pilot. I swear I saw him return our salute as the jet screamed right over our heads, followed by the heart wrenching roar as the jet’s afterburners rocketed the plane straight up into the sky and out of sight in seconds.

Victory never felt so good.

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The night was spent in the foothills. There were three prominent peaks. Each individual platoon was assigned a peak to defend for the night. Each platoon formed their own defensive perimeter. I had my squad—three individual fire-teams—dig-in. The fighting holes should have been deeper than they were dug, but we were tired. The day had been a full one—long and exhausting, and stressful too.

Besides being tired, our entrenching tools had done nothing more than ping off the ground when the pick-end was slammed into the laterite, hard as rock, earth. The earth shattered more like shale would, into slithers, verses the way a rich soil would have actually filled a shovel, overflowing the blade so full. The earth was not impenetrable, but when one was tired, it sure felt that way.

In the end, the holes really were not holes, but more like a depression in the ground—more like shallow graves, which come around 0300hrs we wished the holes had been dug deeper.

I was on watch when the first mortar rounds came crashing down. The CP—the company command post—was targeted. Undoubtedly the enemy had made their calculations during the day, spying on us from some concealed area without our knowledge.

The CP was positioned with one of the other platoons inside the platoon’s perimeter. Their peak was lower than where I was located, so I was looking down upon the red hot shrapnel splattering outward from the mortar rounds’ points of detonation— a light show of bright white flashes, yellowish with some red tint, and the crunching boom that followed—light traveling faster than the speed of sound.

Although I was surprised and awed at the sight below me—the quiet of the night being shattered without notice—although it seemed like it took forever for me to process what I was seeing, I had yelled out, “Incoming!” in the first second of battle.

Everyone woke and scrambled for cover—oh how we now wished we had dug deeper. Even scrunched to the ground, our asses were sticking out above ground level.

Just as I formed the thought or the feeling of pity for those in the CP, a mortar round came crashing down—BaBoom!—very close to my position. Simultaneously, my ears were ringing as chunks of shale rained down, and I was rendered temporarily deaf. I was without hearing for about a minute maybe, and when my hearing returned, it was just in time to hear a radio transmission from the CP, “Gooks in the perimeter!”

An enemy ground-assault was underway, centered on the CP. I saw smaller flashes of detonation —chicoms exploding—as I looked down upon the assault. There were no muzzle flashes, and no

sounds of rifle fire, just chicom flashes. I heard told the next morning how the enemy rushed through the perimeter so fast—it was so dark, and the marines were so low to the ground—that the enemy's charged-up momentum had propelled them straight through the CP, and right out the other side of the perimeter, and back down the other side of the hill.

A few minutes after the assault on the CP had begun, a few more mortar rounds exploded near my position, but none as close as the first one we had taken, but enough for us to keep our heads down. I had new guys in my squad. Every exploding mortar round had them trying to claw themselves deeper and deeper into the ground. I feared a ground attack upon my own position and kept calling out to my squad to keep their eyes peeled for the enemy—meaning eyes could no longer be shielded by ones helmet, or eyes could no longer be kept below the edge of the inadequately dug holes, which meant one had to lift his head up during the mortar attack because of the possibility of a ground assault to follow.

It was easier to coax the new guys to keep their heads up than it was for me to coax myself—I was counting down the days to when I might go home.

Pre-dawn, followed by first-light, gave way to a morning sun. Somehow no one was killed or seriously injured in what could easily have been a deadly attack. A priority classified medevac was requested—wounds needing medical attention, but not severe enough to require immediate evacuation, or not to take preference over an emergency medevac.

Lieutenant Cranch passed down the word that he wanted to know who and how many had been wounded. Lieutenant Wilson relayed the message to his squad-leaders. I asked the members of my squad if they had been wounded. They all said, "No."

A medevac helicopter came and took away the wounded. About twenty minutes after the helicopter left, a member of my squad—his last name was McShane—came up to me and said he had been wounded.

"You've been what?" I said in astonishment, but at the same time perturbed.

"I thought it was nothing, but I got a small hole. Looks nothing more than a bruise, but I can't move some of my fingers."

"And you're just telling me now? Didn't you say 'no' when I asked everyone if they had been wounded?"

"I didn't understand. I mean, I didn't think I had been wounded. I mean, I knew I was wounded, but I was afraid to say anything. It looked minor to me, but now I can't move my fingers."

I called for the corpsman to take a look at McShane's wound. Lieutenant Wilson came too. "O'Connell, I thought you said no one in your squad had been wounded. Didn't you say that?"

"Yes sir, that's what I reported, because that is what was reported to me. McShane here, he just told me about a wound. Says he felt something hit him in the arm but he didn't think much about it."

I watched the corpsman as he was checking McShane's fingers—reflexes, tapping his funny bone on his left arm, jabbing with a pin while asking him if he felt that or this, even taking his pulse.

While the corpsman's examination continued, I wanted everyone to hear McShane admit he had been wounded. "McShane, you got hit when one of the mortar rounds exploded—correct?"

“Yes,” he replied. He then said, “Why, don’t you believe me? I’m not faking.”

The corpsman put an end to this conversation. “McShane has nerve damage. He needs to be medevaced.”

When Lieutenant Cranch got the news he went berserk. “Get me Lieutenant Wilson and O’Connell!—and whoever this fucking McShane is. Get them for me now!

Lieutenant Cranch went up one side of us and down the other. He asked us questions, but when anyone tried to answer them, he shouted them into silence. He was really fired up. I remember hearing him say, “McShane—or whoever you are—you can fucking walk to Da Nang. I’m not calling for another medevac.”

The corpsman came to the rescue. “Sir, the wound looks like nothing, but I think a nerve has been severed.” Plus he said. “Sir, I don’t think you are serious, but McShane can’t walk to Da Nang.”

“Doc, he’ll walk if I fucking tell him to walk. Now everyone, get the fuck out of my sight and return to your positions—better yet—Lieutenant Wilson, get O’Connell and his squad out on patrol checking in front of the perimeter where the gooks screwed last night—understand?”

“Understood,” Lieutenant Wilson answered.

As my squad readied themselves for the patrol, I heard the radio transmission calling for McShane’s medevac. I knew he was not going to walk to Da Nang, but I just wished he had spoken up when he was first asked if he had been wounded or not. Life was tough enough without making it any harder, and anytime Lieutenant Cranch’s tirades could be avoided, one was better off.

———

The patrol discovered two dead enemy soldiers, both dressed in black pajamas. One of the new guys had an instamatic camera with him. He asked me if he could take pictures.

“What do you want to take pictures of?” I asked.

“The dead gooks.”

I said, “Did you kill them?”

“No.”

“Then why do you want to take their pictures. What are you going to do, send them home? Make up some war story? Listen, when you kill your own, then you can take pictures. Besides, you’d never be able to get them developed anyway, so don’t waste your time.”

I had heard told that film with pictures of dead bodies was nearly impossible to get developed, that when the image appeared, and the technician saw the bodies, he or she would destroy the film. Whether this was law, or whatever, that is what I told the new guy.

Even though, I could understand a new guy wanting a picture of a dead enemy soldier, for one of the dead was missing the very top of his head—the crown. The head looked carved up like a jack-o-lantern, with the top-piece missing, with the top of the brain in sight.

It was strange trying to figure out how a bullet had acted like a sharp knife or tool to do such damage to a skull bone.

Just as strange was the other dead soldier—not one mark was found upon the middle-age body. I remember rolling the body about, pulling the black clothing from it, trying to find a point of entry, or an exit wound, but we never found one. It mystified me—could this soldier have simply died of a heart attack?

I think of this enemy soldier more than any other I had ever seen.

Strange, but it almost did not seem right to count this one as a foot-on-chest kill, not when he might have died of natural causes, but I had the new guy with the camera step down upon his chest anyway so he could learn what a foot-on-chest kill felt like, and to experience the sound of the last breath being forced from the lungs.

It was my job to teach the new guys everything.

**Letter # 74**

*August 31, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well the Arizona has taken its toll again. Yesterday while on patrol we had 7 KIA and 7 WIA as we had a 9 hour firefight. Two of the guys I came over with got killed. One of them was my radioman. I know I'm going home now because he was behind me. Plus the guy who was gonna write Marsha got killed. He had gotten wounded back in May on Go Noi Island. Plus our Lt. and platoon sgt got hit so I am now the Right Guide. I am responsible for getting resupplies of food, water and ammo!*

*They say we might get Liberty Bridge security in about 3-4 weeks. This place is really great and there are no gooks there.*

*Well, how are things at home? I received a letter from you yesterday. It mentioned Tommy going to the drags. I hope they are still running when I get home.*

*Well I guess Sharon isn't gonna write as I haven't heard from her yet. She must be feeding Mama a line of shit*

*Oh, the letter I received also said Mom and Barbara might go out to California. I think that would be great. But like Dad said, "Barbara was either full of beer or shit." Well, fill me in later. OK?*

*Well, got to go for now so be good and may God bless you and me. I'll write later.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

It is a letter like this one which makes me want to stop writing this book. Why would I write such a letter and send it to my mother and father, when the fact is no one died, and there was no nine hour firefight. Oh, don't get me wrong, something horrible happened, but not what I had written.

I now face the fact that I was really disturbed and mentally troubled. I made up stories even when it might have been easier to tell the truth—but not in this case.

I'm trying to work this out in my head while I'm sitting in Starbucks. There are many people here, so I do not feel alone—but I am. I'm alone with my thoughts, and not a single person here in Starbucks knows what I am thinking or what I am trying to work through.

———

Seven or eight guys were wounded on August 30, 1969 and I wasn't one of them, but I easily could have been.

We were on patrol in the Arizona. The weather was hot and dry. It was morning. We had patrolled for maybe a few hours and then had stopped to rest on a piece of high ground. We had a commanding view of rice paddies and tree lines below us. Lieutenant Wilson wanted to call-in some artillery on a tree line to our front. I think he said he wanted to practice some of his map and compass skills. There was a group of marines huddled down low conferring with each other about what they thought the correct grid coordinates were for our intended target. I was one of the marines in this grouping.

The Lieutenant got on the radio and requested a routine fire mission. He gave the coordinates and we waited for the faint, single boom of artillery—Willie Peter round on its way—and watched for the rising smoke of white phosphorous.

The round landed off target. An adjustment was made and a request for a barrage of high explosive rounds—fire for effect—was radioed in. Again, the distant booms, quickly followed by the crunch-boom, brown-gray cloud of smoke, earth blown up from the middle of the tree-line, up into the clear blue sky. What was actually in the tree line was unknown to us, and other than taking a quick peek through a set of binoculars, no one seemed to be interested in finding out. Why go looking for trouble.

After the artillery mission had been completed, the word was passed to saddle up. We were going to patrol back towards where the rest of Mike Company was positioned. I stood up and began to walk away from the group. When I got where my pack was, and as I was hefting it onto my back, I was looking directly at the Lieutenant and his radioman. I watched as the radioman began to pick up his radio to put it on his back.

BOOM!

All at once there was a cloud of brown-gray stone-dust super sonically thrust from the point of detonation, like a wave crashed over me. I lost vision for second or two, but regained it to see a mushroom cloud of earth-tone smoke and dust billow up into the sky, and what I saw in the dust back on earth was a hellish mayhem which kept evolving without any sense of time. I do not know what I heard first after the boom—it was either the screams of the wounded yelling in pain, or yelling for a corpsman, or my own voice yelling out, "Incoming!"

I could not tell how many marines were wounded, but I could see that Lieutenant Wilson was down along with his radioman, Edson. And I saw a Dawson on his back, and a marine by the last name of Laracy down on his side writhing in pain. I saw the corpsman making a move towards the wounded. "Doc, you got to stay put. We don't know if that was a mortar round or a booby-trap. Either way, we have to go slow."

It was hard not to rush to the calls of the wounded, but I had thoughts of Doc Pyle being killed on Go Noi Island as he had charged forward to treat the wounded, or what might have happened

to me if I had not been lucky while lugging the remains of Smith and Murphy back out to Liberty Road back in May.

There were more than four wounded; I could not tell how many more, but three, or maybe five guys were walking around in a daze. I yelled out to the marines wandering in a stupor, “Get down! Get fucking down!”

A few of them flopped down, but one or two just slowly twirled about as if they might corkscrew right into the ground.

The corpsman said he could not wait any longer. “Go slow Doc, if you got to go. It probably was a booby-trap. If it had been a mortar round there would have been more of them by now.”

I figured with just a single explosion, and no memory of a whistling round piercing through the air, I figured the explosion was just what I had told the corpsman it was—a booby-trap.

My concern now was the presence of multiple booby-traps meant to take down the rescuers.

Filtering through my mind was the thought that Lieutenant Wilson, Edson, and Dawson had been wounded together on Go Noi Island, in the same manner—a booby-trap. I thought how unlucky Dawson was, as he had just returned back to Vietnam no more than a few weeks earlier after recovering from his wounds received back in May. These facts meant nothing, would help me accomplish zilch, but they stuck with me as I looked at the three of them down on the ground, each in their own sense of pain. These facts distracted from the reality that was before my eyes, distracted me so that I did not have to go crazy.

This time I did not panic like I had on Go Noi Island when I had seen blood spurting from Dawson’s jaw. This time I was able to think, or flip the switch to auto-pilot.

The mayhem would be a collage of sights and sounds if I was to paint it today. I cannot find the way to stress the point that everything was happening all at once.

“Get Laracy on his side, the bad lung down, so he can breathe!” I was able to recall if someone had been wounded in a lung, roll him on his side with the wounded lung down. This would allow the healthy lung to freely expand and expel fully, without restriction.

Laracy’s color improved as he was able to increase his oxygen intake.

Lieutenant Wilson’s guts were exposed, and Dawson was complaining about his breathing, but his leg looked broken too. Edson needed morphine.

The other wounded, the dazed and confused ones—peppered with pebbles and stones, and a few pieces of shrapnel—were simply told to sit.

The platoon sergeant said to me, “There’s a medevac on the way, right?”

“Fuck!” I felt like I was going to mentally snap. Part of me wanted to explode at the platoon sergeant—“Can you fucking do anything!”— but he was new and had never experienced anything like what we were in the middle of.

I grabbed the radio handset and cut into other radio chatter on the company band. “Break-break-break-break-break! Mike-mike-mike-mike-mike! Mike-one-alpha, over!”

The senseless radio chatter continued. I had not been successful in getting anyone’s attention. “Doesn’t anyone understand, ‘Break, break, break,” I thought to myself.

I tried again in a more convincing way, “Break, break—motherfucker—break! This is Mike-one-alpha requesting an emergency medevac, over.”

I now had everyone’s attention. “Mike-one -alpha, go ahead with your message.”

“We need an emergency medevac.”

“For how many?”

“At least four,” I said.

“How many?”

But before I could repeat myself, the radioman said, “Standby.”

I knew in the pit of my stomach what I was standing by for—Lieutenant Cranch.

The Lieutenant’s bark came through the handset, “Give me a sit-rep—ASAP!

I started the situation report. “We have tripped a surprise package. The Lieutenant is an emergency medevac.”

“Your request is four emergency medevacs—is this correct?”

“Affirmative—it might be even more.”

Proper radio procedure ended as Lieutenant Cranch’s fury increased, “Damn it, I need to know what is happening out there. How many wounded are there. Put the Lieutenant on the radio.”

“The Lieutenant is wounded.”

I anticipated some more rage from Lieutenant Cranch, but the next radio transmission was, “Mike-one-alpha, give us your position.”

I thought to myself, why can’t there be street corners with sign posts in the Arizona?

I yelled to the platoon sergeant, “Sarge, can you figure out where we are? I need our grid-coordinates.”

Thank you God—or whoever was looking down upon us—as the platoon sergeant was able to come up with our location in less than a minute.

“And Sarge, I need to know how many are wounded and need to be medevaced.”

He came back with the following numbers, “Seven wounded, but only six will need to be medevaced.”

I relayed this information back to Lieutenant Cranch’s radioman.

The radioman then relayed to me that Lieutenant Cranch wanted the names of the wounded. I was now dumbfounded by the request and left speechless. I just stared for a few seconds—maybe even more—at the wounded that were looking off into space through their morphine filtered eyes, and thought I might join them.

All I could manage over the radio was, “Unable to provide the names. We really need a medevac badly.”

I expected to hear more grieve back from Lieutenant Cranch, but instead, the company radioman gave me the radio frequency that he wanted me to change to so that I could communicate with the medevac-helicopter.

Inside my helmet I had a card with step-by-step directions on how to call in a medevac, particularly what to say to the helicopter pilots. I had been carrying the card for ten months; I actually used to read it once in awhile to myself. It was going to come in handy.

In a short time I heard the sounds of helicopters off in the distance. I hoped they were coming to us as the corpsman was asking every few minutes whether the medevac was on the way. I kept saying, "Two minutes," but we were somewhere near fifteen minutes without help now.

I heard a voice over the radio. It was one of the pilots. I immediately told him I had never called in a medevac before."Take a deep breath for me marine. You'll do just fine," he said.

He said he had our coordinates and wanted us to pop smoke to mark our exact location. When we popped the smoke grenade the pilot said he had us in view. Two Huey gunships flew over our heads and began to fly a wide circle around our location. The pilot then told me to check our intended LZ for booby traps.

Having to walk through the LZ area to look for booby traps was frightening. None of us wanted to do it. No one wanted to leave the safety of where they stood or knelt, or laid, but the sweep had to be made.

When the sweep was completed, I reported this fact back to the pilot. He said the medevac helicopter was approaching the LZ for landing. I looked up, and there was a CH-46 approaching the LZ, and as the helicopter came closer to the ground, all sorts of dust and debris was blown in the air.

With the helicopter on the ground, the wounded were quickly led or carried into the helicopter. The pilot told me he did not want to be on the ground any longer than he had to be. Things went this fast. Helicopter on the ground—tailgate down—wounded hurried, or swiftly carried onboard —tailgate up—hurricane force winds blowing downward—blinding dust pushing out, blasting the faces of those remaining on the ground—and the helicopter rose back into air, destine for Da Nang, with what I believed to be six medevacs, but it turned out to be seven. I would not become aware of the discrepancy until Lieutenant Cranch jumped down my throat.

Another platoon was sent out to our position to escort what remained of the First Platoon. We were down six marines, but actually seven.

Prior to the reinforcements arriving, with the platoon sergeant asking me what we should do, I suggested we spread out in a bamboo thicket and hide, but not too far into the thicket—there was a high probability of booby-traps.

I was feeling proud of myself for the way I had performed. I thought how Captain Burns would have praised me, and how he probably would have put me in for a meritorious combat promotion to the rank of Sergeant. In fact, to this day, the most prideful moment in my entire life was when I called in the medevac and the wounded marines were evacuated to safety, regardless if it had been six, or seven. But my feeling good would soon be tested when I returned to the company perimeter and stood before Lieutenant Cranch.

"O'Connell, what the fuck went on out there?" Lieutenant Cranch was livid.

“Sir, we hit a booby-trap.”

“Seven wounded? What were you in—a fucking cluster-fuck?”

“No sir. We had just finished up with an artillery mission. We were saddling up to patrol back here when the booby-trap exploded. It might have even been an incoming mortar round.”

“Bullshit!”

The fact of the matter was that we had been physically too close to one another. In fact, we had been in a cluster-fuck—just like Lieutenant Cranch had figured—when the booby-trap had been detonated. To me, this was a mute issue, but not to Lieutenant Cranch.

The argument continued.

“Sir, the platoon sergeant can back me up on this. We both assumed it was a booby-trap, but a mortar attack wasn't out of the question. Ask the sergeant, he knows.”

The sergeant began to move forward. “Sergeant, I'll get to you afterwards. You're new here. You might not know any better than to gather in a cluster-fuck, but O'Connell does. So move on if you know what’s best for you.”

The Lieutenant continued with me, “And another thing O'Connell, where did you learn to count?”

“Huh?”

“Where did you learn to fucking count? You reported six medevacs when in fact there were seven. Didn't you count the medevacs getting on the helicopter?”

“Yes I did, sir.”

“You counted seven?”

“No sir, I counted six—there were seven wounded but one of the guys said he was more shook-up than anything else.”

“Then why did he get on the helicopter.”

“Sir, I'm not certain that he did—I counted six.”

Lieutenant Cranch turned to the corpsman and said, “Doc, how many medevac tags did you fill out?”

The corpsman inhaled, and then exhaled what sounded like the last breath from the body of a foot-on-chest kill. He then managed another inhalation and breathed out the words, “Sir, I didn't have time to make out all of the tags. There were... “

“You didn't have time? Are you shitting me Doc? That is your fucking job!”

I had not been surprised by the Lieutenant's violent volley of words after hearing the corpsman's remark, but this situation was going nowhere.

I was growing frustrated. There was nothing I could say that was going to satisfy Lieutenant Cranch. I was ready to throw in the towel.

“Sir, we fucked up—okay?”

“You fucked up all right. You left someone out there. You left somebody behind.”

“No one was left behind.”

“How do you know, O'Connell. You can't count. Didn't you say six got on the helicopter, when in fact the pilot reported seven?”

The sergeant got into the conversation, “Sir, no one is missing. Seven were medevaced. We just reported the wrong number. We should have said seven instead of six. I take full responsibility for the screw-up.”

“And what about Doc's fuck-up. How do you explain that, sergeant?”

“He was busy saving lives.”

I can still see us all standing there in silence—the corpsman, the platoon sergeant, and myself—praying silently for mercy, or so it seemed to me. I could feel the dust still matted on my face—matted the same way on the platoon sergeant's face that no longer looked new. The corpsman's face had dust also, but his dust was mixed with the blood from the wounded—be it six, be it seven, be it a million. What the hell did it all add up to anyway.

Lieutenant Cranch had the last word. “Fuck up again and I'll be taking stripes away. Now carry-on.”

How ironic. There I was thinking Captain Burns would have promoted me, but instead, I was being told that I would be demoted if I fucked up again. There was not much I could do about it. I would just keep my flak-jacket buttoned up and my helmet on tight and weather the occasional verbal barrage which came forth from deep inside Lieutenant Cranch trying to keep us all alive.

Strange, but somehow I believed the Lieutenant liked me. He just had a Marine Corps way of showing it.

_____

My mother and my Aunt Barbara were thinking about flying out to California to meet me when I arrived back in the states. Their trip would allow them to visit with my Uncle Richard who lived in Carlsbad, California. But for whatever reasons, neither my mother nor my Aunt made the trip. My father probably reveled, probably felt like a prophet thinking he had predicted my Aunt not making the trip—reveled in a negative expectation coming true.

_____

I liked going to the New England Speedway at Epping, New Hampshire to watch the dragsters race up the quarter-mile track. I loved the sights and sounds and the smell of burnt rubber. I loved the names of the drivers and the different names of the cars—Sox and Martin, Hurst Hemi Under Glass, Big Daddy Don Garlits, Connie Kalitta, and the wheel-stander funny car known as The Little Red Wagon.

So many times while I was on watch in the dark at night, I would fantasize about driving a dragster, making an explosive hole shot, impressing the crap out of everyone watching, especially Sharon.

## Letter # 75

*Sepember 3, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*Well how are things at home? I hope this letter finds everybody in the best of health. I'm in good health and my morale is very high. Don't ask me why. Being the Right Guide is pretty good as I don't go out on patrols, ambushes or LPs, plus I don't stand lines at night. I stand a radio watch in the command post.*

*I just got finished swimming and it was great. The temp is about 90. My comb goes through my hair again.*

*We heard on the news today that the "old man" up in North Vietnam is critically sick. I hope the bastard dies. And then again if he does they will have a big offensive down here.*

*You said in your letter you heard that we were taking a beating. You've probably been reading about the 7th Marines. They're up in Hep Duc valley which isn't too far from where I am. Right now we are about 8 miles west of An Hoa and 30 miles south of Da Nang. If I ever got caught telling you stuff like that I'd hang. Plus we are down to 123 men when we should have 210. Plus I'm running low on M-16 ammo. I'd tell you more secrets just for spite but that's about all I know.*

*Well got to sign out for now.*

*Love, Paul*

*PS. God Bless ya*

**—Between the Lines—**

At the young age of nineteen, I was put into the position of Right-Guide, for I had more time in Vietnam than anyone else in the First Platoon. This was accomplished by staying alive.

I felt confident as the Right-Guide of First Platoon. My job was logistical. I worked with the squad leaders who kept me abreast of their needs, such as food, water, clothing, and ammunition. I kept a little book with the names of the platoon members and their service and rifle numbers. I kept the Lieutenant and the Platoon Sergeant aware of our inventory. It was my responsibility to keep the company Gunnery Sergeant informed, and to order resupplies through him. I found these duties allowed me to use my brain in a way I had never used it before. I got to think things out instead of just reacting to stimuli. Yes, I was feeling good.

———

I had heard a report on Armed Forces Radio that Ho Chi Minh was dying. I was taught that he was the enemy—the leader of the enemy—so why wouldn't I wish death upon him. I didn't think his death would bring an end to the war—not the way I perceived the war with Germany had ended with Hitler's death, or the way a game of chess ends when someone's king is captured—but instead I felt Ho Chi Minh's death would incite the enemy to increase its fight against the Americans

**Letter # 76**

*September 6, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*How is everybody at home? I hope this letter finds everybody in the best of health.*

*Since the old fart up in North Vietnam died, the gooks have been raising hell. We were told that there would be no fighting for three days but that seems to be a lot of bullshit.*

*Well the temp today is about 90 but as usual it is very humid. We are starting to get a little rain in the afternoon. It keeps us cool for about an hour but then the temperature goes right back up.*

*Yesterday they brought us out hot dogs and bread. We had a good'ole cookout. Plus we had orange juice and candy. Plus chocolate milk in cans. It doesn't taste too good but it's better than nothing.*

*We got a new Lt yesterday, and he is a real winner.*

*Well by the time you get this letter the kids should be back in school.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines——**

Two nights in a row, the enemy mortared and fired B-40 rockets at our positions. The mortar and rocket barrages were followed by ground assaults.

On the first night of attack, from my fighting hole I could see the muzzle-flashes from the enemy mortar tubes—the flashes followed by the popping sound of mortar rounds being propelled out the tubes, followed a second or two later by the crunch-boom detonation as the rounds exploded nearby, splashing red hot shrapnel like the way water would splatter, except the shrapnel would be flying at supersonic speeds.

Although the flashes from the mortar tubes were hundreds of yards away—further than the effective range of my M-16—I aimed my rifle at the flashes and fired off a few rounds. In a split second, a red streak—a train of light, like a thick laser beam—came screaming towards me It was a B-40 rocket round headed my way. I had heard about the infamous red trail of light but had never witnessed it firsthand.

Luck was with me. Although aimed in the right direction—centered left and right—the round had gone high, exploding in the trees high above my head. Along with the explosion, there was the sound of the bamboo trees being split and splintered by the rocket round's shrapnel.

The bamboo thicket towering over my head had taken the brunt of the explosion and had absorbed the concussion, but a few bamboo splinters and bamboo leaves which had floated down upon me reinforced how close the round had come to finding its mark, specifically me. At first I had thought some sort of insects had been falling down upon me in the dark, but a closer look revealed the leaves and splintered bamboo. The enemy might not have hit me, but he sure had deterred me from firing my rifle again.

The enemy continued with their mortar attack. They were being very meticulous in walking the mortar rounds back and forth, side to side, in twenty meter increments. I felt certain that a mortar round was going to find me sooner or later.

I wondered how many marines were ever killed while actually praying. Even though I was still looking to the stars to check on my fate, if I had died on one of these nights in the Arizona—had

a mortar round found me in the bottom of a fighting hole, exploded in a direct hit upon contact with my body like I was imagining—I would have died praying to God.

I had my helmet pulled down as low as it would go and had tightened the chin strap. I had zipped my flak jacket up as high up as it would go and scrunched as low as I could in the bottom of the fighting hole, not like a coward, but someone who wanted to live to see another day. Damn, I was a short-timer. I did not want to get myself killed now, not with less than a month before I was to rotate home.

Different positions around the perimeter were reporting movement. The enemy soldiers were maneuvering by fire—several soldiers firing their Ak-47s while several others moved forward. Then those who had been firing, they moved forward while their counterparts fired their weapons to keep our heads down low.

With the radio reports from some of the other positions—frantic reports of the enemy advance—I knew I had to reemerge from the fighting-hole, at least peek over the edge. I could not let the enemy get to my hole.

There were two other marines in the hole with me—new guys again. I had to encourage them to do the same thing. I wanted them to keep a sharp lookout for enemy movement, thus the three of us raised up just high enough to see over the edge of the fighting-hole.

The battle had started in the dark, but fortunately we now had a C-130 overhead dropping illumination canisters into the sky, with the familiar “pop,” then the bright flare suspended beneath the silk parachute lighting up the terrain.

The flares swaying back and forth made for hundreds of moving shadows, but despite the new guys thinking the shadows were the enemy, my eleven months of combat experience left me knowing the shadows were just imaginary enemy soldiers.

There was no movement to the front of my fighting hole, but other positions were under attack. In the distance I could hear the grenades and chicoms exploding, and the exchange of AK and M-16 fire. It wasn't long before I heard the call for a corpsman—marines had been wounded.

The enemy's probe of the company's defensive perimeter kept up a little longer until the enemy fired a red flare into the sky, signaling their forces to cease the fight, and to go into hiding once more for the day.

As my adrenaline subsided, total exhaustion would take over my body. I would sit in a daze and listen to the engines of the C-130 grow faint as the propeller driven plane made its way back to the Da Nang airfield, the artificial lighting no longer needed as first light, followed by dawn, lit up the sky once more in the Arizona.

———

The new platoon commander—Lieutenant Dwyer—was not new to Vietnam, but he was new to the bush. He had been stationed in Da Nang with a non-infantry unit. On his first day with us he wanted to try his hand at calling in artillery fire. So being the Right-Guide, I joined up with him, the Platoon Sergeant and the Lieutenant's radioman. We were taking a break from the platoon-size patrol we were conducting, resting on a piece of high ground overlooking the rice paddies and tree lines laid to waste in the Arizona, west of where Lieutenant Wilson and the others had been wounded a few days before.

The Lieutenant pointed in the direction of a tree line with a deserted village in the middle of it. He said he would make this his target. When I heard the grid coordinates he radioed to the artillery battery in An Hoa, I checked the grid coordinates on my own map and found them to be at least five hundred yards right of where the Lieutenant had pointed. I said, “Sir, the coordinates you just called in are off.” I pointed out for him to where I thought his calculations would have the marker round fall.

The Lieutenant looked straight at me and said, “What do you know? When I want your opinion, I'll ask you for it.”

Hurt and shocked, I simply turned and walked away, found a place to sit on the ground, and stared out towards the area I had calculated as the target area. I was in a full pout.

The Lieutenant had not noticed that I had walked away in disgust, but the radioman and the Platoon Sergeant had. The radioman looked my way and indicated with a gesture of his hands opened to the heavens, and a slight shake of his head, “Oh well, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

The new Lieutenant had not noticed I had walked away because all he was seeing was what he saw through his binoculars he had trained on his intended target. He did not see the white smoke rising up from where I had predicted—out of view of his binoculars, five hundred yards to the right of where he was looking—not until the Platoon Sergeant had tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

Seeing the white phosphorous smoke, the lieutenant first wanted to believe the smoke he was seeing was another unit’s fire mission. Then he said, “How the hell can that be?”

Just as I had figured, the round had landed right of the target, dead smack in the middle of a rice paddy, nowhere near the tree line the Lieutenant had intended to bomb.

I continued to sit by myself, listening to the Lieutenant tell the others how the artillery battery must have made a mistake, must have aimed the artillery pieces wrong. “Damn, they really screwed up,” he said.

I figured the Lieutenant did not want to embarrass himself by calling for an adjustment of five hundred yards, so he reported that the marker round was on-target. He had his radioman send the verbal message, “Fire for effect,” and a barrage of six high explosive artillery rounds blanketed the middle of the old, non-productive rice paddy. The artillery battery had been led to believe that the original grid coordinates given by the Lieutenant had been perfectly calculated by him, and that the aiming information entered into the artillery pieces all jived.

I was still sitting all alone, slowly shaking my head, hoping we would never need artillery in the thick of battle. I could feel the Lieutenant's stare—his eyes like daggers in my back—as I looked off into space. As far as I was concerned, I could have gone without ever talking to Lieutenant Dwyer again. He did not know me, but I could easily have lived by his rule, “Don't speak unless spoken to.”

With my back still to the Lieutenant, he said with a growl, “O'Connell, do you have a problem?”

Without turning to face him, I said, “None at all, sir.”

**Letter # 77**

*September 16, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well, I'm sorry I haven't written lately but the Arizona during our last 5 days was hell. We were under a heavy mortar and rocket attack every night. The gooks have changed their tactics from ground attacks to ground attacks with help from supporting arms.*

*Well we are now at Liberty Bridge and I don't do anything except hold three formations a day. Then I get drunk. I owe it to myself. I'm still the right guide and the right guide does nothing in the rear.*

*Liberty Bridge is about 6 miles north of An Hoa. It is the only bridge that crosses the Son Thu Bon River to Da Nang. So you can see it is very important that we protect this area.*

*We NCOs have our own quarters which ain't too bad for Vietnam. We live in new tents with plywood dividers inside so it's almost like having your own room.*

*My new Lt. told me today that I have a 90% chance of making Sgt. before I go home. The skipper also talked to me yesterday. He's a Captain and I shoot the shit with him just like if he was a PFC. He told me being 19 years old Sgt. would be something to be proud of.*

*Well got to go swimming down the river. May God bless you all and get me home fast.*

*Love, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

On our last night in the Arizona, the enemy pummeled us with a fierce mortar attack which was followed by a ground assault, but once again I was fortunate for the ground assault had not been directed at my position.

On this night, Mike Company actually was reinforced by an additional marine infantry company, which meant I was manning a different fighting hole from the night before, and not the one I had manned on the night the B-40 rocket had been fired at me.

My new hole had been dug deep, as the digging had been easy going with our entrenching tools having no problem getting into the fertile soil. The digging had been so much easier than digging into the hard laterite earth a few weeks past.

The enemy gunners systematically, once again, were walking the mortar rounds back and forth, left and right. At first I had my head up, my eyes above the edge of the hole, but as I sensed the mortar rounds being walked closer and closer towards my position, I sunk down into the hole and pulled on the trousers of the two other marines I was sharing the hole with. I wanted them down low too.

They scrunched to the bottom of the hole with me.

We were close to one another, like a litter of dogs, but not to keep each other warm. We were close out of necessity. The hole was deep, but not quite wide enough for three without partially being on top of one another.

Just as I had thought about standing upright to glance at my surroundings, a mortar round exploded very close to the edge of the fighting hole. Although I was packed tightly in the bottom

of the hole, and close to four feet beneath ground level, the explosion left my ears ringing and feeling like I had earplugs inserted in them. No way was I or the other two marines going to poke their heads above the edge of the hole. We would have to take the chance the enemy would not maneuver towards our hole with their own mortar rounds raining down close by, but one could never be certain, not with a daring enemy bent on killing marines, or an enemy who might feel it an honor to die and meet up with Ho Chi Minh up in heaven, or wherever it was that he had gone to.

The next few mortar rounds were close, but then the rounds that followed were exploding further and further away—as if a storm front had passed—as the enemy gunners continued to walk their mortar rounds in other directions, this time zeroing in on someone else.

I let some time pass before rising up. Knowing when to come back up was an instinctual thing—a feeling in the gut. It was not like I had checked my watch to see how much time had passed since the last mortar round had landed. No, it was just something internal that said, "Get your head up."

When I did, the sky lit up with enemy tracer fire filling the sky, and a mixed staccato sound of AK-47 being matched by our M-16s, as if they had been talking violently back and forth to one another, tit for tat.

The exchange of fire seemed to increase in intensity, some of the increase because my hearing was gradually coming back to me. Other than a few stray rounds and several ricochets whining high overhead, the actual ground assault was directed at the other infantry company, but nothing had freed us from the fear of an assault coming our way.

After some time had passed, after the C-130 flare-ship had come and gone—just before first light—the enemy fired a roman candle like red flare into the air. They broke off contact and once again went into hiding, all but the dead left behind, sprawled out in front of several positions manned by the other infantry company with us.

After the sun had come up over the horizon, I took a walk to gawk at the dead. They had been stacked like logs. There might have been six or seven bodies, maybe even a dozen with various contorted looks upon their faces. Several marines from the other company razzed those of us from Mike Company over the fact that they were the ones who had come up with the confirmed kills. "Without us, Mike Company would have gotten their ass kicked," they said.

I replied, "They attacked you guys because they knew you were weaklings. They knew better than to fuck with us."

"Bullshit. We came up with the kills because we are hardcore."

"You guys came up with the kills because the enemy came your way. It's just the way it is—but thanks for the help."

"Anytime, Mike Company."

———

Liberty Bridge was heaven after the Arizona. Actually anything would have been heaven, but the living conditions were the best I had experienced in Vietnam, other than when I had been at 1st Med in Da Nang or Stack Arms.

Although I had heard stories about marines having been killed during the Tet Offensive of 1968 while defending the bridge and the artillery battery in place there, the reinforced sandbagged bunkers, and the multiple lines of concertina wire surrounding the perimeter, gave me a feeling of security. I felt like I was in the rear instead of the bush, and on top of this, a mess hall and outhouses where I could actually sit to go to the bathroom, added to the feelings of comfort.

Feeling clean from daily swims in the Son Thu Bon was a relief also. In addition to all of those comforts, the tent I was assigned to sleep in, did not leak, and the tent was raised up off the ground, erected upon a plywood floor. The sides of the tent were sand-bagged up to waist high, forming parapets all around the outside of the tent. The interior was divided by plywood partitions, thus I had space to myself and enjoyed the privacy.

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Lieutenant Cranch was not a captain, but he had been filling the position normally held by one. The Marine Corps had been short on captains, so many infantry units were led by first lieutenants. This was no different than me being a right guide. A right guide should have been a sergeant, but the Marine Corps was short on sergeants too. Maybe this was why there had been talk about a promotion for me.

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If Lieutenant Cranch had ever read this letter, and how I had claimed to have talked with him as if he was a private first class, he would have jumped down my throat. He may have eased up on me some—maybe because we were not in the bush and both from Massachusetts—but I never forgot he was the Company Commander, gung-ho as all hell, and whatever he said was gospel. For all of this I respected him.

My relationship with Lieutenant Dwyer had also become one of respect—mutual respect. I found him to be calm under fire, and although he never apologized to me for how he had treated me on the day we had disagreed about the artillery mission, he asked me more and more for my opinion on different things. It felt good to be thought of as one who was knowledgeable.

**Letter # 78**

*September, 18, 1969*

*Dear Family!!!*

*Well I'm writing this letter by candle light. Actually it's hard on my eyes but I didn't have any time during the day. I've suffered worst so it really doesn't bother me.*

*Well in two more days it will be a whole year since I last seen good'ole "353". It really seems only like yesterday. That is, sometimes.*

*Oh, about the phone call. The other day they said we could place 5 calls back to the states, so being an NCO I was one of them. I just felt like calling. I couldn't hear you and Marsha too good but I could make out your voices. This time, instead of calling from An Hoa, I called from Liberty Bridge. It isn't in the field but you couldn't actually call it the rear. We do have a lot of trouble with snipers. They shot some guy in the ass while he was taking a shower so I think I'll stay dirty until I get home. I think it would be much healthier.*

*Well Tommy and Marsha must be back to the old routine of school again. I sure wish I had spent the last year in school. But then again I'd just be putting Vietnam off.*

*Have Tommy write me about school and maybe I can arrange a few dollars for him.*

*I was wondering how Steve was doing. I wrote him back in May and never got a letter back. Is he off of Vietnam?*

*Now let me tell you what the situation is between me and Sharon. Well she has informed me that we will not be seeing each other cause she has met someone else and has plans to be married in 2 years. This doesn't break my heart one bit. Actually it was better this way cause I found out what she really was like instead of wasting time and money on her. The only thing I want to come home to is my parents and brother and sisters. Like all my buddies told me, these people can never send you a Dear John.*

*Sharon wouldn't have been the type for me when I came home anyway. After being in Vietnam I have grown almost 5 years in maturity. I might not know how to spell it but I sure have it. You'll see when I get home. When a man is responsible for the lives of 35 men he can't be thinking like a glue sniffing kid. When a man sees his best buddy die beside him he really knows he ain't any kid. Plus for the past year I have lived in filth, sweat and some of the most primitive conditions a man can go through, so I'm gonna live with class and dignity. Everything I have will be only the best. Sharon just didn't have the ability to live like this. Whoever she marries, I wish them the best of luck. I will not make trouble cause this is not how a mature man acts.*

*This might have sounded like a lot of shit to you but what I wrote came from deep down inside me. I really never had the chance to express my feelings on paper.*

*Well got to sign off until tomorrow.*

*May God bless you all.*

*Love, Paul*

*P.S. ONLY THE PRIVILEDGED CAN SERVE WITH THE "WORLD'S FINEST."*

*USMC FOREVER?*

*NO TELLING!!*

**—Between the Lines—**

I specifically remember writing this letter.

I was in my plywood cubicle. I was writing and drinking beer at the same time. The more I drank, the angrier I got.

I had finally received a letter from Sharon. I might have gotten it earlier in the day, or maybe a few days before, or maybe even ten days had passed since I had gotten the disturbing news. Maybe this was why I hadn't written a letter home between September 6th and September 16th. Maybe I had been brooding, keeping my emotions to myself, but drinking by myself had brought the pain to the surface.

After I finished the letter to my family, I wandered outside my tent to see who was still up and found Gaither and King Rat drinking beer and whiskey inside a sandbagged bunker. They

offered me some. I took the beer but passed on the hard liquor—beer made me crazy enough—whiskey sent me right over the edge.

I got to telling them about the letter Sharon had sent me—how she was done with me—how she had someone new and was going to marry him. They started to get angry. Their anger came close to mine. No one wanted to hear anything about a Dear John, especially when it happened to a good friend.

One of them asked me what I was going to do about the situation. I told them I was going to write her a damn letter—give her a piece of my mind. So I got a piece of paper and a pen, and while I sat with Gaither and King Rat, I wrote as I spoke out loud these words. "When I get home, you and him can hang it the fuck up. I'm pretty good with an M-16."

"Wow man, that should get her attention," Gaither said.

"King Rat said, "Fucking-A. But one thing, you won't send that letter. You haven't got the balls."

"I haven't got the balls? Here, you mail the fucking letter then."

I addressed the envelope to Sharon, sealed the letter inside, and handed it over to King Rat.

"This doesn't mean a thing," he said. "You could be sending this to anyone. It's probably a bogus address."

"Trust me, it isn't."

"I still think you don't have the balls," King Rat said.

"Just mail the fucking letter and pass me another beer."

———

I called home just like I had the previous March. My father was working at the fire station so I only got to talk with my mother and younger sister. The call was probably received by them early in the morning—before sunrise—back at 353 Franklin Street, my home back in the world.

———

As for the sniper targeting the guy in the shower—hitting him in the ass—this was nothing more than nonsense written in a drunken state of mind.

**Letter # 79**

[type-written letter]

*September 28, 1969*

*Dear family,*

*As you can see I must be in the rear because I am using a typewriter. I still remember a little from high school. I am in An Hoa waiting to go to Da Nang so I can get back to good ole Quincy, Mass.*

*Let me tell you what they have planned right now. Tomorrow we turn in our war gear, get paid and get our final medical work done. Then on the 30th we go to Da Nang for our final*

*processing out of the country. All those people with rotation dates in October will fly home. They will start loading a ship taking the people with November rotation dates from the 30th of November then work to the people with dates around the first. My date is the 12th so if they fill the ship before they get to my name they will fly me home. If I fly home it will be between the 16th and 30th of October. So in this case I would rather take a ship. The ship leaves between the 1st and the 4th of October. It is going to stop in Okinawa, Japan, Korea and Pearl Harbor. The cruise will take from 17 to 30 days from Da Nang. So as you can see I can still not give you a definite date on when I'll be home. But at least I am in the rear and will go to Da Nang in two days. I hope I get on the ship as I've never been to sea. It seems like I've done everything else. Well only time will tell when I get home and how I get home.*

*I sent a Mars Gram last night. I hope you get it. You should get it. It's run by the same unit that puts through the calls back to the states.*

*You might as well stop writing because by the time I get the letters I will be out of this country.*

*!!!!! We just took some rockets. !!!!! That just goes to show you that you're not safe anywhere. But it didn't come close so there is no worry there. Let me get back to what I was talking about.*

*I really felt good when they told me I was going home. I still don't think it's true. I have dreamed about going home so many times that I still think it's a dream. But finally I think it's for real. It's been a long war for me but surviving it I've proved to myself that if you put your heart to something you make your goal. It's really something for a grunt to go a full tour in this war.*

*Well I guess I've said everything I've had to say. We can say that Paul O'Connell has gone through another era in his life. I can't wait to get home. I wish I knew an exact date but you know how Uncle Sam is.*

*So I guess I'll sign off from Vietnam. The next time you hear from me should be from Okinawa.*

*Let us all thank God for pulling me through this year of crisis. Be good and I will be home soon.*

*Love you all, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

This was another letter I specifically remember writing. I was in An Hoa inside the company office. The company clerk had let me use a typewriter.

———

I had not written a letter to my family in the last ten days. We had been out in the bush participating in Operation Golden Harvest, providing protection for the Vietnamese farmers while they harvested their rice.

The days were spent watching the farmers work in their flooded paddies—us watching them as they stooped over gathering the rice. We also kept an eye out for the enemy. If the farmers had not been afforded protection, the enemy would have robbed them of their harvest.

The days were boring. It was just as hard to stay awake during the day as it was to stay awake at night.

The days and nights were uneventful. We made no contact with the enemy, but the boredom was lifted when I received great news that literally had me jumping for joy like a little kid—I was going home.

The news came one morning without warning. The company radioman told me he had just received a radio message ordering the company back to Liberty Bridge. The message also was that those who were scheduled to rotate home in October were going to be sent to An Hoa to begin processing out. All I had to do was survive the hump back to Liberty Bridge.

As crazy as it sounds, I volunteered to walk point for the company. I was so psyched that I didn't care that the journey would force me into the flooded rice paddies—knee deep water—mud practically pulling my boots right off my feet—the water teeming with leaches sucking blood from my legs.

Actually I felt confident in the water for I had learned over the last year that there would be no booby-traps in the flooded paddies, but as I approached the edge of Liberty Road, I slowed down and moved cautiously. I had not forgotten Smith or Murphy's death—killed by a booby-trap on the side of the road back in May—or the time a new guy, his first day in the bush, had his arm blown off.

I took the last twenty yards, step-by-step, painfully slow. The rest of the company—in single file—were stuck standing in the mud and water. They were cussing and swearing like mad for me to speed it up, but I was not going to get killed in my last twenty yards.

When I finally got myself up onto Liberty Road, I felt like I was as good as home. If I stayed on the hard, red-laterite road, and kept my eyes opened for any evidence of the road having been freshly disturbed—a sure sign of an anti-tank mine having been planted—I'd safely make it to Liberty Bridge and one step closer to getting back to the world.

It was either fate, luck, or the Grace of God which had guided me to Liberty Bridge. When I arrived I dropped my pack and rifle and headed straight for the waters of the Son Thu Bon where I dove into the water without taking my clothes or boots off. After a few minutes of soaking, I stripped naked and washed my clothes in the river, and also removed two leaches from my calf. Now that I felt clean, I put my wet trousers back on and walked barefoot, and without a tee-shirt, back to the NCO tent where in the privacy of my small cubicle, I flopped down on my cot and fell asleep, thinking I could catch up to what I was certain was no more than a dream that I was going home.

I woke when someone banged on the plywood partition. It was Lieutenant Cranch. He was offering me a promotion to the rank of sergeant, but it came with a stipulation—I would have to extend my tour of duty in Vietnam for an additional six months. And there was more to it—I'd have to spend the six months with Mike Company in the bush.

"Sir, most guys who extend get an assignment in Da Nang, like being an MP or providing security at 1st Med or Freedom Hill. I'd be interested in staying for another six months if I could get one of those jobs."

Lieutenant Cranch replied, "They don't need sergeants doing those jobs. The Marine Corps needs sergeants in the bush. That is where the shortage is."

"Sir, I'd love to make sergeant."

"Then you have to agree to stay with Mike Company. Think about it."

Without taking more than a few seconds to think, I said, “Sir, I would rather go home. I’d rather go home alive as a Corporal instead of possibly going home dead, as a sergeant. I hope there are no hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings at all. I just wanted to make the offer.”

The next thing he did was a surprise to me. He gave me a pat on the back and said, “You’re making the right decision. I’m glad you’re going home. You deserve it.”

We shook hands and parted. This would be the last time that I would see Lieutenant Cranch until I was reacquainted with him twenty-two years later at a Howard Johnson’s restaurant in Massachusetts.

———

The next day, the daily convoy traveling from Da Nang to An Hoa came rumbling over the Liberty Bridge. I was at the side of the road with my pack and rifle, ready to hitch a ride. I actually had made a cardboard sign that read, “Boston or bust.”

The truck driver who stopped to give me a ride was from South Boston. When I got in the cab he asked me what the sign was all about. I told him I was headed home. “This isn’t the way,” he said. “You need to be going in the other direction. You need to be going east.”

“Oh, I know the way home. I’ve had a good sense of direction for close to a year. I just need to get to An Hoa to drop off my pack and rifle, and then I’ll be headed out.”

“I wish it was me going home, but I just got here,” the truck driver said. “As of this morning, I have three hundred and thirty days left.”

“You’ll get home. It will be like it is for me right now. I can’t believe a year has gone by. Damn, it has flown.”

Then the truck driver said, “Tell me, when does it start flying, because my thirty days have felt like forever.”

“I think the time flies when you learn to say ‘fuck it’ and don’t care about anything.”

“And that begins when?”

“I really don’t know, but I’d say all you really need to know is how to follow the truck in front of you. Stay right in his tracks, and if I was you, I would do anything to keep from being the lead vehicle in the convoy. And one last thing, fuck volunteering. Volunteer for nothing.

The truck driver replied, “I hear you loud and clear. I really do.”

The rest of the trip back to An Hoa had my head somewhere in space. Although no one knew what the outcome of the war was going to be, I remember how ironic I found it that the first village I had ever been in during a combat mission was the last village I had stepped foot in. I felt like I had taken a circular route to nowhere. I simply had done time. I felt the only thing I had accomplished was to have stayed alive. I do not know, but maybe if I had been a truck driver, I could have figured out how many tons of supplies I had transported, but being a grunt I felt empty—a nothingness. Even riding in the truck, although the ride had started out with me feeling giddy, my enthusiasm waned as I let my eyes run along the ridgelines surrounding the An Hoa basin. I saw many peaks and valleys which had been my points of reference for close to a year.

The end of a movie was playing in my mind, and the special effect was the red laterite dust from Liberty Road swirling throughout the interior of the cab.

The truck driver said, "We can put the windows up to keep the dust out, but the heat in here will feel deadly. I've driven both ways. Windows up—no dust but brutal heat. Windows down—fucking dust. You can taste it and hardly breathe. It's up to you."

"Fuck the heat," I said. "I'll take the dust. Keep the windows down if you don't mind."

The windows stayed down, and the red dust persisted.

The truck driver followed in the tracks of the truck in front of him, and in no time—or so it seemed—I was safely back in An Hoa, another step closer to home.

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Although I was known to write untruths and half-truths, An Hoa actually was rocketed while I was typing. I had to scramble to the company bunker. I sure didn't want to die this late in my tour of duty.

———

The rocket attack was very brief, and when it was determined it was over, I went back to the company office and finished my letter.

**Letter # 80**

[type-written letter]

*October 1, 1969*

*Dear Family,*

*I am still in An Hoa as you can see. So I just thought I'd tell you what the latest word was. I'll be leaving for Da Nang on the 6th. I'm going by ship for sure. The ship will take from 17 to 25 days. Uncle Sam changes his mind every 2 seconds.*

*I have mailed home a 1st Marine Division plaque and my purple heart. Plus there was a magazine on combat operations by the 1st Marine Division while I was here. I hope you get them. I am packed and all ready to go. I can't wait to get home.*

*I got a letter from you people today. Mom said she had invited a girl to my party and hoped I like her. I can't even imagine who it would be. You never know. But I'll tell you one thing, there will be none of this steady bit with anybody no more because I learned my lesson. But I do plan on dating a few girls when I get home. I've been writing this one girl from West Quincy since last December and I can't wait to meet her. She works at the library and is a friend of Doris. I might have mentioned her before, I don't remember. Plus there is a girl from Riverside California I want to meet someday. She was very disappointed that I didn't get stationed on the west coast. Then there is the one from New York City who I met on my first R&R. She wants me to come and see her. I might but right now I don't know.*

*Since I have been in the rear I've been drinking a lot of beer. Tonight I had 12 cans so you can see I'm a pretty good drinker. Plus by looking at my belly you can also tell I'm a good drinker. I'll expect a beer waiting for me at the door when I get home. Don't forget. I sure wish the*

*drinking age was 18 in Mass. It's a shame they don't let people from Vietnam drink. They can die at 18 but not drink. I guess I'll have to hold my drinking down.*

*Well I guess I'll end this letter as I'm tired and will probably go hit the rack. I won't be able to write from sea so I'll say bye for awhile.*

*Love you all, Paul*

**—Between the Lines—**

The fantasy girl from Riverside, California, was one based on a real girl I had met at Laguna Beach a few days before leaving for Vietnam. I had gone to the beach with my uncle who lived just outside of Camp Pendleton. While body-surfing, I noticed a couple of girls my age who were body surfing too. I started talking with them and told them I was a marine headed for Vietnam. The girls were friends. One of the girls was with her parents. While I was talking with them, the one with her parents asked me if I wanted to join them for a sandwich. I did not know how long my uncle wanted to stay at the beach so I went to ask him. When I told him about the invite, he told me to go ahead and enjoy myself. I do not remember the girl's name or what she looked like. What I remember is eating a sandwich while sitting on a blanket with this girl, and then walking the beach with her.

I do remember where she was from, and that I never wrote her, and she never wrote me. She was just a lovely thought.

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The girl from New York City—the other fantasy girl—had been with me for more than six months now, ever since my R&R in Hawaii.

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Two fantasy girls. Two bandages. Two ways in my mind to cover up the wound left behind by Sharon no longer being mine.

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There really was a girl from West Quincy who was friends with my cousin Doris. Her name might have been Cheryl or Kathy, but today I am not sure. One of the Quincy newspapers had published the names and military addresses of all the guys who were in the service. This girl got my address from the newspaper and wrote me a letter at Christmas time when I was sitting on top of Hill 500. I wrote her back, and in a short time I looked forward to letters from her. I ended up telling her that we would meet each other in person when I got home. The thoughts of being with a girl were comforting, yet the thoughts of not being with the one I loved called for more beer.

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**Taking the Long Way Home**

**Message from Paul O'Connell to Shirley O'Connell via Paul**

**Morse Navy Mars Operator Boston Mass**

**Will leave on 1st thru the 6th**

**Taking the long way home**

**Cancel all mail**

**Will call from West Coast**

_____

I left An Hoa sometime in the first week of October. There were four or five of us from Mike Company rotating home, going to be making the trip by ship.

We traveled by convoy to Da Nang, driving along Liberty Road for the last time in a steady rain. The truck was uncovered. All we had for protection from the rain were rubber ponchos which we covered ourselves with.

We passed through the forward CP where I had gotten drunk and had gone off into a crying jag and needed a shot from the corpsman to bring me out of it. We passed where Smith and Murphy had been killed in May. We then came to the area of Liberty Bridge, and just before the crossing, I saw Mike Company positioned on a piece of high ground overlooking the Son Thu Bon River. I could barely make out the rubber poncho shelters and a few marines sitting on the edge of their fighting holes. The marines all looked the same to me and blended into the rest of the drab green colors.

No one waved. I felt none of those I saw even knew who we were or where we were headed. Maybe they were simply doing their time, crossing another day off of their individual short-timer's calendar—a day closer to getting home—but while riding in the back of the truck, in silence for no one spoke, I was inside my own head, not really caring about what others were thinking. Again, I was seeing nothing but a silent movie.

Our journey from An Hoa to Da Nang ended at Freedom Hill. We were dropped off at a Quonset hut and began processing out. We were told we were going home by ship, just as we had been told back at An Hoa. The ship was the USS Iwo Jima currently anchored in Da Nang harbor. We were told we would go aboard the ship the next day, but not before we had received immunization shots and traded in our camouflaged jungle utilities for stateside ones. We also were to trade our jungle boots for the black-leather type, and our green tee-shirts for stateside white.

As the day progressed, more and more marines arrived to process out. A formation was called for at which we were told an advanced boarding party of marines was going to be assembled and sent out to the ship. This group of marines was going to be assigned to mess duty. I heard mess duty and was not thrilled by the thought, but when I heard the advanced boarding party was going to board the ship within the next few hours, and not waiting until tomorrow, I volunteered —anything to get out of Vietnam early.

I was one of the marines picked for the advanced boarding party. I felt I had finally caught a break in life as I was going to get a one day reprieve from the possibility of dying in Vietnam.

I climbed into the back of a truck with the other marines headed for mess duty. We were dropped off at a pier near a bridge spanning the Da Nang River. A navy landing-craft was going to pick us up here and take us out to the ship. Rain poured down upon us while we waited. The waiting went on for hours. There was no one in charge, no one to tell us what was going on. We simply had been left at the pier and told to wait.

The rain continued to fall. I had arrived in Vietnam in the beginning of the monsoon season, and I was also leaving in the same type of weather—an all-day rain with no letup in sight.

There was a crane parked on the pier. To get out of the rain, some of us climbed inside the cab of the crane to try and stay dry. We were packed like sardines in a sardine can.

The crane's boom was extended and pointing high into the sky. A wrecking ball was hanging from the boom by a cable. Someone either bumped against or deliberately moved a lever in the cab and the heavy wrecking ball came crashing down to earth, just missing a group of marines standing beneath it. Some of those who were nearly killed—after they figured out someone in the cab had made the ball drop—came rushing over and pulled guys from the cab. A few noses were bloodied, and probably rightfully so, for who would have wanted to die in Vietnam in their last hour, especially because of some stupid mistake.

After milling around for hours in the rain, a US Navy landing-craft came up the Da Nang River and docked alongside the pier. The advance party of marines boarded, and thus, being one of them, I had taken my last step in Vietnam.

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The USS Iwo Jima was an LPH—Landing-Platform-Helicopter—a smaller version of an aircraft carrier. The flight deck was shorter—not long enough for fixed wing aircraft to take-off or land from—but designed to be a helicopter landing zone.

From water level the ship was enormous in height. We were told that we would have to climb up a rope net to get aboard the ship. I thought at first this meant climbing sixty feet to reach the flight deck, but a door in the side of the ship opened—the door being about fifteen feet above our heads. A rope net was dropped down. I had never been trained to climb a rope net, but at the young age of nineteen, in good physical shape and motivated to get home, I scampered up the net and into the ship.

The advance party was taken to the mess hall. When one of the sailors in charge saw my rank insignia, he said, "Corporals and above do not do mess duty." I had lucked out. I had gotten out of mess duty.

In the morning, the Iwo Jima weighed anchor and docked alongside the deep water pier in Da Nang. Torrential rains fell all day, but I stayed dry inside the hanger deck. Able to see out a large opening in the side of the ship, I watched truck after truck drop marines off who were then forced to stand in formation in the rain—the typical Marine Corps hurry up and wait. It was like someone thought the marines needed one more good soaking.

The loading process took all day and even stretched into the early evening. A total of fifteen hundred marines were finally onboard when an announcement was made informing us that the ship would sail at 0300hrs. I had visions of being topside to see our departure, but when 0300hrs came I was sound asleep in a cozy feeling bed.

I was assigned a bunk bed in one of the living quarters. For some reason, I always took the top bunk. Maybe I didn't like the thoughts of having someone being above me. Although the mattress was not the thickest one in the world—and do not tell me I was already complaining—it felt good to be back in a bed with clean sheets, a blanket, and a pillow beneath my head.

I had no sense of time or place when I began to feel a rocking sensation—side to side—which woke me. I opened my eyes and in the glow of the red tint from the night lighting throughout the compartment, I saw the marine who was sleeping in the top bunk across the aisle from me. I wondered if I was dreaming. I inched to the edge of my bunk so I could see a few more of the beds, the ones beneath me. There were other marines in the bunks. They too were under woolen blankets pulled tight to beneath their chins. They were not dead for their faces were not covered.

Just as I started to lower myself from the top bunk, I felt a sickness in my stomach. I felt weak and nauseous. I felt even worse when my feet touched the deck. I was seasick.

I managed to get myself dressed and up to the hanger deck where there were tables setup with stacks of saltine crackers. I was encouraged to get something into my stomach, although I did not know how I was going to eat anything. I was afraid that anything I ate was going to come right back up, but I did what was suggested—I stuffed my mouth with saltines and hoped when they hit my stomach they'd absorb the juices in there which were sloshing about.

Another bit of advice received by me was to find the horizon and focus on it. It was my equilibrium which was being thrown off by false information being fed to my brain. It was like not knowing which end was up, and which end was down.

I stood with a few other marines as we stared at the outside through the large opening where the ships elevator brought helicopters up and down between the flight deck and hanger-deck.

The ocean was dark, gray tone in color, with no hint of blue or aqua. There were large swells, and at the same time, whitecaps, because the wind was tearing off the tops of the waves. If in fact this had been the only water I had ever seen, I would not have known that water was described as being blue. The same would have held true for the sky, for it simply appeared a lesser shade of gray.

Both the ocean and the sky, divided by an ill-defined horizon, appeared ominous to me. I had spent an entire year dreaming about leaving Vietnam, yet this did not seem like the picture I had painted in my mind. It would take sixteen years to realize my expectations—my hopes and dreams—had been too powerful, unrealistic, and impossible to become the truth.

The actual war had ended, yet the memory was just beginning to grow.

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The mess hall was opened for brunch all morning. An announcement had been made over the ships PA system officially welcoming the marines to the Iwo Jima. We were told that today was to be treated as a holiday—sleep anytime you wanted, sleep all day if you chose, and eat to your heart's content.

While standing in the chow-line to get some food, someone from behind poked me in the ribs. I turned and there stood John Hill from Boston. I had gone through ITR at Camp Lejeune and Staging at Camp Pendleton with him. We had flown from Boston to California together. We also had been on the same flight to Vietnam. When we had arrived in Vietnam he was assigned to the Third Marine Division and sent north to the DMZ, while I went my separate way to serve with

the 5th Marine Regiment southwest of Da Nang in the An Hoa valley. We had not seen or heard from each other for an entire year.

It was good to see John, except for when he saw my Corporal insignias on the tips of my collars and said to me, “What were you, some kind of kiss ass?”

I have no recollection of what my reply was, but I can still recall the feeling, for his remark had struck a sour note within me.

For the first time ever, I felt I had to explain my life—what it took to earn the stripes of a Corporal—but I did not do so because of the guilt breaking me into a sweat.

My entire life was different from the life I had been living the year before when John Hill had seen me last. My life now included a slight flesh-wound to my side, the wound that made me yell out for my mother, when in fact the wound had been nothing more than a nick, not even worthy of the Purple Heart I had received. There also was my trip to the nuthouse, and the death of Terry Householder who had died in my place. Yes, this was where the door hiding my past, the guilt complex, would be developed—while standing in the chow-line aboard the Iwo Jima, less than twenty-four hours into my life forever.

———

John was coming home with the same rank he went to Vietnam with—private. I do not know what he had done or accomplished in Vietnam over the last year. I did not ask, and he did not volunteer anything. Actually, for the next twenty-one days, fifteen hundred marines traveled together and I did not hear one single war story told.

The only part of the war John and I discussed was related to whom from ITR and Staging we had seen in Vietnam, and who we knew who had been killed or wounded.

We also took notice of the fact that out of everyone we had gone through training with, and had flown to Vietnam together with—out of all of them, we seemed to be the only ones on the ship from that group of marines—two out of one hundred and fifty. Could the others have been killed or wounded, or had their tour of duty cut short for some other reason?

John told me he knew Ken Blackwell had been killed, and that Pettiti had been wounded in the leg and had gone home. I told him I had heard Burke and Warner had been killed during Operation Meade River, and that I had heard of another marine we had gone through training with whose nickname had been Ski because he had been of Polish descent—he too had been killed. Also I knew of another marine who had been burnt badly when a trip flare had gone off in his utility trouser pocket. I could not come up with his name either, but I described the guy as one who was on the clumsy side back in ITR—sort of a slow learner who wore glasses and was always tripping over his own two feet. Hill said he knew who I meant. Whether he did or did not, it was additional knowledge of marines who had not made it through a year in Vietnam.

———

I have never forgotten the names, Blackwell, Burke or Warner. Little did we know when we were in training that some guys were in the last weeks or months of their lives. We knew so little.

———

More than forty-three years have passed, and I can still see Blackwell imitating a gorilla, Warner lying on his side in his bunk, short red hair, a wide smile, a freckled face, and Burke, boisterous as all hell, so proud of being from New York that he was constantly saying, "So nice, so nice, they named it twice, New York, New York."

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John Hill and I said we would get together when we got back to Boston, but I have never seen or heard from him since. I never knew exactly where in Boston he lived, and years ago, thumbing through the phonebook, and even calling a few Hills proved to be fruitless. Even in this day and age of the internet, I have never been able to find John Hill, or anyone who might have known him.

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On the second day out to sea, I was at the rear of the ship—the fantail—and was mesmerized by the ship's wake. I would spend many days on the fantail staring at the turbulence the ship's propeller's produced while powering the ship through the never ending Pacific. The wake was beautiful white foam mixed with a blend of turquoise blues.

This one day I'm recalling, I took the ring Sharon had given me sometime during our romance, I took it off my finger and threw it overboard into the wake below. I was by myself with my own thoughts. I was not provoked by anyone or anything, except my inner emotions kept to myself. I slipped the gold ring off my pinkie and threw it as far as I could and watched it sail through the air—watched it disappear into the wake. I wonder if it ever found its way to the bottom, or was it light enough to stay suspended in the ocean of life.

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On about the fourth day at sea, land was on the horizon. We could see the island of Okinawa, where a squadron of CH-46 helicopters on board the USS Iwo Jima, were to be reassigned. I would have loved to have been up on the flight deck to watch the helicopters take off, but we were not allowed topside. The best we could do was to watch the helicopters being towed from the hanger deck to the elevator and watch them disappear from sight as the elevator raised them to the flight deck.

Once the helicopters were gone, the hanger deck became one enormous empty space, and before long, basketball games were breaking out everywhere, along with whiffle-ball, and even touch football. There was plenty of pent-up energy needing to be expelled.

The games were played in a voracious manner—lots of fouls in basketball, pitchers whipping whiffle-balls at the batter's heads, and touch football resembling tackle on many plays. There was a lot of pushing and shoving and verbal razzing too, but just good natured Marine Corps style fun that I do remember resulted in one or two black eyes, bloodied noses, and a few sprained ankles.

With the helicopters departed, the ship then proceeded to port where it was tied up alongside a pier. We thought we were going ashore, but the word was passed along that we were only in port for replenishments, mostly food and beverages. Bad enough we were not going ashore, now we were told we were going to be formed up into work parties to help get the supplies below decks and into the supply areas and refrigerated spaces. We were going to form a human chain and pass the supplies from one man to the next—to the next—so on and so on.

I was positioned topside near the beginning of the human chain. Huge cranes were lifting pallet after pallet of food from the pier below, bringing them to rest on the flight deck above where the pallets of supplies were to be broken down, each individual case of food to be passed from one marine to the next, the supplies being passed along until they were locked away somewhere in the bowels of the ship, to be eaten during the Pacific crossing.

When a pallet of eggs was lowered onto the flight deck, almost spontaneously, marines got down to the individual cartons of eggs, opened them, declared the sailors on the pier below the enemy, and rained raw eggs down upon them. What started out as a few marines quickly turned into at least fifty, egg throwing, out of control marines.

The sailors on the pier were running for cover to escape the barrage of eggs, but in the initial bombardment, many eggs found their mark. Sailors—those topside, and those on the pier—were yelling for us to stop, but we kept throwing eggs at the sailors down below. When a few eggs were thrown at sailors on the flight deck, over the ship's PA system a voice blared out a message for us to stop, and if we didn't, we were told that we would be restrained with force.

The eggs continued to fly. Then grapefruits and oranges became our ammunition. The sailors below continued to run helter-skelter and now dodged the incoming fruit. It seemed like every marine topside was out of control with laughter. I had not laughed that hard in a long time, and the laughter didn't even stop when we were told that we would be eating powdered eggs for the next twenty-one days. Like, who really cared, we had eaten C-rations for a year—canned eggs w/ ham/water added. Powered eggs were not going to upset us, and the threat of force seemed to do nothing but increase the intensity of our attack.

———

Our voyage was going to have us cross the International Dateline. The day before we crossed was a Saturday. The day after the crossing, it was Saturday once more. Counting the days until we arrived in San Diego was trying enough without adding another day to our trip, but when crossing the International Dateline—going from west to east—one lives the previous day over again, something many of us would do for a very long time.

The Navy decided to break the boredom by having a two day holiday which was to include a barbeque. There would also be basketball, whiffle-ball and touch football games. There would also be a talent show.

The word was passed that musical, singing, and other kinds of talent acts were needed. I let it be known that I played the drums. Another marine said he played the guitar. A third marine said he had played bass in a rock band back home. The Navy provided the instruments. Just that easy we had a band.

The lead guitar player became the band leader and chose a Buddy Holly song—*True Love Way,* and Sam and Dave's—*Hold On! I'm Com'in*. We rehearsed just once and discovered the bass player had a great voice. We had a viable sound, decent enough to go on stage.

It felt so good to be drumming again, keeping the beat for two talented guitar players. One would have thought we had played together for years. We had a nice clean, crisp sound. When we performed *True Love Ways*, there was not a sound other than the music echoing throughout the hanger deck. The bass player's voice soothed so much that I actually saw marines with teary eyes, but when we went into *Hold On! I'm Com'in*, the entire ship responded, breaking out in song and dance, with guys clapping their hands to the beat of the music. We received an

enormous applause when we finished, and I never felt as good in my life as I did when the three of us took a bow. I definitely wanted to join a rock and roll band when I got home.

_____

After more than seventeen days of nothing but ocean, I saw land. It was the United States—the World—coming into view. The mid-morning overcast had lifted. I saw a lighthouse on the top of a bluff. The word was passed that we were looking at Point Loma, San Diego.

Point Loma marked the beginning of the end of our voyage. Now all we had to do was travel up the Coronado Bay, not a great distance, but cruising painfully slow I did not think we would ever get to where we were headed—Pier #6 in the San Diego Navy Yard.

For an hour or so we were allowed to mill around on the flight deck as we slowly moved towards the Coronado Bridge, but just before passing under it, we were formed into platoons and ordered to stand at the position of parade rest. We remained at parade rest until the Iwo Jima was pushed up against the pier by several tugboats.

Then, just prior to the first note of the National Anthem being played by the Marine Corps Band down on the pier, we were sharply ordered to the position of attention and remained that way for the duration of the anthem, and for the cherished Marine Corps Hymn. Despite any negative thoughts I may have had or harbored inside against the Marine Corps, the hymn left me feeling proud to be a marine.

We were dismissed, and as if an order had been given, everyone moved to the pier-side of the ship to get a view of what was waiting for us below. Hard to believe, but there were so many marines on the edge of the flight deck, the ship seemed to list towards the people greeting us home.

The entire fifteen hundred marines—new veterans of the Vietnam War—were ordered back to formation, and one platoon at a time marched forward onto the ship's elevator which was then lowered to the hanger deck. When the elevator stopped, and I performed an about face with the rest of the platoon, standing in front of the formation was my Uncle Richard. We shook hands and then he embraced me with a hug and pats on the back. It had been more than a year—a long year in Vietnam—since I had last seen my uncle or any other members of my family.

My uncle had taken me by surprise. I never expected to see him aboard the Iwo Jima, but this was my Uncle Richard's good nature. It never bothered him to go out of his way to bring joy and happiness to others. Maybe he came to welcome me home because he too was a veteran—a Korean War veteran. Maybe someone had welcomed him home, or on the other hand, maybe he had experienced coming home without a reception from a forgotten war and did not want it to happen to someone else.

I asked permission to ride with my uncle in his car up to Camp Pendleton where the fifteen hundred marines were being transported, either to be discharged from the Marine Corps, or to be sent home on leave before reporting to their next duty station. I was one of the marines going home on leave before heading to Camp Lejeune.

Someone in charge told me I had to stay together and ride with the others in a military procession to Camp Pendleton. I remember sitting in the back of the bus as I traveled north on Highway 5. When I looked out the rear window, there was my uncle following in his car, waving to me with a big smile through the windshield, and I waving back. If my mother and Aunt Barbara had made

the trip to California like they had talked about, they too would have been in the front seat of my uncle's car waving madly, but I would be seeing my mother and Aunt Barbara very soon, back home in Massachusetts.

It took close to twenty-four hours to process out of Camp Pendleton. As a whole, the group was asked if we wanted to process out without getting any sleep. If we had chosen to get some sleep, then processing would have taken an additional ten hours. The decision was unanimous—we would go straight through without sleeping.

After almost a day of Marine Corps hurry-up-and-wait, I was free to go on leave, free for the next thirty days.

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My Uncle Richard told me to call him as soon as I could go on leave. I called and he came to get me. When I got in the car I expected to be handed a beer, but was not. I asked my uncle if we could get some. He said he had plenty on ice back at the house where my Aunt Joan was preparing dinner—spaghetti and meatballs, a fresh garden salad, warm Italian bread, and of course the beer to wash it down. Although the drinking age in California was twenty-one, my uncle felt the same way I did—if you're old enough to fight, then you're old enough to drink.

I was beyond exhaustion, but felt an alcohol induced feeling of euphoria. My aunt made up a spare bed for me where I slept the next twelve hours of my life—slept until one in the afternoon. I remember after I woke, my uncle drove me to a tailor shop in Oceanside so I could get Corporal stripes sewed on my dress uniform. I also bought the ribbons I rated, including the Purple Heart, so when I landed in Boston my family might feel my sense of pride.

I stayed two nights total with my aunt and uncle. I enjoyed a second night of good food and drink. I do remember my uncle saying something about a letter I had written to my parents in which I had mentioned my radioman getting killed. He said I had really scared my parents with that letter. I do not recall any explanation on my part. I probably just nervously grinned, gulped down some more beer, and said nothing. Or maybe in my denial I made up another story to cover up the first story I had created in my imaginary mind. Somehow I would find a way to work around the painful truth.

My uncle drove me to San Diego where I boarded a plane for Boston. The flight was stopping in Chicago first, and then it was going to continue onto Boston where my family would be waiting for me.

During the San Diego to Chicago leg of the flight I sat with a Marine Corps sergeant and a blond haired girl who I would say was close to my age. She actually started out sitting with us, but she would end up changing her seat before takeoff.

At first there was just the sergeant and I sitting in the same row. He had the aisle seat, and I, the window. He had asked me where I was coming from. I said, "Vietnam."

He told me he was coming from Okinawa. From the ribbons on his chest, I surmised he had been to Vietnam. I also surmised he had been wounded three times—he had stars on his Purple Heart ribbon. When I asked him who he had served with in Vietnam, he said, "One-nine—the walking dead."

I had heard about the walking dead— the 1st Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment. They had been badly beaten up in Vietnam.

He asked me who I had served with. I said, “Mike, three-five.”

“Medevac Mike—I had a couple of friends with Mike 3/5. One actually got killed but I can’t remember his name. It might come to me before the flight is over.”

The sergeant told me that he was headed to Chicago. I told him I was headed home to Boston.

The sergeant had a brown paper bag wrapped around a bottle of wine. The label on the bottle depicted a red eye, thus he told me the wine was Okinawa Red Eye wine. He asked me if I wanted some, and I said yes.

We took turns taking swigs out of the bottle. The wine was very strong and potent—my lips began to numb. When we finished the bottle, the sergeant produced another bottle of Red Eye Wine from a carry-on he had stashed under the seat in front of him. “Not to worry,” he said as he uncorked the bottle with a corkscrew opener attached to a jackknife he had been carrying in his trouser pocket. When the cork popped, he passed the new bottle to me. “Here,” he said, “the first swig is yours.”

It was about this time a blond haired girl appeared and said she had the middle seat in between the sergeant and I. The sergeant got up and curtsied to the girl. “My pleasure, madam.”

She nestled herself into her seat, seeming to be very comfortable between two marines in dress uniform. Her blond hair was straight and beautiful, and the scent of her perfume was going to enhance the taste of the wine the three of us would share. And her smile, perfect white teeth—must I say more. I fell in love.

The sergeant told her we had been sharing a drink together. We were celebrating my return from Vietnam, and his return to Chicago after being in Okinawa for some time. As he went to pass the nearly empty bottle to me, he offered her a drink of wine. “Celebrate with us, please,” he said to her.

I could not belief my eyes when he produced a third bottle of wine. When I asked him how many bottles he actually had, he said, “Just the three. I was bringing them home to my friends, but you have become my friend that I am sharing my wine with, and also this beautiful girl.”

He asked the stewardess for three cups. The stewardess left, then returned with them. He poured the last few drops from the bottle we had been drinking from into his cup, then uncorked the new bottle and filled the girl’s cup halfway, and then mine.

The effects of the wine led us into a comfortable, talkative mood. I learned from our conversation that she was headed to Boston to visit with her boyfriend who was attending MIT. In my mind, I fantasized going on a date with her, even though she had a boyfriend—maybe if she and I drank more wine, maybe she would say yes if I asked her out.

Just before take-off the sergeant got more comfortable. He took off his tie and undid the top button of his dress shirt. He then took his dog tag chain from around his neck, and while dangling the tags from the chain now wrapped around his hand, he said, “Does anyone know what this is?”

I said, “Dog tags.”

“No, look closely.”

I did and noticed something more than just the two dog tags—I noticed something that even to this day reminds me of a Frito Lay corn curl, both in shape and color.

The sergeant said to the girl, "Put out your hand." And when she did, he placed the dog tags and corn curl in her hand and said, "Do you know what you are holding?"

She looked at me as if I was going to tell her, although I was only familiar with the dog tags. When I could not help her out, she shrugged her shoulders and said to the sergeant, "I'm lost—I don't know."

The suspense ended when the sergeant said to her, "You're holding a dead gook's ear."

The girl opened her hand without saying a thing and reached up and pulled down on the flight attendant's call button.

"Bing!"

Every time I hear the "bing" of the flight attendant's call button, even after all these years, I can still see the blond-haired girl standing up and trying to climb over the sergeant's lap while sobbing to the flight attendant, "I need to sit as far away from these two as possible."

When I arrived in Boston, even though I was being mobbed by my family, I could see over the crowd the girl in tears being hugged by her boyfriend. I can only wonder if her tears were tears of joy for being in her boyfriend's arms, or a continuation of tears of shock from having touched the ear cut away from a dead human being.

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I only have figments of a motion picture in my mind after all of these years, visions of my Mom and Dad, sisters and brother, grandparents, and aunts and uncles at the gate welcoming me home.

First of all, I was drunk. The sleep I had gotten from Chicago to Boston was the only reason I was still on my own two feet. Plus there was numbness, both from the wine, and the sight of my family waving a homemade sign—*Welcome Home Paul.* There was my family cheering my return, and even people at the gate who did not know me joining in—all except the blond haired girl who walked away in a hurry with her boyfriend in tow.

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We all went back to 353 Franklin Street—good'ole 353. My mother served coffee and donuts. I was still under the influence of the red eye wine, otherwise I would have felt overwhelmed being back home. If anyone had caught on that I had been drinking, no one said a thing.

I cannot come up with any other recollections of my first night back, but I do remember waking up in the morning and seeing the crack overhead in the bedroom ceiling. This time, being home was not a dream.

In the morning, my mother went to a department store and bought me some jeans and a couple of banlon shirts to wear. When she returned, I put on the new clothes. It was not too long afterwards that Dwight drove up in front of my house and beeped the horn. It was just like old times.

He said, "Fucking Head. Man, it is good to see you."

Yes, once again I was called by my nickname—Head.

I do not remember what else was said when I got into his car, although I felt Dwight would never be able to understand Vietnam, even if I could have found the words to explain it. Saying nothing was easier, less painful, and less complicated. It would be easier to live with Vietnam out of sight, out of mind.

When Dwight said, “Where to?” I replied, “Where else—the poolroom. Let’s go shoot some pool.”

Before Dwight and I had gotten out of his car, we each had downed several beers. Dwight had a six-pack in the car to celebrate my homecoming.

After drinking the beers, I walked into the poolroom. I felt home, although there was not a great big hello. There were handshakes, but no hugs or pats on the backs, and no one asked me any questions about the war. It was like I had stepped out, maybe gone down the hall to the bathroom, and come back. Actually, there were a few new kids in the group. They had not even known I had gone to Vietnam. It did not seem to matter one way or another to them.

I shot some nine-ball for quarters. My game was off. I was rusty from a year in Vietnam. I missed making the nine-ball several times, costing me a few quarters, but costing me also some pride. Someone said I gagged when I missed making the nine-ball for the third time. When the ball knocked around the pocket but did not fall in, I took my pool cue, held it like a harpoon, and sent it flying dead center into the middle of the globe-shaped light hanging over the pool table. The globe blew, shattering into a million pieces. Someone said, “Head, what’s that all about?”

“It’s about losing. I don’t like to lose. Plus don’t call me a gagger.”

The manager—Chick was his name—who had written me several times while I was in Vietnam, came running over when he heard the breaking glass.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he asked.

When no one said anything at first, Chick threatened that he would throw everyone out for a week if someone didn’t fess up. With that said I admitted my guilt. I said, “I broke the light.”

Chick immediately pointed to the door and said, “Well Head, you’re out of here for a week.”

“Damn Chick, I just got home from Vietnam.”

“Vietnam or no Vietnam—you know the rules. The rules are the same for everyone. Break something, spill something, or give me any crap, and you’re out of here for a week.”

And just like that, I was on the outside looking in.

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Dwight asked me if I had seen Sharon yet. I told him she had written me a Dear John. He could not believe it. He asked me why. I told him she had a new boyfriend and was talking about getting married. “So that’s it? Done with? Over?”

“Done—finished—gone,” I said.

He asked me, “Aren’t you at least going to call her?”

I replied sharply, “No!”

We then finished off the six-pack and drove around Kincaide Park looking for a wino to buy us some more beer. Dwight and I were still under-aged drinkers and would need a wino who was broke—but in need of a drink—to buy for us.

In no time we found a wino. He bought two six-picks for us. In return we had bought him a pint of whiskey.

With the resupply of beer flowing, I told Dwight that Sharon was working at a supermarket not too far from where she lived, and actually her new boyfriend worked there too—she had said so in her last letter she had sent to me.

Dwight said, "Why not drive to the supermarket?"

I said I had no interest.

"You mean after all the time the two of you spent together, it's really over?"

How many times did I need to tell him we were through? But he kept it up, and finally I succumbed, "Okay, drive by. Who knows, maybe I'll be able to see her through the window."

So we headed for the supermarket where Sharon worked, and as Dwight drove by, I could see plain as day, Sharon working at one of the checkout registers.

I almost lied when Dwight asked me if I had seen her. A part of me wanted to turn and run, but another part wanted to hold her, to tell her all about how much I had missed her, how I had stayed alive to be with her once more. I wanted to tell her all about Vietnam, knowing she would have sympathy for me—and she would want me back.

I went inside the supermarket without Sharon seeing me. She was busy ringing up customers. I watched her from a distance. I was mesmerized by her usual smile and bright eyes, her hair—the way it was pulled back in a ponytail—and the cheerful way she chatted with each and every customer.

I got in line with a pack of cigarettes and a candy bar in my hand. There were several customers ahead of me, and one or two behind. Sharon still had not spotted me even though I had placed my items on the belt.

She continued with her bubbly talk with the customer just ahead of me. She still had not looked to see who was next in line. I lagged behind a little bit so that the magazine rack partially hid my face.

The pack of cigarettes and candy bar arrived on the belt before I did. As she turned to see who they had belonged to, I came into full view. She looked stunned, but managed to say, "Hi Paul."

Her eyes sparkled as always, but she had a nervous grin on her face, like she knew this day would come, and yet she had not been prepared.

I said, "Hi Sharon. I just wanted to come and say 'hi', and whatever."

She said, "Paul, I'm working. I can't talk right now."

"I know you are. I'm buying cigarettes and a candy bar—and I might get something else."

"Please Paul, I really need to keep up—there's a person in line behind you."

"I just want to say 'hi'. I needed to see your face."

I heard someone say they could take the next customer in line. I sensed movement behind me. The customer was going to a different registrar.

“Call me,” Sharon said. “Give me a call tonight.”

“Can I see you tonight? I’d love to see your parents, too.”

The nervous grin stretched across her face as she said, “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because my father says that if he ever saw you again, he’d kill you.”

“But why?”

“Because of your letter.”

“My letter? What letter?”

“The one you sent to me from Vietnam. The one in which you said you were very good with an M-16. The one that frightened me so much, I had to show my Dad.”

The letter—I could see King Rat walking away with the letter, the letter he said I didn’t have the balls to send. I had never asked him if he had really mailed it, but now I knew he had.

I did not know what to do, or what to say to Sharon, but this did not keep me from reacting, for in a flash, I had thrown in the towel.

“Sharon, listen closely. I don’t want to ever see you and that fucking boyfriend of yours together. And also, do me a favor—wipe that silly fucking grin from your face.”

I then turned and walked quickly out the door. I could have been stopped for shoplifting, because in my hasty retreat, I had forgotten to pay for the cigarettes and candy which I was stuffing into my pockets.

When I got back into Dwight’s car, he asked me what happened. I said, “Just drive and shut the fuck up.”

I was shaking with anger and on the verge of exploding when Dwight said, “I could see the two of you talking. Sharon still looks good.”

With that said I exploded, “Pull over! Pull the fucking car over right now!”

Dwight did not know what to do, or if I had meant what I had said. He had fear in his eyes. At the top of my lungs I yelled again, “Pull it the fuck over now!”

When the car came to a halt at the curb I jumped out. I reached into my pocket and found the candy bar and threw it blindly off the side of Dwight’s car. When the candy bar came to rest on the ground, I massed it with my foot so as to make it inedible. Then without knowing why, I gave Dwight the finger and walked. I walked for miles and miles, finally ending up back at good’ole 353, back in my bed where I stared at the crack in the ceiling, hoping the last few hours had been a bad dream—actually hoping I was back in Vietnam.

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I was never to hear from or see Sharon again. Years later when my parents sold their home—on my last walk through—I noticed the crack was still in the ceiling.

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My parents threw a house party for me. All of my family was there—my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, cousins, and also friends of my parents, and all of my poolroom buddies Also, there was the girl my mother had invited for me—the girl who was friends with my cousin Doris—the girl I had corresponded with for ten months while I was in Vietnam, the one whose letters were always a pleasure to read.

My younger sister knew vaguely who this girl was or what she looked like. My sister said the girl worked at the public library. I heard her tell my mother the girl wasn't going to be my type. I didn't hear why, but I had heard enough to scare me, so when it was time for the party, instead of picking her up myself, I sent my older sister to pick up this girl. I think her name was Cathy.

Now my concern was if she was not my type, if she was not good looking, I did not want my buddies from the poolroom giving me a hard time over having an ugly girlfriend.

Later on in life, my older sister would tell me that she knew when this Cathy got into the car that I was going to be disappointed. I asked her why, and she said the same thing my younger sister had said, "She just wasn't your type. She was straight-laced—you were a poolroom hoodlum."

When she arrived I saw a girl with jet black hair and bushy eyebrows; she wasn't Sharon. My dream had not come true. I honestly thought Sharon was going to come through the door.

Cathy's looks were the complete opposite of Sharon's. I didn't hear a single word she said as my mind was made up and incapable of hearing kind words from her or any other girl. No girl was going to be able to compete with Sharon who was always on my mind.

I distanced myself from Cathy. I wanted it to appear to my buddies that she was a cousin of mine. It worked—none of them asked me who she was.

Cathy had brought me a gift—a bottle of cologne. I thanked her by escaping out the backdoor at the end of the night, leaving with a few poolroom buddies of mine, dumping her onto my sister who had to drive her home.

What a scumbag I was.

Wherever you are Cathy, I owe you a huge apology.

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During the party, while trying to avoid Cathy, I was out in the kitchen with my father and Uncle Gus and Uncle Arthur—all three veterans of World War Two. Some of my poolroom buddies were there also. My next door neighbor, a year older than me and a member of the National Guard—Matt Luke—was there too. One of my uncles asked me what Vietnam was like, or maybe asked what I did there. I told him about burning villages and moving people about, running them out of their homes, making them live in hamlets where we wanted them to live, not caring about their wants or needs. I talked about how cool it was to see napalm bursting into flames and jets dropping bombs. I also pulled up my shirt to show them my flesh wound, but I have no memory of being asked if I had killed anyone, or about marines getting killed, for if I had been asked, in my drunken state, who knows what might have come out of my mouth. But what I do remember is that Matt Luke had heard enough. He pulled me aside and whispered in my ear, "You know all that stuff about burning villages and killing people—it's not cool. It's exactly why the country is against the war."

After another beer I left the kitchen. Matt Luke held court behind my back, talking against the war. The next morning, while my father and I nursed hangovers together, while we drank coffee —while he stared out the kitchen window shaking his head in disbelief with his back to me—he muttered these words, "If you believe what Matt Luke had said in the kitchen about the war, then you have to believe that your entire year in Vietnam was a fucking waste."

Through the fog in my mind I could find nothing to say.

What could be said? What was I suppose to do? I still wanted to be friends with people like Matt Luke.

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I have no memories of interacting with my younger sister Marsha, or my younger brother Tommy while home on leave.

I slept in the same bedroom with my brother. We shared a bunk bed. I had the top while he had the bottom. Tommy's view when he lay on his back was the bottom of my bunk. My view was the crack in the ceiling.

Tommy was sixteen when I arrived back home—my sister Marsha, seventeen. I have a feeling today that my year in Vietnam must have taken its toll on the two of them. I can only imagine what life had been like for them while I was in Vietnam. And on top of that, with my sister Cheryl at Fort Reilly, Kansas with her husband Bob, I figure Tommy and Marsha to have been lost in the mix.

By the time I got home my brother Tommy was well on the way to becoming a drug addict, latter dying of AIDS in the Spring of 1993—a heroin addict who had shared needles with a few buddies of his, all of them dead today from AIDS.

My sister Marsha is as good as dead. She disowned her siblings and her own mother and father before 1990 for reasons in her own head, only shared with herself. She did come to the funeral parlor for my brother's service, but when asked to come back to the house—353 Franklin Street —she declined. She hasn't been seen or heard from since. My sister Cheryl and I have no idea whether she has knowledge of her own mother and father no longer being here on earth.

In some way, I think of Tommy and Marsha as casualties of the war.

As for Cheryl—we get along just fine. We were in the same boat, most likely the center of attraction while we were away from home. We were the ones who received the letters, the ones who were missed, the ones who had my mother and father's undivided attention. Maybe my parents missed what was right before their eyes.

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One day while home on leave, my mother told me how my father was pretty upset with me. I asked her why and she said, "Your father was looking for a cigarette this morning. He was all out. So he thought maybe you'd have a pack in your coat pocket. He found this."

My mother handed me an ounce bag of marijuana. I asked her why he went through my pockets. She reiterated, "He wasn't going through your pockets to check up on you. He was only looking for a cigarette." Then she finished with, "Are you hooked?"

"Ma, no one gets hooked on marijuana."

“Did you bring that stuff home with you from Vietnam?

“No Ma, I bought it right here in Quincy. There’s more pot in Quincy than in any Vietnam. The kids here are stoned out of their minds.”

“Well, your father is worried sick thinking you’re hooked, and he can’t believe you took the chance of sneaking marijuana out of Vietnam. You could end up in jail.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I didn’t get the pot in Vietnam! I got it in Quincy!”

My mother cowered as if I had physically struck her.

“I’ll get rid of the stuff for you,” I said. “But maybe Dad should worry more about Tommy than me.”

I told my mother not to worry. I told her the marijuana wasn’t totally mine—I was sharing it with some of the guys from the poolroom who had chipped in money to buy it. I told her I would hand it over to one of the other guys.

“But are you going to smoke it?” she asked.

“Ma, I said don’t worry. That’s my business.”

As for my father, he never said a word to me about the marijuana, and I never mentioned it to him.

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There was a dance hall called The Surf. It was located at Nantasket Beach. The Surf was non-alcoholic and catered to teenagers—teeny-boppers—who enjoyed listening and dancing to the sounds of popular local bands. Sometimes nationally known bands also appeared, such as Question Mark and the Mysterians, The Kingsmen, Wilson Pickett, and The Left Bank, famous for the song, Walk Away Renee. A few members of the local band—The Pilgrims—became original members of the group, Sha-na-na, a group gaining popularity after their appearance at Woodstock.

The Surf is where I met Sharon for the first time—New Years Eve, 1966. I was sixteen, Sharon was only fifteen. We were two kids who simply loved to dance.

I was back at The Surf almost three years later. A gang of us from the pool hall had piled into several cars after having drunk some beers up on the abandoned railroad tracks behind the pool hall. Although there was the no alcohol stipulation, it was popular with some who went to The Surf to consume some type of alcoholic drink before going there.

To actually be admitted into the dance hall under the influence of alcohol was a challenge. The dance hall was on the second floor. A long flight of stairs had to be climbed to reach the top where an old crabby lady was waiting to smell breaths, look for glassy eyes, or watch for kids who stumbled up the stairs—kids under the influence of booze.

Smell of alcohol and you were sent back down and out the door. This is why the poolroom gang would fill their mouths with wads of spearmint chewing gum before the hike up. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. On this night it worked—all she could smell on my breath was the gum.

I thought I might have found Sharon at The Surf on this night, but she wasn't there. I had no idea what she did on Saturday nights anymore. I remembered she had said to call her, but that was

before she had mentioned the threatening letter I had written while I was drunk at Liberty Bridge. If I had called her, I would have asked her to meet me on the dance floor, where during a slow dance, with her in my arms, I would have whispered in here ear how sorry I was for all the times I had brought hurt to her. But thoughts of her father killing me had scared me off.

I felt strange without her, but also weird for other reasons. Being in a nightclub situation without a beer in my hand wasn't easy. Looking at giggly little girls flitting around, girls who wanted no more than a sip of Coca-Cola, wasn't making it with me either. I was used to Bangkok, the whorehouses of Da Nang, and Tijuana—drinking and sex, and not having to do much to get it.

I felt so much older than the kids at The Surf, although I was still only nineteen. My poolroom buddies were nineteen and twenty. They didn't act too old for The Surf. They were still able to dance and make moves on the teenage girls, just like I use to, but I couldn't get into it. I danced once and felt awkward. I didn't even ask the girl for her name when the song had finished. I just moved once again to the back wall.

After the first set of music, when the band took a break, I left The Surf on my own. I did not say goodbye or anything else to anyone. There were kids still climbing the stairs, passing me by. Some were taking the stairs two at a time. One kid said to me, "How's the old lady's nose tonight? She smell booze on your breath?" I nodded but said nothing in return. I just kept going down.

When I got outside, I could feel and taste the saltwater breeze coming off the ocean. I recalled all the times I had left The Surf at the end of the night with my face, neck, and hair sweaty from dancing, and the sea breeze cooling my skin—so refreshing—and then walking the beach with Sharon.

I began to walk. Quincy was at least twelve miles away. As I walked, something came to me. I don't know what it was, but I felt different than everyone I had been with at The Surf. My poolroom buddies, the teenage kids, the teeny-bopper girls, all seemed immature. Even the band sounded tinny to me. I perceived immaturity in the others because of their ability to laugh, sing, and dance. Maybe I felt different because I knew that on the other side of the world, things were different. No one at The Surf had any idea what the war in Vietnam was about. Yes, I felt different but didn't know exactly what the difference was, and I had no way of putting it into words.

After walking more than eight miles, a car driven by Dwight and loaded with a few poolroom buddies, pulled up beside me. Dwight rolled the window and asked me if I wanted a ride. I said yes and climbed into the back seat. Dwight said he hadn't seen me leave. "When I couldn't find you," he said, "I thought maybe Sharon had showed up."

With that I yelled, "Stop the fucking car!"

I had Dwight trained. He pulled the car immediately over to the curb. When I got out of the car, I went over to the driver-side and signaled for Dwight to roll down the window. With my face in his I said, "You mention that bitch's name one more time and I'll kick your fucking ass from Christ to creation."

I walked home alone.

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One night I drank myself into oblivion—blacked out—and when I mentally returned, I was left in shock when I discovered where my mind had gone.

The night of drinking had started at the poolroom. Chick had reinstated me after only a few nights of banishment. Chick had found some mercy in his heart, maybe because he had heard about Sharon dumping me. I had heard that Dwight had told him so.

Chick had looked outside and saw me standing out front with my hands in my pockets as they were cold—winter was just around the corner. I was waiting for Dwight or a few of the other guys to finish up their pool game.

Chick had tapped on the window, signaling me to come in. When I got inside, he led me to his office where he looked at me and said, “Don't let any woman fuck your head up. There's a million more out there. Just keep looking.”

“I think you're right, Chick.”

As I turned to leave his office, he said, “Go shoot some pool. It's on the house.”

“I'm not barred?” I said.

“You're back. Just don't fuck up again. And another thing, welcome home. I’m glad you made it.”

I walked over to the pool tables after leaving Chick's office. I got more pats on the back from being reinstated to the poolroom than when I had returned from Vietnam.

Being back, I was glad the pool was free because I continued to lose money because of more missed shots in nine-ball, but I was managing to keep my anger under control.

As what seemed to happen most nights, the gang would grow tired of shooting pool and try to come up with something exciting to do. Drinking always seemed to be the first thing to come to mind. We would need someone to buy for us.

Sometimes I was able to get my father to buy a case of beer for me—his Vietnam veteran son, “Old enough to fight, but not old enough to drink.” He seemed even more receptive to buying for me after finding the marijuana in my coat pocket. He probably thought if I was drinking beer, then I wouldn't be smoking marijuana, but it didn't work that way. Most nights, the poolroom gang mixed smoking pot with drinking beer, but this night was different. This night, not only would I smoke and drink beer, I would also try to guzzle down a half-pint of Carstairs brand whiskey.

Maf—short for mafia because this guy was Italian and somewhat shady—loved to down half-pints of Carstairs in one big swig, sucking the whiskey from the bottle—the half-pint bottle emptied quicker than if the whiskey had been poured out on its own. Many of us marveled at Maf's ability to keep the whiskey down. Almost every night, Maf would guzzle a half-pint. It was like a show.

I had never guzzled a half-pint before, but I was feeling a little rambunctious, maybe because Chick had let me back in the poolroom.

Part of the reason I drank the whiskey was because it was free. Maf had gotten his hands on a case of Carstairs half-pints. When asked if he had stolen the case, Maf just smiled.

The entire pool hall gang went up on the railroad tracks where Maf was handing out the whiskey. I uncapped the half-pint. I took a whiff of the bottle. The whiskey fumes practically gagged me, leaving me with second thoughts about drinking it. Someone said, “Let's have a contest to see who can down their bottle the quickest—except Maf can't be in included, he’s unbeatable. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“One—two—three—go.”

I took a big gulp and came very close to puking up the whiskey as it hit my stomach. I had to pinch my nose and cover my mouth to keep the whiskey down. I was unable to get the bottle down in one swig, and even though someone said it wasn't fair chasing down the whisky with a beer—at least not until the bottle was empty—I didn’t care. Initially, I only got half the bottle down before I needed to kill the taste with the chaser. Then I drank a little more whiskey, and then a few more sips of beer. Then I finished the last drops of the whiskey, and kept it down by killing off the burning taste for good, putting out the fire with the rest of the can of beer I had been drinking.

The whiskey went straight to my head. My entire body numbed, my eyes lost focus, and I was slurring my speech. It was as if I had been intravenously fed the alcohol through a vein in my arm—an instantaneous high headed in the direction of drunkenness. Thankfully I wasn't driving.

I ended up at a Howard Johnson's where I ate an order of fried clams and washed it down with something wet. There were some girls hanging out at Howard Johnson's, mostly teenagers. The girls who were older—legally old enough to drink—were at nightclubs where alcohol was served. I would have rather been with the drinking, older girls, but at this point, any girl was fine.

I didn't know any of these girls, but I got talking to one who seemed more mature than the others. I didn't know if she was a tease or the real thing, but she was leading me to think she might like having sex with me, or maybe it was a senseless fantasy of mine, an alcohol induced fantasy steering me in the direction of one of my former sexual escapades in some forbidden place. Regardless, I ended up in a car alone with her. I did not know whose car it was.

I remember I had a beer in my hand. We took turns sipping it. Feeling certain that she wanted me, I made my move—I inched towards her. I made an attempt to steal a kiss. She pushed me gently away. The last thing I remembered before slipping into oblivion was that she was telling me to be a good boy.

I had no idea where I had gone in my mind, and had lost all sense of time, but when I returned from my mental lapse I was in the arms of the girl with tears in my eyes, hearing her voice say, “I am so sorry about your sergeant. It must have been horrible for you.”

I remember feeling paralyzed, not believing what I had just heard.

“My sergeant? What are you talking about?”

Her answer floored me. “I wasn't talking—you were. You were talking about your friend, Sergeant Thompson.”

In my drunken stupor—in a blackout—deep in my subconscious where the booze had taken me, I had dredged up the memories of Sergeant Thompson—memories not so old, but ones I did not know I had brought home.

I didn't say anything else to her. She started to put her arms around me again, but I gently pushed them aside. I then opened the car door, got out, and walked away.

Although I went back to Howard Johnson's a few more times, I never saw this girl again, or not that I have knowledge of, for I had no memory of what she might look like, and no girl ever came up to me and said, “Hi, do you remember me?” But I have never forgotten this unknown girl who might know some of my inner secrets better than I.

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My last day of leave was on Thanksgiving Day. Just as we had for as far back as I could remember, my family and I went to my grandparents’ house. My aunts and uncles were there along with my cousins. Missing was my cousin Steve who was still aboard a Navy destroyer, somewhere off the coast of Vietnam, and my sister Cheryl and her husband Bob—they were still at Fort Reilly, Kansas.

My grandparents’ house was very small, but cozy. The dining room table wasn’t large enough for everyone to sit at, so a collapsible table was setup in the living room for the kids. Although I had been to Vietnam, I sat in the living room with them.

The adults drank eggnog spiked with brandy. Afterwards, they would sip mixed drinks and beer. Although I thought myself deserving of a beer because I had been to Vietnam, I wasn't offered one, and I didn't ask either. I was resigned to the fact I was just another one of the kids not old enough to drink.

So, on this Thanksgiving Day, filled with the traditional turkey dinner and an overabundance of desserts, my thoughts were of having to leave home once more, which pained me in one sense, but in another sense, I knew when I got Camp Lejeune I’d be old enough to drink.

I felt it was worth leaving home for.

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The next day I flew to New Bern, North Carolina, and then took a taxi to Camp Lejeune. I would have preferred being stationed on the west coast at Camp Pendleton, but it was explained to me that if your home was on the east coast, then the Marine Corps stationed you on the east coast, that is unless I wanted to sign up for another four years—something I wasn't willing to do.

I reported to the Second Marine Division Headquarters where I actually was given a choice of assignment. It wasn't too often one was given a choice in the Marine Corps. I could either accept an assignment to the Second Battalion, Eighth Marines which meant I would have been sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or I could accept an assignment to the First Battalion, Eighth Marines and go afloat as part of a battalion landing team aboard a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Not knowing which assignment to choose, I asked the marine who was making the assignments for his opinion. He told me that no one ever got off the base at Guantanamo Bay. He said most marines did nothing but drink during their off-duty time. He said, “Guantanamo Bay is a very boring place to be.” I heard boredom and drinking. Surprisingly, the boredom part outweighed the drinking part in my mind.

“On the other hand,” he said, “a Med cruise would give you a chance to see the world. First Battalion, Eighth Marines is in the initial stages of preparing to go afloat sometime in March.”

I asked, “What would I do between now and March if I chose the Med cruise.”

“You’d be training,” he said. “The companies go to the field during the week—that part kind of sucks. But then they come back to the barracks for the weekend. You'd have most weekends off."

“So what would you pick?”

“Me?—I'd take the Med cruise anytime over Guantanamo Bay.”

“Then put me in for the Med,” I said.

I was assigned to Delta Company, First Battalion, Eighth Marine Regiment—part of the Second Marine Division.

I reported to the company office where I met the First Sergeant. He welcomed with a handshake. I expected him to ask me who I had served with in Vietnam. Being in my dress uniform I thought that he might have commented on my ribbons, especially my Purple Heart, but other than assigning me to first platoon he didn't say much of anything else except to find myself a bunk in the squad-bay, and that liberty call was at 1600hrs.”

In the squad-bay there were three marines sitting on the edge of their bunks. There was Sergeant Gleason, John Grant, and Weaver. All three were decorated Vietnam veterans just back from the war, just like me. They actually had joined Delta Company only a few days before.

It didn't take too much conversation beyond the initial introductions to determine the four of us had a lot in common, thus Grant asked me if I wanted to share a bunk bed with him; he had already claimed the lower one. He told me I was welcome to the top bunk above him. I agreed, thus began a friendship with John Grant.

The four of us had more in common than just being Vietnam veterans. We also shared another interest—drinking.

Sergeant Gleason suggested we change into civilian clothes and go for a few beers. When I asked where we could get one, he said, “Jacksonville.” When I asked how we were going to get there, the Sergeant said, “That's easy, Grant has a car. He's more than happy to take us. Right Grant?”

Grant replied with a nod and a smile.

Just after 1600hrs, the four of us dressed in civilian clothes piled into Grants car—a 1957 Chevy —and off we went to Jacksonville.

Court Street was the main drag that ran through the middle of downtown Jacksonville. The street was lined with bars, a few nightclubs, a smattering of pawn shops and one or two clothing stores. There were a few restaurants but nothing fancy. Hundreds of marines walked Court Street every night looking for the same thing—girls—but the girls who were barmaids, waitresses, and go-go dancers who danced in cages or shimmied up and down tarnished brass poles, were nothing more than fantasies in the minds of the lustful marines.

The four of us decided on a bar where we would start our drinking. We had plans of barhopping, having a few beers in each bar. We’d see how far down Court Street we could venture before we were drunk, but the first bar we went into would be the only bar I would drink in on this night. Within my first hour of drinking I would find myself in jail, locked up for being drunk and disorderly.

The four of us were sitting in a booth, drinking beer and talking a little about Vietnam—not any war stories—but who we had served with. Sergeant Gleason had served with Seventh Marines, and Grant had been with a Combined Action Platoon. Weaver had been stationed somewhere along the DMZ.

The four of us weren't being rowdy or anything, but when the owner of the bar came strolling over to our booth, I had a feeling he wasn't coming to welcome us home from Vietnam, or to tell us the next drink was on the house. No, he came over to the booth, pointed his finger straight at me, and said, "Go get the butt out of the urinal."

Feeling confused, I said, "The what?"

"The butt—the cigarette butt. Fish it out of the urinal."

I said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"There's a butt in the urinal. I had just checked the bathroom before you went in there. After you came out I checked it again and there was a cigarette butt in the urinal that wasn't there before you went in."

"How the hell do you know I flipped it in there?"

"Because you went in there with a butt in your mouth, and when you came out it was gone."

"You're right, but I flushed mine down the toilet," I said.

"Listen wise-guy, you were the last one in there. That's your butt in the urinal. Now get in there, or get your ass out of my bar, and don't come back."

I replied, "I'm not leaving until I finish my beer, and for the umpteenth time, that isn't my butt in the fucking urinal. And besides, we call it a pisser in the Marine Corps."

The owner disappeared, and when he came back he had two MPs with him. He came over to the booth, pointed at me, and said, "He's the one."

One of the MPs said to me, "Marine, did the manager ask you to leave?"

"Sort of I guess. He's falsely accusing me of doing something I didn't do. He says I threw a cigarette butt in the pisser, but I didn't.

"Again marine, did this gentleman ask you to leave?"

"Again, he accused me of doing something that I didn't do. I'll leave after I finish my beer," I said in a belligerent manner."

Sergeant Gleason tried to intervene. He told the MPs we would leave, but I said, "No fucking way. I'm finishing my beer, or I'll take it with me."

With that said I was yanked out of the booth and handcuffed all in one swift movement by the MPs. Sergeant Gleason jumped to his feet but was shoved back down. He was advised to remain seated, or else he would be arrested too."

As I was being escorted out the door, I put up a brief struggle, but a nightstick in the small of my back tamed me. When I asked why I was being treated this way, I was told it was because I was drunk and disorderly. I said, "That's bullshit. I've only had a few drinks."

I was manhandled into a police van and taken to what was known as the drunk-tank, a cinderblock building behind the Greyhound bus terminal. The drunk-tank was managed by the Marine Corps and used to lockup drunks for a mandatory four hours—until they sobered up. Then they would be released.

I didn't believe myself to be impaired by alcohol. I had downed no more than three beers, but my first few minutes in the jail cell found me protesting my arrest by yelling at the top of my lungs, "I'm a fucking Vietnam veteran. This isn't right. Let me the fuck out of here. You fuckers are no better than a gang of hippies shitting on Vietnam vets. Now let me out!"

An MP supervising the drunk-tank came over to my cell. He said, "You may be a Vietnam veteran, but Vietnam was your last duty station. Camp Lejeune is your new one and you will act accordingly. The war is over, marine."

A new duty station? Had Vietnam been no more than a duty station?

Although the Marine Corps hadn't spit on me, or called me a baby killer, I was not feeling a sense of recognition for having fought in a war in which friends of mine—comrades in arms—had sacrificed their lives. The thought of Vietnam being nothing more than a duty station helped nourish the feelings of disenchantment inside my body.

After my initial rant, I simmered down and did my time. When the four hours was up, I got a bus back to the base. When I got into the squad-bay I found Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver sound asleep. I climbed up to the top bunk, lay down without undressing, and fell asleep in my clothes.

The next day I found myself standing at the position of attention before my new Company Commander—Captain Snead. He had been informed of my escapade by the military authorities who supervised the drunk-tank. I halfheartedly plead my case. I told the Captain how I had been falsely accused of doing something I hadn't done. He would hear nothing of this. He told me this was not a good way to start stateside duty. He told me I was no longer in Vietnam. He said I would have to conform to the spit-shine and polish. "Do you think you can do this, Corporal O'Connell?"

I hesitated, gave my answer some thought, and then said, "Yes sir."

"Very well, I am going to restrict you to base liberty for one week. And another thing, I have a feeling you are the type of guy who shouldn't drink. I believe it will bring you nothing but trouble."

The Captain turned out to be right, but sobriety wouldn't come for another eleven years.

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Delta Company was one of four companies preparing to go afloat with the rest of the First Battalion, Eighth Marines. We would be designated Battalion Landing Team 1/8 (BLT 1/8). About fifty percent of the enlisted marines in Delta Company were Vietnam veterans just home from the war, while the other fifty percent were boots fresh out ITR. Most of the officers were straight from OCS, but not Captain Sneed—he had seen action during the house-to-house street fighting in Hue City, or so it was rumored, but I never heard him mention it during the times he had to discipline me.

One might think that this composition would have been advantageous for the new marines—they could learn from those who had actually been to war—but to play war was so much different than the real thing. It almost felt childish.

I was lacking enthusiasm. I did not feel gung-ho, and there was no 'get some' inside me. Firing blanks and sometimes even saying, bang, bang, bang, out loud while we charged a make believe enemy seemed like a joke. I remember thinking that if the boot marines really bought into this, if they later on made it to Vietnam and charged forward at a real enemy firing at them, they'd be coming home in a box.

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From Monday morning to Friday morning the company was in the field training. We often started the week off with a twelve mile force-march into the pine forests of Camp Lejeune. The hump was very wearing for those of us who had spent most of the weekend drinking beer. Of course, I was one of the weekend beer drinkers who struggled. Those who did seem to take the force march in stride were the boots still in good physical shape from their initial training at Parris Island.

Sometimes on Friday morning we would be subjected to another twelve mile force-march, this time back to the barracks, to the rear area where Delta Company was headquartered. Sometimes we would travel by truck—it all depended on how the Captain felt the training had gone during the week. I think if he felt the company lacked enthusiasm, then he would have us force-march back. A week of spirited training and we would be rewarded with the trucks providing transportation.

As the weeks of training progressed, and the pain of the twelve mile humps increased, the Vietnam veterans learned to say bang, bang, bang, real loud like they meant it. And even though the tactic of charging forward through the hail of make-believe bullets felt absurd, we learned to go along with the game, although to fall to the ground from a make-believe wound, from the make-believe bullets, opened the real wounds—the pain of Vietnam left in my mind. But the twelve grueling miles wore us down, and so we learned to act accordingly—to accept our new duty station—and thus we rode more often in the trucks.

Upon our arrival back at the barracks, we would clean our rifles and web-gear. Then we would shower and put on clean, starched, utilities, and our freshly shined boots. We would then stand inspection. The Captain would look for dirty weapons, unshaved faces, the need of a haircut, wrinkled clothing, or dull boots in need of a shining—anything which would cause someone to flunk the inspection and be restricted to the base for the weekend. I had already suffered a week of restriction and did not want to be restricted again, so I learned the ways of spit-shine and polish, passed inspection, and was always granted off-base liberty.

Most weekends were spent off-base with Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver. We drank a lot of beer. The beer drinking led us in the direction of marijuana, and the marijuana took us straight to LSD.

One weekend the four of us drove to Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in Grant's car for a change of scenery—something different to do. We were hungry so we went into a McDonald's for cheeseburgers and fries to go along with the beer we had in the car. Inside the McDonald's were a few hippie looking guys and one girl sitting in a booth. I walked over to them and asked if they knew where I could buy some pot. "You a cop?" one asked me.

“No, I’m in the Marines.”

“Why are you asking us about pot?”

“Because you guys look like the pot type.”

They chuckled.

“Are you with those guys over there?” With a twist of his head, the spokesman had looked towards Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver.

“I am.”

“Are they marines, too?”

“We all are,” I said. “We drove up from Camp Lejeune.”

The spokesman for the hippies stared into my eyes, and then looked at his friends as if to ask them, what do you guys think?

The spokesman said to me, “How much pot are you looking for?”

I answered, “An ounce maybe.”

He said, “I don’t have an ounce. Maybe I can spare a nickel-bag, or at the most a dime. How would that be?”

“Let me go ask my buddies,” I said. “Oh, by the way, you’re not a cop, are you?”

“A cop? You mean a pig? No way.”

I went back to the booth where Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver were sitting. I told them we could probably buy a dime-bag—ten dollars worth of marijuana from the hippies. Weaver had the same concern I had—how would we know if they were cops or not.

My gut feeling was that they weren’t. I said we’d have to take a chance if we wanted to buy from them. The others agreed, so we each chipped in two dollars and fifty cents and I walked back over to the booth the hippies were sitting at. I said, “My buddies and I will take a dime-bag if you’ll sell it to us.”

The spokesman said, “Come on outside, I’ll give it to you there.”

A feeling came over me like I was back in Vietnam walking point. Every step I took was measured. Was this hippie a cop? Was I being setup? Getting sucked into an ambush?

As we walked across the parking lot my eyes scanned left and right looking for a police cruiser, or maybe an unmarked vehicle. I didn’t see one.

As we walked a little further I became leery of the situation. I slowed down my pace and hesitated. The spokesman said, “Here, this will put you at ease. I’ll prove to you I’m not a pig.”

With that he took a joint from his pocket, placed it between his lips, lit the joint, and took a deep drag, holding his breath until he could hold it no more. He then coughed the smoke out. Then he said to me, “Your turn so I know you’re cool.”

He passed the joint to me, and as if it was a sign of peace, I inhaled a healthy amount of smoke, held my breath until I too could hold it no more, then exhaled. We now possessed a sense of trust.

I slipped the hippie eight, one-dollar bills, but fumbled with the two dollars in quarters. He slipped me a small, brown paper bag—like a penny candy bag—which I stuffed in my coat pocket. Before we parted, I asked him if he would be at McDonald's again next Saturday. "Why, will you want more?" he said.

I told him if the marijuana was good, we would definitely be back. He assured me the marijuana was going to meet my approval. He said he would be at McDonald's next weekend. I said, "If my friends like the stuff we'll see you then."

The four of us smoked the marijuana. We found it to be top-notch. The high came quickly and was very intense. Someone saw a sign pointing in the direction of Chapel Hill. We drove to Chapel Hill because Sergeant Gleason said the University of North Carolina was located there. He said we could walk around the campus. At first, walking around the campus was enjoyable. At first I thought nothing of having a short hair, but then paranoia swept over me when I sensed the longhaired college students were staring at me. Not even my John Lennon type sunglasses could disguise my military look.

After only a few minutes on campus, feeling like we might be called baby killers, we got back in Grant's car and drove around town with no idea where we were going, high as a kite with no sense of direction, without a purpose in life.

The next weekend the four of us returned to Rocky Mount and met up with the hippies again. Once more they were sitting in McDonald's.

We bought another ten dollars worth of marijuana from the spokesman who told us his name was Clark. He asked me if the four of us were interested in coming to his place to get high. Actually he said he shared the place with the other people he was at McDonald's with.

The place was an old, dilapidated farmhouse. Clark said tobacco used to be grown there, but that the owners had died off. Clark and his hippie friends rented the house from whoever inherited it. I think Clark and his friends might have been squatters. Other than the income they made from selling marijuana, they seemed to have no other source of money, for no one worked.

The shades were always drawn inside the farmhouse. No natural lighting ever seeped in. As for the artificial lighting, fluorescent type black-lights eerily illuminated several rooms. Psychedelic posters taped to the walls, enhanced by the black-lights, gave me the feeling of being in an amusement park funhouse. Actually, drugs were not needed to feel spaced-out in this place as the lighting and posters were enough, but we—us four marines along with Clark and his hippie friends—drank and drugged the weekend away, searching for the ultimate high, a peace of mind which hopefully would have freed us from the real world.

We listened to records played on a cheap record-player. We listened to Santana over and over until we practically wore the record thin. When we grew tired of Santana, we listened to Sergeant Pepper. When that was worn thin, we played Janis Joplin music or The Doors.

Smoking marijuana made us hungry—gave us the hungry horrors. We would take turns going to McDonald's for take-out food. Most of the time two of us would go, usually Grant, because it was his car, and either myself, Sergeant Gleason, or Weaver.

We lived on cheeseburgers and fries. We washed them down with beer, or if we grew tired of drinking beer, we drank Doctor Pepper.

The hippies never seemed to have money for food, but things worked out because the four of us smoked way more than ten dollars worth of marijuana and on top of this, we had free room and board, even if it meant sleeping on the floor with a dirty blanket over us. What did it matter—we once had slept in rice paddies, or in the jungle.

Although the hippies were strange—very quiet, bordering on aloofness—Clark was interesting. He had very long straight blonde hair which touched his shoulders. He wore a tie-dye bandana around his head, and bellbottom blue-jeans which had not been washed for what might have been months. Somehow he managed to keep his face freshly shaved, while the other hippies had beards to go along with their long hair.

It was during the third weekend we spent at the farmhouse that Clark told us he too was a Vietnam veteran. It was Weaver who said to Clark, "No way—prove it."

Clark slowly got himself on his feet, took off his tee-shirt and turned around so Weaver could see his back. Clark's back was heavily scarred with shrapnel wounds which were highlighted the way a black-light highlights the color white.

Weaver quizzed Clark. He asked him what branch of the service he had served in.

Clark said, "The Army."

"What unit?"

"173rd Airborne."

"Where were they?"

"Ban Me Thout."

"What did you do in Vietnam?"

"I was an infantry leader."

With that said, Weaver's tone of voice expressed astonishment. "You were an officer?"

"A Second Lieutenant."

Weaver paused for a few seconds and then said, "You don't look like a Second Lieutenant."

Clark replied, "In Vietnam I did."

"So you got wounded over there?"

"Ya, a chicom got me."

Hearing the word chicom, Weaver said, "I guess I believe you. How else would you have known that word."

Sergeant Gleason spoke up. He said to Clark, "How the hell did you go from being an officer in the Army to a longhair?"

"Easy," Clark said. "One just tunes in, turns on, and drops out—just like the good Doctor Timothy Leary preached."

With that said, we all took a hit acid.

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For whatever reason, I grew tired of going to Rocky Mount. My last LSD experience might have been the reason why. I suffered through eight hours of paranoia, high anxiety, fear, and panic. I did not enjoy the journey. I was more concerned with the destination, and the destination in my mind was that of uncertainty.

I spent the entire trip trying to hold on to my sanity. I tried to fight off the hallucinatory affects of the powerful LSD. I was claustrophobic inside the farmhouse, but when I ran outside to escape from what I thought was the inside of a coffin, I ran myself right back into the jungles of Vietnam with Grant chasing me down. When he caught me and knocked me to the ground, all I could do was yell out, "Paul O'Connell—Corporal—two-four-two-two-six-seven-one.

I thought Grant was an NVA soldier and I was a POW, and I was giving him only what was required by the Geneva Convention—my name, rank, and serial number.

When Grant stood me up, I pleaded with him not to shoot me. "Shoot you? Why would I shoot you?"

"Because you are the enemy!"

"No, I am your friend."

Distrust came over me because no way was I able to see Grant any other way than an NVA soldier trying to manipulate my brain, telling me he was my friend, when in my mind he was my capturer.

When he took me back to the farmhouse, he was taking a POW to an enemy camp. When he brought me inside, I closed my eyes and died.

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Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver continue their weekend trips to Rocky Mount. At first they bugged me to come with them, but I told them I needed a break, I told them I was tired from the week of training in the field. I told them I just wanted to get some rest. When they kept on me to go back, to get them off my tail I said, "No, I'm not going back. My fucking mind is blown."

Sergeant Gleason tried to convince me that there was nothing wrong with my mind, that I simply had experienced a bad trip—that I had gone off on a bummer.

I should have gotten into the specifics of my mind with him, told him how the war games were affecting me. Although my body had physically been in the pine forest of Camp Lejeune, my mind was back in the jungles of Vietnam—I was ducking bullets. Every time I heard blanks being fired I was taken back. During one staged, make-believe battle, a referee judging who had been killed or wounded came over to me, tapped me on the shoulder and declared me dead. "Lie down," he said.

I remember looking at him and saying, "No fucking way. I'm not dying. You can't order me dead."

The referee just stared at me. He might have seen the seriousness in my eyes. He might have understood I was not some boot marine straight out of Parris Island who he could convince that dying was no big thing. He seemed to come to his senses. He said to me, "I'm sorry Corporal, you're not dead. As long as I'm the referee, you won't have to die."

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With Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and Weaver gone for the weekend to Rocky Mount, I was left to fend for myself. My weekends were now lonely—a loneliness self-imposed. Of course there were many other guys in Delta Company I could have spent time with, but I didn't. Other than an occasional chat here and there, I cannot recall anything of any importance. There was one marine —Henry Richards—who did talk with me a lot. He was a Vietnam veteran, married, and lived off-base. A few times he invited me to have a home-cooked meal with him and his wife at their place, but I used to tell him I was going to be busy. I would make it sound like I had a big weekend planned, when actually I had nothing to do.

In my idle time, bored, I consciously found myself thinking about Vietnam. I felt there was something wrong with me. I thought I was suffering latent affects of LSD. I thought if I went for help, I would be charged with using illicit drugs.

Not too far from the barracks where Delta Company was headquartered stood a stand of pine trees, and beyond the pines was a body of water known as Stone Bay. In front of the pines was a mock-up of a CH-46 helicopter made of plywood, meant to represent the helicopter's interior where the troops would have been loaded, just like a helicopter that had transported me into battle back in Vietnam. Many times I would sit inside the mock-up, no longer armed with an M-16 like in Vietnam, but with a bottle of Ripple Wine concealed inside a brown paper bag.

Although I used to approach the mock-up cautiously because I never wanted anyone to see me getting inside, my fears seemed unwarranted because not once did I ever have to share the make-believe ride with anyone. I never encountered another person at the mock-up. Who the hell else would be spending their weekend flying over an imaginary Vietnam? No one but I.

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Sometimes I would take the bus to Jacksonville and walk aimlessly along Court Street. Money was tight so I never really drank in the bars, especially the one I had been ruled drunk and disorderly in—the one I was barred from entering.

To save money and to get off my feet, I spent time in the USO located a block or two from Court Street. The USO was on the banks of the New River. The USO was a good place to be—everything was free except for the food and soft drinks, but even the prices for these refreshments served at a snack-bar were minimal, way cheaper than in the civilian world.

Sometimes there was a live band playing. The bands actually were pretty good. The beat of the music often made me feel like dancing, or playing the drums, but there never was anyone to dance with, and the one time I asked to sit in with the band, I was told they did not allow it.

Once in awhile there were a few USO volunteers, a few women to dance with, but I didn't have the nerve—I lacked confidence—to ask one of them to dance. God forbid if someone had refused me.

When there wasn't a live band, I liked to listen to music with headphones covering my ears so that I heard nothing else.

There was a room with comfortable chairs and a record-player beside each one. LP-records could be borrowed for free and listened to. I cannot tell you how many times I listened to *The Animals* singing, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place, House of the Rising Sun, It's My Life, When I Was Young, Don't Bring Me Down, Monterey*, and *Sky Pilot*. I listened to *Sky Pilot* over and over, but

I could not grasp the message—the lyrics confused me. My soul internalized the words, but my mind, trying constantly to make rhyme or reason out of the past was incapable.

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Despite my love of hearing the stereo separation in my mind—the guitars in one ear, the organ in the other—the drums and vocals coming through both as if their sounds were coming from the middle of my mind—despite the inner harmony, I would grow tired of the music after awhile. My eardrums would need a rest from the blaring music inside the headphones for I played the music loud trying to overpower my thoughts—so loud that once in awhile I was told to turn down the sound. Despite using headphones, the loud music disturbed others in the room.

Without the distraction of music, the obsession to have a drink would set in. There was no alcohol at the USO, so if I wanted to drink I would have to go out into the world.

There was a Piggly-Wiggly convenience store about a block off of Court Street. To save money and remain inconspicuous—for I knew drinking in public was a criminal offense—I would purchase a bottle of Ripple at the Piggly-Wiggly and keep it wrapped in the paper bag, having only the neck of the bottle showing, just enough to get my lips around.

A lot of times I would find myself sitting under a bridge not far from the USO. The bridge spanned the New River. Vehicles traveling along Highway 17 traveled overhead.

I found solitude while sitting on the granite block embankment beneath the bridge. I was out of sight from the rest of the world, although the tire sounds of the trucks and cars above allowed me some connection to it.

I sensed something was wrong with my thinking which made me feel paranoid and anxious, but the wine I drank under the bridge helped calm me.

Sometimes I felt restless, in need of a change of scenery. These were the times when I would escape from the world—take myself and my Ripple into the pine forests of Camp Lejeune. In the seclusion, and under the influence of alcohol, I would act out my inner feelings. I would run from tree to tree as if someone was trying to shoot me while I maneuvered myself towards the imaginary enemy in a heroic way. I knew this behavior was strange, but the exhilaration it brought me seemed to sooth my nerves, while leaving me with the knowledge that if I was discovered acting in this fashion, I would be deemed crazy.

Sometimes when I was alone and knew for sure that nobody was looking over my shoulder, I would draw maps on paper, maps with contour lines which depicted mountains with fingers and draws, and streams, rivers and trails. I would depict our defensive bunkers and the bunkers of the enemy too. But mostly I would draw a map which showed a trail which looked like the one leading to the top of Hill 322. I would draw upon the images in my mind—images remembered from the stories told to me by those who were with Sergeant Thompson, Corporal Johnston, Christianson, Joe Freeman, and Merryman—images of where they died. I would save these marines with a heroic charge forward. On paper I would wipe out the enemy, I would erase the guilt of survival, when in reality, I would be all alone in my mind, still fighting a war, slowly going crazy.

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For whatever reason, Sergeant Gleason and Grant had decided not to go to Rocky Mount one weekend, so the three of us went to Jacksonville for some fun.

Sergeant Gleason had bought a wig—a long-haired hippie wig. He fitted the wig over his Marine Corps haircut. With the help of the make-believe hair, and a tie-dye bandana wrapped around his head—and he added sunglasses—he truly looked like a hippie straight from Haight-Ashbury.

The three of us went into a bar to drink. Of course Sergeant Gleason stood out like a sore thumb. He was probably the only hippie-looking-dude within fifty miles of Jacksonville. This was strictly Marine Corps country.

Although we were minding our own business and appeared to be two marines with a hippie tagging along, two MPs came through the door and walked straight over to us. They asked us for our IDs. Grant and I showed our IDs without any hesitation, but Sergeant Gleason just sat and ignored them. He kept right on drinking. When he was asked for his ID, he asked the MPs what authority they had to ask a civilian for one.

Neither of the MPs replied to Sergeant Gleason's question of authority, but one of them spoke, "Take off the sunglasses."

Sergeant Gleason made like he was deaf. He did not respond in any way to the MP's order.

"Get up, marine."

Still he did not budge. It was at this point that the MPs pulled him to his feet and took the sunglasses from his face, and staring Sergeant Gleason straight in the eyes, one of the MPs said, "You sure have the stare of a Marine."

The MP did not know it, but he was staring into the eyes of a Silver Star, Bronze Star, and two Purple Hearts recipient. Yes, Sergeant Gleason was a decorated war hero, but he wanted to be a free-spirited hippie instead.

When the MPs yanked Sergeant Gleason to his feet, the wig ended up kilted to one side of his head. At this point, one of the MPs pulled the wig from Sergeant Gleason's head, and in one swift movement he was handcuffed. When Grant and I protested—when we asked why someone could not wear a wig—they called for more MPs. The three of us ended up being handcuffed, and chained together, pushed into a military van, and taken away to the drunk-tank for a four hour stay

The next day, once more, I found myself standing at the position of attention before Captain Snead. When he asked me what it was going to take to learn my lesson, and I said I didn't know, he said, "Well, O'Connell, two weeks of restriction to the base should give you time to come up with some ideas."

He finished off by telling me I was working on getting myself thrown out of the Marine Corps. "Not a good thing," he said.

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I spent the next two weeks restricted to the base. After my restriction was lifted, I was able to stay out of trouble, mostly because I drank by myself, and mostly because I stayed away from the bars in Jacksonville. It was back to the USO for some headphone music, and when I grew tired of that, I went to the Piggly-Wiggly for some Ripple, then sat my ass down beneath the bridge spanning the New River for some solitude—just me and my wine.

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Delta Company completed its training sometime in early March. We were trucked to Morehead City, NC, where we boarded the USS Chilton (APA38); an assault transport ship which had participated in the invasion of Okinawa during World War Two.

During our time in the Mediterranean, Delta Company, along with the rest of the battalion, participated in war-games with other NATO forces. We were expected to simulate the same style beach-landings made by the marines in the Pacific while they recaptured islands from the Japanese.

We scrambled down nets draped over the side of the transport ship, then dropped the last few feet crashing down onto the deck of the World War Two vintage landing-craft which were bobbing up and down at the whim of the sea. After loading, the landing-craft would then quickly head towards the beach, but not quick enough for the many that grew seasick before they reached the shore. Then when the landing-craft ran aground, and the front ramp fell forward—when we saw water between us and the sandy beach—we knew we would have to wade through at least waist-deep water before making it to the boot-top-deep sand. Soaking wet, while imagining being fired at by a concealed enemy, we would scream and yell while firing blanks in our charge ashore to please those who took these games for real. I was not one of them.

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The Atlantic crossing took ten days. The ship pitched and rolled all ten of them. Many marines were seasick until they got their sea-legs. For some it took a day or two—some up to five days. A few were sick all the way across.

The USS Chilton was nothing like the Iwo Jima. The Chilton was slower, less stable, and more confining. The bunk-beds—four high—were located down in what was no more than a cargo-hold. The ventilation was poor at best and most times nil because the ship was often secured water-tight—most hatches and bulkhead doors shut and the ventilation system closed—for training purposes. Many times general quarters would be sounded. My general quarters station or assignment was to get in my bunk which was one of the top bunks. General quarters meant no ventilation which led to stifling heat, contributing to a lot of discontentment amongst the marines stuffed below the main deck.

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We were kept busy by being assigned to work-parties. The assigned work was to chip paint from the steel walls, decks, and ceilings. If it was painted grey, then chip it. Chisel-head hammers were used to get the ship's surfaces down to bare metal, or the best we could. The sounds of the chipping was deafening and got on my nerves in such a way that often I would bang away at the steel as if I thought I could break through it.

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Normal food lasted the first few days out to sea—real eggs, whole milk, fresh vegetables, and tender cuts of beef. The last eight days we ate powdered eggs and drank powered milk. Canned vegetables replaced the fresh ones, and the beef—roast beef every day—was as tough as shoe leather.

After a brief stop in Rota, Spain (for the ceremonial changing of the guard), we slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar in the middle of the night, trying to keep our arrival into the Mediterranean Sea a secret from the Russians who always kept a close eye on the American

forces. Some guys stayed up to see what they could of the Rock of Gibraltar, but I slept right through. When I woke in the morning and went topside, I could have been anywhere I was told I was, because the middle of the Mediterranean looked no different than the middle of the Atlantic or Pacific—nothing but open waters.

Before steaming into Malaga, Spain, for a few days of liberty, we stormed a beach along the Spanish coast. We had gone over the side of the ship and down the nets and dropped the last few feet down onto the deck of the landing-craft. One marine, as he dropped down and the landing-craft rose—the force practically snapping his leg in two, the bone protruding through the skin—suffered a broken leg, and his screams of agony took me right back to Vietnam.

This mock amphibious assault started off with Delta Company wading ashore after the landing-craft had run aground on a spit of sand. The water was waist-high in depth—deep enough that our cartridge-belts and the bottom of our packs were soaked and would not completely dry for days, or if ever.

I was a fire-team leader. My job was to urge my fire-team forward, to charge the beach, to enthusiastically fire blanks at an enemy that did not exist. I was a bad influence on my team because I found nothing enthusiastic about being soaked, practically waterlogged, while stumbling and falling face-first into the sand—then after coming up, looking like a sugarcoated cruller, but the sugar was gritty sand.

My platoon commander—Lieutenant Pace, straight out of OCS so everything was real—would be yelling at the top of his lungs for his platoon to fire their weapons. I hated to fire blanks—they dirtied a rifle barrel more than an actual bullet would. I hated cleaning my weapon.

Lieutenant Pace would practically plead with Sergeant Gleason to get the men to fire their weapons. Sergeant Gleason would say to me, “Come on, we got to play the game a little bit.”

I would say back to him, “I liked listening to you better when you were a hippie with longhair.”

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We spent about a week ashore playing war games. After assaulting the beach we moved inland a few miles and secured our assigned objectives in the foothills, just as we would in a real war. We did not encounter an enemy, but we did come upon Spanish farmers who seemed to look at us with disdain as we dug fighting holes in their rich fertile soil. I remember digging a hole in a field that had recently been fertilized with dead fish. The fish were in the early stages of decomposition and their stench so powerful that we had to move our positions several hundred yards. We left the fishy smelling field pockmarked with holes for the Spanish farmers to fill.

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When the Spanish invasion was over, we boarded the Chilton again and sailed to Malaga, Spain, for a few days of liberty. I remember officially being told two things—do not expect to find any prostitution in Malaga, and two, if you went to a bullfight, do not cheer for the bull.

Guided tours of Malaga and the surroundings were offered to us for a nominal fee. By signing up for one of the tours, it was possible to go on liberty at 1000hrs instead of waiting until 1600hrs.

Henry Richards, the married marine who was always asking me to join him and wife for dinner at their home back at Camp Lejeune, was interested in taking one of these tours and asked me if I

wanted to join him. Getting off the ship early sounded good to me. Even touring Malaga did not sound like a bad idea, so I agreed to go with Richards.

The two of us, along with other marines, boarded a tour bus which had very comfortable seats, so we were riding in style.

Richards had a state-of-the-art 35mm camera. Packing several rolls of film, he was prepared to capture the moments he would spend touring Malaga. He would have the pictures forever and would be able to share them with his family. As for me, I climbed aboard the bus with all intentions of seeing and learning about Malaga and Spain, but these intentions would sooner or later give way to my desire to have a drink. Someone had said that the cognac in Spain was to die for. Having never had cognac, my curiosity slowly overpowered my feelings for tourism.

At first I found Malaga to be interesting. I had never experienced Spanish architecture before—stone and masonry construction centuries old—so much older than anything I had ever seen in the United States—different looking than the Orient. I actually was left in awe and relaxed in my mind as it expanded with new knowledge. I still remember seeing a monastery which the tour guide told us had taken more than a hundred years to build, and that even before the monastery was finished being built—because of the length of time and not inferior construction—the parts first built were already in need of repairs. There was enjoyment in trying to mentally calculate this amount of time and in thinking about the dedication the Spanish builders had demonstrated —generation after generation—in building the church. As for my dedication, I was nearing the end of my attention span, my attention being turned in the direction of some cognac.

I just was not Richards, even though a part of me wished I could have been. He was such a good tourist, never losing his desire to see and experience the sights and sounds of the Mediterranean. He was absorbing culture while I was downing cognac and beer. I wasted so much of my time in the Mediterranean drinking, getting drunk, and chasing women. Richards, he drank, but he sipped his drinks, and never overindulged.

After we toured the monastery on foot, I told Richards I had to find a bathroom. What I really was looking for was a way to escape. When I turned the corner and disappeared from those boarding the bus headed for the next stop on the tour, I took off for the closest bar. In the early evening when I returned to the ship, Richards would ask what happened to me. I would tell him I had not been feeling too good, that I was in the bathroom longer than I had intended—that when I came out, the bus was gone.

Richards was a good friend. Despite the fact that I stunk of booze, and boarded the ship some five hours after he had, he never questioned my story, and never stopped asking me to join him on other tours, although other than going out one day for lunch with him in Genoa, I never toured with him again.

After Malaga, every port was the same for me—Nice, Genoa, Naples, and Athens. I could have taken side trips to the Swiss Alps, Paris, Monaco, Pompeii, Rome, or the ancient Greek ruins, but I did not. Instead I didn't venture more than a few blocks from the waterfront. I didn't see anything except the inside of a bar where I joined other rowdy marines interested in nothing more than getting drunk and sleeping with paid whores. The country, the language, the weather, the currency, nothing mattered as long as there was booze and women to go along with it.

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Athens was a little different. Actually I left the ship feeling like I wanted to be a tourist. This feeling was sort of strange because instead of being with Richards, I was with Sergeant Gleason and Grant. Weaver normally would have been with us too, but he was no longer with Delta Company. He had gotten in a fight with a few Navy sailors—Filipinos—who were stewards to the captain of the Chilton.

Weaver had been drunk and thought the Filipinos were Vietnamese. He instigated a fight. He bloodied two of them as he fought with them going up the gangway in Naples. He bit a healthy chunk off one of the Filipinos left ear, and came very close to throwing another one off the gangway, into the water, or even worse, down onto the concrete pier below. He actually was charged with attempted murder.

When the ship departed Naples, he no longer was on board. The rumor was that he was locked up in the brig at NATO headquarters, or was locked away in a nuthouse. Regardless, he was never heard from again.

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While in Athens, Sergeant Gleason, Grant, and I got into a taxi. The driver spoke English. We asked him if he could show us around. He said, "You mean you want to visit the Acropolis and the Parthenon?"

"Sure, but we'd like to get something to eat and drink first. Do you have any suggestions?"

The driver took us up to a mountain top overlooking Athens. The view was quite impressive. There was a restaurant with tables and chairs on an outside patio. I remember the driver telling us that Saint Luke had written some of the Bible in this exact location, out on the patio where we were sitting. I was impressed by the thoughts of sitting where Saint Luke had been.

Grant wasn't impressed. He questioned the driver about how he knew this to be true about Saint Luke. The driver said that Saint Luke's presence had been recorded in history. Grant said, "I don't believe any of what you are saying. I don't believe in any of the Bible. I think you are just giving us this crap so the restaurant can overcharge us for some shitty food. Now take us back to the ship."

The driver took us directly back to the pier where we started our liberty all over again. I never did see the Acropolis or the Parthenon.

Instead of getting into a cab while continuing with our liberty, the three of us walked a few hundred yards to a bar. We had been officially warned during an informational session held onboard the Chilton, by Navy officials, that Ouzo—Greek liquor—should not be consumed. When asked why not, the official said, "It's dangerous, its effects are very powerful. Let's leave it at that."

A marine raised his hand and said, "I read that Ouzo has opium in it. Is this true?"

The official said, "That's only a rumor. There is no opium in Ouzo. It's just that the alcohol content is high. That is why you are being told not to drink it—period."

Before leaving the meeting, I joined a few other marines who were asking the marine who had mentioned the opium what he had been talking about. He stated that Ouzo definitely was cut with opium.

Having stored this information in my mind about Ouzo having opium in it, when we got inside the dimly lit bar, we moved towards the extreme end of it because we had made up our minds what our drink was going to be, and we felt like we were going to have to sneak the drink, which of course was going to be Ouzo.

I waited to be told by the bartender that he couldn't serve Ouzo to us, but he never said such a thing. He filled three glasses with ice and then poured clear liquor over the cubes. The ice immediately began to melt, and the liquor turned a milky white color. I took a whiff of the drink and smelled black licorice. The three of us downed our drinks and hoped for an opium affect to occur.

Ouzo was everything it was cracked up to be—a mixed feeling of a drug high, wrapped up within a drunken stupor. There may have been opium in the Ouzo, but we didn't know, but it sure made the three of us crazy.

Someone in the bar said there was a go-cart track where we would be able to drive go-carts just a few miles away. Driving go-carts sounded like fun.

The three of us downed our third glass of Ouzo and then jumped inside a cab. I had not eaten anything, and the Ouzo on an empty stomach had my head spinning.

When we told the taxi driver where we wanted to go—to the go-carts—he said in broken English, "Too drunk to drive. No drive."

Sergeant Gleason bellowed out, "Who the fuck is too drunk to drive. We'll drive if we want to."

When we got to the track we slapped our money down on the counter. "Three go-carts.".

The guy behind the counter signaled no at first, but when Sergeant Gleason put more money on the counter, we got our go-carts.

There was an outside patio with a bar overlooking the track right opposite the start/finish line. The patio was packed with Greek men and women out on dates, or looking for a date, maybe even with a marine.

When the Greeks saw the three of us walking to get into our go-carts, and saw us roll on the ground when we tried to lower ourselves in, there were outbursts of laughter. Needless to say, the three of us turned the go-carts into bumper-cars, despite posted regulations prohibiting bumping cars into one another. Plus we rearranged every bale of hay lining the track when we careened through them.

The guy behind the counter wasn't laughing, nor was he going to deal directly with us. Maybe he knew an argument would occur between us and him, for he knew we were drunk, so he did the smart thing—he summoned the Greek police who came and waited at the finish line with their hands on their nightsticks ready to beat us. We may have been drunk, but we weren't stupid. We allowed the police to escort us from the track. When we got outside, we tried to get a cab back to the pier, but none of the drivers wanted to drive three drunks. When we asked one of them for a ride, he said in English as he pointed to the police, "Ask them. They will give you a ride."

Sergeant Gleason blasted back, "Fuck you Greek bastards, we're Marines, we'll walk." And thus we walked back to the ship.

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On my twentieth birthday I went on liberty with Sergeant Gleason and Grant to celebrate. We went to the sleazy bar we had been in the night we ended up in the fiasco at the go-cart track.

We began the evening with some Ouzo, but not in excess—not yet. We got talking to several marines who told us about a whorehouse where the girls were simply beautiful, and the prices were cheaper than the whorehouses closer to the pier. When we asked about the location of the whorehouse, they told us to ask any cab driver to take you to the Oasis. So the three of us finished our drinks, got into a taxi, asked to be taken to the Oasis, and off we went without another word said.

The Oasis was heaven. There was a full bar and a jukebox on the first floor, and the bedrooms were on the second. The jukebox was loaded with many of the Top 100 songs from back home. The only negative I remember at the Oasis was hearing the song, I Heard You're Getting Married, by Brooklyn Bridge, coming from the jukebox. It allowed memories of Sharon to move from my subconscious to the surface of my mind, but these thoughts, the pain of knowing Sharon was marrying someone else, were doused somewhat with Ouzo, but I must admit, when I was sleeping with one of the Greek prostitutes—although her hair was long, straight, and jet-black—in my mind, I was making love to Sharon and running my hands through her blond hair.

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Liberty was to terminate at midnight. I got a taxi back to the ship along with Sergeant Gleason and Grant. If we had walked up the gangway when we got out of the cab, we would have been ten minutes early, but instead we ended up being three days late.

When the three of us had gotten out of the cab, we looked up the gangway and saw the Officer of the Day standing on the quarterdeck. He was joined by several sailors who were checking IDs as the marines and sailors who had been ashore on liberty returned to the ship

All the three of us had to do was climb the gangway, salute the Officer of the Day while verbally asking permission to come aboard, show our IDs, allow ourselves to be searched for drugs and alcohol, stumble our way down to the hold, climb into our bunks, and pass out. But I turned from the gangway and saw the lights of the taxi which had not left the pier yet, and said, "Fuck this, there's still ten minutes left to celebrate my birthday. I'm going back to the Oasis."

With that said, with my back to the ship, I returned to the cab, climbed in, and said to the driver, "To the Oasis."

I was not alone—Sergeant Gleason and Grant were coming along for the ride.

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I woke in the morning with my arm across the bare chest of the girl with the long, straight, jet-black hair. I thought to myself, who is she, what is her name, and where am I?

I had no idea, but when I sat up and began to put on my socks which were lying on top of my uniform, which was balled up on the floor at my side of the bed—when she stirred herself awake, she asked me, "Am I still Sharon?"

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It was 0800hrs. If I returned to the ship now, I would be eight hours late. But the Captain had preached to all of us in Delta Company, "Two minutes late will be considered the same as a day late. Be late, and you will find yourself demoted, fined, and restricted to the ship."

I figured if I was going to be late eight hours, I might as well be a few days late—I may as well get my monies worth.

Sergeant Gleason and Grant felt the same way, thus the three of us spent another day and night at the Oasis. We drank more Ouzo, mostly on an empty stomach because we were running low on cash.

I slept the second night wrapped in a horse-blanket on the floor in some room void of any furnishings. I did not have the money for a bed, and most certainly, not for the services of a girl. Although it seemed the Greek girls at the Oasis enjoyed our company during the day and into the evening—we bought them their drinks—when it came time to find a girl and a bed to take her to, being broke meant sleeping alone.

With no money and with the prospects of having no place to stay, we had struck a deal with the bartender. We helped clean-up the bar—gathered the empty glasses and empty bottles of beer, dumped the ashtrays, wiped down the tables, and swept and swabbed the floors, all for a place to sleep, although the only place the bartender could provide for us was a backroom on the second floor, down the hall from the bedrooms where the Greek prostitutes sold their wares through the night.

The next morning the three of us looked horrible. We had not eaten in over a day—not since the day before. We had not showered or shaved or brushed our teeth for almost two days, and having rolled my uniform into a ball the first night, and slept in it the second one, well, we all looked like hell.

On top of this, during the second night, a few of the marines who came into the Oasis were from Delta Company. One was actually a staff-sergeant in one of the other platoons. He told us that the Captain was outraged at our absence, and that the Captain was going to deal with our unauthorized absence in a severe manner. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he threw the three of you into the brig,” he said.

So being wrapped up in a horse-blanket while lying on a hard floor, with the effects of the Ouzo tapering off, the impending doom had made it hard for me to get any sleep.

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The three of us hitchhiked our way back to the ship. The first driver who stopped to give us a ride said we were thumbing in the wrong direction. We needed to be on the other side of the road. When we asked him if he could give us a ride anyway, he said he couldn’t. He had stated that he was in a hurry to get to where he was going.

We crossed the street and began to hitchhike in the other direction. A pickup truck stopped. The driver said he could give us a lift but that we would have to ride in the back, in the open bed. He had his dog riding with him in the front seat, passenger side.

In the back of the pickup was a partially opened bag of dry, powdery concrete mix. The powder seeped out and swirled about in the truck’s jet-stream. The three of us ended up powdered with the mix, and by the time we made it to the pier we looked nothing like United States Marines.

When we walked up the gangway, the Officer-of-the-Day was waiting for us. Most likely he had seen us getting out of the back of the pickup looking like bums. Grant, who had a heavy beard and always looked like he needed a shave—even if he shaved several times a day—looked like a werewolf dressed in a Marine Corps uniform. And Sergeant Gleason, with his chest-full of

ribbons, severely disgraced his uniform too. And I, covered in powder like the rest, looked flat broke, down and out.

When the Officer-of-the-Day checked our IDs and searched for our names against a list he had on a sheet of paper on a clipboard, having discovered we had been listed as UA (unauthorized absence), he ordered several sailors—members of the ships security team—to escort us to the ships brig. When the three of us arrived there, we were locked inside one of the jail cells.

The three of us sat down, then stretched out upon the steel deck and dropped off to sleep which came so suddenly it was like I had been banged over the head.

What comfort there was in sleeping was quickly removed by the bellowing voice of Delta Company's Gunnery Sergeant barking out, "What the fuck do we have here? Gleason, Grant, O'Connell, stand the fuck up, right now."

The three of us in our powdered uniforms pulled ourselves up the bars of the jail cell and managed to stand in a half-ass position of attention. I don't know how Sergeant Gleason or Grant felt, but I was numb, dead without any fight inside me. If I was to be beaten, I wouldn't even have raised my hands to protect myself.

The Gunnery Sergeant paraded us down to Captain Snead's office. When the Captain laid eyes on us he shook his head side to side in dismay. He said, "I want the three of you out of those uniforms which you have desecrated, and somehow get them cleaned, not because you'll need them for liberty, but because you'll need them for your court-martial. And another thing, get your asses looking like Marines and do it ASAP. I want you back in my office, showered and shaved, in three zero minutes."

After cleaning myself up and taking my uniform down to the ship's laundry in hopes of getting it dry-cleaned, I made my way back to the Captain's office. I was the first one back.

I stood at the position of attention before Captain Snead. He told me to stand at ease, then asked me why I had gone UA. I told him I had felt I needed a rest. He asked me, "Did you let anyone know you were tired? Maybe if someone had known, maybe if you had come to me, maybe I could have granted you permission to spend a night or two ashore."

Captain Snead had made it sound so simple. All I had to do was tell him I was tired and he would have let me have a night or two of rest?

The Captain then thumbed his way through my military service record which he had on his desk.

"I see you just had a birthday. Did you celebrate?"

"Yes I did sir. I celebrated a little bit too much."

The Captain turned a few more pages of my records and then said, "O'Connell, I hate to see a marine going downhill. Your proficiency marks in Vietnam were exceptional, but if I had to grade you right now, you would be flunking in every category—and do you know why?"

"No sir, I do not know."

"Well I'll tell you why. It's because you are a drunk, and because of it, for some reason you have lost your sense of discipline."

I stood silent. I could hear the ship's ventilation system—a low-octave hum. The sound was making me anxious. It reminded me of being in a helicopter headed to an LZ in Vietnam, leaving me with a feeling of impending doom.

I heard Captain Snead's voice, "I'm referring this matter to the Battalion Commander. I don't know what will come of it, but you better pray for the best. I would hate to see you drummed out of the Marine Corps. And one other thing, I am restricting you from leaving the ship. You will have no more liberty while we are in the Mediterranean. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

When I got out into the passageway I saw Sergeant Gleason and Grant waiting to be called into the Captain's office. They asked me what had gone on, "What did the Captain say?" I told them he had placed me on restriction and that I was going to face charges before the Battalion Commander.

"Did he say anything about a court-martial?" Grant said.

"I didn't hear the word, court-martial, but I'm assuming that's why he's passing this matter up the chain of command." I also added, "I think we might be fucked."

Sergeant Gleason said, "They can court-martial my ass all day, but damn, I hate to miss liberty at Palma Majorca. I hear the Spanish whores there are unreal. I've been looking forward to that place for this entire cruise. One way or another, I'm getting off this ship."

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I would get off the ship one last time. This was to participate in an amphibious landing somewhere near the Greek-Turkish border, or so I was told that's where the location was. I do remember that not too far off the shore were Russian vessels closely monitoring our war games. If the Russians had possessed a strong pair of binoculars and they were focused on me, they might have been able to see me standing before a Major who was conducting a disciplinary hearing—known as Battalion Office Hours—which was not long in duration.

"Lance Corporal O'Connell, do you have any excuse for your unauthorized absence?"

"No sir."

"Then Lance Corporal, consider yourself lucky. Your punishment will be a demotion from the rank of Corporal—E-4—down to the rank of Lance Corporal—E-3. You will forfeit one-half of one month's pay for the next two months. This is equivalent to forfeiting an entire months pay, but the Marine Corps, in its kindness, does not take your pay all at once. The Marine Corps would not want to leave you broke. But I'm not certain what you will need money for anyway, because you are to be restricted from liberty for the duration of the cruise. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Lance Corporal, you have the right to a court-martial if you feel aggrieved by this ruling. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Then carry on."

The Major's opening question had said it all. He never addressed me as Corporal. It was Lance Corporal right off the bat. At least the hearing was short and sweet. At least I had not gotten myself thrown out of the Marine Corps, although it did smart me hearing my newly earned title.

Grant received the same punishment dished out to me. As for Sergeant Gleason, he could have gotten off with the same punishment, but he chose to be court-martialed. By the time he finished running his mouth, he too was a new lance Corporal, but he was reduced two ranks; from E-5 to E-3. He was told that if it hadn't been for his superb combat record, he would have been thrown out of the Marine Corps with a 'General Discharge under less than Honorable Conditions'.

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While the Chilton was in Palma Majorca, Lance Corporal Gleason, although he was restricted to the ship with Grant and I, got himself assigned to a work-party which went ashore to unload supplies from a truck. When no one was looking he slipped into a taxi and found his way to a whorehouse to sleep with a woman. He found his way to a bar also and got drunk. He was arrested my MPs who found him staggering down an alleyway. He was returned to the ship in shackles and thrown into the brig. He had his second court-martial in less than a two week period. Lance Corporal Gleason became Private Gleason and most likely was going to be thrown out of the Corps upon his arrival back in North Carolina.

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Ironically, while coming back across the Atlantic Ocean, a company formation was called for on the main deck of the Chilton. Members of Delta Company witnessed me being presented with a Navy Achievement Medal with a combat 'V'. This medal was slow in getting to me. The award was for my actions along the berm in Vietnam, June 6, 1969 to be exact, and for participating in other mentioned operations: Operation Taylor Common, Operation Muskogee Meadows, Operation Pipestone Canyon, and Operation Durham Peak. It felt strange to me to be standing before the company, receiving a citation for once having been a squared-away marine, back in a time when I was a Corporal.

Captain Snead pulled me aside after the company was dismissed to tell me that he thought I could still be a good marine if I put my mind to it. He said, "Become the person you were back in Vietnam."

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My mother and father were not writing to me on a daily basis anymore. My father had asked in a letter if this was okay. I wrote back that it was. I didn't write like I had back when I was in Vietnam either. I don't know how often I wrote to be truthful, as my father did not save any of my letters written while I was in the Mediterranean.

I do remember parts of the first letter I wrote home after being demoted. I remember the lousy feeling that came over me when I wrote my new return address on the envelope.

In the letter I wrote something like, "I don't know if you noticed or not, but my return address has changed. It is no long Corporal Paul O'Connell. I am now Lance Corporal O'Connell."

I do not remember how or if I even explained my demotion, but it was not too long afterwards that I would receive a letter from my mother stating that my father was hospitalized because of a nervous breakdown.

At the time, I never gave it a thought that all the worrying my father had about me might have been the reason for his condition. I was so much in my own head that I had not given anyone else any thought.

My mother told me my father was worried about dying because his father had died at the age of forty-six, one year older than my Dad's forty-five. All I knew was that I felt a horrible sickness inside when I read my mother's letter. I wasn't doing well either. Demoted, restricted to the ship, floundering inside my soul, I too felt like breaking down.

My father and I never talked about his breakdown or what it was about. Although some people thought I was a war hero, I wonder if my father really felt the same. Maybe he suffered from the same delusion that I had in my mind—just survive Vietnam and everything else in life will be rosy in color. The reality of it all, having survived Vietnam was not a free pass in life, although the warrior inside expected one.

My father would spend the rest of his life dependent upon prescription drugs to get him through each and every day. I would believe that some of my behaviors had played a big part in his problems. Maybe this motivated me later on in my life to somehow make him feel proud to have me as his son.

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I returned to Camp Lejeune towards the end of the summer. Those in Delta Company who hadn't been to Vietnam yet were being ordered to serve there. They would go home on leave for twenty-one days, and then head to Camp Pendleton, and then onto Vietnam. Those of us who had already been to Vietnam were scattered about the Second Marine Division, except for a few marines who re-enlisted and were being transferred to duty stations of their liking. I remember one sergeant who was headed to Parris Island to become a drill instructor. Had I still been a Corporal, I might have had a chance to be a Primary Marksman Instructor at the rifle-range in Quantico, teaching officer-candidates how to shoot a rifle, but instead I was assigned to a skeleton company—Alpha Company— which was part of the Eighth Marines. This was an assignment where I seemed to do nothing more than exist.

Although I was still with Gleason who was no longer a sergeant, but now a private in limbo—not knowing whether he was going to be thrown out of the Marine Corps or not—and still with Grant who was on the verge of losing his fiancé back at home, I spent a majority of my time with my old friend Ripple. I was back under the bridge along the New River, back in the woods still saving my buddies in Vietnam, and back riding in the wooden mock-up helicopter, flying over an imaginary Vietnam.

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One Friday afternoon, not long after being transferred to Alpha Company, Grant would announce he was driving home to get married. He should have been back the following Monday, but he wasn't, and he wasn't back on Tuesday or Wednesday, or even the next week. In fact I never saw Grant again. He initially was listed as UA, and after being absent for thirty days, he became known as AWOL—absent without leave. I do not know if he ever returned to face charges.

And for Gleason—the two of us would be discharged honorably from the United States Marine Corps on December 10, 1970. Gleason's war record must have been the reason he was able to dodge a less-than-honorable discharge.

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My discharge seemed to materialize overnight. About a week before, while in company formation, the Company Commander announced that the Marine Corps was trimming its ranks. Thus anyone who had served in Vietnam and had less than eighteen months to serve, they could apply for an early-out if one had a non-critical MOS. As I listened to the Company Commander, as I tried to figure out the catch, I thought I had found it when the Commander mentioned "non-critical MOS." In fact, someone in the formation had raised his hand and asked the question, "Sir, what is a non-critical MOS? Are grunts non-critical?"

The Commander replied, "Yes, riflemen are considered to be non-critical."

"Sir, if we are non-critical, why were we so needed in Vietnam."

The Commander said, "Marine, I don't have an answer to your question. I suggest that when you get home, you take it up with your congressman."

I felt just like the marine who had questioned the Company Commander. I wondered why a grunt, an infantryman, a rifleman, was considered to be non-critical. Had someone sitting behind a desk determined this? Had they been in the jungles or the rice paddies of Vietnam? Maybe I didn't understand politics and the finances of war. Maybe I couldn't see the big picture, but what must have been the little picture to the man in Washington was the entire picture to me. But what did it matter anyway, I was getting out of the Marine Corps. Critical or non-critical, it was to be irrelevant.

I had fourteen months left on my enlistment. I had been to Vietnam. I had a non-critical MOS. Thus I qualified, and thus applied for the early-out.

As I signed my discharge papers, I had the same feeling come over me that had come over me when I had stepped over the trip-wire alongside Liberty Road while I was recovering Smith and Murphy's mangled bodies—the feeling that someone up in heaven was looking out for me. I felt I had gotten out of the Marine Corps by the skin of my teeth. Any longer, and I would have self-destructed, ended up with a General Discharge, or even worse, maybe an Undesirable. I knew a few marines who would have benefited from the early-out, but they had been discharged less than honorably for an array of disciplinary reasons, but mostly because they had been unable to adjust to the spit-shine and polished Marine Corps after the blood, sweat and tears of Vietnam.

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I served two years, nine months, and twenty-two days. The time had gone by in a flash, or so it seemed when it ended.

Many times during my enlistment I had fantasized about what I would do when I was discharged. I had thought about hitchhiking across America, going wherever I wanted to go, possibly going back to California and living by the ocean, or maybe travel by train. I also used to contemplate going back to the Mediterranean to visit, maybe even to live, but when the day finally arrived and I was no longer a part of the Marine Corps, I climbed inside a taxi-van along with Gleason and other newly discharged Vietnam veterans who filled the van to capacity. We were all headed to New Bern, North Carolina, and from there, on our merry own ways, back to our bedrooms, back to our homes, back to what used to be where we lived before the war. I thought this day should have been the happiest day of my life, but it didn't seem so.

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No one spoke in the van. There was no jubilance. It was quiet, like I was back in Vietnam in a helicopter about to bank and descend towards another battle, into the unknown, wondering if I would survive. Maybe the others felt the same way, but if they had no one was saying.

Panic and anxiety began to overcome me. I contemplated screaming, "Stop the fucking van—I want out," but I managed to remain quiet. But my heart raced and I was sweating profusely, and the sweat smelled like the beer I had downed the night before. In fact, the van smelt like a mix of brewery, and the manly odor of Vietnam veterans who might have been sweating the unforeseen future. In my head, I was stuck thinking, *"*What am I going to do with the rest of my life.*"*

———————

At the New Bern Airport, Gleason went inside a bathroom stall. He had taken his nearly empty sea-bag in with him. I could hear him rustling about—he was in there for some time. When he came out he was partially dressed in civilian clothes—bell-bottomed blue-jeans, suede cowboy boots, and an enormous belt buckle shaped like a peace-sign. He blended all that in with his Marine Corp, winter-dress blouse coat which he was wearing unbuttoned to show off his faded tie-dyed tee-shirt. To top it off, he was wearing a long-haired blond wig and a rust-colored paisley bandana. Add to this, easy-rider sunglasses. In just minutes, Gleason—formerly Sergeant Gleason—recipient of a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts, was transformed into a hippie. Actually, I'm not convinced that Gleason knew what he wanted to be, because on his Marine Corps blouse coat, over his heart, he wore the actual medals he deserved to wear, plus a medal of the same size depicting a peace-sign.

Gleason was headed home to Mobile, Alabama. His plane was leaving before mine. Before he left the terminal to walk across the tarmac and board his flight, he shook my hand and then said goodbye. When he got to the top of the stairway, just before he entered the plane, he turned and saluted the world with his left hand—nonmilitary like—then disappeared from sight.

As I watched his plane taxi away, I realized he did not have his sea-bag with him when he had boarded the plane. I then realized he had not taken it with him when he had left the bathroom. I went looking for it. I found it stuffed inside a trash receptacle inside the terminal. I thought of pulling it out to see what he had left behind, but I decided against it for I had my own to carry.

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Not long after Gleason's plane took off, and before my plane arrived, a marine waiting for a flight walked over to me and said, "Did you get that Purple Heart up on Parker Pen Relay?" He was pointing at my Purple Heart ribbon, one of seven ribbons pinned to my dress uniform.

I must have had a quizzical look on my face, or one painted with anxiety as I felt another panic attack coming over me.

"You don't remember me? I was up on Parker Pen Relay with you," the marine said. "You know —Table Top— up where we burnt those fucking gooks."

He most certainly had been there—he knew the gruesome particulars.

"I don't remember you, but yes, I got hit up there.

"You call that getting hit? Are you shitting me? You had nothing more than a fucking scratch. I saw guys with bigger wounds from getting sliced by elephant grass."

I was speechless, caught by surprise. I had no idea what this conversation was about or where it was headed.

I finally managed a few words, “I didn’t put myself in for the Heart, the First Sergeant did.”

“Likely story,” he said, and we parted ways.

As I turned and walked away from whoever this marine was, for I have never been able to recall him up at Parker Pen Relay, he fertilized the seeds of guilt which would bloom in time, not as a beautiful flower, but as a tangled weed with thorns.

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When my flight landed in Boston, my mother and father were there to pick me up and take me home. I looked at my father to see if he looked any different—what would someone look like after having a nervous breakdown. Maybe he would have looked like me, suffering from anxiety tied to the uncertainties of life.

When we arrived at home, my mother laid out cold-cuts and fresh Italian bread along with potato chips and homemade potato salad. We were to make our own sandwiches, a “help yourself meal.” This style of eating was the norm. I wasn’t complaining.

My sister Marsha and my brother Tommy were at the dinner table eating also. I wondered if they, or my father or mother, noticed that I had stopped eating my sandwich after only a few bites. Leaving food uneaten had never been a trait of mine or tolerated by my father who use to preach, “Take all you want, but eat all you take.” I had heard this same saying in the Marine Corps, but I wasn’t hungry. My stomach, although empty, felt dead.

I remember climbing into bed on my first night out of the Marine Corps, boosting myself up to the top bunk in my old bedroom. I had to be conscious of the position of my brother lying on the mattress of the lower bunk, for if he was close to the edge I could have easily stepped on him while getting up to the top.

Tommy and I were bunkmates, but I cannot recall any conversation between us. We not only were three years apart in age, but separated by our different life experiences—mine being the war, my brother’s being drugs—his own battle with whatever it was that ran through his mind.

I climbed into bed and pulled the sheet and blanket over my head. I couldn’t sleep. I felt like I would never be able to sleep again. I felt that this feeling of fear would be with me for the rest of my life. I could not think of a way out.

Insanely I wanted to talk to someone, but everyone in the house, except for my mother, was either sound asleep or soundly passed out. Tommy most likely was zonked by an intravenous shot of heroin, and my father by some form of prescribed tranquilizer needed for sleep. Marsha was asleep in her own bedroom in the rear of the house, or maybe talking to her boyfriend on the phone. Whatever it was, she was behind closed doors. As for my mother, she could be found sitting at the dining room table working on a paint-by-numbers picture which seemed to be her escape.

If I had thought of it, I would have prayed myself to sleep, but after surviving Vietnam, the need to pray seemed to have vanished—thank you God for the help, but I won’t be needing you again.

With the sheet and blanket pulled up over my head, I grew terribly hot. I became a ball of sweat. I kicked the covers off but after awhile I felt a chill, so I pulled just the sheet up, covering myself

up to my chin. I clenched the top of the sheet with my tightly balled fists. I was holding on for dear life.

Although I somehow knew my mother was still up, I couldn't convince myself to get out of bed, go down the stairs, and have a talk with her. I did not have this relationship with her or anyone else.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I do remember waking. I felt the same way as the night before. There were times in the Marine Corps that I would feel anxious in bed, but I always felt refreshed in the morning. Every awakening greeted a new day, or at least the anxieties of the day before had been lifted.

I got out of bed to go to the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror, saw no one I recognized, so I climbed back into bed. My brother was stirring but he wasn't making an effort to get up. From my parents' bedroom, I could hear my mother snoring. I don't know what time it was, but the thin window shades were unable to keep the bright sunlight from filtering into my old bedroom. And I could hear cars, trucks, and buses driving by the house, and just before I pulled the sheet back up over my head, I saw a ray of sunlight shining on the crack in the ceiling above my head. This was not a dream. This was reality.

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Sometime just before noon as I walked down the hall from the bedroom to the bathroom, I could hear my father's voice coming from the living room downstairs. I heard him say, "I bet he got a dishonorable discharge." I assumed he had said it to my mother and that he was talking about me.

After I came out of the bathroom and pulled on a pair of jeans, I rummaged through my sea-bag which I had thrown in the corner of my old bedroom the night before. I found the envelope that contained my DD-214—my official discharge document. My DD-214 indicated that I had been issued an Honorable Discharge.

I took my DD-214 downstairs with me. My father was sitting at the dining room table. There was a half-eaten sandwich on a plate in front of him and a cup of coffee.

My father looked up at me as I entered the dining room. I walked over to the table and slapped my DD-214 down. I pointed, pounded the table with index finger with force. I was pointing at the box that indicated I had received an Honorable Discharge. "There, look and see for yourself. It says, 'Honorable'."

I then turned from my father who had a scared look on his face. I said nothing more, and he said nothing in return. I left the dining room, went back upstairs, finished dressing, and walked to the poolroom where I hung-out for the day.

The next day when I woke around noon again, I went downstairs and my mother was sitting at the dining room table painting by numbers. She said, "Your father is just baffled, He doesn't know how you could get out of the service without serving the four years you had signed up for."

"Ma, they are getting rid of the Vietnam veterans. We are no longer needed."

She replied, "I see."

But what did my mother see—what was there to see? Could she see the unruly drinking and drugging Vietnam veterans hell-bent on self-destruction, having trouble readjusting to life back

in the world? Could she see that the country was cutting its losses—getting rid of those no longer needed?

No way could she see it, or could anyone else. It was not obvious to many people, and not at all to those who had never left the states.

And mostly, not obvious to guys like myself.

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**Home**

None of this book would have been possible if I had not stopped drinking.

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It has been close to thirty-three years since I last had a drink of alcohol which has led me to what I know to be a state of mind called sobriety—the quality of being serious and thoughtful. Without sobriety I would never have been able to take a good long look at my life.

Whether what I have seen is the truth or not, no insight to my past will ever bring an end to the war for me, but I have received a sense of serenity, courage, and wisdom.

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For the first thirteen weeks of civilian life after my discharge from the Marines Corp, I collected unemployment—forty-two dollars a week—of which I paid my mother ten dollars for room and board. Also budgeted five dollars a week for the Beachcomber—a nightclub in Quincy—where I used to like to frequent on Tuesday nights which was "Lady's Night." The drinks were half price for the ladies—fifty cents.

I tried playing the drums in a band, playing with a friend who played the B-3 Hammond and sang. The band also had two guitar players—but it didn't work out. My downfall was the free beers that the band was given when we played out, which actually was not that often.

The organist was a no nonsense type guy who frowned upon members of his band returning to the stage late after an intermission, or like I did one night, going for a ride with someone to smoke some marijuana during a break and showing up late, and stoned, and upon playing again, having no sense of the rhythm, unable to keep the beat.

The end came when one night I didn't even show up—I had gone drinking instead.

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Most of the thirteen weeks is a blur. It was winter time; cold and snowy. My father did let me borrow his car off and on, but I really did not travel much further than the pool room, or at night, Howard Johnsons located on the Southern Artery. If I knew I was going to drink, I did not borrow the car at all—I would let Dwight do the driving. Even with him at the wheel we never went too far.

Sometime in March of 1971, a friend of mine got me a job working at an ice cream factory where he also worked. I physically took frozen, hard as a brick, packaged ice cream from a conveyor belt and stacked it on pallets. The pallets of ice cream were then loaded onto trucks and taken to a cold storage warehouse in a remote location. I would do this job for more than two years until I was appointed to the fire department.

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During the same week that I had started work at the ice cream factory—on a Tuesday night—I went to the Beachcomber. The poolroom gang—those of legal age to drink—never missed a Tuesday night, a chance at maybe meeting the girl of his life, or a girl who was simply looking for one night of fun.

Now I wasn't old enough to drink yet, but I had doctored up my military ID so that it showed that I was born in 1949 instead of 1950. Between still having the looks of a kid, and possessing an ID, that to the naked eye had definitely been altered, the police officer at the door always let me in because he knew I had been to Vietnam—plus he too was a Vietnam veteran.

On this night I was scoping out a group of girls sitting at a table. I figured they were new to the Beachcomber because I had never seen them before, and they stood out to me as I looked at the regulars who could always be counted on for a dance if you bought them a drink.

One girl at the table caught my eye. Having had a beer or two to drink, I found it easy to make my way over to her, and when I did I asked her to dance. We danced to several fast songs, and after the second or third song, I asked her what her name was. She said Judy, and I told her that mine was Paul.

I ended up sitting at the table with her and her friends. I do not know whether I bought her a drink or not, for money was tight, for I had not gotten a paycheck from the ice cream factory yet.

I remember dancing the rest of the night with her, and before closing time, asking if she would like to go out on a date with me some night. She said yes and gave me her phone number. Thus we began to date, which led to dating regularly, which ended up with us exclusively dating one another .

Although I told her that I had been in the Marine Corps and had been to Vietnam, in the beginning it was not a topic of conversation.

We fell in love with each other, and were married the following November. The following March our daughter was born.

At first we lived with Judy's mother and father. This living arrangement lasted about two months. We then moved into an apartment, and then were fortunate enough to secure a VA loan so that we could buy a home. We moved to Stoughton in 1975.

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In June of 1973, I was appointed to the Quincy Fire Department as a firefighter. I became the seventh family member to serve on this department, following in the footsteps of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my Dad, his two uncles, and his cousin. On the day of my appointment, I stood proudly with my father and mother, and my wife and daughter as I began what would become a glorious career, one in which there were many proud moments, one which was when I was promoted to the rank of Fire Chief, in charge of the two hundred, thirty man

department. At the time I was only thirty-eight years of age. I made it to the top of the ladder in less than sixteen years.

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I did not deal with or confront my psychological problems related to Vietnam until 1985, ten years after the fall of Saigon. It was during the week in which April 30th occurred that a lot of attention was being given to the tenth anniversary in the form of press and television coverage. One news item was a newspaper article in a local paper in which a psychologist, a Doctor Ouellette, was interviewed. The interview had brought out his opinion that the anniversary might prove to be problematic for some Vietnam veterans who had not given any thought to the war in some time. He talked about veterans who had come home from the war, those who appeared to have no problem with adjusting to civilian life, who had settled down, gotten married, had children, and were busy in their careers, but who were sometimes visited by what he referred to as intrusive thoughts—thoughts about the war which came at uninvited times, almost like out of the blue. But instead of these thoughts being acknowledged, they were denied, or pushed back down in their dwelling place deep inside the subconscious. He said that this anniversary would stir up the past for some, allowing the thoughts to surface.

My intrusive thoughts, the ones I had carried aboard the USS Iwo Jima, the ones symbolically stashed away in the bottom of my sea-bag, the ones I drank Ripple with under the bridge in Jacksonville, or took for a walk in the pine forests of Camp Lejeune, or for a ride in the wooden mock-up of a helicopter while it was in an imaginary flight over my thoughts of Vietnam—these thoughts had never left me, and yet people didn't know because I had kept them to myself to preserve my image of sanity.

A wife, two children—for in April of 1975, my son had been born—a single family home, two cars, a dog, the ability to take my family on a cruise or to Disney, promotions to higher ranks in the fire department, even five years of sobriety, all of this which I had used to shore up my psyche, were now to take a backseat in my mind. There would be a new driver sitting right up front—Vietnam.

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Somehow I was able to obtain a phone number where I could reach Doctor Ouellette. I wanted to talk to him because I felt I had been the one he had described in the newspaper interview.

I called the Doctor's number. He personally answered the phone. I told him my name, and then I told him how I had read an article in the newspaper in which some of it had been based on his opinions regarding Vietnam veterans and what the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon might psychologically do to them. I told him that I fit his description of the veteran perfectly. He told me that he had only expressed a composite idea of the Vietnam veteran who might have strong feelings rise to the surface.

I told him that I was currently a captain on the Quincy Fire Department, that I was one of the youngest ever promoted to that rank. I also told him that I was married and had two kids, and that I was sober for more than five years—yet I felt Vietnam was a problem for me.

He asked me if I had ever been to the VA to seek help. I told him that I had gone there for my alcoholism, that the counseling I had received had helped me to put down the drink.

He asked me if I had talked about Vietnam while I was there. I told him that it didn't seem to come up. Better yet, the answer had been "No."

I asked him if it might be possible to come and talk with him. He told me that I would need a referral from someone. When I asked him who that someone might be, he said that it would be a counselor at the Veteran's Outreach Center.

I told him that I didn't know what he was talking about, that I didn't know what this Center was. He said it was part of the VA system, and that it was commonly referred to as a Vet Center. He said that there was one located in Avon, Massachusetts. He recommended that I take myself there and see if I could get a referral. He also asked me if I thought I was in crisis. I told him that I did not think so. He asked me if that was a yes, or a no. I had to think about it, but then said that the answer was "No."

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Although I was feeling fearful as I parked my car outside the Vet Center, my fear lifted when I was introduced to a gentleman by the name of John Reardon. He introduced himself as a fellow veteran, and that he was the Team Leader, and after the introduction, he said, "If no one has ever said, 'Welcome home,' then let me be the first."

Although it felt awkward when he gave me a manly hug, I had a sense of actually being in a safe place.

I told John about the newspaper article and that I had called Doctor Ouellette, and that he had said that to see him I would need a referral. Long story short, after John gathered some information from me, including my DD-214, he wrote out the referral and even called the doctor to setup an appointment.

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I met with the Doctor once a week for more than a year. In the beginning I talked about how I had gotten sober, how booze had played with my mind, how I had been a blackout drinker, how I was a changed man. After several weeks of going over and over my sobriety, he said, "When you called me the first time, you said you had issues with Vietnam. Do you still have issues?"

I still can recall this day. I was sitting in a love seat in Doctor Ouellette's office with him sitting across the room from me. I had my back up against the wall. The office window was open. I could see a few sparrows in a tree, and I could hear kids playing baseball, for I heard the crack of the bat and someone yelling out, "I got it," and someone else saying, "Nice catch." I do not know why I remember this, or why this memory has stayed with me, or what makes it significant, but I often felt that somewhere there must be some meaning. The word innocence comes to me.

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Here is what Doctor Ouellette said to me about the affects of putting down the drink. He said it was like pulling the plug on the swamp—that the waters drained—yet in the muddy banks could be seen all sorts of creatures left behind. He said that for me, the creatures most likely were memories of Vietnam.

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For the next few weeks I would say that we touched upon my Vietnam experience, but without going too deep, or better yet, in retrospect, going only as deep as I could.

Towards the end of one of our weekly sessions, I had a thought come to me that my father had told me that he had saved my Vietnam letters, the ones that I had had written to him and my mother, which also included my brother and sisters. When I shared this thought with Doctor Ouellette, he said that in his opinion, these letters would prove to be invaluable to me if in fact I could obtain them. Thus, when I left his office, I drove straight to my parent's home still located at 353 Franklin Street.

When I arrived they were sitting at the dining room table watching a rerun of Archie Bunker on TV while having a cup of instant coffee and a few Oreo cookies. My mother offered me a cup of coffee which I accepted, and also a few Oreos.

My father asked me if I was headed to work. I told him that I wasn't, that I had come by to see if he still had the letters I had written while I was in Vietnam. Without another word said, he got up from the table. I heard him go up the stairs, and then I heard him pull down the stow-away stairs that led to the attic.

My mother asked me if everything was okay. I told her that things were fine, that the kids were looking forward to summer, and that Judy and I were talking about taking a trip to California—maybe fly into San Francisco, and then drive south to visit with my Uncle Richard and Aunt Joan. We were also hoping to spend a few days at the Grand Canyon—maybe ride the mules down into the canyon.

Just after my mother said that the trip sounded like fun, and that my Uncle Richard would really like to see me again, my father came back into the dining room and placed a white plastic bag on the table. He said, "Here are your letters. I've been keeping them for you."

My mother said to me, "Is there any particular reason why you want them?"

My father spoke up immediately after my mother had asked me her question, spoke before I had a chance to answer her, "Jeez Shirley, what does it matter. The letters belong to Paul. He can do whatever he wants to do with them."

To reinforce what he had said, my father then gently pushed the bag in front of me.

As they lay before me, I said to him, "Dad, I just want to borrow them. I'm doing a little research."

"Like I said, they are yours. You keep them."

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My mother said, "Aren't you going to look inside the bag?"

My father had gone to the front door, for the mailman had just come and pushed some mail through the mail-slot.

I opened the bag just enough to make out a shoebox which had a purplish elastic band keeping the cover secure. I then half pulled the box from the bag and saw a picture of a dog that I was familiar with—it was the Hush Puppy, the trademark of a pair of shoes that my father once owned, or maybe still did, for he wasn't one to buy too many new things.

When my father came back to the table my mother asked him if there had been any mail. He said, "Just the usual bills."

I then removed the Hush Puppy shoebox from the plastic bag and took notice of my father's handwriting on the cover that read, "Paul's Vietnam Letters—1968-1969" The writing was in black magic marker, the color having faded over time.

When I barely touched the elastic band, it snapped, but it was more like it had disintegrated, having lost its elasticity some time ago. My mother said to my father, "Buddy, the elastic broke," to which he replied, "Do you think I'm blind. I saw it break too."

When my father got up from the table and went over to his desk, I knew he was getting me another elastic band, because he was efficient in that way.

I had not planned on opening the shoebox, or for that matter, I had not planned on any of this. What was playing out seemed surreal to me, like I was in a trance.

I finally did remove the cover, and inside I saw white envelopes striped with red and blue which of course would make anyone think of America, or the flag of the United States. The way the letters were in the box—they fit perfectly inside as if the box had been produced for exactly eighty letters which were in the envelopes filed in chronological order.

I had a feeling that maybe the letters did not want to be disturbed.

I took the first envelope from the shoebox. I noticed the address written in hard pencil—353 Franklin Street, Quincy, Massachusetts. It was written in my handwriting, yet it seemed like it could have been someone else's from some other time—but it was mine. I could sense stress just in the way the cursive writing appeared, the way the pencil had been bared down hard on the paper. I also noticed that there had been no stamp on the envelope—only the word, FREE. Yes, I remembered that there was no charge to mail a letter from Vietnam.

Also on the front of the envelope, lightly written in pencil, was the number one, or ***#1***. I would later find that each envelope had been numbered, and also the date that the letter had arrived at Franklin Street was lightly written in pencil upon the envelope. All of the record keeping notations were in my father's handwriting.

I noticed that each letter had been opened by the use of a letter opener that must have been sharp, for there were no tears to the paper evident.

As I took the first letter from the envelope, my mother said to me, "Didn't your father do a nice job of keeping your letters?"

My father interjected, sounding perturbed, "Jeez Shirley, you would think I had done something wonderful. All I did was put the letters in a box. It didn't take much."

I said, "Dad, Ma is just saying that you did a nice job of taking care of the letters for me. I appreciate it."

I read the first letter, and then folded it back up, making sure to follow the original creases made in the paper seventeen years earlier.

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When I got home, I was alone. My wife, who was working at a travel agency just down the street from our home, was at work. My kids were outside, somewhere in the neighborhood playing with friends.

I took the plastic bag with the shoebox inside it, down to the playroom I had constructed in the basement for my children when Judy and I had first bought our house. I removed the shoebox from the bag which I noticed the word, ‘perishables’ had been imprinted onto the plastic. I presumed that the bag had once been used for vegetables bought at a market.

I undid the new elastic band my father had given me to secure the cover to the box. I then sat myself down on the sofa and turned on a lamp. I then uncovered the shoebox and brought the box up to my nose so that I could smell what I thought might be Vietnam.

There was an odor which I assumed was nothing more than aged paper. I guess I could say it had the smell of Vietnam, but it did not—not the rotted vegetation, or rice paddy water, or damp soil, or gun powder, or mosquito repellant, or burnt flesh, or the iron odor of blood.

I read the first letter, and then reread it, and then once more. Again, the penmanship was different than the penmanship I had developed over time. My penmanship had evolved over the last seventeen years into something smoother, and the height of the letters had grown smaller, and I was crossing my tees more exact.

Keeping the same creases again, I put the first letter back into its envelope. I then read the second letter. After finishing the letter, I meticulously folded this letter, and into its respective envelope it went. I read letters with interest until I read the letter about Hill 500—the letter in which I had stated that we had been met by a regiment of NVA soldiers, and that marines had died. In fact, I had written that even a good friend of mine had been killed. It hit me hard inside when I realized that what I had written back then had been a lie.

I put this disturbing letter quickly back into its envelope, almost losing track of the creases, and filed it back into the box. Later on I would find it out of order.

I then contemplated whether I would continue reading the letters. I also contemplated destroying them, maybe taking them somewhere I could burn them. I wondered to myself, that if I did destroy them, could I find a way in my mind to forget what had come to light.

I found myself reading the next few letters, and found a few more lies which made me think that maybe what I had written had really happened—that I had seen a friend of mine killed, or had a mortar round explode close to me that sprayed mud and water in my face—that I had been in denial—that I had pushed all of this deep down inside.

But my memory was very good, and I knew for certain that when we had landed on Hill 500 there had been no enemy—no battle—just my own fear.

———

I read on until I got to the part where I had been hospitalized for combat stress. I had totally forgotten about this having occurred in my life, but as it surfaced, Terry Householder came into view. That was the end for me.

I put the letter back into its envelope, and the envelope into the box, secured the cover, and stretched the elastic band to secure everything. I then put the box into the plastic bag, and then in the unfinished side of my basement, in a dark corner, I hung the bag from a hook that was screwed into a floor joist.

The bag hung untouched—undisturbed—for the next eleven years.

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During the next appointment after I had gotten the letters from my parents, I told Doctor Ouellette about the lies I had discovered, and about my hospitalization. At first I skirted around the death of Terry Householder because I did not want to let the Doctor know that I had caused the death of a marine, or so I had thought so. I did not want to expose my cowardice. In keeping this to myself, I then saw the cave. I had forgotten the cave too.

Towards the end of the appointment, the Doctor asked me if I might want to bring the letters with me to our next visit. I told him that I wasn't interested in doing so—that actually I was thinking of trying to put this entire Vietnam thing behind me—that I was going to find a way to put it back in place—that I was having a change of heart.

He then said, "Once you know, you can never not know."

It would be the knowing that would bring me closer to the truth.

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In time I told the Doctor about the cave, about Terry Householder, John Kirschner, Sergeant Thompson, Davey Johnston, Joe Freeman, Merryman, Ron Christianson, Smith and Murphy, and on and on. I told him about when I got wounded—calling out for my mother—and how I actually had refused to fight.

He told me that acceptance was the key. He said it seemed that I took way more blame for the things that had happened around me in life than I deserved to take credit for. He said that if I could look at things as being 'grist for the mill,' that acceptance might come easier.

He said, "We have no idea who created the waters, but we are quite certain that the fish did not."

I remember saying to him, "What the hell does that mean?"

He said, "Go home and think about it. Maybe we can discuss it next week."

———

In my sleep I came to realize that I was not the creator of the universe—that I had not started the war, and was not to be blamed for it. I came to realize that I had not killed Terry Householder, and that I am only human with limitations, capable of breaking, of taking only so much—capable of breaking down.

The next week we began to talk about the rest of my life.

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What I can say for myself is that I try my best at what I do.

I have been young at everything I have tried. I Joined the Marine Corps at seventeen, went to Vietnam at eighteen, and honorably discharged at twenty, even before I could legally drink.

I married young, had children young.

I went on the fire department at twenty-three. I made lieutenant at twenty-eight, captain at age thirty-four, and deputy chief at thirty-seven. And at the age of thirty-eight, I was promoted to Chief of Department. I was an overachiever trying to make up for an inferior complex, in which my Vietnam experience did not help.

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I have always been going places fast, as if I have had knowledge of my destination. Or was it that I perceived that someone or something was chasing me down. Or was it that I knew how short life could be—how it could turn on a dime.

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I thought that a promotion in life would help make me feel better, yet every time I was promoted I would sink into an unexplained depression. I internalized this as an attitude of ungratefulness on my part. Those around me did not sense this, for I did not express it to anyone. In fact I worked hard at wearing a mask. In my pursuit of being happy, in my constant retreat from my past, I was fortunate that I did not run for the woods, or a drinking place under a bridge, or a self-inflicted bullet to the head. I was fortunate to be one of those who had hope—a vision of something better.

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My opinion of what kind of husband and father I have been may not always be truthful on my part, for I can lean in the direction of feeling less than, more than I can feel that I have done a good job as a parent and a spouse. But again, I have tried my best, and when my best has not been to my liking, even though I may slip away into depression, up to this very moment I have always come back. Maybe this means that I can be counted on.

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I have never been able to escape from Vietnam, but have always stayed positive in the way that it has affected me. I have never had the poor me's regarding the war, or bitterness towards those who did not serve, or beat the draft—none what so ever.

I do have problems with politics because I do get caught up in the notion that we could have won the Vietnam War if Washington had not meddled with the military, or that we should have never gotten into the war in the first place. I mean, what did I know? You've read my letters. They are not written by an intellect.

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Maybe this book could go on and on, and yet, what else would I really be saying. Oh, I did go back to Vietnam in 1990 looking for answers to my life. I had it in my head that I would never feel better if I did not go back.

It ended up that what I had been looking for was not something that I had left behind in Vietnam, but something that needed to be unlocked in my own mind. Seeing Ho Chi Minh lying in state—the infamous Hanoi Hilton—the city of Vinh where I saw the actual hut that Ho Chi Minh had been born in—Con Thien—Dong Ha—Hue City—Da Nang, including Marble Mountain—a swim at China Beach—and even an excursion to the pier where I had boarded the landing craft which had taken me out to the Iwo Jima—none of this helped me to see what it was that I was looking for.

Visiting My Lai—Quang Ngai—Nha Trang—Chu Lai—Cam Ranh Bay—the tunnels of Cu Chi—or Saigon—that did not do it either.

I will never know that if I had been able to stand where Smith and Murphy had died along Liberty Road—for in my mind I knew I could find the exact place, the exact spot, maybe even

the actual moment when they were killed—would I have found the spirit that had come to me on that day, and would I have been healed.

But this was not to be, for the Vietnamese had said that this area was still unsafe to visit, for it was still heavily booby-trapped. Not being able to visit this spot—what in my mind I considered to be sacred ground—is a great disappointment in my life.

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When I returned from my trip to Vietnam, the Mayor called me to his office. He said, "Chief, how was your trip?"

I told him that it had been fine; that I had felt like I was traveling through a National Geographic the entire time.

He said, "Do you think it will be helpful?"

I said that I thought so.

"In what way?"

"Well, I saw a lot of things there that seemed peaceful. Like there was no sign of the war ever having happened."

He then said, "What was it that you were looking for anyway?"

"Mayor, I was looking for myself."

"Well, I don't think you ever had to go looking for him, because he has been here all along. In fact, he's the man I promoted to Chief."

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I have continued to move forward. The year is now 2013. I am sitting in my lanai in Englewood, Florida, trying to convince the reader that all is fine. At this moment I am going out on a limb to say that things are.

I'm retired. I'm still married to Judy who has been my wife for more than forty-one years. My children—Jennifer and Brian—are grown and doing well, and my granddaughters—Amanda and Emma—love their Papa.

Maybe one day when they are older—for this is not a fantasy for children, nor should it ever be—maybe they will read this book and discover who it really was that loved them.

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**About the Author**

After serving thirty-two years with the Quincy Fire Department, I retired in 2005. Judy and I are enjoying retirement, our family, and our grandchildren.

Over the years I have been able to get together with other marines from Mike Company. For the last five years, we have gathered on Memorial Day at the David A. Johnston American Legion Post # 283 in Pickerington, Ohio, where we find a sense of peace...

Semper fidelis.

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