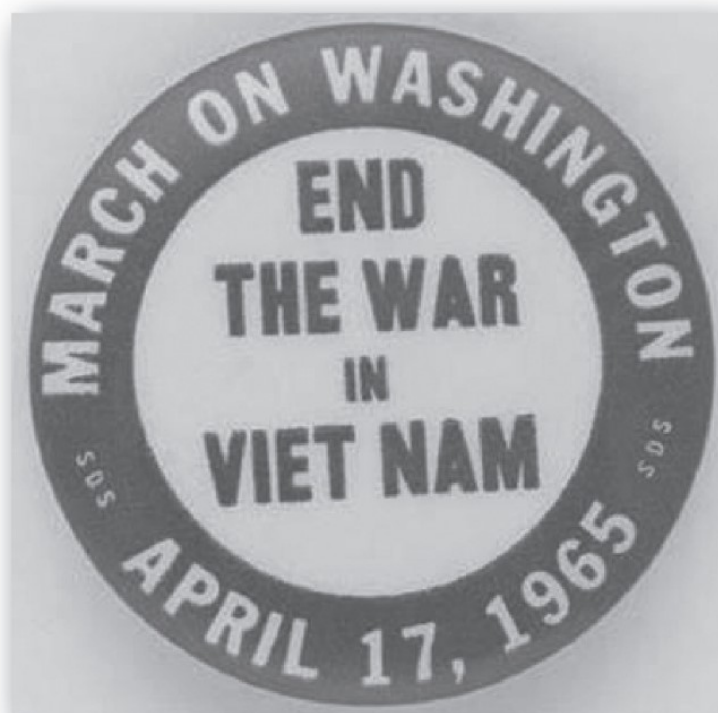


My Confessions from Vietnam

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MARK S MILLER

With Brooke Miller Hall

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Mark Stephen Miller

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Prologue

Since 1971, I have blocked out my year in ‘Nam. I have never participated in veterans’ events or worn a hat saying I was a Vietnam veteran. Today, I hear people thanking veterans for their service and calling them heroes. When I came back from the war in Vietnam, I was met with protests, not parades.

I felt like a criminal.

In those days the government employed a draft, definitely not an all-volunteer army like today. They introduced the draft lottery in late 1969, but in 1968 all men registered for the draft when they turned eighteen. Then the local draft board evaluated who was deferred and who was called. I was deferred through college, but after I graduated, I was drafted.

I was a reluctant soldier, one of over two million who were forced to serve. Our options were to serve, leave the country, or go to jail.

Public draft card burning on college campuses was common. But my family-including my dad, who was a navigator in World War two - had a history of serving in the military. So when I was drafted in 1968, shortly after I graduated from college, I chose to serve instead of running away to Canada. I spent almost two years in the service.

I did things in ‘Nam that I regret. And by military law, I should have been court-marshaled and sent to jail.

Several years ago, I was going through some old papers and found my Vietnam journal. I faithfully kept the journal while I was in the service and sent my entries to my girlfriend, who kept it for me.

I am seventy years old now and feel it’s time to make public *My Confessions from Vietnam*.

...

From Brooke Miller Hall

My dad doesn’t yawn. Ever. Because in advanced infantry training (AIT), he was taught it was a sign of weakness to yawn on guard duty-so forty-five years later, my dad still doesn’t yawn.

My dad doesn’t camp, either.

He hates weapons of any kind. We never even had water guns growing up.

And he’s vehemently, unabashedly antiwar.

I guess we always knew he was a Vietnam veteran, but he was never the type to talk about the army. He doesn’t use military jargon or wear a buzz cut or even buy USAA insurance. And it’s just recently that he might take advantage of the free meals they sometimes serve at restaurants on Veterans’ Day.

Things would slip out sometimes. Like when we cleaned our rooms or the basement playroom, and he would jokingly yell out “INSPECTION!” and my little sister and I would stand at attention. Or sometimes he would wake us in the morning with a goofy reveille rendition that included humming loudly into his hands and pretending it was a bugle.

But for the most part, we didn't discuss his time in the service. And I think a lot of people who know my dad, both personally and professionally, would be surprised to find out he was a sergeant during the in Vietnam.

When he told me he wanted to write this memoir, I was surprised but honored that he wanted my help. Much of what he has to say isn't flattering. And as his daughter, I have found some of it very hard to read.

For privacy purposes, we've changed the names, nicknames, and personal details of everyone mentioned, but they are based on real people and true experiences.

I think it's important to share this story, a unique view of a not-often-discussed time in US history. He shows us firsthand what war does to young people-in his case, someone who had little choice about serving and never wanted to be a soldier to begin with.

Sergeant Garbage, my dad, was far from being a model soldier. But I think he's very brave for sharing his experiences, and we can all learn a lot from him. I certainly have.

One

SHAKE 'N' BAKE

October 1968-July 1969

I wasn't the kid who dreamed about becoming a soldier.

I grew up in Wisconsin and was into basketball and golf. I did OK in school, hung out with my buddies, and had a nice girlfriend. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life after college graduation-I wasn't ready to get married and didn't have a job lined up or especially big career ambitions. I was right at that intersection of youth and adulthood when I was drafted in 1968.

I never wanted to join the army. At first I gave serious thought to running away to Canada like so many were doing at that time. But I worried that if I ran away, how would I support myself? And part of me was curious, what was war really like? Was it as bad as they said?

I was inducted into the army on October 14, 1968, and spent the next ten months training and preparing for Vietnam.

My introduction to army life happened at basic training in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I went from being a big man on campus-an all-conference basketball player and Tiger Club fraternity member at Saint Thomas University in Minnesota-to a reluctant buck army private.

Basic training was serious stuff. It was hot and humid in Kentucky, and we spent three months sweating. Our platoon was assigned a drill sergeant whose job was to mold us into soldiers. He kept us motivated with comments such as "You have to be quick, or you will be dead," and "Spread out, or one grenade will kill you all."

As completely inexperienced soldiers, we learned how to salute, shoot a rifle, and get in shape. But the main objective of boot camp was to teach us how to follow orders-and to do it quickly and without hesitation or questions. To keep us in line they used sleep deprivation, pushups, harassment, kitchen duty, and fear.

We learned to march to cadences to keep us in step. The drill sergeant asked for a volunteer to play a snare drum while we marched. Since I had played drums for the Boy Scouts Drum and Bugle Corp, I volunteered.

That's when I learned my first valuable lesson in the army: never volunteer for anything! The first day of playing the drum, I broke the drum cover. I was on the drill sergeants' shit list and ended up on kitchen duty for the next six weeks.

Here's an example of one of our marching cadences, led by the drill sergeant with the troops repeating after him.

I want to be an Airborne Ranger / I want to be an Airborne Ranger
I want to go to Vietnam / I want to go to Vietnam
I want to kill the Vietcong / I want to kill the Vietcong

Sound off / One, two
Sound off / Three, four
Sound off / One, two, three, four -three four

The physical part of basic was no problem for me. My upper body was a bit weak, so pushups and monkey bars built up my arms and shoulders. I could run forever, so I had no problem passing the physical tests.

At the conclusion of basic training, we received our job assignments, or MOS (military occupation status). I was assigned to 11 Bravo, or infantry. Typical army! I was a college graduate with very bad eyesight, and my job was infantry soldier?

My next training assignment was advanced infantry training (AIT) in Fort Lewis, just outside Tacoma, Washington.

Fort Lewis was cold, dreary, and rainy that winter. The hardest part of AIT was the bivouac, a sort of temporary camp where we slept outside for weeks in the field doing combat exercises. At night I huddled under my poncho liner (like a blanket), shivering in the cold Washington January. Small rocks and hard mounds seemed to find their way to where I was trying to sleep.

One neat skill we were taught was how to avoid yawning. Our instructors told us yawning was voluntary and that we didn't have to yawn if we didn't want to. On guard duty it was important to stay quiet-no yawning. Anyone who yawned had to do twenty push-ups.

During these war games, we took turns on guard duty. Falling asleep on guard duty was one of an infantryman's worst possible offences and was strictly punished. To stay awake and pass the time, almost everyone in the army smoked. Cigarettes were free, and infantry life was mostly "hurry up and wait." Bivouac taught us how to light and smoke cigarettes at night without alerting the enemy.

At the end of AIT, I was told to report to the first sergeant's office. He told me, "Private, you have a choice to make." He explained that most soldiers had two weeks' leave after they finished AIT, and then they were shipped to Vietnam. However, since I had a college degree, I had another option: go to Fort Benning, Georgia, for thirteen more weeks of training and become a noncommissioned officer.

"You are very lucky to get this chance," he confided. "I was in the army for three years before I was made sergeant."

So I had to choose: Vietnam or Fort Benning.

At this time, there were peace marches and protests going on against the Vietnam War. I rationalized that after thirteen more months in training, the war could be over. On the other hand, I didn't see myself as a leader in the army. I never wanted to be in the army in the first place. And after sixteen years of Catholic education, I had been taught to love one another and that killing was a sin. I didn't know if I *could* kill, even if I had to. How could I possibly lead a squad? And I certainly didn't want the responsibility for the lives of the guys in my squad.

"Will I have to sign up for additional time in the army?" I asked.

"No, private, no additional time is required," the first sergeant replied.

The next day I was on a plane headed for Georgia. I hoped the war would be over soon!



Private Miller

...

Noncommissioned officer (NCO) school was actually the first thirteen weeks of the Infantry Officer Training program run by the army's elite Airborne Rangers. The Rangers are the ones with the black berets and jump boots who spend a lot of time trying to prove they are tougher than the Green Berets. The motto for NCO school is Follow Me, and we wore it on our armbands.



Every day we were loudly awoken at 4:00 a.m. for cleanup, a five-mile run, and general harassment before breakfast.

We spent four hours a day in a classroom studying weapons deployment, leadership skills, map reading, radio operations, and Vietnamese history. For another four hours we marched and worked on marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat, and physical education.

Two hours at night were set aside for studying and homework for the next day's classes. I spent most of the study time writing letters to my family and my girlfriend, and I started a journal.

During NCO school, several of the candidates washed out. These soldiers didn't score well in some areas of training or they just couldn't stand the constant harassment. The washouts were given two weeks' leave and sent to Vietnam. There were times when I considered quitting, but the desire to delay my departure was so strong that I stuck it out.

...

We learned that the Vietnamese people had been fighting for the past thirty years. War was a way of life for a whole generation of Vietnamese. First they fought the Japanese, then the French, and now a civil war pitting the North against the South. The Communists of the North were supported by the Soviets and China. The South was supported by the United States, Australia, and Great Britain.

Our instructors told us we would be fighting in a guerilla war; the Communists didn't have the firepower or manpower to win a traditional war. The South had air and helicopter support and more sophisticated weapons. The North was organized into small units that specialized in hit-and-run tactics. They told us the North was content to wear down the enemy and prepared to fight for another thirty years—certainly not something I wanted to hear!

And our enemies in the North were actually two different armies. The North had a crack regular army called the People's Army of Vietnam, or PAVN. PAVN was well trained, dedicated, and well equipped. The other army was the National Liberation Front of Vietcong. The mission of the Vietcong

(VC) was to infiltrate local villages in the South and convince villages to back the Communists. They used fear, torture, and murder as methods to convert the villagers.

“The Vietcong are made up of old men, women, and children who dress and act just like the civilians in the South,” they warned us.

The South also had an army: the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. It would be our job to support, train, and supply ARVN so they could win the war against the Communists. The South was trying to counter the Vietcong by consolidating small villages into larger strategic villages that could be protected more easily.

As infantry soldiers we had two primary missions.

First, find the enemy, whether Vietcong or PAVN. We were to go on search-and-destroy missions and set up ambushes. We would make contact with the enemy so the helicopter gunships could blow their forces away.

And second, we were to guard valuable US and South Vietnamese installations. Favorite targets for the enemy were airports, ammo dumps, roads, and bridges- so that’s what we had to protect.

They told us, “With your dedication, leadership, and hard work we, can beat the commie bastards.”
Class dismissed.

...

After only six months in the army, I was commissioned as a sergeant E-5. I was next assigned back to Fort Lewis for a nine-week assignment as an assistant drill sergeant.

Then I got two weeks’ leave and was ordered to report to the Fourth Infantry Division in South Vietnam.

On leave, I said my good-byes to my family, friends and girlfriend. My girlfriend was starting her senior year in college. She promised to wait for me, but I begged her to see other people and have fun her senior year. College was a blast for me, and I didn’t want her to waste her last year.

And to be honest, I knew that I might not come home from Vietnam.

I also knew that if I did come home, I would certainly return a different person than I left.

Two

THE GARBAGE SQUAD

September 1969

The flight to Vietnam took twenty-five hours, and I didn't sleep at all. I smoked two packs of cigarettes on the plane, as did most of the other soldiers on the flight. The plane was thick with smoke, and we all stunk when we finally landed.

Two soldiers sitting behind me were going back to Vietnam for a second tour. When they learned I was a sergeant, they told me how useless shake 'n' bake officers were. Army sergeants who went to NCO school and were officers after less than a year- like me-were known as shake 'n' bakes after the quick-prepare meal mix that was popular at the time. The guys behind me casually predicted I would be killed in less than a month. It wasn't the last time I would hear this.

We first stepped foot on Vietnamese soil on September 17, 1969, at Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam. It was the first time I had been out of the United States. Before that, the farthest I had been away from home was when a buddy and I drove to San Francisco the summer before- 1968, the summer of love.

It was a shock arriving in Vietnam. Immediately you felt the heat and humidity, and we were all soaked with sweat ten minutes after we got off the flight.

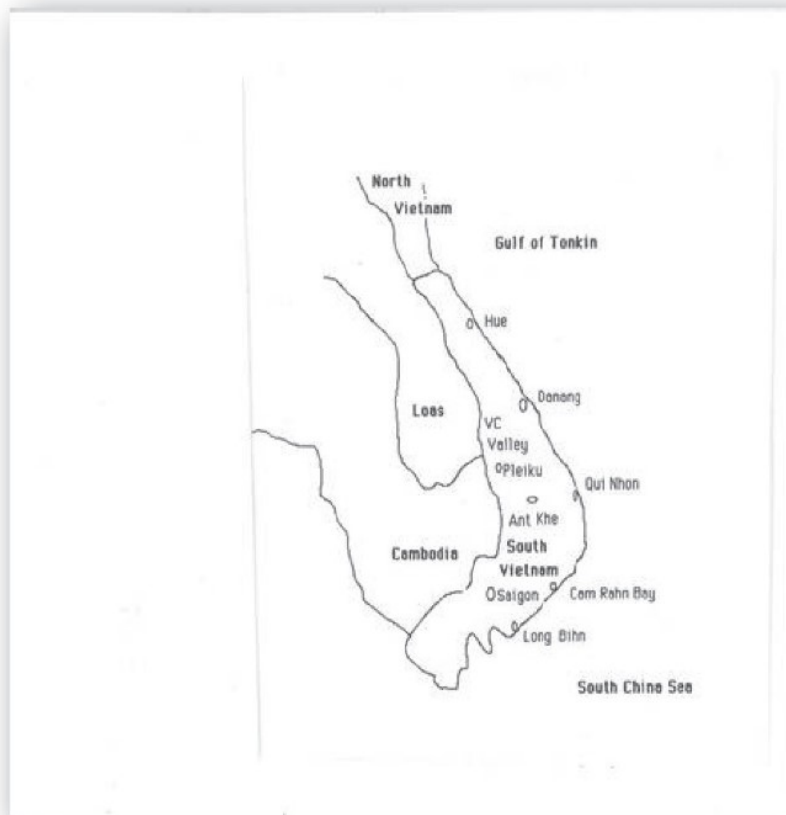
Besides the heat, the noise was the next thing I noticed. Helicopters were hovering all around Cam Rahn Bay, and the thrashing noise from the blades was deafening.

"Hey, shake 'n' bakes, how short are you? We've got one day and a wake-up left in in-country. I pity you cherries!" someone yelled at us.

The tour in Vietnam was 365 days, and everyone kept track of how long he had left. Guys started bragging about how "short they were" when they had less than 100 days left, and many carried a short stick and marked off how many days they were in in-country.

We were assigned a wooden barracks as the army processed us into the country. And that's where I was introduced to night fire, my first night in Vietnam. On most nights, soldiers used a variety of tactics to keep the enemy away from camp. One of these tactics was night fire, which meant firing mortars, illumination rounds, and tracers outward from the perimeter of the base constantly throughout the night.

For most new arrivals, myself included, night fire was terrifying.



It took us a couple of days to be processed in, and then a C-130 transport plane flew me to Pleiku in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, which was the headquarters of the Fourth Infantry Division. The Central Highlands of Vietnam was a mountainous area, populated with only small, primitive villages.

...

September 22, 1969

“Pay attention and you might not get your ass blown away the minute you get to the field,” the first sergeant yelled at us. Welcome to Pleiku!

He explained that we would be training here for a week, and we were to report back at 1600 hours.

“OK, rookies, get your hands out of your pockets and get cleaned up. You are filthy!”

“Just like basic training,” I muttered as we were led to the barracks and a cold shower.

Training turned out to be a repeat of the weapons training we had already received in basic, AIT, and NCO school. Soldiers carried a variety of weapons in Vietnam. Most carried an M16 rifle, which, was light and could be fired in single-shot mode or automatic. A couple of members of each squad carried the M79 rocket launcher, which could fire shoulder gun shells or grenades. The problem with the M79 was you could only load one shell at a time and were constantly reloading. Some carried a 45 pistol, but these pistols were primarily reserved for officers. One member of the squad carried an M60 machine gun, and most members carried machine-gun ammo. Many members of the squad humped claymore mines, which were deployed at night to protect your position.

...

After a week of training, the first sergeant gave us the night off, so a group of us shake 'n' bakes went to check the NCO club. One of my fellow NCOs commented on how beautiful the Vietnamese women were and on how we never saw one who was fat. "I was always a sucker for a thin body and big eyes," he said.

"You're just horny, and you've only been away from your wife for a couple of weeks!" I told him. I reminded him what they told us in NCO school: don't mess around with local women or you'll catch the black syph and your tool will fall off!

The Vietnamese band kept playing three songs that were the unofficial anthems for GIs in Vietnam:

- "Leaving on a Jet Plane" by Peter, Paul, and Mary
- "We Gotta Get out of This Place" by The Animals
- "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding

All these songs had to do with getting out of Vietnam. The local bands were pretty good, but it was obvious they couldn't speak English and had just memorized the words.

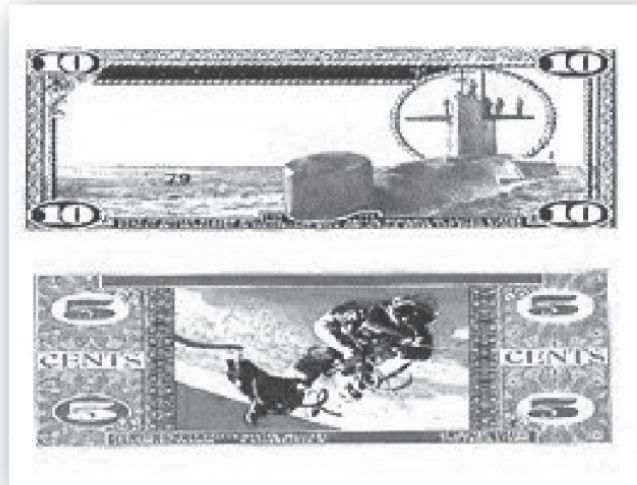
That didn't matter, though, because everyone in the NCO club was singing wildly along.

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September 29, 1969

The next morning, hung over, I was shoveled into a deuce-and-a-half truck and driven to the division's firebase in Ant Khe. With ten thousand soldiers stationed there, Ant Khe looked more like a city than a firebase. There were barracks, artillery units, PXs, clubs, an airstrip, and headquarters for several units assigned to the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Surrounding the camp was a series of bunkers, trip wire, and barbed wire.

One of our first stops was to sign in and see the financial officer. NCOs (E-5) at that time were paid about \$250 a month, plus a \$30 monthly bonus for combat pay. I signed up to be paid \$30 a month in cash and put the rest in a savings account. The army paid for everything except cigarettes, beer, and favors from local women, so we really didn't need much money. We were paid in military script, called MPC (military payment certificates). The United States didn't want American dollars circulating in Vietnam, so they invented currency for us. MPC was good for buying anything on base, and the locals also took it.



We were given shots and issued a one-month supply of malaria pills: big white pills to be taken weekly and little orange pills to be taken daily. We were reminded several times that the penalty for not taking your malaria pills was a court-martial. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to catch malaria.

At the supply tent we were issued rucksacks to carry our belongings, a poncho liner to protect us from the rain, C-rations, an M-16 rifle with three spare magazines, three grenades, and a claymore mine.

The division captain's version of a welcoming speech was to remind us that the United States was fighting a war and it was our job to fight and win it. And, of course, he had to throw in some jabs about how green we were.

"Now go out there and kill some gooks!" he added. "Welcome to the best fighting unit in Vietnam."

He turned us over to the platoon sergeant to take us to our assigned squads. After the Captain left, the platoon sergeant warned, "You shake 'n' bakes better do what I tell you. We need some butt-kicking in this platoon, and I'm counting on you to do the kicking. We have been getting low kill totals, and the brass is really pissed."

The platoon sergeant was also a shake 'n' bake instant NCO who reenlisted after NCO school so he was promoted to E-6 or platoon sergeant. We called him Shaky.

Shaky pointed me to a bunker about one hundred meters away, where I would meet my squad. "Tell the Jew to introduce you around. Tomorrow we move out for the boonies, so get to know them in a hurry."

Each platoon had four squads, and each squad had between eight and twelve members. Of the four squads, three were rifle squads and one was a weapons squad that managed the mortars.

As I approached the bunker, I was met by a short private first class (PFC) with glasses. "I'm PFC Soko from New York City, but everyone calls me the Jew. What should we call you?"

"Sergeant Miller is my name, but my nickname is Garbage," I answered. I was known on the basketball court for collecting rebounds after missed shots (i.e., garbage shots). My buddies kept the name going because I was the furthest thing from a picky eater: I would eat just about anything- a good skill for my time in the army! And the guys also joked that I would date, well, just about anyone who would date me.

"Sergeant Garbage it is. I'm acting squad leader since the last shake 'n' bake got hurt," he explained.

“How did he get hurt?” I asked, already wary of the bad reputation of my fellow shake ‘n’ bakes. “He stepped on a booby trap one night when he was walking into the bush to take a leak.”

Man, it wasn’t even safe to take a piss in Vietnam.

The Jew told me about the squad. There was Mark from Ohio, two guys from Texas: Grandpa, who was old at twenty-six, and Tex, a machine gunner who thought he was John Wayne. Then there were John, Andy, Brian, and Gook, our radioman. The Jew introduced me to Charlie Brown from Minnesota, adding that Charlie used to be a good soldier, but was really messed up now.

Most of the squad was drafted like me. They seemed like really good guys who just wanted to get out in one piece.

“The sooner you take over, the better,” the Jew said as we entered the bunker. “Being a leader is a pain in the ass.”

After I met everyone, I assigned guard duty for the night and was called to headquarters by Shaky and briefed on the next day’s mission. I was now with my squad, which came to be known as the Garbage Squad.



The Garbage Squad

Three

LZ LARRY AND THE FIRST MISSION

October 1, 1969



My first unit

“Do you always ride these things with your legs hanging out?” I wondered out loud, imagining tumbling to my death below as the Huey helicopter airlifted the Garbage Squad north of Ant Khe.

It was October 1, 1969, and we were heading to landing zone (LZ) Larry, all of us hanging out of the helicopters with our legs resting on the choppers' landing legs. It was a twenty-minute ride over the jungle, which was so plush and thick we couldn't see the ground.



“Don’t worry, Sarg, your heavy rucksack will keep you from falling out of the bird,” the Jew reassured me.

I leaned as far back into the helicopter as I could and asked the Jew if he’d ever been to LZ Larry before.

He and Soko explained that they’d never been to Larry specifically, but they didn’t like landing zones in the middle of the jungle, period. The LZ showed the enemy exactly where we were, whereas in the boonies we could hide.

“I’ve seen more action on landing zones and base camps than I have humping in the jungle,” Soko added.

LZ Larry was on the top of a barren hill with jungle all around. There were twenty-two bunkers around the perimeter, with mortars and a communications bunker in the middle. The LZ was a maze of activity with GIs moving from one bunker to another. The ground in the perimeter was a mass of murky mud, which the monsoon rains were making worse. Outside the bunkers was a stretch of cleared land dotted with claymore mines, barbed wire, and trip wires.

Shortly after landing we were told by Platoon Sergeant Shaky to set up hooches-crude tents made from our poncho liner-to sleep in. An airplane flew overhead with a loudspeaker blasting something in Vietnamese.

“Hey, Gook! Your people are calling you,” Grandpa shouted at the radioman.

Gook said they were telling the VC to surrender. "I hope they surrender and leave us alone tonight," he added. Grandpa and I agreed.

I looked at Grandpa and tried to imagine what it was like for him. He came from a family of nine children in Tyler, Texas, and dropped out of school at age sixteen to help feed his younger siblings. He worked in a gas station, got married at seventeen, and had three sons in three years. He received a hardship deferment from the draft until he caught his wife in bed with another man and got a divorce. Grandpa was now twenty-six years old, but he looked much older than that. He had lived a hard twenty-six years.

Our squad was assigned guard watch for two of the bunkers, and I arranged bunker and guard-duty assignments. I picked the 4:00 to 6:00 a.m. shift for myself.

Darkness spread over the LZ. The rain had stopped and the stars brightened up the dark jungle. The stars seemed so close, I felt I could reach up and grab one. The jungle came alive with sounds of insects and animals. I settled down in my hooch to try and get some sleep. The ground was damp and hard, but I gathered my poncho liner around me. I was warm and almost comfortable.

I was soundly asleep when there was a large volley of rifle and machine gun fire from the bunkers.

"Holy shit! Are we getting hit?" I yelled as I tried to find my glasses, rifle, and helmet in the dark.

"Don't worry, Sarg, it's just a mad minute." Grandpa explained that each night at 2300 hours all the guys on guard duty emptied a magazine out into the jungle, hoping to catch Charlie (our nickname for the VC) sneaking in.

"Didn't they teach you anything in shake 'n' bake school?" he teased.

I growled and curled up again in my poncho liner to sleep until it was time for my guard watch.

A loud explosion followed by yelling, screaming, and rifle fire awoke me several hours later. Immediately, I knew this was different from night fire or a mad minute.

Several more explosions shook the ground close to our bunker.

I lay huddled in my poncho liner, so terrified I couldn't stop shaking. I had no idea where my glasses, rifle, or helmet was.

"Gooks in the wire!" someone yelled.

"Medic, I'm hit," yelled someone else.

I held my breath, praying silently. I didn't know what was going on. I questioned whether I'd live to see the morning.

"Are you all right, Sarg?" the Jew asked me.

"I...I...think so," I stuttered.

"Just keep fucking low," the Jew whispered. "We're OK as long as they can't find us."

Panicking and without making a sound, I kept feeling around in the dark for my rifle and glasses.

The firing gradually subsided, and someone yelled, "Cease fire, they're gone."

I poked my head out of my hooch and found Matt, Mark, and Grandpa lying in the mud with their rifles pointing into the darkness outside the perimeter.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Some sappers got inside the wire and threw satchel charges around. It sounds like some of our guys got hit," Mark replied.

"What's a sapper?" I had to ask, feeling like a clueless shake 'n' bake.

They explained that sappers were specially trained, elite-force PAVN or Vietcong who stripped down and were able to feel their way through our barbed wire and trip wires in the dark. Sapper units usually prepared and mapped out an attack for several weeks. They carried sacks full of explosives and grenades, and once they penetrated the perimeter they were hard to stop.

"We're afraid to fire inside the perimeter for fear of hitting our own men," Grandpa concluded.

Then the guys turned to me-I must have been a sight-and asked where my glasses and my rifle were. Ugh.

“Keep them in your hands when you sleep,” suggested Mark, “if you want to stay alive.”

Medivac helicopters arrived, and the wounded were flown back quickly to Ant Khe for emergency medical care. We learned that two lieutenants were killed and three officers were wounded, including the commanding officer of C Company. One of the sapper’s satchel charges had landed in the command bunker and blown it apart.

I still couldn’t stop shaking. I’d never been so scared in my life.

I told the guys, “I feel like a sitting duck on this LZ. What’s to stop the gooks from snaking in tomorrow night and throwing more satchel charges?”

“You’ve got to get over the frights and stay the hell with it, Sarg!” Grandpa ordered.

“Be careful and, of course, don’t take stupid chances. But if some dink sneaks up on you and fries you in the middle of the night, you can’t do much about that,” the world-wise twenty-six-year-old schooled me. “When your time comes, it comes.”

I didn’t answer but stared into the night thinking about my family and girlfriend back home. How did I get myself into this situation? Would I ever see the world again? I was still terrified.

October 2, 1969

The next day the weather was beautiful. The sun was shining and the mud was drying up. The jungle was green and smelled fresh and clean. We soldiers on LZ Larry were assessing the damage from the sappers and trying to function after the night of worry and no sleep.

It was that morning the Garbage Squad got our first combat mission.

I was ordered to take the squad around the perimeter of LZ Larry and see whether we could find anything left by our visitors last night. After we made the loop, Platoon Sergeant Shaky commanded that we head east for a klick (one kilometer) and see whether we could make contact.

“We’ll have gunships flying overhead to cover your ass,” he added.

I got the squad together and gave them instructions. Grandpa would walk point. I would be just behind, with Gook keeping the radio close to me. Mark and John walked flank (to the side), and Charlie Brown, Brian, and Tex followed behind Gook. Jew brought up the rear.

We started carefully and spread out.

We got one hundred meters from the perimeter when Grandpa put up his hand. “Take a look at what I got here, Sarg. Looks like the sappers left behind a satchel charge and a rocket.”

I told Gook to get me the platoon sergeant on the radio.

“Top One, we have what looks like a satchel charge and a rocket. What are your instructions?” I asked into the handset.

“Bring the items in, Top One, over.” That was the response!

“Bring these in? He’s gotta be kidding! We’ll be blown away,” I said to Grandpa.

Grandpa carefully picked up the rocket and started walking back to the perimeter. “Come on, Sarg, these won’t hurt you.”

I reluctantly picked up the satchel charge and followed Grandpa back to LZ Larry. It had been a satchel charge, identical to the one *in my hand* that had ripped apart our command bunker and killed our guys last night.

I was sweating like crazy. With every step-every breath- I imagined the satchel exploding.

We eagerly passed our finds on to Shaky and rejoined the squad outside the perimeter. We didn’t find anything else as we completed the loop.

Then we struggled our way east through the jungle.

And then it happened: sniper fire two shots.

We all hit the ground.

When no more shots came, I yelled, "Anybody hurt?"

"OK back here," the Jew reported.

"Nobody's hit," called Mark from the flank.

"Top One, this is Charlie, we're taking sniper fire. Where are the birds? Over." I demanded into the radio, my heart racing.

"Charlie, what is your exact position? Over."

I looked carefully at my map while answering. "Top One, we're five hundred meters east of Larry. The sniper is another two hundred meters east on a little hill. Over."

"Charlie, the birds are on their way. Pop smoke to mark your position," commanded the voice on the radio.

I grabbed a smoke canister from my belt, pulled the pin, and threw the canister. "Top One, smoke out. Over."

"Charlie, birds see red smoke. Over," the voice answered.

"Top One, red smoke, roger. Over," I replied, relieved. A Huey gunship hovered above our squad. The gunships were very fast and narrow, making them difficult for the enemy to shoot down.

The gunship fired a rocket pod, and its machine guns roared with a distinctive whining sound. The hill where the sniper was completely exploded. Trees were bent and blazing. The rocket explosions tore deep holes in the earth. I couldn't imagine anyone being able to survive the pounding of the gunship.

"Charlie, return to base. Over," commanded the radio voice.

We were happy to get out of there and moved quickly.

When we got back to LZ Larry, Platoon Sergeant Shaky said the gunships had spotted what looked like a company of NVA troops heading down the hill toward our position, which is why he ordered us out of there in such a hurry.

And that concluded my first mission and first action in Vietnam.

Since it involved enemy fire, each Garbage Squad member earned the coveted Combat Infantry Badge. But medals were the furthest thing from my mind.

At least I had stopped shaking.

Four

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

October 3-8, 1969

The Garbage Squad stayed in LZ Larry for one week. We hated it there, just like the guys predicted. During the days, we had patrols outside the perimeter, trying to make contact with the enemy again.

But the nights were the worst. Since that first night, I kept seeing images of sappers slithering into our camp. I got very little sleep in LZ Larry. When I finally managed to doze off, someone would poke me to take my turn on guard duty.

The second night after the sapper attack, it rained hard all night. The rain settled in the top of my hootch and filled it with water. I awoke to a gallon of water splashing on my head when the hootch finally collapsed.

Replacement troops came to cover for the brass that were wounded and killed by the sappers. Helicopters also dropped us some supplies: food, water, clean fatigues, ammo, cigarettes, and beer. All the essentials.

Every C-ration meal came with a short pack of cigarettes, and I found myself smoking a lot, trying to calm my nerves. Mark and the Jew were the only nonsmokers in the squad, and they traded their cigarettes for candy or beer.

The Jew spent one afternoon in LZ Larry writing a long letter to his father. They had had a terrible fight. The Jew was the second of four brothers, and his older brother, Jacob, seemed like the perfect son. Jacob was an A student and a star on the baseball team. The Jew was a C student and nonathletic. His father was always on his case: Why don't you study harder? Why don't you go out for the team? When the Jew flunked out of college his freshman year and was drafted, his father was furious.

October 9-20, 1969

It wasn't long before Shaky summoned me to get briefed for a new mission: search and destroy the gooks that hit us last week.

They would drop us ten clicks to the west. We were to set up ambushes and hump around until we found them. The Garbage Squad was just one of several squads that made up Charlie Company, and the whole company was headed on this mission, with Shaky leading us.

He warned that we might be out in the bush for a month. "Make sure your squad has plenty of rations, ammo, and water. Tell everyone to take their malaria pills and put purification pills in the water. We need everyone healthy."

I was told to brief my squad and be ready by 0800 hours.

...

We were ready at 0800, but the Huey helicopters didn't make an appearance. Nervously, we waited and tried to nap or write letters.

The choppers finally showed up at noon. When they dropped us off in our new position, I was surprised they didn't land. Instead they hovered about six feet above the jungle floor, and the helicopter door gunner gave us a kick in the rear. We each smacked the ground with a thud.

We spent a week and a half in the bush, but made no contact with the enemy. The weather was hot and humid, and it rained each night.

I didn't have to worry so much about sappers now that we were in the bush and away from the landing zone. But it still wasn't easy to sleep. Danger always lurked over us. And at night the mosquitoes were thick and constantly buzzing around our heads. The army-issued insect repellent didn't help, so we pulled our poncho liners over our heads, making sleep a hot and stuffy affair.

"I have so many skeeter bites, I don't know which sector to scratch first," Tex complained one morning as the squad prepared our packs for the day's mission.

"When will we get new supplies?" I asked the Jew.

"After your uniform rots off and you smell so bad even the mosquitoes don't come around," he told me.

Harold ordered us to move out. We had five clicks to hump to meet up with the second platoon. "Second squad, you move up front. First squad to the left-Third to the right," he barked. "Spread out so one grenade doesn't get us all!"

Among my guys, it was Charlie Brown's turn to walk point. But he grumbled immediately.

"There are too many booby traps around here," he confronted me. "Besides, I got less than one hundred days left in-country. I'm too short to walk point."

I paused and looked hard at Charlie Brown.

"Everyone takes a turn walking point. Besides, you fell asleep again last night on guard duty. I should put you in jail, not just have you walk point. You could have gotten us all killed."

Charlie Brown mumbled something under his breath, but he walked point that day. The jungle was so thick we had to hack a path with our machetes. Creepy, twisted vines hung down from the trees and made our progress slow.

At 13:45, Charlie Brown held up his hand, signaling the squad to stop.

"What have you got?" I asked.

"A gook village is just ahead," Charlie Brown said as he motioned to a couple of thatched huts in a clearing in front of us. "I can see pigs, but no sign of people."

"Gook, call Top and tell him we found a village," I told the radioman. "Ask for instructions."

After a minute, the radioman replied, "He said to recon the village. The first squad will back us up."

"OK, let's see what's in the village," I told the guys. We dropped our heavy packs on the ground.

"Spread out and don't get careless. Grandpa and Mark, you lead us in."

As we headed to the first hut, I called up to them, "Watch out for trip wires and booby traps!"

Mark entered to first hut and signaled that it was clean.

It turned out the entire village was deserted except for the pigs. There were no booby traps either. That was a relief.

But what to do now? I turned to the Jew. "What should we do with the pigs?"

"Standard procedure is to burn down the village and kill the animals," he explained. "This was probably a staging area for the dinks who hit us on LZ Larry."

"Oh boy!" Tex yelled as he readied his M60 machine gun. "I'm going for that fat little piggy over there!"

Tex started firing, and the targeted pig squealed as the bullets tore into him.

The Garbage Squad went into a frenzy of firing and yelling. Everyone wanted to kill one of the enemy pigs.

When all the pigs had either been killed or escaped into the jungle, we set fire to the two huts.

Platoon Sergeant Shaky appeared out of the jungle and approached me. I wasn't sure how he was going to react to the scene. But I didn't have to wonder for long.

"Good work, Sergeant Miller!" he congratulated me. "We'll report the pigs as dead Vietcong. Our enemy kill count needs some improvement."

And then he ordered us out. We had two more clicks of jungle to cut away before the day was done.

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That night the Platoon Sergeant called the squad leaders together and informed us that Company C had new orders: we were leaving the jungle to guard some bridges.

I was overjoyed that our mission was ending.

The worst part of being in the bush was the constant tension, the cloud of danger hanging over us. We never knew whether a sniper would take a shot at us or whether we would walk into a booby trap. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

It had been three weeks since I first arrived in the field, and I now felt like a seasoned veteran.

Five

BRIDGE 30

October 22, 1969

We humped two clicks up and over a big hill covered with thick jungle to the agreed-upon pickup location. Our hands were blistered and sore from cutting a path with our machetes. Halfway up the hill, the monsoon rains hit and the ground turned to mud. We slipped and struggled in the muck. It was a grueling hike, but the good news was that the terrain was so bad there was little chance of running into hostiles.

The helicopters picked us up just before dark and brought us to LZ Schula. We quickly put up our shelters to try and keep dry. I had a couple of beers with Tex and Mark and went to sleep.

The next day we were airlifted from LZ Schula to Base Camp Blackhawk, located on the main highway across South Vietnam, Highway 1. At Blackhawk, we were given clean clothes, the mail for the last couple of weeks, a warm meal in the mess hall, and our pay for the past month. We also got the night off!

The Jew got a letter from his mother. It was a newsy letter telling about his brothers' successes in school and details of a friend's wedding. He got no messages from his father.

I got three letters and two packages from my mother and one from my girlfriend. My mother's letters were hard to make out because her handwriting was so bad. The squad often shared letters from home, and together we tried to decipher my mother's letters. The goody boxes contained cookies, sweets, and clean socks, which everyone in the squad shared.

My girlfriend's letter was cheerful but not too personal. She talked about the college football games and described the teachers she had in her senior-year classes. She sounded far away, and it was hard for me to imagine what her life was like back home. I told her to enjoy her senior year and date other people. I wondered whether she had found someone else.

The next morning we were loaded on trucks and driven down Highway 1 about three clicks to Bridge 30. Highway 1 was the main highway that crossed South Vietnam. It got lot of traffic from jeeps, resupply convoys, and locals. GIs could hitchhike from one location to another: army vehicles always picked up soldiers. On Highway 1 there were brothels and Coke girls selling products from their motor scooters. You could get cold Coca Cola, beer, and illegal substances if you wanted. Drug use was prevalent among the GIs in Vietnam, but my squad was pretty straight. There were sometimes some reefers, but not any hard stuff.



Coke Girls

“Has anyone had bridge duty before?” I asked as we jumped off the truck.

“I was in a fucked-up squad at Bridge 22 on the other side of the pass a couple of months ago,” Charlie Brown said. He told us how he got hit one night when everyone was screwed up on dope. A couple of guys got killed and Charlie was still getting the shakes sometimes at night when he thought about it.

“You didn’t have much trouble sleeping the other night on guard duty,” Grandpa quipped.

“Go fuck yourself,” Charlie Brown shot back, giving Grandpa a dangerous look.

Bridge 30 spanned a large river, and on the other side was a small village guarded by an ARVN unit. My squad was charged with manning two bunkers on the opposite side of the river from the village.



Village During "Tet"

Village by Bridge #30

"It's a beautiful day," I proclaimed enthusiastically. "Let's go out and set some trip flares and claymore mines. Tex, you can use a bath. Go down to the river and test the water. Take some soap with you."

"Sarg, it's Shaky on the radio," Gook said as he handed me the radio.

"Sergeant Miller, there's an NVA company reported in the area," the voice on the radio squawked. "Put your squad on full alert. Take half your squad one klick north of your position and set up a night ambush."

I turned to the Jew, who was listening to the platoon sergeant's orders. "It sounds like we're not going to get any sleep tonight!"

"Sarg, it doesn't sound like a healthy idea to split the squad if there's going to be action tonight," the Jew replied.

"What else can we do?" I asked. "You heard the orders."

"The hell with the orders. Shaky is just after a promotion," the Jew said.

Word on the street was that Shaky one of the first picked for shake 'n' bake school, and he liked. Nam so much he reupted for another tour. He made platoon sergeant by volunteering *us* for dangerous missions,

"Don't worry, he won't be checking on us tonight," the Jew said. "He'll be too busy kissing the captain's ass. Keep us in the bunkers tonight, and we'll be a lot safer."

I knew that I could be court-marshaled for disobeying orders. But I cared a lot more about staying alive and keeping my guys alive than killing the enemy or being a hero.

“We won’t get caught,” the Jew assured me. “Who’s to know? The gooks on the other side of the bridge don’t care what we do.”

“I told you I was no hero, but ending up in jail doesn’t appeal to me either,” I replied, trying to decide what to do.

I finally decided to skip the night ambush and keep the squad whole. But with possible enemy in the area, we’d double up the guard duty for the night. Fortunately, none of my guys were gung ho, and we all agreed to search and evade rather than search and destroy.

It was an uneasy night, and in the middle of the night we were woken by Tex screaming at the top of his lungs.

“A goddamn rat just bit me on the hand!” He swung a machete toward the dirt, flailing at the infestation of nasty rodents all over the bunker. “Die, you sucker!”

The rest of the night, we were kept awake fighting off the rats and keeping Tex from slashing one of us by accident.

“I’m going to chop these ugly rat fuckers into little bitty pieces and eat them for breakfast!” Tex ranted.

October 23, 1969

In the morning, I felt we had gotten away with not sending out the night ambush. It was the first time I defied orders so blatantly, and it was a relief that rats were the worst we’d had to deal with.

That was, until Gook told me I was ordered to report to the company commander at Blackhawk to brief him on what we had seen during the ambush last night. The commander’s nickname was Chicken Man.

“I’ll let you guys know where to send the cake with file in it if they send me to the brig,” I joked, worried about what I was going to tell Chicken Man.

I took Tex with me to have a medic look at his hand. I hoped they’d send me back with some rat poison, if indeed they sent me back at all.

Tex was a baby-faced nineteen-year-old from Dallas. He was as strong as an ox and had volunteered to carry the squad’s M60 machine gun. He had Gook take pictures of him to send home—he stuck a cigar in his mouth and draped strings of machine-gun ammo across his bare chest. He was trying to look like John Wayne, but he was really more like a teddy bear.

Tex and I hitchhiked to Blackhawk on the back of an army deuce and a half. I left Tex at the medics’ station and reported to the command bunker. After I saluted Chicken Man, he asked me, “What did you see on your ambush last night? There have been several convoys hit by the VC close to Bridge 30, and we’d like to find out who is doing it.”

“Well, Captain,” I began, stalling for time. “The terrain was very thick just north of the wire. We found two paths that looked like they led to the river. We followed one path and set up the ambush on the path,” I lied. “There was no activity last night.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Keep an eye out. We need to stop our convoys from getting attacked.” He replied, without paying much attention to my story.

Then he surprised me by asking, “Do you have a Private Burrows in your squad?”

“Yes, sir,” I responded. He was talking about Grandpa.

“Private Burrows hasn’t gotten his high school diploma yet, and it’s one of my goals to get all my GIs’ GED high school equivalents. The GED tests are tomorrow. Make sure Burrows takes the test. That’s all, Sergeant,” Chicken Man barked, and I saluted and left the command bunker.

Phew.

But then Shaky followed me out.

"Tell your squad to keep their helmets and flak jackets on," he ordered. "There's a general doing inspections along Highway 1, and he's a helmet and flak jacket freak."

I told him I would.

"And remind your guys to take their malaria pills," he continued. "We've had three guys from Company C come down with malaria. If we find out they got malaria and didn't take their pills, we'll send them to jail."

"Sarg, can I get some rat poison?" I asked. "Tex is at the aid station with rat bites, and I don't want to lose men to rats."

"We're all out. I have some more ordered. In the meantime, set up some rat traps," he said with a hint of a smile on his face. He found it funny that rats were crawling all over us in the bunker while he was nice and comfy in the barracks on Blackhawk. I gritted my teeth, not feeling bad at all about defying his orders the night before.

Tex and I stopped and picked up the squad's mail and went to the PX and bought beer and candy.

"Do you know how to make a rat trap?" I asked Tex as we were riding back to Bridge 30.

"I'm going to get those ugly, long-tailed bastards with my machete. That sorry fucker who bit me last night is dead meat," Tex hissed, not answering my question.

"Hmm, maybe we should have a contest to see who can catch the most rats. We could all throw in five dollars MPC and the best rat catcher wins the pot," I suggested.

Tex agreed.

The great rat-catching contest of 1969 was on.

The squad spent the rest of the day drinking beer and making rat traps. Grandpa enlisted the help of one of the scraggily dressed Vietnamese kids and nicknamed him Todd. They made a trap with a spring device that released with pressure. Grandpa and Todd used an old trip-flare spring to trigger his trap. They used some cheese from a C ration as bait. It was obvious that Grandpa's trap was superior in design to the rest. Apparently he had grown up catching rats in Tyler, Texas.

The best this city boy could come up with was to tie a string to a box. When a rat ran under it, I pulled the string. For my trap to work, I had to stay awake to pull the string. I looked at Grandpa's trap with envy. "Grandpa you're ten times smarter than me. Why don't you take the GED test tomorrow and at least get a diploma from the army?"

"Naw, I don't need no diploma. I got a good job as a mechanic waiting for me when I get out. A piece of paper won't help me none."

Grandpa went to the other side of the bunker to read a letter I delivered from Blackhawk.

After a while, Grandpa looked up from his letter in frustration and said, "My goddamn ex-wife has taken my kids to Arkansas! The whore should fry in hell for doing this. The judge issued an order giving me custody. I'm completely helpless being so far away...not knowing what's happening to the kids." His voice choked with emotion.

"Maybe we can get the Red Cross to help?" I suggested.

"I never thought of that," Grandpa replied.

"Tell you what," I proposed. "If you take the GED test, I'll talk to the Red Cross and see whether it can do something to help with your kids."

"You got a deal, Sarg. Imagine: Grandpa with a high school diploma!" Grandpa said and went back to testing his rat trap.

That night, two events kept us awake. The first was the Garbage Squad's great rat-catching contest. We all stayed poised by our traps. Tex was in the corner with his machete raised for the kill. I had my string in my hand, hoping to win but looking kind of pathetic. The Jew, Brian, and Charlie Brown also

watched their traps. Grandpa was the only one who slept, and of course his was the only trap that caught a rat.

The other event was a mortar attack that started about two in the morning. The mortars landed near the road and frighteningly close to our bunker. When Gook called headquarters, he was advised that the rounds had been fired by a rookie mortar team on Blackhawk. We had almost been killed by friendly fire!

The next day Grandpa collected his prize money and went with me to Blackhawk to take the GED test. I visited the Red Cross rep, and he promised to He agreed to contact the judge in Texas to issue a warrant to get the kids back. He hinted a hardship leave was possible if the court order was unsuccessful.

November 1969

The next couple of weeks were peaceful.

Shaky got us some rat poison for our bunkers on Bridge 30.

Grandpa heard from the Red Cross that his kids were safely back with his mother. He also got his high school diploma.

The Jew went on R&R to Bangkok.

Shaky surprised us with an inspection one day and caught us without our helmets or flak jackets on. He fined us each ten dollars for the violation.

To pass the time we played games. One was knife throwing. Each of us had an army-issue knife that we competed with. The target was a playing card, the ace of spades pinned to a sand bag. Many GIs kept an ace of spades and a bottle of mosquito lotion in the elastic of their helmets. It was tradition that when a VC was killed, the ace of spades was pinned to his forehead. Tex and Grandpa won most of the knife-throwing money.

Another game we played was snake slashing. We paid Todd to catch snakes for us, and then we stood in a circle with our machetes poised. When the snake was released, we each tried to be the first to cut off the snake's head. I became quite good at snake slashing. Our guard duty on Bridge 30 was boring, but I hoped the rest of my time in 'Nam was just as boring. We all did.

November 20, 1969

The calm at Bridge 30 was broken by a series of attacks on American truck convoys as they went around dead man's curve, which was close to our bunker.

Before each attack, we'd see a group of five woodcutters leave the village and go into the jungle carrying primitive axes and saws. Within an hour, mortars would start dropping on our trucks. Then the five would come out of the jungle and walk back to the village carrying a couple of pieces of wood.

Again the next day, an oil tanker was hit by a rocket, and black smoke could be seen billowing above the trees after the woodcutters left the village.

After watching the woodcutters' routine for several days, I asked permission to take the squad into the jungle and look around. I was speculating there would be mortars and rockets hidden nearby. "No dice, Sergeant Miller," was Shaky's response to my request.

Shaky said the villagers were the ARVN's responsibility. He'd pass my suspicions along, but he didn't want us to go anywhere near the woodcutters. He added, "With the shit that has come down as a result of My Lai, the last thing we need is to have your squad blow away some gooks from the village."

My Lai was a famous incident in 1968 in which two villages were wiped out. Estimates are that between three hundred and five hundred villagers were massacred.

"I thought we were supposed to protect the convoys. Am I supposed to sit and watch American soldiers get blown away by these VC woodcutters?" I asked.

"I said I'd pass your concern along to the ARVNs. That's all we can do. And you'd better be alert the next couple of nights. If the woodcutters are VC and find out you blew the whistle on them, they might have a score to settle," Shaky said.

The squad was tense the next couple of nights, but nothing happened. The woodcutters stopped going into the jungle, and the attacks on the convoys stopped. I felt we had done something to help the good guys.

The Jew came back from R&R with tales of wild nights filled with lusty sex. He kept talking about how beautiful the prostitutes of Bangkok were. Thailand was nothing like Manhattan. He convinced all of us to sign up for R&R in Bangkok. Other GIs met their wives in Hawaii or went to Hong Kong or Australia, but after listening to the Jew, we decided our choice was clear.

Todd, the Vietnamese boy, was becoming a daily fixture at the bunker. He was about twelve and wore an oversized cowboy hat and an old pair of camouflage army fatigues. One day Todd entered the bunker with a small gray monkey sitting on his shoulder. "Hey, GI. Number one pet. Beaucoup super number one. Five dollar."

"Jesus, Todd what a cute little monkey," said Mark as he grabbed the monkey from Todd's shoulder. "I'll give you five dollars for him if the Sarg says it's OK."

"Get serious," I said. "All we need is a squealing, shitting monkey running around. First we have Tex keeping us up all night hunting rats, now a monkey?"

"Loosen up, Sarg," the Jew protested. "Monkeys are good company in the bush. If Brian likes the little guy, it won't do any harm."

So the squad inherited a monkey that we named Garbage Junior.



Garbage Junior- on shoulder

November 24, 1969

On November 24, orders came from Blackhawk that Company C was leaving the bridges and heading back to the bush.

Four days after we left Bridge 30, a satchel charge was thrown into the bunker, killing four soldiers. The woodcutters did get their revenge.

Six

STAND DOWN

November 24-25, 1969

After living for a month in the bunker on Bridge 30, we packed our valuables into rucksacks, rigged up a leash for Garbage Junior, and left everything we couldn't carry to Todd. Company C was trucked into Ant Khe where we were scheduled for a stand down, the army's equivalent of a long weekend off. The first orders we got in Ant Khe were to get haircuts, shave, shower, and put on clean fatigues.

"Your haircut is so pretty, it would chase maggots away from a goody truck," Grandpa teased Brian.

"I'm going to start recording your hillbilly sayings in my journal," I told Grandpa. "Yesterday you told Todd not to smoke because it's like a dog sucking eggs. What does that mean?"

"You Yankees don't know shit," Grandpa answered. "If a dog gets into a henhouse and sucks an egg, it's like drugs to them. You never get them away from the eggs."

My squad was assigned to sleep on the mess hall floor during the first night on stand down. Shaky gave orders that everyone was to be asleep by 2200 hours and ready for inspection by our new commanding officer (CO) at 0700 hours the next day. He also had me fill out an application for R&R. After listening to the Jew's tales of Bangkok, I applied for R&R there. Shaky said there was a long waiting list, and I would be advised when I was near the top of the list.

"Can you believe this horseshit?" complained Charlie Brown. "Bed check at ten o'clock and inspection at seven in the morning on Thanksgiving morning. What's wrong with this new CO? He must be a gung-ho lifer. What happened to Chicken Man? He wasn't a great CO, but at least he didn't mess with us."

"I heard Chicken Man got hit and sent back to the world," the Jew piped in. "So we got this new captain who only has two days in-country."

It was our third CO in the three months.

"Well, he'd better not mess with us or he'll end up with a bounty on his head," Charlie Brown said.

"I heard a second luey in Company A got fragged because he wanted to be a hero," Brian told us. "These lifers have to realize that we just want to get back to the world in one piece. It's surprising the number of accidents that can happen in the bush."

"And grenades don't leave fingerprints," Tex said. He told us that his buddy back home read that there are over a hundred fraggings a year in Vietnam. Tex said that he'd heard friendly fire was the number one cause of death.

"To hell with Shaky, the new CO, and their bed check," I ventured, not wanting to be labeled a gung-ho lifer. I suggested hitting the club and checking out the new movie *True Grit*.

The next morning the new captain-CO Point, short for West Point- inspected the Garbage Squad. We were tired and hung over but smug in the knowledge that we had pulled one over on the brass. The new captain was nervous and unsure of himself as he inspected each man and his weapon carefully.

After the inspection, the captain turned to Shaky, who wrote down the comments in his notebook.

"Men, your weapons are not clean." Point then addressed us. "I want you to strip and clean them until they are spotless. When they are clean, the platoon sergeant will inspect them again. Only after these weapons are clean can you get Thanksgiving dinner in the mess hall. Now get to work!"

We spread out our poncho liners on the ground and started disassembling our rifles.

Gook had a goody package from his girlfriend, Maggie. He bragged that she sent him cookies, some paperbacks, and roll-your-own cigarettes.

Gook was scrawny with a thin mustache and was from Memphis, Tennessee. He always joked about how well qualified he was to be a radioman. In Memphis, he worked as a newspaper route man before he was drafted.

"Hey Sarg, can you roll your own?" he asked.

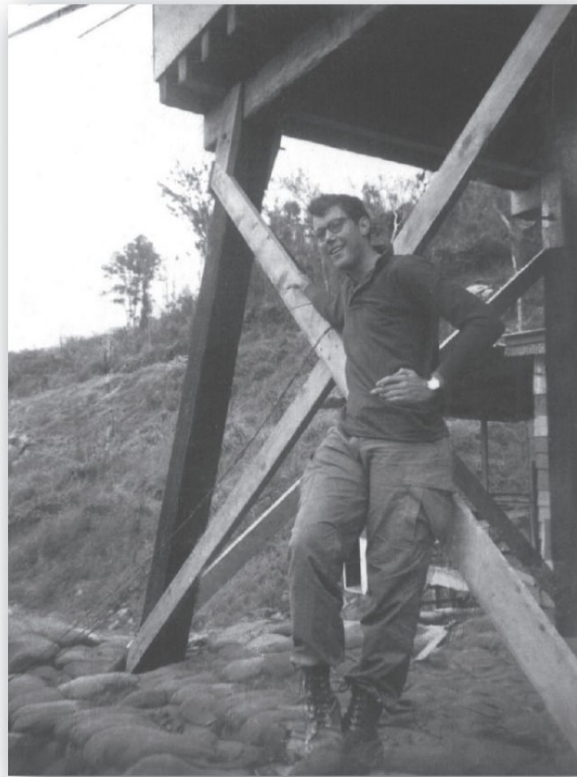
"Sure," I responded, with a frown. I didn't have a clue. I took some paper and tobacco from Gook and tried to assemble the cigarette. I ended up with a fat, spongy tube that fell apart when I tried to light it. The guys found my Yankee antics hilarious, and Gook rolled on the ground, holding his side.

"You'd better stick to the store-bought kind" Andy mumbled, watching me make a fool of myself.

"Come on, you hillbillies," I said, shifting the attention back to our weapons. When they were clean enough, I headed out to get Shaky for an inspection. But then I paused.

"Jew, you'd better check to make sure Garbage Junior is still tied up to the side of the mess hall," I remembered, thinking that if CO Point found out about the monkey, that would be the last we saw of Garbage Junior.

Dinner was turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie. It tasted incredible after eating C rations for a month. C rations came by the dozen, each meal consisting of a canned main course and a can of fruit. The main course was either beef stew, corned beef, turkey loaf, chicken vegetable, or ham and eggs. Nobody liked the ham and eggs. I always kept the fruit, but only kept a couple of the main courses. I had lost about ten pounds since I was in-country.



On stand down

After dinner, Shaky stopped me as I left the mess hall. “Sergeant, the head of administration for the Fourth Infantry is looking for an NCO to do his grunt work for him. Since you have a college degree, he wants to interview you at 0800 tomorrow.”

I couldn’t believe my luck: a chance to get out of the field and spend the rest of my tour in the rear area? I wanted that job.

November 26, 1969

I did my best to clean up and look efficient and intelligent. But after sleeping on the ground for three months and wearing combat boots and jungle fatigues, I didn’t feel prepared for my job interview.

I was interviewed by a full-bird colonel who explained he was looking for someone to keep the division’s statistics, do clerical work, and be his gopher.

“So you graduated with a BS degree in business administration” the colonial remarked, looking over my service records. “What courses did you like in school?”

“I liked statistics and business law, and I took extra English classes as electives because I like to write,” I answered, trying to give him exactly the answer he was looking for.

“Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?” he asked.

“I was on the basketball team and a member of Alpha Beta Epsilon business fraternity,” I told him.

“Hmm, a jock. Seems like every jock I’ve known is a screw-off,” the colonel commented. I had a sinking feeling I had blown my chance for the job.

“I’m a hard worker, sir, and I know I can do a good job for you,” I replied, selling hard.

“There’s one other candidate I am interviewing. We’ll let you know tomorrow,” the colonel replied and saluted, signifying that the interview was over.

Seven

GREEN-LINE DUTY

November 27, 1969

During formation the next morning, CO Point announced to Company C that we had been assigned green-line duty at Ant Khe. The green line was a series of bunkers that ringed the perimeter of the base camp. Each bunker had a lookout position that was manned twenty-four hours a day. Behind the guard position was a bunker for sleeping, which became our home on green-line duty.

The CO explained that four people would be assigned to each green-line bunker, with the assignments chosen by our platoon sergeants. And, of course, he emphasized wearing our flak jackets and helmets while on guard duty.

“I want two GIs awake at all times each night!”

We all groaned, and he barked back, “There will be guard inspection each night, and anyone caught sleeping will find him in the brig.”

Shaky assigned three bunkers in a row to my squad. He let me decide who would be in each bunker but advised that the squad leader should be in the middle. He also said there’d be one ARVN soldier assigned to each bunker, and we should let him know if they gave us any trouble.

“There will be some night ambushes away from the perimeter as part of this duty,” he warned.

And what he said next was like a kick in the gut.

“By the way, Sergeant Miller, you didn’t get the rear-area job. I told the colonel you were a screw-off rebel. I know you’ve disobeyed orders several times. I told you that if you fuck with me, you’d be sorry.”

Shaky stared directly into my eyes, daring me to punch him.

I turned away and headed back to my squad. Shaky had gone out of his way to fuck me over, and I swore to get even.

Back with the Garbage Squad, I put Jew, Andy, and Brian in bunker one; Charlie Brown, Gook, and myself in bunker two; and Grandpa, Mark, and Tex in bunker three.

“Sarg, do we really have to keep two up at night?” Brian asked.

“Set your own schedules. But watch out for Point and Shaky. And give a couple of blinks on your flashlight to alert the rest of us if the brass is inspecting,” I suggested.

At our bunker, we met the ARVN assigned to help us pull green-line duty. He was a Montagnard who went by the name George. The Montagnard was a primitive tribe who lived in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Montagnard meant “mountain peasants.” They had darker skin than other Vietnamese and were often exploited and oppressed by their countrymen.

Over the week of green-line duty, I got to know George pretty well. He was very dependable, unlike Charlie Brown, and spoke a few words of English. He had volunteered for the army three years previously because he hated the Communists. George never got home leave, so each year he went AWOL to visit his family during the Vietnamese New Year, or *Tết*.

While on the green line, we had some free time during the day. If not on guard duty, we were free to roam the base. One of the other sergeants in Company C was Sergeant Phillips. He was a shake 'n' bake who was drafted and just trying to get out of the army as soon as possible also. I spent most of my time either sleeping or visiting Sergeant Phillips, who was also on green-line duty.

"My squad is a bunch of heads," Phillips often complained. "It seems all they care about is smoking dope and getting high. What's your squad like?"

"One guy is a flake, but the rest are great," I told him, feeling lucky.

I also told him that I'd signed up for R&R in Bangkok. "I'm so horny I can't stand it."

"Didn't you visit the whorehouse by Bridge 23?" Phillips asked, "The girls were ugly, but at least I got my rocks off."

I asked my friend whether he was worried about getting the black clap or something. "You don't want to bring anything home with you," I warned.

"I always used a rubber, but I still got a case of the crabs. Boy, those suckers will drive you crazy the way they itch. But it was still better than sitting around all day watching my squad get high," Phillips told me. And I felt even worse for him.

"Does Shaky know your squad is all screwed up?" I asked.

"Shaky doesn't know shit!" he replied. "He's in his pretend, lifer world and doesn't have the slightest idea what's going on around here."

Then my buddy added, "Even if he knew, he wouldn't do anything about it. It would tarnish his record if there were druggies in his platoon."

I told him how Shaky made sure I wouldn't get the clerk job with the full-bird colonel and that Shaky had just given me orders to take the Garbage Squad on a three-day ambush.

"He probably found out I let the squad stay out past bed check when we were on stand down," I murmured. "I think he's trying to get me blown away."

"Keep your head down, Garbage," Phillips reassured me. "Shaky will get his one of these days."

I hoped he was right as I headed back to the bunkers to break the news to my guys that we were going out on another ambush.

December 5, 1969

The first night of the ambush, we were supposed to hump two clicks from our bunkers, find a trail, and get set up. Instead, Grandpa found a thicket about one click from the bunker line, which looked like a perfect place for us to hide.

So far, our strategy of hiding and avoiding trouble had worked pretty well. We didn't want to be heroes: we just wanted to stay alive.

Our "ambush" spot worked great for a few hours. Then mortar shells from Ant Khe started dropping almost on top of us.

We buried our heads and prayed.

"Jesus Christ, we're going to be killed by our own mortars. Don't they know where we are?" Charlie Brown yelled.

"No, they don't!" I hurled back at him. It was true; we were a long way from where we were supposed to be. With a sinking feeling, I realized what danger I had put us in.

It appeared our strategy to stay alive just might kill us all.

Fortunately, the mortar fire ended that night and nobody was hit.

The next two nights we set up closer to our assigned positions. We still hid, but nearer to where we were supposed to be. We had no contact with the enemy on the three-day mission, but a tiger walked into our position on the third night.

Brian spotted it and started yelling. Fortunately, the tiger growled and scurried away.

"This mission is more like a safari than an ambush," I joked. "Let's get our sweet asses back to Ant Khe." And we started the hike back to camp.

After we got back, the colonial went a squad from Company D on a three-day ambush on the same trail, the same place we were supposed to go. And they got hit. They were ambushed and two guys from the squad were killed.

Grandpa and the Jew knew what they were talking about when they encouraged us to hide. Even though it got us in trouble that first night of the ambush, we continued to use this plan every chance we got.

In fact, a couple of times we snuck back to the bunkers after dark, and slept there while we were supposed to be out on ambushes. Then we'd sneak back out in the early morning, so everyone would see us marching back after our assigned mission.

We weren't proud of the fact that we were defying orders. It was a matter of survival.

We didn't want to get hurt. And we didn't want to hurt anyone else.

December 25, 1969

The Garbage Squad met at my bunker to exchange Christmas wishes, and we contemplated our families celebrating without us back home.

Andy and Phillips went to morning worship service, but I didn't go. I was brought up Catholic and went to Catholic schools all the way through university. I was taught to love thy neighbor and to be truthful and honest. In the army, I learned to kill, cheat, and disobey orders to survive. I felt like a hypocrite going to services.

Most of us got care packages from home, and Mark even got a two-inch tree that we set up to make the bunker feel a bit festive. I got a small toy from my girlfriend that laughed when it was wound up. The whole squad found it hilarious, and the guys would start cracking up right along with that thing. She said she thought we could use a good laugh, and she was right.

Charlie Brown got a Christmas letter that contained a five-dollar bill. "It's illegal to have real money out here! What should I do, Sarg?"

I didn't know what to tell him but suggested he could send it back home to someone.

"Good idea," Charlie Brown replied.

Charlie Brown never talked much about his family. He was from a small town in northern Minnesota, which was once a booming mining town but now was almost deserted. Charlie Brown was a football star but didn't get good grades because he was lazy. He did everything in slow motion. That's where his nickname came from. Charlie Brown enlisted in the army as a way to escape from his hometown and see the world. Now he just hoped to get home.

The guys then turned to me and asked whether I knew what our next mission was going to be. We all sensed that our time on the green line-it had been a whole month-was nearly over.

"Shaky says we're going to sweep a place call VC Valley," I told them.

"Shit," the squad moaned in unison.

And the Christmas spirit was ruined.

Eight

VC VALLEY

December 29, 1969

We were ordered to be up, dressed, packed, and ready for the field by 0430 hours. We ended up sitting around until 1000 hours. This was typical army: hurry up and wait.

Finally, we were airlifted by Huey helicopters to be part of a large mission in VC Valley.

VC Valley was located east of Pleiku, close to the Laos border. The valley was a staging area from which the Vietcong received supplies from the north along the famous Ho Chi Minh trail.

"Can you believe this mission?" I complained to the Jew. We were sure that some lifer had come up with the idea. The army was sending two brigades into the valley to form a circle. We were supposed to close the circle and trap Charlie in the middle.

"Kind of like playing 'Ring Around the Rosie,' and when we find the dinks, we all fall down," the Jew commented grimly.

The Hueys' circled the LZ our squad was supposed to land on. The LZ looked flat and quiet. Once on the ground, we did a recon around the LZ. We found some old fighting positions next to a well-worn trail.

I reported what we found to CO Point.

"Set up a perimeter around the LZ and wait until the rest of the battalion is in position to start the mission," Point ordered over the radio.

Company C started digging in, but when I told the Garbage Squad about setting up the perimeter, the Jew complained loudly.

"It's crazy to sit around the LZ! Charlie knows we're here. It's a much better tactic to set up as far away from the LZ as you can," the Jew said. "This rookie CO is worse than Chicken Man was."

As if on cue, sniper fire ripped past us. We hugged the ground, getting as low as we could. Someone yelled "Medic! And there was a scurry of activity on the other side of the perimeter. Minutes later, a Medivac helicopter landed on the LZ and flew quickly away. Later we heard from a medic that the soldier who was hit was Sergeant Phillip's platoon leader. He died en route to the aid station.

After that, we humped two clicks to our designated night area.

We were depressed and irritable. Garbage Junior was whiny and squealed all night. And Charlie Brown kept us awake, saying he saw flashlights in the hills above our position.

VC Valley was not a healthy place to be!

December 30, 1969

The next morning, CO Point and Shaky were all over Mark about his monkey.

"Get rid of that damn animal!" CO Point commanded.

Mark was heartbroken. He had hidden and fed Garbage Junior for more than a month, and we all had gotten attached to him.

“My monkey wasn’t making that much noise. What’s going to happen to him? He’ll die if I don’t take care of him,” Mark pleaded with me.

“Monkeys belong in the jungle,” I told him. “He’ll be happier with his freedom. Garbage Junior will be fine. Let him go.”

Mark watched sadly as his pet monkey scampered into the underbrush. For the first couple of hours of the sweep, Mark thought he heard Garbage Junior moving with us in the trees. That night on guard duty, Mark thought he heard a monkey crying. But we never saw Garbage Junior again.

December 31, 1969

The next day was stifling hot and slow going as we hacked a path through the jungle. It was also a challenge to find water in the Central Highlands but critical that we stay hydrated. In fact, GIs were commanded to drink at least two quarts of water a day.

We were just about out of water, and since we were humping up a large hill, the prospect of finding any wasn’t good. I carried a five-quart canteen and two one-quart canteens.

In the bush, we filled canteens from any streams or puddles we found and added purification tablets to kill bacteria. You had to let the tablets sit in the water for an hour, and the water gradually turned from murky to somewhat-clear and drinkable. Nobody cared about the taste or temperature out in the jungle: we were happy to have anything wet. When they dropped soda or beer to us in the boonies, we were happy to have it and drank it warm without complaint. When we were lucky enough to be at a base that stocked ice, it felt like an incredible luxury to drink something-anything-that was actually cold.

“The only way we’ll find water is to get off this goddamn mountain,” Brain moaned as he drank the last sip from his canteen.

“I think the CO is pissed too. Let’s see whether he can get something done for us,” I thought out loud.

The captain signaled for Company C to halt and form a perimeter. CO Point reached for his radio and called in a request to resupply us with water.

Twenty minutes later, a helicopter dropped us containers of clean drinking water. Hallelujah!

I wasn’t certain, but I thought I saw one of the helicopter pilots whip a finger to Company C as he passed over our perimeter. Maybe the new CO was going to be OK after all.

January 3, 1970

After four days in VC Valley, it was my turn to take my squad out for a night ambush. We were told to set up half a klick from the company perimeter, next to a trail.

The Jew found a good place to hide in some thick grass near the trail. Grandpa suggested the ambush should be set up in a circle so the enemy couldn’t sneak up from behind us. Tex set up the claymores facing the path.

I settled into a night position in the middle of the squad, close to Gook and his radio. I laid out my grenades, rifle, and glasses so I could find them in the dark. I remembered that first night on LZ Larry when I couldn’t find my glasses or rifle. I had learned a lot since then.

It was a beautiful night and the crickets were noisy. Grandpa said it was safe when the crickets made a fuss. When the crickets were quiet, you had better be in a deep foxhole.

Charlie Brown woke me up. “Sarg, I see flashlights and I hear movement from the path.”

My first reaction was to ignore Charlie Brown, who was always going on about seeing flashlights. But then I heard movement from the path, too.

We poked the rest of the squad awake and listened. It was very dangerous to blow an ambush. The enemy knew where you were. And running back to the company perimeter in the dark could get you shot by your own people.

Gook radioed the company, telling them we had movement and we were contemplating blowing the ambush.

We strained our ears listening for any sounds from the direction of the path.

A dry, fallen twig broke loudly, directly in front of us. I pulled the pin on one of my grenades and lobbed it toward the path. The grenade exploded with a bang, and it signaled the Garbage Squad to blow the ambush. The claymore mines were detonated, and we each fired a clip from our M16 rifles in the direction of the path.

We then held our fire. The guys awaited my signal. I grabbed the radio and yelled "Coming in!" into the handset, and we began running toward the perimeter.

Just after we took off, Charlie Brown moaned, "Help, I'm hurt!"

Brian and I stopped running and moved toward Charlie Brown's voice. We found him on the ground holding his ankle.

"I fell in the dark and screwed up my ankle," he gasped.

We grabbed him under the arms and dragged him back to the perimeter. The company was quiet, listening from the ambush. The night had become very still. No crickets chirped anymore.

Doc, our company medic, tended to Charlie Brown's ankle.

I gave a report to CO Point, and it wasn't until I started talking that I realized how scared I was.

January 5, 1970

At first light, Charlie Brown was taken by helicopter to the rear area. Our squad went back to the ambush site to retrieve our gear and see whether we were successful.

About twenty meters down the trail, we found the mutilated bodies of a young Vietnamese woman and her small baby.

I stumbled into the bush and was sick.

How could this be? There weren't supposed to be any friendlies in the area. Was the woman a VC or just a refugee trying to escape the war?

No matter how many times I thought about that night, I would never find out what she was doing in the jungle with her baby at that moment in time.

Point later congratulated us and was pleased that Company C had been credited with killing two enemies. I didn't feel like a hero. That was the last thing I felt like.

January 20, 1970

We were resupplied with food, water, and mail. The resupply helicopters also brought out a chaplain to say a memorial service for the luey killed by the sniper when we arrived in VC valley.

"The only time we see a chaplain in the field is when someone has bought I" remarked Brian after the service. "I hope we never see the chaplain again."

"Come on, Brian, he's just trying to comfort us," Grandpa said.

"Mark, how come you're grumping around. Are you still pissed off about your monkey?"

Mark sat on his bedroll, eating a can of C-ration fruit. "Sure, I miss Garbage Junior, but my girlfriend just sent me a letter." Mark pointed at a paper crumpled at his feet. "She was saying how much she loved me and lusted for my body. Trouble is, she started the letter 'Dear Ted.' Ted is her old boyfriend! Doesn't she realize what this does to me? How can she be so stupid?"

"I'm sure it doesn't mean anything," I said, trying to cheer him up. "Mark, you take first guard duty tonight."

The next day Shaky ran into a VC booby trap, called a punji stick, along our trail. It was a sharpened bamboo stick with feces put on the end. When the shit dried it turned into a nasty poison. Punji traps are put by the side of trails and sometimes on the bottoms of camouflaged pits. The punji stick was designed to slow down the enemy, not necessarily to kill.

Shaky was sent off by chopper, his leg swollen and infected.

With Shaky gone, I found myself as acting platoon sergeant. We spent the next two weeks in VC Valley and had no additional contact with the enemy. The sweep didn't net the enemy in the middle as the brass had planned.

Word came down from headquarters that the mission in VC Valley was over, and Company C was sent back to Ant Khe for a stand down.

Shaky and Charlie Brown were released from the hospital and rejoined us in Ant Khe.

We were relieved to leave VC Valley.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget the woman and child we had killed in the ambush. The sight of those mangled bodies would haunt me the rest of my life.

Nine

R&R IN BANGKOK

January 21, 1970

After three weeks in VC Valley, we were glad to get out. While the mission hadn't trapped the VC as planned, the sweep did destroy several villages believed to be VC staging areas.

Shaky was waiting for us in Ant Khe. His leg was healed, and he was strutting around showing off his Purple Heart.

After filling in for him, it was my turn to take a spot on sick call. I thought I had developed an ulcer from all the pressure of being acting platoon sergeant. My stomach hurt so bad I couldn't eat, and I was starting to turn feverish when we landed in Ant Khe.

After two days in the hospital and a few rounds of tests, I was diagnosed with an intestinal infection. I was put to bed and given an antibiotic.

While lying in Ant Khe base hospital, I learned our next mission would be that of palace-guard in Qui Nhon. I didn't know where Qui Nhon was or what palace-guard duty entailed, but it had to be better than VC Valley. I also learned that my number had come up for R&R and that I was scheduled to leave for Bangkok in three days if I was released from the hospital. I got an instant hard-on and suddenly felt a whole lot better!

January 24, 1970

Each soldier was entitled to one R&R per twelve months in Vietnam. We each got five days in a vacation location, which included one day before and after for travel. Two locations were seven days because of the long travel times: Hawaii and Sydney, Australia. The five-day choices were Hong Kong, Malaysia, Manila, Singapore, Taipei, Tokyo, and Bangkok.

I was pulled out of my unit, fresh from the hospital, and flown to Cam Rahn Bay, where I turned in my uniform and gear and was given civilian clothes. I took no military gear, and my baggage was inspected. For the first time, I was given US dollars, not MPC.

A chartered airplane we called a Freedom Bird flew us to Bangkok. On the eight-hour flight to Bangkok, I was so geared up I couldn't sleep. I was very much looking forward to acting normal in civilian clothes, sleeping in a real bed, eating good food, and, of course, the Thai women.

Once we landed, we were bused to an R&R center for a two-hour briefing. We exchanged our US dollars into baht, the local currency. We had to select a place to stay and pay in advance before we left the R&R center.

"First time in Bangkok, kid?" asked a master sergeant seated next to me.

"Yes, Sergeant. Have you been here before?" I asked.

“Often,” he said. “I love this city. There is so much history. Plus, the whores are the best in the world.”

Then he went on to give me some sound advice.

“All the GIs pick the Holiday Inn, so I pick a less popular hotel like Holliways. It’s small and family run and a lot quieter than the Holiday Inn. The first thing you want to do is hire a cab driver to take care of you during your stay. The driver can find you a girl, show you the sights, and keep you out of trouble.”

The R&R Center gave us a list of emergency contact numbers and enough condoms to last a year and sent us on our way.

Outside the center, a mass of cabdrivers mobbed us.

“Two hundred baht, all week!”

“Findy number one dinky dolls!”

“Me showy you good time, GIs!”

Over all the yelling, I noticed a tall cabdriver standing over to the side, not aggressively selling himself. I approached him and asked, “Are you for hire? I need someone to show me around and take care of me.”

“I best cabdriver,” he said in broken English. “My name is Adisorn. Three hundred baht for five days.”

“The rest of the cabdrivers want two hundred baht. Why do you get three hundred?” I asked.

“I take care of you, number one,” he said. “And others ask more money each thing. Three hundred for me is all, no more.”

I took out 300 baht (equivalent to 25 US dollars) and handed it to Adisorn. “I am staying at Holliways. First I need some more clothes, then a good meal-then a girl.”

Bangkok was a large, crowded, and mostly modern city. Adisorn took me to a small clothing store. The weather was sunny, hot, and humid, so I bought two sport shirts, a pair of shorts, a pair of slacks, and a swimming suit. Next we checked into the hotel and went out looking for food and a woman.

We ate together at a restaurant across from Silpakorn University, and Adisorn asked me what kind of woman I wanted.

“One that’s clean, friendly, and tall,” I told him.

“I know special girl you likey,” he answered with a grin.

Adisorn escorted me to a dark, noisy bar near the university. Many scantily dressed girls were talking to other GIs, trying to sell their services. A band was playing the Rolling Stones song, “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” Adisorn signaled me to a table in the corner. We had some beers and listened to the music and waited.

I looked at the bar girls, trying to decide which one to choose. Adisorn had talked to the doorman when we had come into the bar, so I assumed we were waiting for someone.

Finally, a tall, conservatively dressed Thai girl approached our table. She was about five feet nine and had long black hair falling down the back of her dress. She was thin and smiled broadly as she approached us.

“Sergeant, this is Sita,” Adisorn introduced us.

I stood up and bowed and said shyly, “I’m glad to meet you.”

I couldn’t help but stare at her, and my mouth gaped open. I couldn’t believe how beautiful she was!

“Sit down,” I stammered. “Let me get you a drink.”

“Thank you. Coca Cola. Long time you have no girl?” Sita asked as she sat down next to me.

“Yes, a long time,” I answered.

“You want a girl for all R&R or you be butterfly and go with many girls?” Sita asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean by a butterfly. But I like you very much," I answered. "You are very beautiful. If we are having a good time, we can be together for the whole R&R."

"One hundred baht for one night, and five hundred for all R&R," she said as she sipped her Coke and casually rested a hand on my thigh.

I reached into my pocket and passed one hundred baht to Sita, who placed it carefully into a small purse.

"I think we go now," she said as her hand moved up my leg.

"Yes," I answered with a groan as I felt my erection building. I wasn't sure whether I could stand up without being noticed, but at that point I didn't care.

Adisorn left us at the hotel and promised to be back to show us around the city in the morning. I led Sita to my room, wondering what was going to happen next. I tried to make small talk, but all I could think about was the beautiful girl who was mine for the whole night.

Sita leaned against me as I closed the door and motioned for me to sit on the bed. I took off my new slacks and sports shirt and lay down to watch her. She smiled and went into the bathroom. I could hear water running from the sink.

Sita came out of the bathroom carrying a basin of soapy water and a washcloth. She had taken off her dress and was wearing a halter top and panties. "We make you clean," she said, sitting down on the bed and pulling down my khaki boxer shorts.

"Such a big boy," she said as she washed my penis. I felt like I was going to explode as she washed and massaged me gently. When she was done washing me, she unrolled a condom and put it on me.

Then she pulled off her halter top and panties and posed for me. I stared at her as if I was in a trance. She had small breasts with long, extended nipples. Her nipples were at least an inch long, and they pointed proudly upward. She had glowing olive skin and not an ounce of fat.

"Now we take care of big boy," she said as she moved slowly to the bed and climbed on top of me. Slowly she rubbed my chest hair and then played with my nipples.

I reached up and touched one of her long nipples, and she moaned, "Easy, easy, mum."

She spread her legs and lowered herself onto me. Each time she moved, I felt a tremor start from deep inside me. She moved faster and faster and from side to side until I couldn't wait any longer. I exploded.

We lay still for a long time, and she finally lifted herself off me, grabbed my hand, and led me to the bathroom. Sita turned on the shower, and we spent the next half hour washing and rubbing each other as the hot water pulsated against us.

The rest of the night was spent resting and screwing. I only got about an hour of sleep, but I didn't mind a bit. I told Sita I had no intention of being a butterfly. She was everything I could want in an R&R girl.

January 25, 1970

Adisorn was waiting for us when we finally emerged from our room. I was happy and tired, but above all, I was hungry. The three of us ate breakfast at the hotel restaurant. Adisorn and I ordered pancakes and eggs, while Sita had some fruit.

"Adisorn, we show Sergeant where Sita got her name? Temple of Wat Phra Kaew," she suggested.

"Please call me Mark," I said as I put some more syrup on my pancakes. "I'd love to see a temple, but what does it have to do with your name?"

“It is the most famous temple of all Thailand, called the Royal Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The main building, or hut, is where the emerald Buddha is,” Adisorn answered. It was clear that neither Sita nor Adisorn was going to spoil the surprise regarding the origin of her name.

The temple was a complex of many buildings used both for ceremonies and for schooling and housing the monks who lived there. All the buildings were decorated with golden statues, demons with emerald-jeweled swords, and works of art.

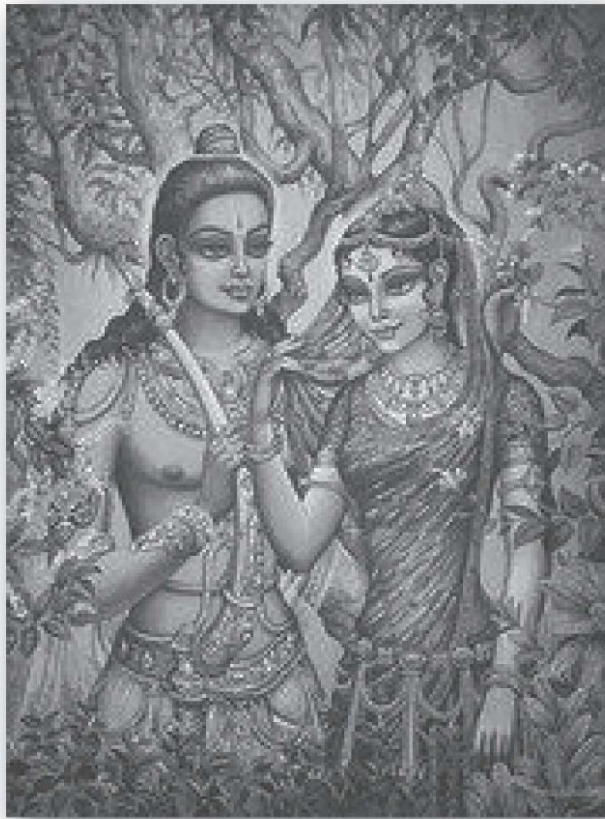


Bangkok Temple

On the walls surrounding the main temple building was a mural. “This is the story of my name,” Sita said, pointing to the images painted on the wall.

“Most famous Thai story, the *Ramayana*. Story has two kings fighting over a virgin maiden named Sita. That is her picture over there,” Adisorn pointed to the image of a naked Thai woman with distinctive extended nipples.

I now understood why she was named Sita.



The rest of the week passed quickly.

Adisorn took us to the zoo, and I got to hold a large boa constrictor.

We put on swimming suits and took a ride down the Chao Phraya River. We were going to swim, but when I saw trash floating in the river, I decided a swim wasn't a good idea. We took a river cruise instead and then swam at the hotel pool.



On the River- Bangkok

One night Adisorn took us to visit his house. It was a stilt house in a long row of other stilt houses. The houses were shabby and in need of repair.

We took off our shoes and went into his one-room house. Adisorn offered me a beer that he went out and purchased just for me. Adisorn and Sita drank tea. Some of his neighbors came over to visit. They were reserved and shy when they saw me.

Adisorn explained later that most Thai people didn't see many Americans, and the tourists they did meet were loud and crude.

Adisorn turned out to be more than just a cab driver. In his younger years, he was a track star and represented Thailand in the 1964 Olympic Games. He also carried a gun, which was a requirement for his second job. He was a member of the Thai secret police and being a cab driver was his cover.

Toward the end of my R&R, I tried to talk to Sita and find out more about her. But communication was impossible. She was great for sex but wasn't very good company outside of bed.

On the flight back to Vietnam, I relived my R&R in Bangkok. I wondered what would become of Sita and Adisorn.

I also couldn't help but think about what was in store for me and the Garbage Squad when I returned to the realities of war.

Ten

PALACE GUARD

February 3, 1970

When I landed in Cam Rahn Bay, I reclaimed my M16 rifle, my grenades, and rucksack and hitched a ride to Ant Khe. Company C was still in Qui Nhon on palace-guard duty. I reported to company headquarters and was told to stay on the green line that night. I was then to catch a ride to Qui Nhon in the morning to rejoin the Garbage Squad.

The next morning, the green line was buzzing with the news that the Fourth Infantry was being pulled out of Vietnam by March 1. This was part of Nixon's withdrawal plan to reduce American troops to four hundred thousand by April.

I was elated! I had only been in-country for five and a half months, and soon I could be going home.

The news in Bangkok had been full of the peace talks going on in Paris. Nixon had promised to end the Vietnam War and bring Americans home. But when I was on R&R, I never let myself get my hopes up. The negotiations in Paris had been going on since I was drafted, and they never seemed to be making any progress. Yet now it was beginning to sound very promising.

The trip to Qui Nhon turned out to be a major hassle. A convoy was hit along Highway 19, and I had to find five different rides. It took me four hours to get to Qui Nhon. The trip didn't bother me because I was on such a high about the idea of going home. Just the thought of seeing my parents, friends, and girlfriend again was thrilling.

Qui Nhon was a coastal city that hosted a medical evacuation hospital, a large air force base (Camp Humper), and also the in-country R&R center with a nice beach (Red Beach).

Company C was assigned to a series of old barracks on the east side of Camp Humper. The barracks had real beds and clean sheets, and we got hot chow.

"Hey Sarg, did you screw your brains out in Bangkok?" Tex greeted me as I entered the barracks. Tex and the Jew were the only squad members there when I arrived.

"I was with a beautiful girl. She had the biggest nipples you ever saw. They were this long," I exclaimed as I held my fingers several inches apart.

Then I changed the subject. "Did you hear we are all going home?"

"You've got it all wrong, Garbage," the Jew shot back, and my heart sank.

"The Fourth Infantry is going home, but that doesn't help most of you," the Jew explained. "They take the short-timers with the most time in-country and transfer them to the Fourth. The rest of you are going to get assigned to other units. I think I'll be able to go, but not most of the squad."

After a minute, he added, "It means our squad will be broken up."

"Shit," I cursed. "I thought I was getting out of this place."

"No such luck," the Jew confirmed.

Letting that sink in, I asked the guys about palace-guard duty. So far, this place seemed like a country club next to VC Valley.

"It's no country club," Tex assured me. "They keep us up all night on guard duty. Each of us gets posted in a different position and is ordered to stay up all night with no relief. And the lifers are all around checking up to make sure no one is sleeping. The other night, half the squad was asleep on guard when Phillips woke us up before we were written up."

It sounded brutal, but I was glad to hear my old buddy Phillips was around and helping my guys stay out of trouble.

"Where's the rest of the squad?" I asked as I unloaded my gear on one of the bunk beds.

"They all went to Red Beach to sit in the sun," the Jew replied. "Red Beach is super. They have surfboards, sailboats, and miniature golf, just like in the real world! During the day, we're free to go to the beach or just loaf around. We have to be ready for Shaky's inspection at 1600 hours. Tonight we guard the tank farm."

"The tank farm?" I questioned.

The Jew explained that it was where they stored the fuel for planes, helicopters, and motor vehicles. "If Charlie blows up the tank farm, Camp Humper will be one big bonfire."

That night, Phillips and I posted the guards at the tank farm and settled down for a long night of playing cribbage and making sure everyone stayed awake. We gave our squad members breaks during the night but didn't pull guard ourselves. Phillips told me that the other night when he checked, half the guards were cutting Zs.

After midnight, Shaky called on the radio and told us there was a yellow alert. Radar had shown unfriendlies in the area. Phillips and I checked the perimeter and roused several of our guys.

Later that night, I relieved Brian so he could get a cup of coffee and go to the john. The night was clear and the stars were so bright it was like daytime.

And we never did run into the unfriendlies.

February 3, 1970

At 0700 hours, we were relieved from guard duty. We ate breakfast and went to sleep in the barracks.

At 1300 hours, Mark, Grandpa, and Brian circled my bunk and looked down on me, peacefully sleeping. On Grandpa's signal, the three GIs jumped on me and started putting me in various wrestling holds. Brian grabbed my wrist, Grandpa went for a headlock, and Mark tried a foothold. The craze of the day was all-star wrestling.

I squirmed and growled at the three, "You pricks have picked on the wrong guy. I have three brothers, and they don't call me the Crusher for nothing."

I moved my free hand to Mark's stomach and squeezed. He squealed as a result of my famous claw hold. I wrapped my legs around Mark and got him in a scissors hold. With two of my attackers controlled, I moved my attention to Grandpa, who still had me in a headlock. I grabbed the back of Grandpa's neck and squeezed. All my attackers were now in pain, begging for mercy.

"OK, I'll let you assholes up, but you'd better not try this shit again," I bragged as I stood up and raised my arms in victory. He was excited with important news to share. "I'm going to be a father! Maggie's going to have a baby!"

"That's great, Gook!" Grandpa said, rubbing his sore neck. "When is the baby due?"

"She says she is six months gone," Gook answered

"How can you be the father if you've been in this hole for seven months?" Grandpa asked with a perplexed look.

The barracks got real quiet as Gook's face went taut and red with rage. He had just realized Maggie was telling him she had found someone else. Instead of a baby and girlfriend when he got back to Memphis, now he had nothing. He turned and ran out of the barracks.

Tex followed him out. "I'll make sure the little guy doesn't do something stupid."

An engineer from Headquarters Company came into our barracks shortly after Gook and Tex left.

"Could one of you grunts help us," he asked. "Our little cocker spaniel named El Cid got into some rat poison and is real sick and suffering. He needs to be put out of his misery, but none of us can do it."

I followed the forlorn engineer out of the barracks. He led me to a small yellow dog, withering on the ground and making a terrible whining noise. A foamy red liquid was seeping from his mouth. I raised my rifle and fired two shots into his head. The engineer thanked me and started to dig a hole to bury his animal. It was a terrible thing, but killing didn't bother me.

What was this place doing to me?

That night our squad had guard duty at the ammo dump. Munitions were stored in five tin sheds. Ten guard bunkers were built on five-foot platforms circling the sheds. Several layers of barbed wire were strung outside the bunkers, with claymore mines and trip wires hidden in the wire.

Gook and Tex were both roaring drunk when they reported for guard duty. I tried to keep them away from Shaky, but they were too far gone. Shaky wrote them up and sent them back to the barracks to sleep it off. Being two short meant I had to do guard duty myself, and none of the guards got a break that night.

February 14, 1970

The Jew found me sleeping in my cot and grinned as he approached. He gave a yell and jumped on top of me. He wanted more all-star wrestling.

"You son of a bitch, didn't you learn your lesson before?" I shouted as I flipped him off me and pinned his arms to the floor.

"Are these your glasses I'm laying on?" the Jew asked, holding up a mangled pair of glasses that were under his butt.

"Maybe now I'll get a new pair," I said. "I'm legally blind without them I've been trying to get Shaky to get me another pair for months, but army regs call for only one pair. I'd be in a world of hurt if I broke my glasses in the boonies somewhere."

As if on signal, Shaky marched in and announced we were having a beetle and roach inspection today. "Everyone out for the inspection," he barked. "Sergeant Miller, what happened to your glasses? Go get a new pair right away."

We grumbled as we walked sleepily out of the barracks. "Beetles, my ass," said Grandpa. "We all know they're searching for drugs,"

Good thing we were probably the cleanest squad in 'Nam.

I headed to medical to get a new pair of glasses.

March 10, 1970

The Jew looked around the crowded beach and couldn't help looking beyond the sunbathers to the twenty-foot blue sailboat anchored in the harbor. He knew how to sail and convinced me to go out with him.

I signed all the proper papers and said to the Jew, “We have to swim out to the boat. We’ll pretend we are going to glide around the harbor, but then we’ll head for the open water and sail all the way to California.”

“I don’t know, Garbage,” the Jew replied, not sure whether I was kidding or not. “It’s a long way, and even if we get by the coast guard, the elements will get us.”

“Just leave the worrying to me,” I said confidently. “After all, I read the book *Kon-Tiki*, so what else is there to know?”

We started the long swim to the blue sailboat. I swallowed more than my share of saltwater. We lay on the boat for a long time and rested.

The Jew found the line to raise the sail and pulled it up. He told me to pull up the anchor, and he started to steer us around the harbor.

“California or bust,” I yelled.

“Or sink, starve, drown, or freeze is more like it!” the Jew replied, leaning back as we glided out from the harbor.

We passed several Vietnamese fishing boats, and most of them waved at us as we passed. We had one close call with a fishing boat that refused to yield the right of way. The Jew had to bring the boat sharply about to avoid a collision.

Eventually, the Jew took a compass out of a plastic bag, and we set a course for the open seas.

“I’m getting hungry,” I said. “Let’s catch some fish.”

“How are we supposed to catch them, with our hands?” the Jew asked.

“They have cheeseburgers and fries back on the beach,” I suggested.

“Do you want to go back and get some lunch?” the Jew asked.

“Yeah, let’s chow down,” I said and started laughing. “What do you say we head for California tomorrow?”



Red Beach

March 23, 1970

On March 23, 1970, the Fourth Infantry was disbanded, and soldier's in-country for more than ten and a half months were sent home. The Jew, Charlie Brown, and Grandpa had all put in enough time to get on the Big Bird back to the world.

The rest of us were given new orders and assigned to one of the infantry units that stayed.

The Garbage Squad was no more. I never saw the Jew, Brian, Mark, Charlie Brown, Tex, Andy, John, or Gook again. We promised we'd write and stay in touch, but it never happened. We had shared experiences that couldn't be explained unless you had been there. We complained, argued, and got on each other's nerves, but we were also friends. The Garbage Squad will live in my thoughts forever.

Eleven

APRIL FOOLS' DAY

March 16, 1970

I said my good-byes to the Jew, Charlie Brown, and Grandpa as they headed for home. The Jew was going back to New York to show his father that the army had made a man of him. Grandpa was heading back to Tyler, Texas, for a reunion with his three sons. Charlie Brown decided that he was going back to school at the University of Minnesota on the GI bill.

I also said farewell to Tex, Andy, Mark, Brian, John, and Gook: they were all assigned to other units. I would never see any of the members of the Garbage Squad again. I had been with them for seven and a half months, and we shared a lot, both good and bad. I would miss them.

Phillips and I were assigned to the Second Battalion/Thirty-Fifth Infantry Regiment Division. We were ordered to report to LZ Challenge outside of Ant Khe. I was happy to be with Philips, but unfortunately Shaky was also assigned to the Second/Thirty-Fifth and ended up being my platoon sergeant again.

"I've heard the Second/Thirty-Fifth is a bunch of crazy mothers who think they are all John Wayne," Phillips told me as we packed our rucksacks. "They are nicknamed the Cacti."



"The Second/Thirty-Fifth is scheduled to be sent home in July," I told him, "so we'll probably have to change units again before we get out of here."

March 17, 1970

While waiting for a chopper to take us to LZ Challenge, Phillips explained his plan to get out of the field: he was going to stop taking his malaria pills.

“When you get malaria, you get to stay in the hospital-safe-for a whole month!” he said.

It did sound a whole lot safer than humping around the VC Valley. But I had my reservations.

“But you can die from malaria!” I warned him.

“Besides,” I added after a minute, “the army can court-martial you for not taking your pills.”

“Malaria isn’t that bad,” Phillips assured me. “And how is the army going to prove I wasn’t taking my pills?”

I thought about a month in a hospital with clean sheets, good food, and pretty nurses-away from the danger and stress and killing, and away from the war.

Maybe my friend had a point.

From that day on, I stopped taking my pills.

March 18, 1970

I met my new squad and they seemed like nice enough guys, but they certainly didn’t have the same philosophy as the Garbage Squad. They felt their purpose for being in Vietnam was to fight and kill the enemy and to keep America safe from Communists.

I hoped an infected mosquito would find me in a hurry and get me safely into a hospital.

The most interesting member of my new squad was a Vietnamese Kit Carson scout named Tu. Kit Carson scouts were former VC soldiers who had defected to the South. They were assigned to the Americans to show us around the jungle, and they were very familiar with Vietcong tactics. Most Kit Carson scouts spoke very little English.

Tu’s wife and baby had been killed by the VC, and he had been forced to work for them. He defected and for several years had been working with US soldiers.

Now with the Cacti, I was airlifted back to VC Valley on a search-and-destroy mission. I couldn’t stop thinking that I had already spent too much time in VC Valley as it was.

Not long after we hit the ground, Tu warned, “Beaucoup VC, number ten,” pointing to a steep, heavily forested hill we were about to climb.

Immediately, a sniper opened fire, and we scrambled for cover.

“There!” Tu cried, motioning to a ridge about 150 meters from our position. I spotted two figures lying on the ridge exactly where he’d indicated.

I signaled for the squad to open fire on the enemy. The snipers tried to retreat, but our fire hit them, and they sprawled motionless on the ground.

“Tu, you are number-one scout!” I complimented the little man, realizing he might have just saved all our lives.

The next couple of days, the sweep continued up the steep hill. The weather was very hot and humid, and water was in short supply. Many of the GIs in our company were sick, leaving a trail of vomit and diarrhea in our wake. Some weren’t putting iodine water purification tablets in their canteens, causing the stomach problems. It took a couple of hours for the pills to work, and they didn’t want to wait.

“The VC won’t have any trouble tracking us,” I mumbled to myself as another of our squad stumbled behind a tree and retched. “They’ll just follow the smell.”

At the top of the hill, we took a break, drank the last of our water, and rested. Many of the company were weak, dehydrated, and very sick. The CO requested a resupply of water. But when the helicopters

circled for the water drop, snipers opened fire on them. The choppers hurried off without dropping the precious water.

“Get those suckers!” Shaky yelled as we fired in the direction of the sniper fire.

Sick and thirsty, we advanced farther up the hill in the direction of the sniper fire. But as we tried to advance, the snipers kept us pinned down.

The jungle was so dry that the gunfire started a fire. The wind was blowing in our direction, so we now were faced with a new danger: a forest fire.

The tinder crackled, and the flames and heat crept closer to our position.

The CO ordered us to fall back and dig a trench to create a firebreak. It was getting dark, and we were trapped by the fire that was burning very close to our position. If the firebreak didn’t hold, we were in big trouble.

My face was flushed as the inferno approached. My eyebrows were singed by the intense heat. I lay on my stomach at the far end of the firebreak.

There was nothing we could do but wait and hope.

Just before the fire overtook our position, the wind suddenly shifted and the fire burned itself out.

“I thought we were going to fry for sure,” Shaky muttered as we all sighed with relief.

“Hell of a war,” I commented. “Come to this country to fight gooks, and we almost die in a fire. They never taught us firefighting in NCO school.”

“Hey Sarg, maybe they’ll give us medals for firefighting,” I teased.

“Hell of a war,” Shaky mumbled in agreement.

April 1, 1970

The next morning, we headed down the mountain to try to find some much-needed water. My squad was walking point with Tu in the lead, and I was second behind the scout. The weather was clear and terribly hot and humid. I kept shaking my five-gallon canteen, hoping to discover one more sip.

Suddenly the wind kicked up, at first a welcome relief from the heat, but quickly turning into a gale force. The sky turned eerily black. I didn’t think too much of it, assuming a thunderstorm was approaching.

But then GIs from the top of the hill started yelling and screaming in a panic.

I hit the ground and pointed my M16 rifle up the hill. I thought surely we were being attacked. But no shots were fired.

Two American soldiers came rolling down the hill past us, screaming and squirming painfully on the ground. They were covered by large, ugly black wasps. They swatted frantically at the huge insects, but it didn’t keep them off. They were being stung over and over again.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Tu grabbed me and I followed him to a spot down the hill. The scout reached into his rucksack, grabbed a smoke canister, and pulled the pin that activated it.

Several large wasps landed on my face. I slapped at them wildly, accidentally flinging my new glasses down the hill in the process. A falling GI unknowingly crushed them.

Then, as quickly as they appeared, the wasps were gone.

The smoke kept most of the wasps off Tu and me, but many of my Cacti comrades had multiple stings and were swelling up.

Three men had their eyes swollen shut, and two others passed out from a reaction to the wasp poison.

Medivac helicopters were called in, and we started to clear an LZ so they could land and take to the hospital the soldiers who were hurt the worst.

The wind started to blow even harder. It started to rain and even hailed briefly. It was a cold, hard downpour.

The rain felt wonderful. We lifted up our heads to catch the cold water on our faces. We took off our helmets, caught the icy water from the sky, and drank it eagerly.

I sought out Shaky and told him my glasses were demolished. Since he hadn't let me get a spare pair, I told him I needed to go back with the wounded.

At first, he seemed ready to argue, which is what I expected. But when he saw me squinting to see him from five feet away, he grudgingly agreed.

The choppers flew out the wounded first, and I took their gear back on the last chopper. I dragged five rucksacks back to Ant Khe.

When I reported to the division clerk, he gave me a shock.

"It's about time they sent you back, Sergeant Miller," he said. "We have had new orders for you for the past two weeks, but your platoon sergeant refused to send you back. You're to report to Long Binh tout de suite, right away."

So Shaky had tried to screw me again!

I was sure that somehow Shaky would get his.

I left for my new assignment the next day and never saw Shaky again. He was stuck in VC Valley without me to kick around.

The date was April 1, 1970: the day the wasps attacked, we got ice water from the sky, and I escaped VC Valley for good.

April Fool's Day.

Twelve

LONG BINH

April 3, 1970

I read my new orders over and over, trying to figure out why I was pulled out of the field. I had less seniority than other sergeants in my new unit, and I had only been with the Cacti for two weeks. It didn't add up.

I was thrilled, of course. But it felt almost too good to be true.

The orders told me to report to the security guard unit at MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) headquarters on Long Binh base. The company clerk explained that Long Binh was the largest base in Vietnam and very close to Saigon. I would have a seat on a transport plane to Saigon the next morning.

My last night in Ant Khe, I pulled one last green-line duty, and it was more eventful than I'd hoped. Sappers got in through the wire and blew up twenty-five helicopters. Luckily, the action was on the other side of the perimeter, so I wasn't involved. But it was still scary and awful, and I couldn't have been happier to be getting out of there.

In the morning, I got my new pair of glasses and the company clerk for the Cacti processed me out of the unit. I turned in my M16 rifle, my grenades, and my rucksack.

Then I headed to the airfield and impatiently waited for my ride to Saigon on the transport plane.



USARV headquarters- Long Binh

Even though I couldn't wait to get away from Ant Khe, the transport plane was significantly delayed in taking off because of the damage the sappers had done the night before. Helicopter wreckage was strewn all over the airfield.

At 1500 hours, we finally touched down in Saigon. It was another hour's trip by truck to Long Binh. The Saigon R&R center put me up for the night.

Long Binh was the headquarters of the US Army in Vietnam and had more than sixty thousand troops. The base had been built in 1967 and had barracks, basketball courts, movie theaters, PXs, massage parlors, and night clubs. Most of the brass in Vietnam was stationed here.



Vietnam village MACV Headquarters

In the center was the MACV headquarters, made up of five large air-conditioned buildings and two smaller storage units. As I stared at the watered and manicured lawns, I couldn't help but think of the guys humping out in the boonies without a drop in their canteens.

In the middle of the five buildings, a mock Vietnamese village stood on display.

And all the personnel working at MACV headquarters wore clean, starched uniforms, spit-shined boots, and shiny brass on their uniforms.

It was a different world from Ant Khe.

When I got off the transport at MACV headquarters, I was still in my grubby jungle fatigues, filthy from my two weeks in VC Valley. A short, fat first sergeant with a stub of a cigar hanging out of the corner of his mouth spotted me immediately and headed me off.

"Where the fuck did you come from looking like that?" he growled through his cigar.

"From the Second/Thirty-Fifth Infantry in Ant Khe. I have orders to report to the security guard unit here," I answered and handed him my orders.

He considered this a second and quickly changed his tone. "Just out of the field, eh? Hop in, I'll run you over to the security guard unit." He motioned to a jeep parked besides the building and gave me a lift.

I reported to the first sergeant of the security guard unit.

"Our job is to provide protection for the brass at MACV headquarters," the tall black sergeant explained. "As an NCO, you will post the guards, make assignments, and make sure the security guards are performing to the highest army standards. We operate on a swing shift, eight hours a shift, with

one shift on and three shifts off. You will also pull CQ [guarding the barracks] duty for me every other weekend.”

Compared to what I was used to, this sounded like a piece of cake. I nodded eagerly.

“Being a security guard is a great honor,” the first sergeant continued. “The requirements to be a security guard are that you’ve earned a Combat Infantry Badge and a Purple Heart.”

Now I was truly puzzled. I had earned a Combat Infantry Badge for seeing action. But fortunately I hadn’t been wounded and didn’t have a Purple Heart.

I wondered for the hundredth time, “How did I get these orders?”

I sure wasn’t asking any questions.

“When on duty, we wear starched, pressed uniforms, spit-shined boots, and highly polished brass. You will live in barracks C and a Vietnamese mama-san will get you clean uniforms and shine your boots.”

The first sergeant continued, looking me over. “Sergeant Miller, you look like shit. I know you just got out of the field, so I’ll cut you some slack. But by 1200 hours tomorrow, I want you to have a decent haircut, shave, and have your uniform squared away. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” I answered, happy to comply.

I was assigned a room by myself in barracks C with my own refrigerator and a real bed—it seemed incredible! The barracks had flush toilets and showers with warm water. Just up the street was the NCO club, which featured bands nightly and served food from back in the world like pizza and hamburgers. The security-guard company had basketball and volleyball courts. Several companies close by had beer bars and showed movies every night, all at no cost.

And just days ago, I was in the jungle fighting off snipers, thirst, wildfires, and giant wasps. The contrast was unreal.

As soon as I settled in, I sat down and wrote long letters to my folks and my girlfriend, telling them I was safe and out of the field. In five short months, I would be going home.

For the first time since the sapper attack on LZ Larry, I was starting to believe I would live through my year in Vietnam after all.

April 5-14, 1970

That first night in the posh-seeming barracks, I woke up with a splitting headache. Soon I felt dizzy and hot with a fever.

I stumbled as I tried to get out of bed and somehow found the aid station at my brand-new base. The doctor on duty took one look at me and asked whether I had been taking my malaria pills. Before I could answer, I passed out on the floor of the aid station.

For the next two days I was in the hospital, delirious with the high fever and shakes that are common with malaria. I was given aspirin and sugar pills.

In my haze, I decided the army must be punishing me for not taking my malaria pills. Everyone knew that quinine pills were the remedy for malaria. Why was I being given sugar pills?

After four days, my fever broke, and I was able to eat. In my newfound clarity, a nurse told me the sugar pills were actually flavored quinine pills.

I knew I was getting better when I noticed that a couple of the nurses were good-looking. A couple of days later, I patted one of them on the butt, and they decided I was well enough to be released.

I grew up going to Catholic schools and considered myself a Christian. But since I’d been in Vietnam, I’d distanced myself from religion. The only time I ever saw a chaplain or priest was when someone was killed.

Now I had the feeling God was smiling at the irony. I had stopped taking my malaria pills to get out of the field. Then I miraculously got a new cushy assignment out of the field and promptly came down with malaria.

Someone was sending me a message.

April 15, 1970

When I returned to my room in the barracks, a note was pinned to my door: "Please see me as soon as possible, room 2210 MACV headquarters- G."

I was scheduled for my first guard duty the next day, and I would check out room 2210 then. But I wondered who G. was?

The first sergeant inspected the guards before duty the next day. I had on freshly starched fatigues as promised, along with spit-shined boots and a black-white helmet with "SG" stenciled in white letters across the front. As part of our uniform, I also had a black-and white armband with "SG" on it, noting my security-guard status. The first sergeant passed me by without comment, so I assumed I passed inspection.



Security Guard

Security-guard duty consisted of posting guards in positions around MACV headquarters and posting the colors on the flagpole. I also went around giving each guard a break to go to the can and get a cup of coffee. During the days I was on duty, I had to salute all the brass as they passed. There were

tons of officers around so my arm got tired. On second and third shifts, things were more peaceful. But in reality, it was all pretty peaceful compared to where I was coming from.

During my first day on duty, I caught a glimpse of two GIs sneaking into the mock Vietnamese village. I followed them and found they were a nurse and a second luey looking for a place to make out. I thus discovered that security duty consisted of saluting officers and keeping lovers away from the generals' play village.

After I had posted the guards and chased the lovers from the village, I went looking for room 2210. It was on the second floor of the headquarters, building number two, in an office titled Assignments Section.

As I entered, I was greeted by a familiar face: Specialist Biers, who was a friend from college. Biers was nicknamed Gabby because he loved to talk. He had been a nerdy accounting major in college who had helped me pass a calculus class when I was a freshman.

"Garbage, is that you?" Gabby exclaimed with joy and gave me a big hug. "I've been trying to find you for months! I found out you were in 'Nam a couple of months ago. This section makes all the combat assignments. I finally located you when the transfer came through to the Second/Thirty-Fifth. I made out orders for the first vacancy that I could find in Long Binh."

Gabby added with a smile, "Besides, I need someone to talk to. Nobody around here will listen."

"Nobody at school listened to you either," I joked.

But the whole thing was hard to get my head around. Gabby got me out of the field?

"As a clerk, can you just cut orders for a friend?" I asked in disbelief.

"Sure," he shrugged. "The major in charge of this section doesn't review any of the orders. With five hundred thousand troops, he leaves most of the day-to-day stuff to me."

A wave of gratitude rushed over me for this chatty little accountant who rescued me from the jungle.

"Gabby, I can't even think of a way to repay you," I told him. Then I grabbed the specialist-grade-four's shoulders, gave him a big hug, and thanked him for saving my life.

I couldn't believe how lucky I was.

Thirteen

BERNIE BUTT CANS

April 28, 1970

On April 26, 1970, President Richard Nixon announced the United States was sending troops into Cambodia and Laos. Both of these countries had long been staging areas for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops for sending supplies and men to the South. The Cambodian government had been democratic, but a revolution was underway by the Communist Khmer Rouge. North Vietnam and China were both supporting the Khmer Rouge. So America's so-called mission of keeping the world safe from Communism was expanding

In the United States, this caused an increase of protests and riots. Nixon had announced a withdrawal from 'Nam, and now he was sending ninety thousand troops into Cambodia? There were shootings at Kent State and many ROTC recruiting locations. The war was very unpopular back home.

We learned about all this from the military's *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. Those of us on the ground, there was very limited radio and no TV.

One of my new security-guard buddies was Sergeant Webert.



Stars and Stripes

"I heard a bunch of my old squad bought it in Cambodia," Webert confided in me mournfully. "Have you heard anything from your squad?"

I hadn't heard from any of the Garbage Squad members since the army broke us up.

"No, but I sure wish I could do something to get all the guys from my old squad out of the field," I told him.

"I can't believe this shit," he said.

I agreed. "Nixon says we're pulling out and turning the war back to the Vietnamese, and then he goes and invades Cambodia!"

Remembering back to basic training, I shuddered at how naive I had been. When they first offered me the chance to go to shake 'n bake school, I had actually thought the war might be over before I got shipped to Vietnam.

And then again after my R&R, I really thought there was a chance I'd be going home early.

What a joke!

The first sergeant was a favorite topic of conversation among the security guards. He used to attach cigarette-butt cans to his long pant legs so that his starched uniform would hang perfectly straight. But when he walked, they rang like cowbells, so you could always hear him coming.

The guys called him Bernie Butt Cans behind his back.

"He's a typical fanatic lifer," I complained to Webert.

"Did you know he told me to stay away from you because you were a troublemaker?" Webert asked. "What did you do?"

I was no secret that Bernie didn't care for me. But I had especially ticked him off recently.

"I was on CO duty the other night, and he told me not to let anyone interrupt him, no matter what," I explained.

"What was going on? Did he have a mama-san in his room?" Webert asked.

"That's what I assumed. Lots of guys do that, right? No big deal, I couldn't care less," I explained. "Well, about midnight two MPs stormed into the orderly room and said there was a report of a wild party going on in Bernie's room. I told them, 'No, it's been a quiet night.' They hung around for a couple of minutes and didn't hear anything, so they left.

"Well," I continued, "the next morning Bernie came into the orderly room, and I told him about the MPs. And for some reason, he made the assumption that I had reported him!"

May 20, 1970

One day I was having lunch with Gabby, and we got on the topic of what we'd do when we were out of the army.

"I'm going to work for one of the Big Three accounting firms and make all kinds of money," Gabby announced.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I said. "I'd like to be a writer, but I'm not sure I can make a living writing."

"You're always writing stories and articles while you're on guard duty. Tell me something you wrote recently," he said.

I laughed, "Well, yesterday I wrote the ten commandments of Bernie Butt Cans."

Naturally, he wanted to see them. So I pulled them out of my uniform and handed the list to him.

1. **Never associate with anyone of a lesser rank.** This includes drinking, playing cards, or eating.
“That means I can’t be talking to you, Gabby,” I commented.
2. **NCOs should never carry cigarettes or lighters.**
“It improves morale to give the privates a chance to furnish NCOs with smoking material,” I mocked.
3. **Have your bed made when not sleeping in it.**
“OK, this sounds like a reasonable rule, but Bernie carries it to extremes.” I said “The other day I worked third shift, and I was sleeping in the morning. I got up to go to the can, and when I got back Bernie was shaking his butt cans and pointing wildly toward my unmade bed.”
4. **Remember that a soldier is not a man.**
“One of my squad fell asleep the other night on guard duty and Bernie caught him,” I said.
“When the PFC explained he hadn’t slept for three days because of the schedule, Bernie responded, ‘A man can get tired, but a soldier never would!’”
5. **Do not allow spider webs to be spun on the orderly room wall.**
“Bernie hates spiders and cobwebs,” I relayed. “When I’m on barracks duty, he insists I do a search-and-destroy mission on them. I found it’s easiest to ambush the cobwebs if you turn out the lights and search by flashlight.”
6. **Never go to the club alone.**
“That one actually makes a lot of sense.” I said. “GIs from other companies had been jumped and beaten up on the way back from the club. They even closed the NCO club for a few days.”
7. **Thou shalt not write on the guard-shack walls.**
“Bernie insists that all guard shacks and latrines be free of graffiti,” I explained. “He carries a big black crayon in his pocket to cross out any sayings he doesn’t like.”
8. **Never put trash in the trash bin.**
“Our barracks got written up one day because he found trash in the trash bucket!” I explained.
9. **Don’t use big words.**
“One day I asked Bernie a question and I used the word *cooperate*.” I said. “He chased me out of the orderly room, saying I was a ‘stuck-up college punk.’”
10. **I am Bernie Butt Cans and thou shalt not have any other first sergeants before me.**
Gabby, who had been chucking throughout, applauded me.

I shrugged, “It gets boring around here, so I’ve been writing about the funny things I observe. And, of course, I’ve been updating my journal and sending entries back home to my girlfriend.”

“I know something you can write about.” Gabby exclaimed.

He recounted the cheesy commercials they played day and night on armed-forces radio, warning about venereal diseases.

“I’ve been lost for ten days without food or water in the terrible Yucatan rainforest,” he said dramatically. “I’ve got to escape the fierce Zoolie warriors who are after me, but I can’t go any farther. I should have noticed the burning sensation and dripping sooner. I’m afraid I’m done for!”

I laughed and made a note on my writing pad. “I’ve got to send that one to my girlfriend.”

“Are you going to get married when you get back?” Gabby asked.

"I'm not sure. My scouts from our old school tell me my girlfriend has been dating someone else for a while," I responded. "But then again, I told her to enjoy her senior year. So we'll see what happens."

Together, we finished our beers, happy in our friendship and the knowledge that our biggest problem was putting up with Bernie Butt Cans and not getting beat up on the way back from the NCO club.

June 17, 1970

For my twenty-fourth birthday, Webert, Gabby, and I got passes to go into Saigon.

Webert wanted to hire a tailor to make him a new suit for job interviews back in the world. So we hitchhiked into the city for our day of shopping. We exchanged MPC for South Vietnamese piasters.

The shopping district was a mass of activity with merchants hawking their products to GIs. We started with a couple of beers to fortify us against the crowds. Merchants were selling watches, jewelry, stereo equipment, drugs, and woman. But no suits.

Finally, a couple blocks from the main drag, we found a small tailor shop. The tailor promised to make Webert a dark suit with two pair of pants for 200 piasters (20 US dollars).

"For that price, I should get one too!" I said. My clothes back home were mostly out of style and wouldn't fit anymore.

"Me makie beaucoup number one suit," the tailor promised, reaching for some rolls of material to show me. "Real cool stuff, GI."

"I like the blue," I remarked as I pointed to a shiny aqua wool material. "How much would it cost to make a double-breasted suit with bell-bottom pants?"

This was my idea of fashionable.

"Two hundred piasters, done in two hours," the little Vietnamese tailor replied as he started taking my measurement.

"What can we do for two hours while we wait for the suits?" Gabby asked, bored with watching us shop.

"I saw a bar up the street," Webert suggested.

The bar was called The Boom-Boom Club, and it was nearly empty when we entered at 1400 hours. We were greeted by a fat, heavily made-up mama-san. "GI, you want some beers and a boom-boom girl?"

"Give us three beers," Gabby ordered as we sat at a small table. "Have you guys ever been with a boom-boom girl?"

Webert and I didn't have time to respond.

As if on cue, two girls with long black hair approached our table, clad in low-cut mini-dresses. One was dumpy and plain, but the other was slim and quite pretty. The pretty one sat next to Gabby and snuggled close to him.

"I think she loves you, Gabby," I teased. "I think it's time you lost your Vietnam cherry. I'll treat!" I pulled 200 piasters from my fatigues.

"And I'll furnish the rubbers. I always carry a pack for a friend in need," Webert offered.

"Do you think it's safe?" Gabby asked. "After hearing all those ads about VD and the Yucatan rainforest..."

We watched as Gabby disappeared to the back of the bar with the pretty boom-boom girl holding onto his arm.

I figured it was the least I could do for Gabby after he rescued me from the field and probably saved my life.

July 15, 1970

I started running, working out, and playing basketball to try to get back in shape for returning to the world. I even stopped smoking.

One day when I was shooting hoops outside the security-guard dayroom, a tall specialist four approached me. He looked vaguely familiar, and he watched me shoot for a couple of minutes.

"You never could shoot worth a shit, Miller," he yelled, mockingly. "But I bet you're still as dirty as you ever were! Let me show you how to shoot a jump shot." He grabbed my ball and arched a twenty-foot shot toward the basket. It swished cleanly.

"I'd recognize that jump shot anywhere! You're Tom from Saint Mary's," I exclaimed.

Tom was my hated rival in college. We ended up guarding each other twice a year. He was six feet five with the body of a weightlifter. With his famous jump shot, he was the conference's leading scorer.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I gaped.

"I got drafted just like you. I'm a clerk working for a colonel in Headquarters Company," he explained.

He told me his company basketball team was playing for the base championship that coming weekend.

"Why don't you play with us? We could use another big body!"

"I'm so out of shape, I can't run around the block," I told him. "I won't help you much."

"Miller, I know the way you play. You hold, scratch, step on toes, and shove. Even out of shape, you can keep their big guys off the boards," he commented.

I smiled at the thought. It felt like another lifetime since I'd played Division III conference games against Tom from Saint Mary's.

"After the game we'll drink a hundred beers and tell lies about our college days," he promised. And that was enough to convince me.

Since I technically wasn't part of Tom's company and couldn't legitimately join the team, I played in the championship game under the name of my old college roommate, Private First Class Licari. I played awful, but our team won easily and Tom scored about thirty points.

The boonies started to feel a long way away.

I slowly started remembering what it felt like to be a college kid again, back in the world. Amazingly, I had reunited with my college buddies, Gabby and Tom, plus I'd made new friends like Webert to bum around with.

My only problem was staying out of Bernie's doghouse.

Fourteen

SHORT

August 1, 1970

Webert, Tom, Gabby, and I spent the next few months trying to perform our army duties in an admirable fashion. For the most part, we stayed out of trouble and were able to keep off Bernie's shit list. During our off hours, we spent our time drinking at the clubs, drinking in our rooms, or drinking at the movies.

One afternoon after drinking several beers, Webert and I decided to organize a baseball game. We went to the company supply room and checked out baseball gloves, a bat, and a baseball. We recruited several of our squad members and were ready to play some ball.

"You pitch, and I'll catch. I'll bet you a beer you can't strike out PFC Bieker!" Webert challenged me.

"He'll never even see my fastball," I bragged and made a couple of warm-up pitches.

Bieker walked up to the plate (a beer can) and waved the bat fiercely at me. He also looked a bit afraid that I might hit him.

I went into my Lou Burdett windup. My right leg kicked high, and I hid the ball in my glove. I let go with a low fastball that skipped past Webert and was stopped by the barracks wall.

"Didn't they teach you how to pitch in Wisconsin?" Webert taunted me.

The next pitch was waist high, and Bieker made a mighty swing and fouled the ball right into Webert's mouth. He wasn't wearing a catcher's mask and went down like a sack of potatoes, clutching his bleeding mouth.

"Shit! Are you OK?" I asked, bending over my fallen friend.

"My front teeth got knocked out," Webert said, showing me the two bloody, pulpy teeth he was holding in his fist.

The dentist on duty in the aid station worked on Webert for a couple of hours. He reattached his two teeth and stitched up his gums, giving him a fifty-fifty chance that the teeth would live.

I walked Webert back to the barracks.

"I guess playing baseball wasn't such a good idea," I said, full of guilt.

"The Novocain is starting to wear off, and my mouth hurts like hell. Will you cover my guard duty?" Webert asked.

"Of course, that's the least I can do. In fact, I'll tell Bernie about your teeth and maybe he'll put you on sick call," I suggested.

"I'll be OK in the morning. No sense getting him all pissed off at us. Just take my shift, and I'll get your next one," Webert offered.

"Let's wait and see how you're feeling in the morning," I said as I left Webert in his room.

The next morning, the whole side of my face was swollen. I looked like a chipmunk with a mouth full of nuts.

I wondered whether I was having a psychological reaction to knocking my friend's teeth out.

I went back to the aid station and ended up seeing the same dentist who had worked on Webert. The dentist found I had an impacted wisdom tooth that needed to come out. After an injection of painkiller and much yanking and cracking, my infected tooth finally came out.

"No tobacco or alcohol for the next two days, and bite down on these gauze squares until the bleeding stops," the dentist instructed.

That afternoon, Webert's mouth was still very sore, so I took my own duty. I was still biting down on the gauze squares when I presented the squad to my nemesis, First Sergeant Bernie.

"Call your squad to attention," Bernie ordered.

"Atte 'son," I mumbled the best I could.

"What's the hell's wrong with you, Miller?" the First Sergeant bellowed.

"Ad 'ooth 'ulled," I attempted, trying to speak without opening my mouth.

"Speak up, soldier! It sounds like you have marbles in your mouth," Bernie commanded.

"I had a tooth pulled," I said. But when I opened my mouth wide enough to speak properly, blood spilled out.

Bernie saw the blood and quickly ordered me to keep my mouth closed.

August 15, 1970

Gabby and I passed many nights at MACV headquarters talking about the war and other current events. Living up to his nickname, Gabby did most of the talking.

"Do you think we can win this war? If you look back in history, no one has been able to win a guerilla war," Gabby declared. "Look at the Russians in Afghanistan. They were there for ten years and couldn't win!"

"You don't know who's a friend and who's an enemy," I added, thinking back to the jungle. "The Vietcong don't wear uniforms. They might look like village woodcutters and really be blowing up convoys."

"Many of the GIs here were drafted and don't want to be here. How can you win a war if your soldiers lack the will to fight?" Gabby posed.

"You have all these young, scared soldiers carrying guns. More guys are getting wounded from friendly fire and accidents than the enemy," I said thoughtfully. "Having people carrying loaded guns is a recipe for problems. When I get back to the world, I'm never touching a gun again. And I'm also never sleeping on the ground."

"They say we are fighting to defeat Communism. The weapons used by the North and Vietcong come from Russia and China. Don't we have an obligation to protect the world from Communism?" Gabby asked.

"I don't think you can win over people's minds with guns and war," I answered. "Especially when the public back home doesn't support the war."

"I wonder how they'll treat us when we get back," Gabby asked. "Should we tell people we were in Vietnam?"

"I'm going to try to forget this whole year," I replied. "I don't plan on talking at all about what happened here."



With AK 47

One of the Vietnamese maintenance workers interrupted our philosophical discussion with a frantic appeal. "Come, GI, mama-san time has come!"

She grabbed Gabby's sleeve and pulled on it.

We followed her quickly down the hall. She led us to a moaning, very pregnant woman. She looked like she was in the process of having the baby right on the floor in front of us. Gabby grabbed a phone and called the MPs to bring a jeep and take her to the aid station.

Fortunately she got to the medics' station before the baby was delivered.

As I rode back to MACV headquarters, I thought about the baby and mother who we killed in VC Valley. I didn't like to think about that field in Long Binh.

We were only going to be in Vietnam for a short time, but the Vietnamese had been living in a war zone for more than twenty years.

I wondered what kind of life this new baby would have.

September 5, 1970

For the third night in a row, I was wide awake at 400. For some reason, I was tense and didn't have an appetite. I was finding myself drinking more beer and smoking more cigarettes-which I had previously quit-but nothing would relieve my tension.

I had only five days left in Vietnam, and I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me.

"You've got shortitis," Webert suggested.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“For two years, the army told you what to do, what to eat, what to wear, and what your job is,” Webert explained. “In a few days, you’ll have to decide these things for yourself. Where do you want to live? How are you going to do to make a living? Who will you marry? This is shortitis.”

“I can’t wait to get out of the army! I can’t wait to see my girlfriend again,” I stated, defiantly.

“Are you going to get married?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I pondered sadly. I still didn’t know definitively whether my girlfriend had found someone else. Plus, she wanted to live in Minnesota, but my family was all in Wisconsin.

“Do you have any idea what you want to do for a living?” Webert asked.

“I thought I’d like to be a writer, but I haven’t the foggiest idea how to start. I’ve written some stories and poems and sent them in to magazines, but they’ve all been rejected. I’m not sure I have the ability to make a living as a writer,” I told him, feeling even more down.

“Yep! A classic case of shortitis,” Webert teased, with a big grin on his face. But then his expression turned serious. “Did you hear that our baseball buddy, Bieker, tried to kill himself today?”

“You’re kidding. What happened?” I stammered, shocked. “He seemed like a pretty squared-away guy.”

“His stupid bitch of a wife wrote him a Dear John letter, telling him she’s in love with someone else,” Webert relayed. “He’s only got twenty days left in-country! She could have at least waited until he came back and told him face-to-face.”

I suddenly didn’t feel quite so sorry for myself.

“It makes you wonder what the people back in the world are thinking about this war and how they’ll treat us when we get back,” I thought out loud.

“Well, we read about all the war protests, the Kent State killings, and the My Lai massacre and that’s all the news reporters talk about,” Webert said. “I don’t think we’ll be bragging about our year in Vietnam when we get back.”

We sat in silence.

September 1-12, 1970

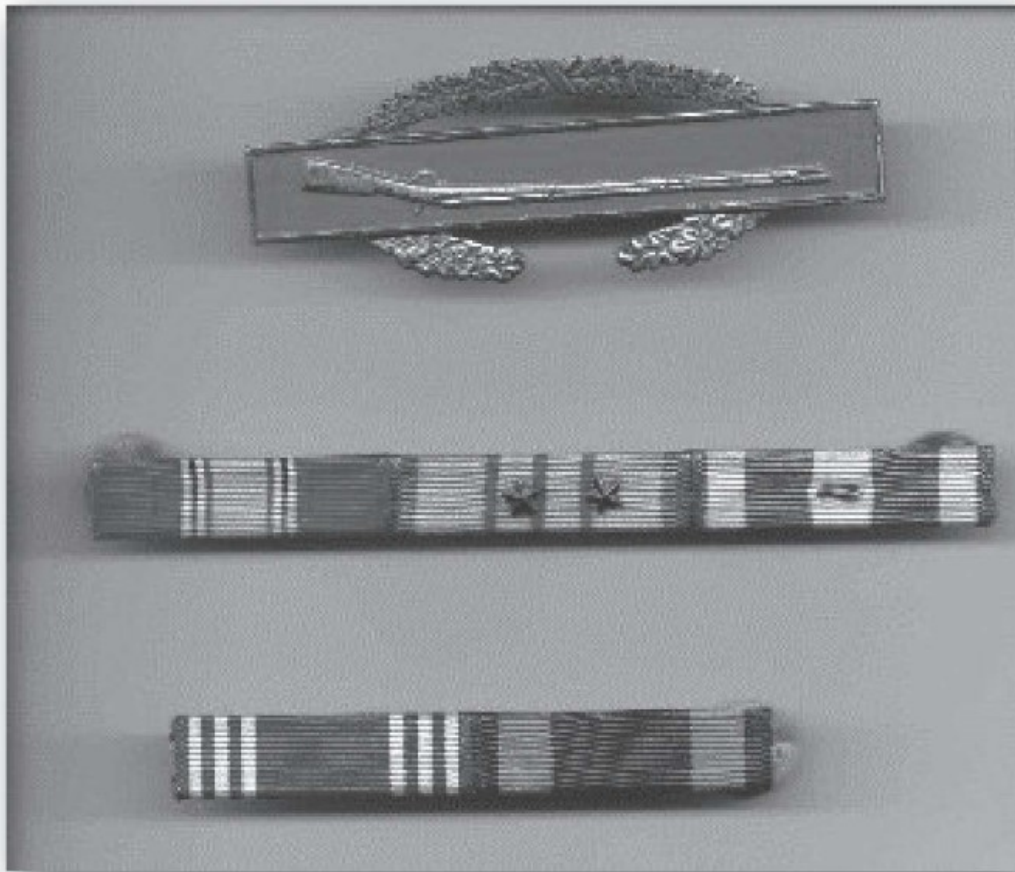
I said good-bye to Sergeant Webert, who was scheduled to leave the following week. Tom and Gabby had several months to go, and I promised to get in touch with them when they got back to the world.

I reported to the Ninetieth replacement center in Long Binh to start the process to go home. I waited five days in the replacement barracks before I was assigned a seat on a TWA flight to take me to Oakland.

I was in Vietnam for exactly 365 days.

Once I made it to Oakland, it took twenty-six hours to process me out of the army.

Since I had been in the army for twenty-three months and had a leave coming, they let me out one month early. They gave me \$2,400 in back pay and a folder containing my honorable discharge papers. I was also awarded the Vietnam Service Medal and the Combat Infantry Badge.



My medals

Civilian Mark Miller got a standby seat on a plane to O'Hare. I called my parents and gave them my flight information so they could meet me at the Chicago airport. I was reunited with my parents and brothers on September 12, 1970.

I slept for fifteen hours when I got home and woke up charged and ready to handle civilian life.

But I never talked about my year in Vietnam. How could I explain to people what it was like? This was not a war I had chosen. I felt I had been a disgrace as a soldier: I had disobeyed orders, given false reports, gotten malaria on purpose, gotten a rear-area job because a friend found a way around the system, and had gotten a medal for killing a woman and a child.

I would feel guilt for the rest of my life. I made a promise to myself that I would never discuss Vietnam with anyone.

Epilogue

When I returned home, my journal ended. It has been interesting for me, forty-five years later, to look back on my time in the service. I can see now that, in some ways, it shaped my life afterward.

When I returned home, I didn't join any veterans' groups or put a decal on the back of my car announcing I was a Vietnam veteran. And for most of my life, I didn't talk to friends or family about my year in Vietnam, just as I had promised myself. In fact, many of my acquaintances will be surprised to learn that I was there at all.

But after all these years, I decided it was time I relive my memories.

True to my pledge, I never touched a gun again or slept on the ground. My daughters used to give me grief for never taking them camping: maybe now they'll understand why. Today, all my friends have concealed-carry permits, and I think I'm the one Republican in the country who believes guns lead to more violence. For a while, when I was first married, I kept a baseball bat by our bed, but now that is gone too.

When I returned from Vietnam, I tried to find a job in the Twin Cities close to my girlfriend. But on one of my treks to Minnesota, she told me she was in love with someone else. I guess it wasn't a huge shock. So I returned to Wisconsin to live with my folks.

My ex-girlfriend had faithfully typed my Vietnam journal from the letters I'd sent her, and much of that became the basis for these memoirs. She also had the decency to wait until I was home to give me the news in person. When I returned, I had no job, was a little goofed-up in the head, and was not a good marriage prospect. I never held it against her, and I hope she has had a wonderful life.

In 1972, I met Betsy, and we were married on December 23, 1972. We have been happily married ever since, with two wonderful daughters, two grandsons, and a terrific son-in-law. Below is a picture of my pride and joy.



Back row: Betsy, Courtney, Mark, Brooke, David
Grandkids: Mason, Max

I did take advantage of some of the benefits that came from being in the service. Until I found a job, I collected unemployment benefits and went back to school and got my MBA on the GI Bill. The only souvenir I brought back was my camouflaged poncho liner that I slept on when I was in the field. It is still intact and in the trunk of my wife's car.



Poncho liner

To conclude my memoir, I have three closing thoughts on what I learned from my time in Vietnam, and how I've used those lessons to shape my life in a positive way.

1. **Networking is critical.** Networking involves building a large group of acquaintances, friends, and relatives whom you regularly keep in touch with. Networking saved my life in Vietnam when a friend got me orders for the rear area, and I'll always be grateful to him.

Today, I tell my students the number one way to find a job is through networking. It's not what you know, but who you know. And that's how I finally got on my feet after returning from the war.

I never made a living as a writer. After looking for a job for six months, one of my friends called to say he had just gotten a job, and the company was looking for one more person. I got the job and spent the next thirty years with JI Case in supply chain management. I did write articles for business journals, chapters for textbooks, and even three ten-minute comedy plays with my daughter Brooke. (Brooke is a professional writer, and I thank her for helping me with this project.)

After leaving Case, I went to work as a professor at a small liberal arts college in Kenosha, Wisconsin, called Carthage. I even help students write their senior theses, so that makes me feel like I've become a bit of a writer after all.

2. **Don't be consumed by fear.** When we were attacked by sappers on LZ Larry, I was so afraid I couldn't function. That's when I decided I couldn't survive a year in Vietnam being constantly afraid. So I put my fear aside and took each day as it came.

Many times since Vietnam, fear could have stopped me from doing something: speaking at a conference, getting married, going back to school, or writing this.

Many years ago, I got a new boss who brought all his direct reports in for meeting. He said he thought we all were poor employees and would give us one month to confirm his assessment before we were all fired. At the time, I had two small girls to support. The rest of the people in the meeting were scared to death. I remembered Vietnam, put a smile on my face, and refused to be scared. I wasn't fired but instead promoted.

3. **Remembering soldiers and the Garbage Squad.** I never got in touch with Webert like I promised, but I did try (unsuccessfully) to reach Gabby and had dinner with Tom and his wife shortly after his return.

I lost track of the members of the Garbage Squad and always wondered what happened to them.

In 1993, I spoke at a conference in Washington, DC, and for the first time I visited the Vietnam Memorial. I looked up all the members of the Garbage Squad, and to my dismay, one had died after the Fourth Infantry was broken up:

BRIAN EDWARD MC CARTHY
CPL - E4 – Army - Selective Service
His tour began on Oct. 21, 1969
Casualty was on May 10, 1970
In Cambodia
Panel 10W–Line 14

Brian was a great guy, and I think about him often. He was just one of the fifty-eight thousand Americans killed in the Vietnam War.

Standing by his name at the wall, I started to cry. My goal in Vietnam was to come back safely and make sure my squad did too. Brian didn't make it back, so I felt I had failed.

My wife was there with me at the Vietnam Memorial, and for first time I told her about the Garbage Squad. As I began to open up and reflect on my experiences, it became important for me to share my story about what happened in Vietnam.

I never heard from the Jew, Grandpa, Tex, Gook, Charlie Brown, Andy, Phillips or Mark. I hope they lived happy and successful lives. If any of them see this, I'd love to talk to them again.

When we returned from Vietnam, there were no lines of people at the airport to thank us for our service. The guys in the Garbage Squad were all draftees, and none of us wanted to be there. But I found out what a difficult and dangerous job it is to be a soldier.

I firmly believe that nothing good comes from war, yet I have nothing but respect and admiration to those soldiers who volunteer to keep us safe.

Mark S. Miller (Sergeant Garbage)

Notes

1. While it is very difficult to pin down the actual number of friendly fire deaths in Vietnam, sources including the American Friendly Fire Notebook say that it accounted for 39 percent of all American soldier deaths in the Vietnam War.
2. I can't remember the name of our third CO, so I'm calling him CO Point, since. I remember him as a by-the-book, West Point kind of guy.

Mark Stephen Miller



Mark worked for 30 plus years for Case CNH in Supply Chain Management. The past 11 years have been spent as an Associate Professor teaching business classes at Carthage College in Kenosha, WI.

Mark has over 30 business articles published, has written two text book chapters and three ten minute comedy plays with Brooke. He loves mentoring students on how to become better writers.

He loves to play golf, read, travel and spending time with his amazing family and friends.

Brooke Miller Hall

Brooke is a former journalist who has appeared in numerous print and online publications. As a corporate communicator for 10 years, her work was recognized by the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communications.

As a creative writer, her screenplay won the Wisconsin Screenwriters Forum contest and made it to the second round of the Austin Film Festival (2012). She also co-wrote a comedy play with her dad that was produced as part of the 2011 Snowdance festival.

Brooke currently works as a freelance writer in Indiana, where she lives with her husband and two sons

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