

# A SPHINX



THE MEMOIRS OF A RELUCTANT SPY IN VIETNAM

JOHN G. BURDICK



# A Sphinx

by  
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# Dedication:

**It was not an easy task** for me to write this book. Dredging up all the old scars and feelings that this war brought with it was painful. I started writing the book in 1978 but soon dropped the effort only to start again later. With all the stops and starts I had attempting to write this book I could never have finished it without the constant support of my sons, Carl and Kirt Burdick who, in their youth, heard me tell tales of things I did in Vietnam. (Most of the time it was after I had more than a few drinks.) Still they pushed me to tell the whole story. So after forty years I have finally put my story down on paper. Writing this the book became a family project. Some of the family reviewed the work as it developed and their comments were invaluable. My sister Teresa Luis and her partner Blanca Sanchez; my brother Joseph Burdick and his wife Andrea; also my brother Marc Burdick (who shared with me what it was like to see his older brother go to war) - all offered constructive comments that led to the completion of this project. Special thanks go to my cousin, Dr. Bernard Burdick, who took time to critique every page of several drafts. He helped make the story clearer and better. Bernie was incredible. A special thank you to my wife Mary Beth for her love, support and understanding as I struggled with my feelings during the final phase of this project

Finally, I have to thank all of the men who served with me whose stories are in this book. The men who flew the helicopters and planes that I used, the men who went out on missions that I had planned, and all the rest were the true heroes in that war. Our country called them to fight and they went. They might not have agreed with the politics but it was their country that called and so they proudly served.



The Sphinx was the symbol of Army Intelligence—quite appropriately. The Greek Sphinx was a demon of death, destruction, and bad luck. In ancient Assyrian myths, the Sphinx usually appears as a guardian of temple entrances. The original Sphinx guarded an entrance to the Greek City of Thebes and all who passed had to answer a riddle. Once the riddle was solved the Sphinx was so mortified at the solving of her riddle that she cast herself down from the rock and perished. At the time of the Vietnam War, Army Intelligence chose the Sphinx as its symbol because it saw itself as the guardian of the United States and, through guile and deception, sought knowledge from all who approached her. I was part of that group—A Sphinx. Like the Sphinx, I became its servant: bringing death, destruction, and bad luck to all who thought we could help. In my case, when I realized the answer to the riddle, I did not destroy myself, but I was never the same.

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*I participated in every action described in this book during my tour of duty. I have changed the times of a few of the actions and have left out or changed some of the people who were involved in each action to improve the flow of the story. I have also changed the names of all the participants, either because I have sadly forgotten their names or because they had cover names and I never knew their real names anyway. Every action described in this book actually took place. My participation is as described. We should never forget the men who served their country. You will never know what they have done for you, whether you wanted them to do it or not.*





# Chapter 1

**It had been a good day.** Still, Fort Hood sucked: a dusty Army base in the middle of nowhere—and in a dry county, too. But I was almost done. I had been sent here the last week of September 1967 to complete a few background investigations. Just a few more people to talk to and by tomorrow I would be out of here. That was when I got a call from my office in San Antonio. It was nothing special, I thought. Usually, they just wanted to know when I would be done. They liked their damn daily reports and I had not called in today or yesterday. But it wasn't my sergeant; it was my lieutenant. That was different. He did not sound like the officious jerk he normally played. His voice was subdued and was tainted with a reluctance I could not understand. I immediately was cautious and concerned. What had I done wrong this time? My stomach slowly turned into a fiery knot as I listened. His words burned like a hot poker in my ear, and chilled my soul. He had just received orders for me to go to Vietnam. I didn't know what to say. What could I say but, "OK. When do I report?"

The lights in the office seemed to darken. For the first time I felt really hopeless. I wanted to destroy something, break something, and then I wanted to cry. I truly never believed this would happen. What was worse, everybody in the office must have known this was coming, but no one could tell me until headquarters made it official. My life was over. I was going to Vietnam! I didn't know what to say so I said what everybody expected me to say as I slammed the phone down: "Shit! Fuck! Damn!" They all had the same look in their eyes: pity for me and elation that it wasn't them. Some fucking friends! What do you do when your life is over? My first thought was: How do I tell Lena? I was so sure this was not going to happen.

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In two weeks I would have been too short to send. You had to have 15 months of service time left to be sent overseas. In two weeks I would have been under the limit. The fucking Army did it to me again! I tried to be cool. Inside, terror and anger wrestled. I needed to talk to somebody—but not these idiots.

I had only been married just about four months. It was the best thing I had ever done. I wasn't sure why I did it, but it was working out better than I ever thought it would. We were getting along so well, learning about each other, talking about our dreams, and sharing our lives. We loved each other, and now I would have to tell her I was going to Vietnam. I always called home every night and would have to call tonight or she would worry. I couldn't bring myself to tell her this over the phone. It would be too impersonal and cruel not to be there with her so we could share our fears. Still I wanted desperately to talk to her about this. Reluctantly I decided we needed to be together when she found out. So tonight, for the first time, I would have to lie to her and pretend things were all right. Of course, lying came easy to me since I was an Intelligence Agent, a "spook" for the Army—and I did it well. This, however, was different and I had to prepare myself. The only way I could think to do it was to pretend to be mad at some idiot here at Fort Hood and hope my anger would hide my feelings. It almost worked when I called, but she sensed something and I just denied it and said I was tired. I never felt so bad after a phone call in my life. For the first time I had deliberately lied to my wife.

Ironically, I had joined the Army to stay out of Vietnam. My life had been a good one. I came from a large, rather well off family with parents who loved me and raised me well. I always expected to get what I wanted because I always had. As I became older, I made choices whose consequences I never fully understood. My first was to go to a seminary for high school and college. I was going to be a Catholic priest! I think I meant it at the time. No one really told me what it meant or how it would change me. I thought I was in control of me. I was in the seminary for four and a half years. I was taught by Jesuits, who I found challenging. I think I stayed so long because I enjoyed the friendships and camaraderie. Religion was there, but secondary to me. Eventually, I realized that and left. It

was hard to leave my friends, but I realized I was supposed to be there to become a priest, not to be with friends. The priesthood was something special. It involved a commitment that I had just begun to understand. It was a commitment that I could not make and was not really interested in making. So I left. Leaving may have been one of the first honest things I had done. What I didn't know was how much of their beliefs I had absorbed. It was something I was going to struggle with for the rest of my life. Besides the morality they drilled into me they gave me something that I'm sure they never intended. After going through the Army's Counterintelligence Program I realized that there is not much difference between trying to convert someone to be a Catholic and recruiting a person to spy for you. You use the same methods and tools except that the priest believes what he teaches and is honest about his beliefs while trying to convert someone. A Counterintelligence Agent only wants to recruit his subject and will reflect whatever the subject wants to hear and believe. The trick is that the subject believes what the agent is saying because he sounds and acts as if he cares like a priest does.

After the Seminary I went to college and was exposed to ROTC. It was not a good fit. I really did not like the military mindset and I let them know it. However, ROTC was a requirement for graduation at Santa Clara University so I had to take it. They originally told me that I would have to take it for two years, as all the other students did. I was such a pain, though, that they decided after one year I would no longer have to take it. I was happy with that.

The rest of College was a blur. The seminary had not prepared me to deal with the opposite sex at all, so I drank plenty of beer and complained about women all the time. It was the sixties and the new era of free sex was loudly acclaimed. Let's just say I missed the call on that one. I guess you could say it was because of a strong belief of right and wrong that I absorbed from the Jesuits or, more likely, just plain fear. Maybe it was just the lack of opportunity. But I didn't dwell on it.

It wasn't until the start of my senior year in college that I realized that I was actually going to graduate and lose my military deferment. That meant I could be drafted. All you had to do was watch TV news and you knew what that meant. I had no desire to be cannon fodder for anyone. I didn't deny that my country could

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draft me, but I didn't want to go. I knew if I got called to service I would have to go. I had somehow already made up my mind that if I could get out of it by running away to Canada, as others had done, that would not be right. It had nothing to do with the war being right or wrong. I really had not thought much about the war. I was more into beer and pizza and finding the next "kegger" party. Vietnam was something our politicians wanted us to fight. It was not something I was interested in. Yet, I was an American and patriotic in my own way. I was seriously thinking of joining the Peace Corps or in some way working to help people. It was kind of fuzzy since I had not really thought it through. Yet, I had a strong belief that I owed something to my country. I just did not think that being in the military was something that I would pay that debt with. To tell the truth, I would do almost anything to avoid it. I had learned to be quite good at avoiding things I didn't want to do so far, and I was sure I could avoid the draft. I was also pretty sure that I wouldn't pass the physical. My eyes were very bad. Yet, philosophically, I agreed that the government had the right to draft me and if the government wanted a hundred men they would get a hundred men. If I didn't go, someone else would go in my place, probably someone poorer than me, most likely someone of color. This seemed wrong to me. That didn't mean I had to volunteer, nor did it mean I couldn't get a deferment. It did mean I couldn't run away. It was those damn Jesuits in my mind reminding me of right and wrong all the time. I wasn't sure what to do so I did what came naturally and tried to stay in school and keep my II-S deferment. That meant going to graduate school. The problem was, nobody wanted me. I wasn't really the best student. To say I barely worked at studying while in college would probably be an exaggeration. I never even tried to study or keep up. Somehow I survived college and—miraculously—was accepted to graduate school in Mexico City (of all places) at The University of the Americas. So, after graduation in June of 1965, I went to Mexico.

Mexico was unknown to me. Well, I knew where it was and I had eaten Mexican food. I even had met a few Mexicans. But I knew nothing of Mexico. This was going to be a great adventure. I was going to hop in my VW bug and head to Mexico City on my own. And I did. It was so much more than I thought when I left. As

an American, you are burdened with a belief of your righteousness and your truths. Here, right next to where I lived, were a people who believed in their righteousness and in their truths. Theirs were different from mine. The cultural differences were huge, yet tantalizingly close. I was Catholic and this was a Catholic country run by a government whose official policy was atheism. It made sense and didn't make sense at the same time. The people I went to school with were not Americans. They came from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Sometimes, I felt they were brought up on a different planet, but I listened to them and I hoped they listened to me. Two things quickly became very clear. One was that America didn't always act fairly in its relations with other countries. The other was that the people I met placed a very different value on human life. To me, every life was precious. To them, life was a coin to be spent as needed for the betterment of the society they wanted. Death was part of their lives.

While I was learning all of this, my draft board sent me a notice that my deferment had been overturned and that I was now I-A and would have to report for a medical checkup prior to induction. This did not set well, to say the least. Our government, once it gets something in its teeth, does not let go and now it wanted me. I, of course, appealed and lost. It had to be the quickest loss in history. They wanted me to report to Santa Cruz, California from Mexico City. I refused unless they paid me for the trip. Some genius must have looked at a map and found that Panama was closer than California so they sent me a notice to report to some place in Panama. I could see me trying to drive through Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to get to Panama. They didn't even have roads through most of those countries. So, like a fool, I solved the problem for them and suggested Laredo, Texas. I could easily get to Laredo from Mexico City and they would have to take me from there. They finally agreed to that and I was committed to going to San Antonio, Texas for my physical.

Before I left for the States I went to the US Embassy just to find out some of my rights about induction. This was not a good move because they thought I was trying to evade the draft by hiding in Mexico. They were ready to arrest me and send me home in a pouch, I thought. I explained what was going on and they finally

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had a military liaison officer come in and explain what was going to happen. From the information he gave me, it was fairly apparent that I would not be drafted because of my bad eyes. I felt a whole lot better and looked forward to visiting Texas because I hadn't been there before.

I left Mexico City for Texas on a Wednesday morning. I planned to be in Laredo by that evening. That would give me a chance to check out Laredo on Wednesday night and Thursday morning. Thursday afternoon the Army was going to drive us in a bus to San Antonio for our physical on Friday morning and we were scheduled to be back in Laredo on Friday afternoon. I knew this before I left Mexico City, so I told my roommates to expect me late Saturday or sometime Sunday at the latest. The drive to Laredo was uneventful and I found a good steakhouse Wednesday evening and a pleasant motel to stay in. Things were looking up. The next morning I paid my hotel bill and asked the landlady if I could leave my luggage with her until I got back on Friday. She agreed. I took an overnight bag with one change of underwear and went to meet the bus. Things went downhill from there. The bus held a little over 40 of us: 39+ Texas teenagers and one 22 year-old Californian. I stuck out like a sore thumb. They avoided me like I was a carrier of the plague and—worse—would sneak looks at me like I was an exhibit in a zoo.

The drive to San Antonio took forever. We arrived in San Antonio and stopped at a hotel whose best year was 30 years ago. They gave us “chits” for dinner and breakfast. Dinner was something dark brown covered in light brown glue. We had no choice and we could not leave the hotel to find something more edible. After dinner we went to our rooms and stared at the ceiling light since there was no TV or radio in this hotel. In the morning I had my first meeting with grits. It was not a good meeting and I had no idea what they were and why they came with breakfast. The Texas boys gobbled theirs down, though. I left mine behind as a memento of my visit.

We were then driven in an old Army bus to the Induction Center for our physical. Thus began the Army's dehumanizing treatment of draftees. They poked. I coughed. They drew blood. I bent over. They poked something in my ears. They checked my nose, mouth, and teeth. Then they asked me to remove my glasses and read a sign.

I, of course, couldn't see the wall. Bad eyes are bad eyes. At the end of all these tests we all got dressed and waited in a large room. After a nervously long wait, a military guy came in and started to read names. After each name he said "Passed" or "Failed." People who passed had, at the most, six weeks until induction. I waited and waited. Finally, my name was called when they said, "Burdick—retest." What the hell did that mean? Out of all those kids I was the only one to be retested. I found the military guy and asked, "What does that mean?" He said that I failed the eye test so they needed to retest my eyes at Fort Sam Houston and that could not happen until Monday since the Fort's Eye Clinic was closed on the weekend. That meant three more nights in the hotel from hell.

When we got back to the hotel the others stayed on the bus. I got off, was given a handful of "chits" again, and watched the bus leave. I went to my room and began the wait. At least during the weekend I could walk around town a little. However, we were in a rather seedy part of town and walking around was a risk. I found an old bookstore and bought a sci-fi book to read over the weekend.

Monday seemed to take a month to arrive, but it eventually did. This time a sergeant came and picked me up in a jeep and drove me to Fort Sam Houston. The Induction Center had not been truly military—as I had discovered—but this place definitely was. I really felt uncomfortable and wanted out of there as soon as possible. That is when I learned about "Hurry up and wait." Finally, a guy about my age in a white coat came and got me. He told me how guys were always trying to get out of the Army by saying they couldn't see. I assured him my eyes were truly bad. All he had to do was look at the thickness of my lenses. He was not impressed. I'll never forget the test he gave me.

I was asked to take off my glasses, which I did. He then beamed a three-foot-tall letter on the wall 20 feet away. He asked me to get up and walk toward it and tell him when I could make out the letter. I wondered: What kind of dumb test was this? But I stood up, squinted at the wall, took one step forward, took another step forward, took a third step forward and knocked over the projector which—unbeknownst to me—was directly in front of me. I was so intent on staring at the wall that I didn't see it and, without my glasses, wouldn't have seen it anyway. It shattered on the floor. I

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was surprised because I was so focused on the wall. The guy in the white coat was really pissed. He yelled, “You dumb asshole! You passed!” He made a notation on my record, signed it and then stomped out of the room and my world died again. Before he left I tried to explain to him that it was just an “accident” but he would have none of it.

After he left, I looked around for someone who could help me. I saw this guy with a lot of stripes on his arm and went and talked to him. “He never tested me. He just got pissed at me because I broke his projector and then signed that I had passed. Who can I see to give me a real eye test?”

The old soldier just shook his head and asked, “You said he signed your papers. Is that right?” I nodded. “OK, here’s the deal. You can appeal your test. The officer over there (he pointed to a man sitting at a desk in the corner of the room) can take your complaint, but I don’t think it will do you any good. Appeals take six to eight months to decide. You will be drafted in six to eight weeks and will have to report for induction into the Army. Go ahead and make the appeal if you want, but in a couple of months you will be in the Army as a draftee, no matter what happens. Sorry, son! Once the clerk signs the medical record with your approved status you are going into the Army. Good luck!” He patted me on the shoulder and walked away.

I knew he was probably right and that I was screwed. I did go over to the officer—a real eye doctor—but he said the same thing. I slowly realized—sadly—that there was no appeal that I could find for the decree of this clerk. Bureaucracies, I learned at that moment, were unstoppable. I had been caught in its trap and there was no way out—or I didn’t know of one at that moment. So I was tossed into the Army by some unknown optometrist’s assistant who passed me only because I broke his projector. I was royally screwed. I knew now how a person who had been shanghaied must have felt. A cold dark anger filled my soul. From that moment on, I knew I would get even somehow. I knew I had about six weeks until I was drafted. But first I had to figure out what I was going to do now. I was taken back to my hotel and my thoughts. They sent me back to Laredo the next morning.



On the way back to Laredo I was a jumble of thoughts. It took half the trip for me to really understand what had happened to me. I hated the fucking Army. I had been screwed by a pea-brained idiot with the IQ of a ball of lint and there was nothing I could do about it. The Army had me and they knew it. It was hopeless. Yet, I would not give in to the hopelessness. There must be a way around these idiots. So I sat and thought out my options and decided that maybe I should join up in the Navy, Air Force, or Coast Guard. At least I wouldn't be in the Army! After all, I had a college degree and was in graduate school. There must be something I could do that would not render me cannon fodder. So I went to the motel again and explained to the landlady what had happened. My stuff was still in my old room. She just shook her head and gave me back my old key. I went to my room and took a long hot shower, changed my four-day-old clothes and went back to that good steakhouse. This time I had more than a few beers but I didn't enjoy them as much as I did the first time. The next morning I planned to start my search for a new life.

About mid-morning I went to the Courthouse because that was where all the recruiters were. I first went to the Navy and asked about joining. The recruiter asked me a number of questions. He wanted to know what kind of job I wanted. Now that was something that I hadn't thought about. So I had to listen to all his options. He thought I would make a great officer but was vague about the job I would have. Finally, I told him about the tests I had taken for induction, so he made a quick call to San Antonio and began writing down various numbers and short quotes. He hung up and began looking through his manuals. This took a fair amount of time and it was near lunchtime when he finally looked up and said, "Look, why don't you go get some lunch and come back between 3:00 and 4:00 this afternoon. By that time I will have found something for you." He had the look that a hunter must have when he has the fox in the trap: I was about to be skinned. With that, we shook hands and I went to lunch and then back to my room to watch a little TV before I became a sailor. I went back at 3:00 but had to wait because he was talking to some other poor soul. A little after 3:30 he was done and called me to his desk. When I sat down I noticed he looked

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really uncomfortable. That did not bode well. I felt my stomach tightening.

“Well, Mr. Burdick, I researched everything we have and with your eyes you do not qualify to join the Navy as an officer. Your eyes are just too bad!” Somehow, that figured! So I asked about becoming an enlisted person. “Look, I went through the entire Navy ‘regs’ but there was nothing that you could qualify for.” With that he slowly closed my file and my heart sank. “I’m sorry, but with your eyes you can’t join the Navy under any circumstance as your vision does not meet our minimum standards.” We shook hands and I dragged myself out of his office. This was not a good sign. I left and went to get a beer. I needed to think this through again. While I was drinking my third beer I looked in the phone book and found there was no Coast Guard recruiter in the town. I had already decided that the Marines were not an option, which was probably one of my better decisions.

So, the next morning I went looking for the Air Force recruiter. This time I said I wanted to enlist and that I was aware that my eyes might be a problem. I told him about the testing by the Army. He made some disparaging comment about the Army that I agreed with and made the same call that the Navy recruiter had and got my eye exam numbers. He also began the same search for a job in the Air Force. He would name different jobs and then look up the requirements if I was interested. We went through five or six of these, all of which I could not qualify for because my eyes were too bad. He, too, finally gave up. I was dead! It was too late to go anywhere else so I went back to the motel and stared at the TV. The news from Vietnam was on. I watched them load body bags onto a helicopter. This was not good for me to see so I changed the channel. I was getting very depressed. Despite my feelings about the Army, tomorrow I would have to try to join the Army. If they could draft me, they could enlist me, and maybe I could get a job that would keep me away from Vietnam. I felt sick to my stomach. I was losing my battle to stay out of the Army.

First thing in the morning, I went to see the Army recruiter but had to wait for two other enlistees to finish. I explained my situation and that I had decided to enlist. I was sure the Army could find a place for me. The recruiter almost licked his chops. He immediately

brought up officer training and we discussed several possible jobs. He then made that same call the other recruiters had, wrote down those same ominous numbers and began to look in his books. He kept looking and looking and finally said I could not enlist as an officer's candidate because my eyes were too bad. He was sure, though, that there was something I could enlist in as a regular soldier. He looked again. I was getting a little upset. This was ridiculous. I could be drafted into the Army but I couldn't join it. What an organization! After a longer while he admitted that he could not find an MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) I could enlist in with my eyes as bad as they were. By then I was really upset. I jumped up from my chair, almost knocking over his desk, and yelled my frustration about the crap that was happening to me. Surprisingly, the recruiter agreed with my outrage and even sympathized with me. He had an idea. In the entire world I found a recruiter with a brain! He had met some Military Intelligence Officers recently and they said they were looking for recruits. He had a card from one of them and said he would give them a call that afternoon. He did not think that my eyes would be a problem with them. He asked me to return the next morning. Intelligence! I was still absorbing that when I left. What the hell was that? I was curious. At least this option was interesting. I went back to the motel. I was still wearing the same clothes that I arrived in over a week ago. Things were getting ripe. I showered again.

On Friday morning I went back to see the Army recruiter. I had now been in Texas almost 10 days. I was supposed to be back in Mexico City last Sunday. I was going to be drafted now in five weeks. Time was ticking away. The recruiter was waiting for me. He had talked to the guy on the card and they were interested. They had no problem with my poor vision. Now I wanted to know what they were talking about. The recruiter admitted he didn't know much about what these guys did. I would have to go back to San Antonio for an interview that might take two to three days. This did not sound right, so I asked for some details. He said I would have to join for three years. If selected, I would be given a car, would wear civilian clothes, be paid to get an apartment, and get money for clothes and food. I was beginning to wonder if they would also throw in the Brooklyn Bridge. This offer was too good to believe. But I had to

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be accepted first, and that meant an interview Monday morning. So, by Friday afternoon I was on the bus again, heading for San Antonio and the same hotel. Things couldn't be better. At least if I got the job in Intelligence, it sounded like I would not really be in the Army, but working like a civilian. I liked that thought!

Monday morning a businessman—well he looked like one, suit and tie and all—showed up and took me in his car to an office building. We went to a large office and I was told to wait in the front area. In about a half hour another man showed up with a load of forms that he asked me to fill out. It was lunchtime before I finished and they told me to go down to the corner restaurant and get lunch. This was weird! Was this a test? So I went down and got a sandwich while constantly looking around to see if someone was watching. I never saw anyone. I returned and waited again for what seemed forever until another man showed up. He and I went into a small room and he went over every item on the forms I had filled out. He made notes on a little yellow pad every now and then. He talked of many things. He asked me about my activities in college. What was I doing in Mexico? It took forever. I kept my views on the Army to myself. There was no need for him to know that the Army had become my enemy. He probably sensed my anger at it, though. Towards late afternoon, he said I would have to come back tomorrow. He also asked me if I minded being given a polygraph test. This was cool! I had never seen a lie detector, let alone been on one. I was curious and really wanted to do it. So back to the hotel I went.

Tuesday morning, the same man who had gone over my forms picked me up. We went back to the office and into that same room. This time there was equipment in it that I took to be the lie detector. He sat me down and explained what was going to happen. First, he hooked up pads to my fingers and strapped a wire around my chest. I wondered if I was going to undergo shock therapy instead of being questioned with a lie detector. He had a long list of questions he was going to ask and went over each one of them before the test began. He also spent a considerable amount of time explaining the strengths and weaknesses of lie detectors. It was interesting. He then hooked me up and began asking the questions. He did this twice. I then had to go out front and wait again. About mid-morning he had me come back into the room and he began explaining the jobs available in

Counterintelligence. I was fascinated. I had passed the interviews and tests. They were now going to do a background investigation on me and, if that turned out OK, I would be in the Intelligence Community of the Army, either as a Clandestine Agent—what I later learned was called a “super spook”—or as a Military Intelligence Counterintelligence Agent. Both sounded good to me. I asked how long that would take and he really didn’t know. I had to admit my problem with the draft and I was assured I could join but not until the first quarter of 1966. I didn’t understand because I would be drafted before then. The balloon popped. He laughed when he saw my face drop and told me that I could fill out papers and join tomorrow. Once I signed up I could no longer be drafted. I would not have to actually report for Basic Training until about February. (It was now early November.) I asked again to be sure that I would not be subject to the draft. He smiled and again told me I would not be drafted. So I was taken back to the hotel and then, on Wednesday, back to Laredo for what I hoped was the last time.

The lady who owned the motel thought the whole thing was hilarious. She had never seen someone have so much trouble getting into the military. During the whole two-week-plus journey she only charged me for 4 nights. I guess in her heart she felt sorry for me. I had one more night to go. Thursday morning I was waiting for the recruiter at his office. We went directly to his desk and began to negotiate my next three years. I made him write down about the clothes, apartment, and car. I really didn’t believe they would do it and if they didn’t live up to the contract I thought I could get out of the Army. I might win yet! I signed the paper. I was going into the Army. I was to report to the Induction Center in San Antonio on February 26, 1966. I felt sick!

Now I had to get back to Mexico City. But before I left the States, I called home and let my mom know what I had done. I would be home sometime in early February before I had to go to Basic Training. She didn’t say much, but I could tell from her voice that she was worried. I then hopped in my car and headed for Mexico. I wondered what my roommates would think. It was almost three weeks that I had been gone. I was two and a half weeks late. I picked up a tourist visa for my car and took off.

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I arrived in Mexico City late in the afternoon and pulled into my apartment's parking lot. My roommate couldn't believe his eyes. He thought I was dead by the side of the road somewhere. He had reported me missing to the American Embassy. Evidently, everyone was out looking for me. We opened a beer and I told him my story. He was speechless and couldn't figure out what to say to me. So we drank our beer quietly. I felt strange. Things had happened so fast and I had to talk to Sylvia. I had forgotten about Sylvia. Nothing is easy.

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I hadn't intended to get involved with anyone while in Mexico, but I found the Mexican women irresistible. Never had I seen so many pretty women. When I first got to Mexico City I would go down to the *Reforma* near the Monument to Independence and sit and watch all the secretaries from the office buildings go to lunch. There were thousands of beautiful women walking hurriedly in every direction. It was an incredibly beautiful sight. My roommate, Tom, had met one—Maria—and invited me to go with him to meet her family. My Spanish was better than his since he had none. That's where I met Sylvia. She was not like others I had seen. She had eyes that tugged at your heart and a smile that warmed the soul. As with most things in Mexico, things were not really what they seemed. My friend from Chicago wanted to sleep with Maria in the worst way. If going to visit the family was part of the process, he was willing to do it. So we went to their house.

I guess no one told him about Maria's brothers. They did not like Americans in general and American students in particular. Luckily for us, no one in the family spoke English except Maria and Sylvia, although Sylvia's was not very extensive. The brothers did not know how much Spanish I understood. However, it didn't take a translator to ascertain their dislike. There were pleasantries and I translated most of what I understood to Tom. While I was doing that, though, I was adding to my suspicions about the brothers from some of what they were saying. I guess if you were a moth on the ceiling it would have been comical. It was not for us. Luckily, this was going to be a short visit. All that we had been told was that we were to meet the

family, have a beer and a snack, and then leave. I was ready to go back to our place when I saw Maria's brothers, but since I had not been able to talk even a little with Sylvia, I decided to stay a little longer. Tom was getting nervous, both from what I was telling him and from what his imagination must have been telling him. He was now very aware of the brothers. Maria, as was the custom, never stayed in the room for long. She would go out to the kitchen and bring back some crackers and sodas. The beers never arrived.

Then we were asked if we would like a shrimp cocktail. I talked to Tom and he thought it would be a good idea. I had eaten many shrimp cocktails—lettuce, catsup, a little horseradish, and some shrimp. I must have forgotten where I was. Mexican shrimp cocktails aren't like that. As a point of honor, the eldest brother said he would make them. Maria was impressed that her brother would be amiable to the American students. The hair on the back of my neck came to attention. In a few minutes he returned with an ornate tray with two crystal bowls filled with what looked like shrimp in dishwater with green, orange and white things swimming with the shrimp. We were the only ones served. We smiled and I thanked him as he maliciously grinned at us. Back in college at Santa Clara University I had realized that if I focused a little bit I could tell what someone was feeling when I met them. It helped me get out of numerous situations in College. When I met Sylvia's brother I was not getting a warm feeling. He did not like us and I understood immediately what was happening. Machismo runs deep in the Mexican character and we had stumbled into his trap. If we refused his offering, we would insult him and have to leave. If we tried to eat and could not, the same insult was there. If we insulted him, Maria could never see Tom again. That probably meant that I would never again see Sylvia. As I was complimenting the dish to the brothers, I told Tom what was going on. I took my first bite. Luckily, I was used to spicy food. The green parts turned out to be pickled Jalapeño chilies, the orange parts were pickled sliced carrots, and the white parts were pickled onion slices. The juice was lime and the oil was from a can of pickled jalapeños. We were in trouble. Tom was suffering. He was not used to spicy food—he thought catsup was spicy. Still, he grinned and bore with it.

We struggled through the bowl, all the time complimenting the brothers about the dish while our lips were burning and God-knows-what was happening to our intestines. I would smile at Tom and ask him if he was dying. He would smile back and ask me: How do I get out of this? We both would then take another bite. This continued as we ate the cocktail. I was not going to let the brothers win, so I kept saying how much we liked it, even though it was different from what we had in the States. Of course, they didn't bring us any more drinks. We were dying. Sweat was running down our backs and beginning to drip off our foreheads. After we finished the bowl, the brothers said they would make us more since we liked it so much. Again, if we turned them down we would insult them since, obviously, we didn't like it and were lying—which was true. The rules of machismo being what they are, I of course accepted. I then told Tom, who understood but was losing interest in Maria as the pain increased. While the brothers were out of the room we plotted our exit. After a couple of bites, Tom would look at his watch and tell me that we had to get back so that he could finish a paper. It was an old routine but all we could come up with as more sweat rolled down our backs.

They returned with new bowls that had less shrimp and more of the peppers and other things. We thanked them and I waited for Tom to set the routine in motion. I waited and waited. I looked at Tom but he had gotten the machismo fever. He looked directly at the brothers as he deliberately put bite after bite into his mouth. I finally said, "Are you nuts!" That broke the whole cycle and I translated my remark for them, as I could not believe how much Tom liked their shrimp cocktail. Tom then started the routine about the paper that was due. We made our apologies and thanked them for their hospitality. Tom thanked Maria for inviting him and asked her out to a movie and to bring Sylvia along. She accepted and told her brothers, who reluctantly approved. We slowly got into my car, waved goodbye, and drove carefully to the corner. I turned the car right and burned rubber (which is hard to do in a VW bug), looking for a cantina to get a cold beer. We quickly found one, and after four beers each were able to talk and laugh because we won. Later, Maria told Tom that her brothers were impressed with our manners and respect. They allowed Maria to continue seeing Tom. As far as



I know, Tom never succeeded in sleeping with Maria—but as in all things it's the quest, not the capture, you remember. That was the first time Sylvia and I met.

Over time, Sylvia and I became good friends. I even met her mother. I kind of got myself into a position I shouldn't have, and didn't know how to get out of. First, you have to appreciate that I had previously spent five years in a seminary to become a priest. I knew nothing about how women think or what they feel is important. I just wanted to be with people I liked and who thought I had something to offer. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and absolutely no idea how my attitude was read by the women I met. I really wanted to help people. I just knew that I didn't want to do that as a priest. Without real goals but with a very strong curiosity, I really was the wrong type of person to become involved with a "Sylvia."

It turned out that Sylvia's family was extended. Her father had married another woman in the church and had a family with her. This was his "real" marriage. He had also married Sylvia's mother in a state marriage recorded in the *barrio* (district) she lived in. Sylvia thought he had also married some other women in other *barrios*. In Mexico, the church had central records so there could only be one church marriage, while the state had no central recording system then. Some men used that loophole and got married in various *barrios* of the town. Mexico City is so huge that they could get away with it. Since it was required for all Mexicans to be married by the state before the church, it was possible for the men to get married in the state and then not have a church wedding. Sylvia never blamed him but was sad and would cry because she would never know her half-sisters and half-brothers. I had read about this in college and now I was in the middle of it. It was really very interesting and touched my Jesuit-implanted desire to help those in need. This desire to help was a very dangerous thing for the Mexican women that I knew because they read this attitude of mine as a serious interest in them for marriage—but I didn't know that. Everything I learned about Sylvia just strengthened my desire to help her.

Eventually, I was invited to her "house." Until then, we had always met at some public place and gone to dinner or a movie—always with another couple. Although she gave me directions,

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I had a hard time understanding them. Her mother lived in one of the poorer *barrios* in Mexico City. It was not a place I would normally drive to or even stop in, but I went anyway. I was going to take her to the *Torre Latino Americano* for drinks at the bar at the top of the building, which at that time was the tallest building in Mexico City. So I had a coat and tie on. I stepped out of my car into a dark, foreboding street, trying to avoid garbage and worse. I went to where she said was a walkway and found a dark alley with a single light bulb way at the end of it. People were huddled in various doorways down the alley and some were sitting in the filth—and all were staring at me. This looked somewhat risky to me but I went into the dark alley and headed for the light anyway. This penchant for ignoring risks was going to haunt me later in life, but now it seemed perfectly correct to charge down a darkened alley in Mexico City's worst slum.

There was supposed to be a courtyard at the end. All I was hoping was that I would somehow get out of this place alive, so I went on. I finally came to the open space Sylvia had called a “courtyard” but which was no more than a bare dirt open space with a dripping faucet at one end where people presumably were getting their water. To my left were two doors that you could tell were common bathrooms for how many of the people who lived here I didn't know. Sylvia's place was supposed to be to the right so I turned and looked. There was a doorway but I didn't see a door. It looked closed but it was too dark to be sure—the tiny lightbulb did not shed much brilliance here. I went to the doorway and stopped. It was a blanket or rug. There was no door. How do you knock on a blanket? I knocked on the wall next to the blanket. I was determined to go through with this. Besides, if I left I would have to go through that dark gauntlet of foreboding eyes alone. I knocked again.

Sylvia pulled open the blanket, stepped out and invited me in to meet her mother. I thought she was a bit loud about this but by this time every noise I heard was amplified by my fear. I later found out that her neighbors all thought she was exaggerating about having a rich American as a boyfriend and had been giving her quite a bad time about it. She wanted all to know that I had come to visit her mother. I didn't realize the importance of this to her at the time—or

to her mother—or the implied commitment I was making. Life is simpler being ignorant, I guess.

We entered into what could barely be called a hallway. On the left was a small table with two freestanding gas burners on it and a bucket next to the burners. I had no idea what was in the bucket and did not look. A small cupboard was on the wall next to a refrigerator. On the right was a doorway that Sylvia pulled me into. In the room were an overstuffed chair, a large bed and—surprisingly—a 21” color TV playing brightly. Sylvia’s mother was sitting on the bed and motioned for me to sit in the chair. I declined and asked her to sit in the chair. It was her house. (Well, at least her room.) Sylvia tried to get me to sit in the chair but for some reason I still refused. It didn’t seem right. Then Sylvia disappeared and returned with a chair. Where it came from, I did not know. I suspect she borrowed it from a neighbor. I sat on the chair. Her mother then went and sat in the overstuffed chair and Sylvia sat on the bed. She was beaming. Somehow, I was doing the right things without realizing it. I was given a beer, as was her mother. Sylvia also brought crackers and some kind of white Mexican cheese. We talked. My Spanish was not all that good and I understood more than I could speak.

Sylvia’s mother, it turned out, claimed Aztec roots and was very proud of that. She even knew some *Nahuatl* words and spoke them. I was taking a graduate course that taught us some of the Aztec language so I said something back in *Nahuatl*. You would have thought I had hit her with a club. Her eyes widened to huge disks and then she laughed in joy. I was afraid I had said something really stupid. I thought all I had said was that I knew some *Nahuatl*. She was shocked that a *gringo* would know anything about her culture. We were friends from that moment on. Sylvia was not in the room when this happened and came running in as her mother babbled a long statement that I didn’t catch. I asked Sylvia if I had said something incorrectly. All she did was say, “No,” but she was beaming and blushing at the same time. After a little more time her mother dismissed us to let us go to the *Torre Latino Americano* and we went out for the night.

As we walked down that darkened alley that had frightened me before, there seemed to be a lot more people and Sylvia was talking mostly in English, which was not normal or easy for her. She looked

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very happy and proud. I was feeling very guilty. Until this moment this had been a game for me. Chasing women was good sport. But I sensed I had entered somewhere I didn't belong, a place where life was not a game, and a place where life was real. To the people I had just left, I was the dream, and, though they didn't know it, a dream that would never be fulfilled.

It only got worse after that. I wanted to take Sylvia out without her friends but somehow could never get that across to her. So I asked one of the graduate students from Texas what I was supposed to do or say that would tell her I wanted to be alone with her. I was tired of her friends. He told me that she would have to be my "girl friend" officially before that happened. I understood "girl friend." It just meant we were only seeing each other and that, somehow, that would let her go out with me alone. He even told me the phrase to use. Never seek advice from a Texan—as I learned the hard way.

The next time I was out with Sylvia I used the phrase and was astonished with what happened next. She started crying, and then gave me the biggest hug I had ever gotten from her, and then she smiled, laughed, and cried at the same time. I tried not to look shocked but I knew that the phrase I used meant something more than I thought. That damned Texan had gotten me into trouble. I found out the next day that the word I used meant "girl friend" in Texas but "engaged" in Mexico. What had I done to poor Sylvia!

Life after that was different. I should have stopped and explained my mistake but I didn't. Sylvia doted on me. Her eyes glowed with pride. She wanted to show me off to all her friends and we went to party after party where I was always introduced as being with Sylvia and always was the only American there. Sylvia waited on me at every one of these events. If my drink were empty she would get another one to me before I could find out where the drinks were. If I said we should get something to eat, she would disappear and return with a huge plate of food for me. I could do no wrong in her eyes and she would do anything for me. But I never did get to take her out by myself. Her friends were no longer going with us. Now an aunt of hers was assigned to go with us to every event. If we went to a movie, I had to pay for her, too. A "*Duena*" was what she was called. So all my effort to be alone with her had done was formalize a chaperone that I could not get rid of. I was worse off than before.

This was where my life was when I got my draft notice and went to Texas.

Now I had to tell this woman—who thought I was her way to the golden spoon—that I was going off to war. Well, at least off to the Army. My guilt was doubled by my seminarian training. Wanting to help people was built into me. Sylvia needed to be helped. She was a fine young woman who I believed loved me completely. She could either come with me or remain to live in that one-room hovel that was her home. I did not want to end her dreams now. I kept up the relationship. When I told her that I was going into the Army those big brown eyes filled with tears that flowed down her dark cheeks. She hugged me and cried. She knew about Vietnam and she was afraid I would be hurt or die in war. So was I. But she stopped because she didn't want her pain to make my time with her a sad time. Still I could see her soul through her big brown eyes and she was terribly sad.

One day she asked me to take her to the Shrine at Guadalupe. She knew that I had been there several times on my own and I was curious why she wanted to go now. So we went. It turned out that she had purchased a small gold medal with a picture of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on one side and etched on the other side were the words "Sylvia Y John." She wanted it blessed at the Guadalupe Shrine. So she found a priest and he blessed the medal and then me. Sylvia put the medal around my neck and said, "Now you are safe. The *Virgen* will watch over you." It was a special moment. I wore that medal every day until I was dating Lena. When she noticed it and the inscription, she yanked the chain and medal off my neck and threw it into a field next to her house. I suppose I should have put it away before I started dating Lena, but it was a link to a time that would always be special to me and was a lesson that I should control what I get into and not fall into things, like I did with Sylvia.

I left Sylvia in early February 1966 to go off into the Army. I was first sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana for my Basic Training. Fort Polk was a life-changing experience and not a good one. Every soldier in my training company was from the South. I was the only one from the West and—worse, according to my drill instructor from California, for the first few weeks—I was just the "fucking hippie from California." Training was brutal but somehow I survived. I got

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more KP and Guard Duty than anyone else. Despite that, I never learned to shut up. Meningitis was a problem at the camp and one of the men from my company died from it during training. I did not know him but I was sad to see anyone die. At the end of training everyone's orders were posted on a barracks' wall. When I looked at mine they just said "Confidential." I had no idea what that was about. One thing it did was shut up all the drill sergeants. They were genuinely worried that I might be reporting on them. The last week was easy. The Company Commander finally gave me my orders, which were to report to Fort Holabird, Maryland for a classified assignment. I went home for a week and then flew to Baltimore, where Fort Holabird was. There I was trained to be an Army Intelligence Agent. Most of the training was classified and it was here that my eyes were opened to the clandestine struggle the US was involved in. Life was not as simple as I thought. After training I was sent to be stationed at San Antonio, Texas. I was sent back to the very same office that I had interviewed for becoming an agent almost a year ago. While working as an agent my view of things changed. I knew that my relationship with Sylvia was wrong, so I broke off with her about a month after arriving at San Antonio in a poorly written letter with some lame excuse about war and death and other junk. The truth was that I had begun to change into something other than what I was. I was a colder person and she did not fit into my plans any more. Who knows how I would have turned out if I had never gone into the Army? I will never know. A few months later I met Lena and within six months we were married.

Strangely, my time in Mexico prepared me for my work in Vietnam. My ability to sense someone's intent even if I didn't speak their language at all would be key to my survival and my success. I had also found out how to impress someone with my sincerity and make them a friend by seeming to share their beliefs and respect their culture, as I had with Sylvia's mother. In addition, I realized that I liked to take risks which would not be a good thing to do in Vietnam. But, like walking down that darkened alley in Mexico City, I would take many more serious risks in Vietnam. It was an addiction I could not give up.

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I was now an hour out of Fort Hood and nearing San Antonio. My head was bursting with all kinds of thoughts. How would I break the news of my going to Vietnam to my wife? Reality was heading my way faster than I could think. I arrived at our apartment's parking lot and sat in the car to gather my thoughts. The fear about what was going to happen to me was strong and I did not want to share it with anyone. I would have to keep "a stiff upper lip" attitude with Lena. For once, I could not tell her what I was thinking. I didn't want to show weakness.

When I got into the apartment I found she wasn't home yet, so I went to the refrigerator and found a cold Lone Star and opened it. I sat at our dinner table, sipped the beer and waited as the dread built up. She got home sooner than I wanted. She had a load of groceries. She had stopped to buy a steak and some things for a special dinner since I had been gone for a week. I stood up and she gave me a peck on the cheek and a small hug.

"After dinner we can relax," she said as she winked at me. Putting away the food and starting dinner, she continued to talk about school. She was a fifth-grade teacher and the kids had been terrible today. I sat sipping my beer. Slowly, she stopped talking and turned and looked at me. Worry was written over every inch of her body. "What's wrong?" She had realized that I hadn't said two words since she came home.

"Sit down for a minute," I said. She slowly sat in the chair opposite me. There was no easy way to sugar coat this. "I received orders to go to Vietnam." Her face fell. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"When?" she said.

"Sometime in December. I won't know until I get the hard copy of the orders Monday."

"Well, we'll have an early Christmas then!" she said as she went off to finish making dinner. Both of us wanted to scream, shout, swear, cry—but did nothing. She started talking about her school again and I talked about my trip to Fort Hood. What could we say to each other?

Monday I picked up my orders. The office was quiet. I was to depart from California on December 17, 1967 and to report to the 525th MI Group in Saigon for assignment. It appeared I was being sent over to work as a counterintelligence agent. Nobody could tell

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me what I would be doing. They didn't know. It was stiff upper lip time. I joked about going. Inside, I was more curious than afraid. I had gotten over the initial fear that had overwhelmed me and now my curiosity was building. I was going to Vietnam! What would I be doing there? The Army had been a private joke for me so far. The work wasn't hard—I even enjoyed it. As an MI agent I worked in a regular office in civilian clothes and kept regular civilian hours. Rank meant little among agents. We did background checks on people needing military clearances. I had some practice doing vehicle surveillances, but no real counterintelligence work. I didn't speak Vietnamese, so what would they have me doing? Watching the news on TV made it worse. Seeing wounded and dead American soldiers gave me a cold feeling inside. That could be me! I quit watching TV news. I went through some training at Fort Sam Houston that, while informative, was a joke. I had to be in uniform but my rank was classified so all I wore were officer's insignia with "US" where the rank was supposed to be. No one knew how to treat me, so, typically, they just figured I was a VIP of some kind and treated me with more respect than some of the officers going through the training. That alone taught me something about the military that I hadn't realized before, and would be used by me more than once in the future. My feelings about the Army had not changed much. The Army still sucked, but as an MI agent it was bearable. I had survived almost two years of it and I thought I could do one more if I just knew what I was going to be doing. Nobody could tell me that, though.

I guess there were things you are supposed to talk about before you go to war, but nobody had told me what they were. I chose to ignore what was happening and believed that this was just a stupid trick the military was pulling on me to get even for the easy job I had so far. Time seemed to speed by faster and faster. Sometime along the way I had another birthday. Thanksgiving happened. Goodbye parties happened. Finally, I was signed out of my unit, turned in my gun and credentials, and received my final orders to fly to Vietnam. It was time to go. I didn't know where I was going—just somewhere in Vietnam. I didn't know how I was to get there except to report to the Oakland Army Terminal for processing. What I did know was that I was going alone. I had no buddies, no unit, no nothing! I was



alone. What I had to do, I had to do by myself. I did not know that “aleness” could grow, but it did. Ever since I received notification of my orders at Fort Hood, it grew. My anger at the Army also grew. Their massive bureaucracy had let an insignificant optician force me into an Army that I could not join. Then, just before I reached the date that I couldn’t be sent to Vietnam, I received my orders. Somehow, I knew I would get even. I did not talk about my thoughts to anyone. I held them close to myself. I had begun to shut my life down and prepare for the un-preparable. I wanted to survive this, and giving in to my fears would not help me.

It should have been a closer time for my wife and me but we both avoided talking about it. She probably followed my lead in this. We never spoke of what could happen and I never talked about what was happening to me. One of the older agents at the office had once taken me to lunch and asked if I had made up a will and talked to my wife about what to do if I were to die. If that were to happen, then what should she do and how was I to be buried? He tried to make me prepare for the worst. He tried to make me see that I needed to talk to my wife about all the things that could happen. I nodded my head in agreement. I knew what he said was right, but I did nothing. I could not bring myself to talk about this with Lena. I don’t know why.

Finally, the day came and Lena drove me to the airport. It was the only time she had ever seen me in uniform. What do you say when you go off to war? Nobody had told me and I didn’t know. I held back my tears and so did she. We hugged and kissed. I went through the door waving to her. We had said nothing to each other. Her waving at me was the last sight I would have of her until I returned—if I returned. It was not enough.

I went onto the plane and sat in turmoil where I was assigned to sit. I looked out the window for my last view of San Antonio. Behind the sadness of leaving my wife grew a feeling of excitement for going into the unknown. There was adventure ahead of me and I was curious about what it would be. It was a strange mixture of feelings—but they were mine.

As I sat there alone in my seat, thoughts bounced around my mind that I could not control. One moment I was consumed with the hurt of leaving my wife. Next, I wondered what my job would

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be in Vietnam. I was told I would be in civilian clothes. But what was I supposed to be doing? Would I be a coward when I faced the enemy? Why did I have to go? Where would I live in Vietnam? I had seen too many news programs and had seen their towns. I hoped I wouldn't be in one of those places and I had never seen anybody serving in Vietnam in civilian clothes. I had gone through Basic Training in the Army, but that was years ago. I knew I was not ready for any hard physical work. I knew I had never been in any physical confrontation with anybody. How would I react when I was forced to fight? What would it do to me? I couldn't answer that as I flew from San Antonio toward a place where that question was not a philosophical one. I sat in the plane heading to California with my emotions jumping from the fear of not being able to do what I would be assigned to do, to the pain of leaving my wife, from wondering about my job, to worrying about fighting. I was gnawed with fears. Alone in a cabin full of people who somehow knew where I was going—or at least I thought they did. They seemed to look at me as if they knew I was going to Vietnam and did not know what to say to me. Some had pity in their eyes. Others looked angry or just looked away. They would not look at me. I looked out the window to avoid their hidden glances. Through the window every sight seemed a last sight. Would I survive this? Yet somehow, part of me was also curious about what was about to happen. Slowly, this curiosity was becoming my strongest feeling. This could be my great adventure. Surprisingly, I realized that part of me wanted to go.

## Chapter 2

**It's strange being around a group** of people who really don't know what to say. I had arrived home in uniform, something no one had ever seen me in before. I only had a short time to say my goodbyes. They knew this could very well be the last time they would see me alive. They would never find out how close to the truth that was. We talked and joked. They didn't really know what I did in the Army. They knew I was an investigator of some sort. To them that meant I would not be in a combat outfit. Even I did not know what I would do there. Not knowing was not a relief to me. I joked and told them not to worry, that I would be fine. When you're in your twenties, you are immortal! I would survive. How, I didn't have a clue. The visit was a blur to me. My mom tried to make my time enjoyable with all my favorite foods, but like my mood, the weather was terrible and we lost power so the prime rib that mom was cooking in the oven had to be completed on the barbeque in the back yard. I'm sure it was a great meal, but I have little memory of it. There was a strange moment at the end when my brother, Jim, a priest, said a Mass for me in the front room of my parents' home. It was uncomfortable and left me feeling a bit weird. It was sort of like being awake for your last rites or something. I was confused and holding myself together by sheer willpower. The unknown was staring at me and I was losing my nerve. I could not bring myself to call my wife one last time. It would hurt too much and I couldn't do it. What was going on inside me was hard to describe. It would be a year and a day before I would hear her voice again. I was already counting the minutes.

After breakfast the next morning, I loaded my gear into my dad's car. I hugged my mom—who had tears in her eyes but said nothing—said

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my goodbyes to my brothers and sister, who really didn't understand what was going on, got in the car and had dad drive me to the Oakland Army Terminal. I don't remember talking much on the way there. I suppose we did. I tried to soak in the views as we drove—I would not see them for a long time. We found the debarkation point reception area at the Oakland Army terminal and I took my stuff out of the car. I shook hands with my dad. We said something I can't remember. You would think there would be some wise thought to be shared. There was not, and even if there were I would not have heard it. My mind was racing with too many thoughts and feelings. Walking calmly into a building that may take you to your death is not a normal or easy action. I watched dad drive away and a thought crossed my mind to get in a cab and go to Canada. But it was only a thought. I turned around and dragged myself off to war. With all of my thoughts, I was still curious about what I was going to see and what I would do. I went into the building and entered a world I had never even dreamed about—or even believed could exist.

They took my papers and I became a thing. The papers were stamped and directions were given. The Army treated me like a piece of baggage. The feeling sucked. They gave me a tag with a number on it and told me to go to the transportation point, where my number would be called. I was told I would be going into the barracks area and would have to change into my summer khakis. I knew I would be cold—it was winter after all—but I didn't dwell on that. In the reception area there was a silent rumble in the background that I couldn't quite place. Finally, I was led out of the reception room to my group area which was nothing more than a large warehouse. The noise there was incredible. The "silent" rumble was now a roar in here. Beds were in rows in every direction—as far as I could see. Everybody had a strange look in his eyes. We knew no one and none of us really knew where we were going, except to Vietnam. The fear was covering all of us like a blanket of lead. Worse, we were all strangers so there was no buddy to talk to or get strength from or even protection from. You could not leave your stuff alone or it would disappear and there was nothing you could do about it. What was the penalty for stealing? You get to stay in the US! The MPs—who were scarce—knew this and just told people to watch their stuff. They had no intention of arresting anybody. Here and there fights broke out.

I found an empty bunk and changed into my khakis and packed my winter uniform in my duffle bag. Being a sergeant kept me out of the troubles but I had to be careful. Everyone would stop whatever they were doing when the PA system would announce the next group to go to the buses for shipment to the Republic of Vietnam. We all looked at the tags they gave us and, if you won that lottery, you would get up, grab your duffel bag and move to a large door at the side of the building. The soldiers would then line up and begin to board the buses. When the door closed, we would all start looking around and the same process would begin again. Many of the men would sit on their bunks chain smoking cigarettes and vacantly stare into nothing. I had quit smoking so I just stared into the same nothingness and tried to control my thoughts. Sometime around midnight, guys began to lie down on their cots and take quick naps. Most hugged their bags while they slept. I did the same. During the night more numbers were called and more soldiers left. Around 0430 hours my number was called. I had not slept. I got up, grabbed my bag and headed for the door. I have to say I was glad to get out of the damn depot and I was very curious about what was going to happen to me next. Curiosity was going to get me into a lot of trouble. Every soldier around me was going to some specific unit to be stationed at a specific site somewhere in Vietnam. I was going to some unit to be sent in as a civilian under cover. I knew this. I would have no buddies and I may not even have my own name. I had no one to talk to and nothing I could talk about. I sat on the bus in silence and watched the early morning fog drift in from the bay. The bus started and then drove out to Travis Air Force base. I was on my way.

Leave it to the Army! Who had ever heard of Flying Tiger Airlines? I knew about the Flying Tigers from World War II. My guess was that I was going to Vietnam by lowest bidder. After the plane was loaded we took off and went almost straight up. Well, it seemed straight up. I had flown on a few commercial airlines but never had I flown in a plane that took such a steep ascent. We were all pressed far back in our seats, quickly looking at each other to see if it was all right to panic. We didn't, however. The plane eventually started leveling off. The stewardesses thought it was great fun—you could tell by the way they were joking in the back. I looked out the window. It was black. There was a glow through the fog behind us

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that must be San Francisco. I suddenly realized that I had no idea what our route was. How were we going to get to Vietnam? Was it a direct flight or were we going to stop somewhere? When the stewardess finally came by, I asked her and she said we were going to Honolulu first. I was going to Hawaii! Probably just a fuel stop and we would not be there long, but at least I could brag that I had been there. We settled in for the flight. Everyone was lost in his own thoughts. I kept wondering if I could do what I would have to. That was difficult because I had no idea what I would be asked to do.

We arrived in Honolulu early the next morning, their time. We were all to disembark while they prepared the plane for our flight to Manila, which I had discovered was our next stop. The waiting area was a couple of barracks with a few phones for soldiers to make their last calls home. It seemed morbid to me. NCOs were separated from the rest of the troops and our area had only one phone. As always, I thought quickly about how I could screw around with the Army. My dislike for the Army—even in my “cushy” agent job—had never left me. I had always found some way to buck their system and screw with their minds. It was my way of fighting back for forcing me to join them. An idea came to mind. I started talking to a couple of what appeared to be grizzled old veteran lifers. I mentioned to them about the lack of phones for us. They gave me a look that I was soon to become very familiar with: the “who gives a fuck!” look. I smiled (if nothing, I was quick on my feet). “No,” I said. “Suppose I go ask the officer over there if we can go into the terminal to use the phones there.” Three of them gave me a curious look—they sensed I was up to something. It’s strange how one can sense a scam coming on. They followed me over to the officer—a young lieutenant who didn’t want to be there and looked like he was afraid of soldiers, especially sergeants. I made my case to him about the lack of phones and—since we were NCOs, we wouldn’t get lost—we just wanted a chance to call home. Evidently, no one had ever asked him that before, and for some reason he let us go. The three sergeants followed me, still with curious looks on their faces. I then said the magic word “Bar” and they started grinning from ear to ear. We headed for the first bar we could find. We ordered things with umbrellas, in pineapples, in coconuts and with plenty of rum. I was really in Hawaii now! I only had to buy one drink.

The sergeants bought the rest. Eventually, two MPs showed up and asked us what we were doing. I said we were waiting in line for a phone. You should never carry a scam too far. They, of course, noticed there was no phone near us and told us to get our butts back to the plane “NOW!” We guzzled our drinks and were escorted back to the waiting area. I never saw those sergeants again but I was very satisfied with myself, and flying with a “buzz on” would make the trip a little more bearable. Tricking the Army was fun. Again we were marched onto the plane and tucked ourselves into our seats. I got a window seat this time. We took off again, this time without the fighter-jet takeoff. We were on our way to Manila.

But things didn't go quite as planned. As we took off some white smoke began coming out of the air nozzles above our heads. It wasn't cold or wet and it didn't smell like smoke. We were all sure it wasn't supposed to happen. The stewardess told us the captain was working on it and in a few minutes it stopped. The air still blew but it was no longer white. We were given no explanation and flew on. All of us were a little on edge after that, but after a couple hours, things seemed to be going all right and we relaxed a bit. It was a long and boring trip. No movies for us!

We arrived in the Philippines a little after dark and were told to prepare for landing. I looked out the window. It was dark but you could see the airport lights. I didn't know that airports had so many red lights next to the runway. I thought maybe this was peculiar to a military airport or a foreign airport. We continued our approach and, as we were about to touch down, I became very worried. Those red lights turned out to be attached to fire trucks and, as we landed, they began to follow us. I looked about the cabin but nobody else seemed to notice. I looked for the stewardess and saw the one sitting near the pilot's cabin blessing herself and looking very worried. Something was happening and it wasn't good! Since there was nothing I could do, I turned to watch what was going on. As the wheels touched down, a horrendous roar filled the cabin. Everybody was suddenly awake and looking around. I pointed out the window to the people in my row. Pieces started to fall off the far engine of the wing next to me. I watched in amazement and curiosity. The roar began to hurt our ears and then suddenly stopped as the plane jerked to a complete stop. A large piece fell off the engine. We sat in silence, waiting for

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instructions. None came. We sat some more. The firemen sprayed foam on the engine and still we sat. There were no lights, no power on the plane—and we sat. For almost an hour we sat in the dark and stuffy plane, red lights blinking all around us. Finally, the fire trucks began to leave and we were alone. We then felt a lurch forward. We were being towed somewhere. We had still not heard anything from the crew. They had essentially disappeared. The slow tow finally stopped and the door cracked open. MPs armed with M16s were at the door and ordered us off immediately. We were herded into an area that obviously had just been created for us: a building surrounded by layers of concertina wire. Obviously, they didn't want to lose any of us. We were informed that we could not leave the area and that an engine on our plane would have to be replaced. The replacement could take up to 12 hours. My only comment—made aloud—was that I didn't care where I spent my overseas time. Several soldiers near me nodded their heads affirmatively after they heard my remark. A day in Manila was a day of overseas duty and a day I would not have to be in Vietnam. One sergeant did escape but they caught him after about 8 hours of freedom. He had a smile on his face when he got back. After 15 hours of waiting in the heat and humidity of the tropics, we were re-boarded on the same plane and left for Vietnam. My tour did not start with good karma.

The trip from Clark Air Force base, Philippines to Tan Son Nhut, South Vietnam was short. All of us were rather quiet and lost in our own thoughts. I had wondered what I would do. How would I react? What was it going to be like? Would I be going home alive? In college—back in the US—you could talk about what you would do. You could guess how you would feel. This was real. There was going to be no theory here. I didn't know where I was going, what I was going to do or even if I had a good chance to survive. Deep inside, I think I understood that I was not ready for what was going to happen. I was an innocent, thinking I was tough. Thinking I could do anything. Curiosity covered the confusion and I stared out the window for my first glimpse of Vietnam.



## Chapter 3

**I don't know what I expected.** My first look through the plane window was a blur of colors. The dominant color was red. The very earth was scarred blood-red. It was as if the world had been slashed open here and there with a savage blade. There was also green—a lot of it—in the distance, but most of what I saw as I got closer was trash. There were numerous little huts whose sides consisted of pieces of crates holding up a tin roof held down by what looked like US Army truck tires. There seemed to be some tall buildings off in the distance. I had landed at Tan Son Nhut airport, outside of Saigon. Everybody near our plane that I could see was carrying a weapon of some sort. There were bunkers and foxholes spotted around.

When the plane finally stopped, the door was thrown open and the smells of Vietnam invaded the cabin, accompanied by an oppressive heat. It was like walking into a hot oven where they were cooking garbage and something else that I couldn't place—and probably was smart not to try to place. The sun was blinding. Twenty-four hours ago I was in a wintry San Francisco covered with a cold fog and chilly winds. The human system was not made for this rapid a change. They rushed us off of the plane and ran us over to a building with no walls, just a tin roof. They wanted to get us out of the sun. There were water bags around the non-existent walls, hanging from the roof beams. I got some water but it tasted of chemicals and was kind of cloudy. I wasn't sure if it was safe to drink so I left it alone.

I had an odd feeling when I recognized a staff sergeant in our group. He was one of my drill instructors when I went through Basic Training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. He really liked to chew on me because I was the only one from California—and a college graduate.

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Two years later and he was still a Staff Sergeant E-6 but I was no longer a Private E-1. I was a Sergeant E-5—almost equal to him—and I did it in less than two years. I was planning to talk to him but they pulled all the E-6s and above out of the area. I was left behind.

I had never been rank conscious. I had never been in uniform except in Basic Training. I was a Sergeant E-5, which meant I had more rank than most on the flight. I was now treated as a sergeant by all the men around me: they thought I should know what was happening and kept asking me questions. We eventually got our duffel bags and were taken to the reception center, commonly known as the “repo depot.” Here we had to go through in-country processing. The first thing they did was make us give them all our money, including coins, for which they issued military scrip: Funny Money! Everything, including coins, was duplicated with strange, ugly pictures on paper scrip about half the size of a dollar bill. I guess this was to keep us out of the black market where US dollars were king. Most locals would take scrip, but that was always a risk, with the threat of the military changing all the scrip and thus nullifying their bankroll. This hung over everyone’s head. The Army never changed it during my tour, though. After the money changing, we were moved to some living quarters at the repot depot. We were assigned beds according to rank. I moved into a bunker-type dormitory and grabbed a bottom bunk. The walls were made of sandbags up to a height of 6 feet and then open for a couple of feet before the tin roof, so air could flow through and keep it cool. We were told where the mess tent was and grabbed some dinner.

Afterwards, I came back and lay on my bunk and listened to the sounds of Vietnam. I really hadn’t listened until then. The airport was nearby so I heard jets and planes and helicopters. There were also the sounds of trucks, bikes rattling, and people talking gibberish. I had seen some Vietnamese running around as we deplaned. They wore those conical hats I had seen on the TV news. They were short, small people who—by what I was seeing—worked quite hard. As it got dark, I began to hear explosions and gunfire from far away. As it got darker, it got louder and, I thought, closer. I soon discovered that waiting for the unknown was much harder than reality itself. I wondered where I would get a weapon if something happened. I had never thought about having a weapon before. What would I do if

something happened? The sounds of what I thought was a battle in the distance continued. I slept poorly that night.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, we were taken to local indoctrination classes. Basically, we had to wait until our units heard we were here and sent someone to pick us up. The group I was in consisted of individual replacements. We were all being sent to different units. My orders were a bit different, as they did not specify anything other than an "MI GROUP"—which could mean anything. There were meetings about the culture of Vietnam, about their military and their various units, and something about the various areas of the country. I had heard it all before. In the afternoon of the first and last day of training we were moved into a large room holding about 35 or so of us and given forms to fill out in the eventuality of being wounded and meeting death. The room got very quiet. It was pointed out to us that 30% of us would (not could) be wounded and 1 out of 10 of us would die. (I found out later those figures were high, but the chance was there.) The forms were simple. Do you want us to notify anyone if you are lightly wounded? If so, who? Who do we notify if you are seriously wounded? And finally, who do we notify upon your death? The room was very quiet. You could see the men counting with their eyes, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven and so on." I did it too. Would I be one of the unlucky 30% or, worse, the one guy out of ten that would die? It took me a while to fill out the forms. I decided that light wounds would get no notification from me. I listed my wife and mom and dad as people to notify about serious wounds or death. I didn't realize how hard that was to do. It was incredibly difficult to print the information on the form and then sign it. There was finality in that act that I did not like. I wasn't the only one who had trouble with this. Everyone in the room got a serious dose of reality that afternoon. Some of us were not going to come back alive and some of us were going back in hospital planes. I made an inward decision that I was coming back alive and on my feet, no matter what it took.

We went back to the barracks and a couple of us decided we needed a beer. One of them had heard of an enlisted men's club for NCOs so off we went in search of it. It took us a while, but finally we turned the right corner and there it was. I had to blink my eyes a couple of times. It looked like a regular bunker with a metal roof,

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but, instead of sandbags, the bunker was surrounded by cases of Lone Star beer cans. Who but an Army sergeant would think of that? None of us could believe our eyes. We walked up to it and had to touch the cans. They were hot from the sun and were not pop-tops. You needed a “church key” to open these. Lone star was one of the first breweries to come out with pop-tops and had them on all their beers for almost two years. Some military genius had bought up old beer and it was only good for sandbags. We went inside where they had cold beer and spent some of that funny money on a lot of it. Somehow, we made it back to the barracks.

The next day they yelled us out of bed and I was given a squad to go fill sandbags. It seems everybody was filling sandbags. I had never been in charge of anybody in the military—agents were solitary beings. Somehow, I got them to where they were supposed to be and did what I saw the other sergeants do. I watched them fill sandbags and tried to look busy doing something else. After lunch somebody came and got my squad. Their units had shown up so they were off somewhere. I was left alone. I went off to find that building made of beer again. A cold beer sounded good.

Vietnam was a hot, muggy place. The heat and humidity were hard to handle. It hung on you like a hot, steamy, suffocating blanket. The sweat was pouring off all the new arrivals. One of the side effects for many of us was a rash—the infamous “Crotch Rot.” The very air seemed alive with vermin. Get a scratch and it turns red, raw and infected in what seemed like minutes. So everyone eventually goes to see a medic and gets a tube of ointment that gets rid of it. You just walk oddly for a day. After a week or so, your body becomes more acclimated to the heat and the rashes disappear. The vermin in the air was still there, but by that time your body had made peace with it. I had already gotten my tube of ointment. On my third day at the repot depot I was called to the office and introduced to my ride: some guy wearing a khaki shirt and cutoffs. I got my stuff and threw it in the back of his green army jeep. This jeep, even I noticed, was different. It had no stenciled army unit or recognition on it. I was back in the clutches of MI once again.

My driver was not very talkative. He looked at my orders and said nothing. He wore a .45 pistol. I had a hat. We drove out of Tan Son Nhut and into the chaos of bodies, trucks, bicycles, motorbikes,

pedicabs, and countless people. I had no idea where we were going. It seemed like we drove up and down streets randomly. We seemed to miss people, buildings, vehicles and everything else by mere inches—but not on purpose. A considerable number of these people were armed. The ones in the black pajama-like clothes worried me, but the driver seemed unworried so I bore my thoughts silently. Finally, we were driving down a road next to a canal and up ahead I could see a compound with guard towers at the four corners and a big gazebo-like structure near the front gate. The gazebo looked like an open-air bar. We drove in. I was right. The gazebo was, indeed, a bar, so this had to be an MI compound. They put me in a room with a bed and showed me where the outhouses were—and they were out houses. I ended up in the gazebo, naturally. Upon entering, I was greeted by hoots and shouts. Some were laughing. I guess I was a newbie and it showed. I was motioned to a table with about five guys. They were celebrating with one of the guys who was going home tomorrow. The guy who was going home bought me a drink right away. He knew I wasn't his replacement, but he said seeing somebody new come in made him feel better. I didn't understand, but I bought him a drink too. They were all agents like me, so we talked and shared stories. The stories of their work here in Vietnam made me apprehensive, but the drinks felt good and, since the gazebo was up high, a cool breeze came from somewhere and life felt better. I didn't yet know where I was going, but it felt good being around other agents. From them I learned some of what they did in their assigned areas. I listened closely and asked questions every chance I could get. I was beginning to learn about MI in Vietnam. This could be interesting. Around midnight I staggered back to my room and fell soundly asleep to the sounds of gunfire, explosions, and diesel trucks. Noise was right up there with the heat in Vietnam—it was everywhere.

The next morning they came and got me for in-country preparation—at least that's what they called it. I was told to put on my civvies and get to the jeep in the front of the building. Actually, it was next to the bar and the driver was in the bar having a morning pick-me-up. Not a bad idea, but I needed to know more before I got drunk again. So there I was wearing a white shirt and black pants with black shoes, getting into a jeep with a guy three sheets to the wind wearing jean cut-offs and a khaki shirt. This was Vietnam? He drove

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through hordes of people, trucks, and military vehicles from various countries. How we continued to miss everything I never knew, but we did. The sights were mind-bending. Oppressive heat, brightly colored buildings and signs saying things I didn't know or understand. The smells were worse than the heat. I really didn't want to know where they came from or what caused them. Sometimes it is good not to know. I wondered what would happen if I got separated from this jeep and its driver. I didn't know where I had come from and I didn't know where I was going. I felt very alone. I gripped the seat of the jeep a little tighter and tried to figure out where I was being taken. There were too many twists and turns. I was lost. All I knew was that we must be getting closer to a downtown district since the buildings became taller and more modern and the Vietnamese girls prettier.

Suddenly, the driver slowed down and turned left into a compound with a three-story white building. The gate was guarded by MPs but there was no identification anywhere. The MP recognized our jeep and passed us through. We pulled up in front of the building and stopped. Like a puppy dog, I followed the driver into the building. He approached the front desk, said "Fresh meat" and motioned for me to sit down. To my surprise, he had my orders under his khaki shirt and gave them to the clerk. He then waved and left. I wondered how I would get back to that gazebo bar—I needed a drink. It wasn't even 9:00 AM. A lieutenant entered the room and went to the front desk, picked up my orders, looked at them and said, "Mr. Burdick, come with me." When he said "Mr." I knew I was back in MI again. No longer a soldier, but a spy. It didn't feel as good here as it did in the States.

Processing was quick. First, they took all my military IDs, my ration card, and my dog tags. I was issued a civilian ID card. I was now a GS-9. They gave me a new ration card. It was different from the first one, but I didn't know why. Then they brought out my credentials and badge. It was the same as I had turned in at Fort Sam Houston when I left San Antonio. Holding them made me feel good—it was hard to say why. It was the only thing that I had and had used in the outside world. It was like touching home. I slid it into my shirt pocket. I felt safer now. All I had to do was show this to a soldier of any rank and they would help me. Inside my credential was a written order from the Secretary of the Army, Stanley R. Reasor,

which essentially stated that anyone presented with these orders would have to comply with the request of the holder. Powerful stuff in a country run by the US military. I patted my pocket again. It felt good. So far so good.

I was taken to another room for placement in the field. This time it was a captain. He told me that I would be under “light” cover. I would use my own name and have a very limited cover story as an employee of the Civilian Rural Development Group. I could not carry military ID except for my credential. I then heard words come out of his mouth that I had heard in training at Fort Holabird, Maryland: “If caught, you can expect immediate execution.” The Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) would be targeting me because one of our tasks was to eliminate the VC and NVA infrastructure—and one of theirs was to eliminate us. I didn’t need to ask what that meant—it was fairly obvious. I wondered how the hell I got this job. Yes, I was an agent and had been one for two years, but I was mostly a background investigator. I had not really been trained for this task. It was no use even bringing it up to the captain as I could tell he couldn’t care less who I was or what happened to me.

The captain left the room for a minute and then came back with a .45 pistol, a holster and a web belt. I signed a paper and took the weapon. It was empty so I asked if it came with any ammunition. He looked at me, slid one bullet across the desk and said, “This will be all you need until you get to your assignment.” At first, all I could think of was: “One Bullet!” What did he expect me to do with one bullet? Was I supposed to shoot myself rather than risk capture? What else could you do with one bullet? My mind was going in several different directions at the same time and none of them were healthy. Then I thought: “Assignment, what assignment?” As if on cue, the clerk at the front came in with a batch of papers and handed them to the captain.

“We’re sending you to Nha Trang, II Corps, for assignment. You fly out tomorrow morning. There will be someone to meet you at the airport. Good luck, Mr. Burdick.” With that he got out of his chair, turned around, and left the room through the back door that he had come in from. I went out the front door, accidentally crumpling my papers while trying to snap on my web belt with the pistol. I shoved the bullet into my pocket and went to the front desk. My

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driver was waiting by the door. I got into the jeep and we drove back to the compound. I said nothing. When we arrived I went to my room, sat on my bed and loaded my one bullet into the .45 clip. I sat staring at the wall for what I thought was a few minutes with thoughts streaming through my mind, questions I could not answer, and meanings I did not understand. I looked at my watch. Forty-five minutes had gone by while I sat there and thought. I needed a beer. I went looking for the gazebo.

As I went up the stairs I heard someone yell, "Hey, Burdick, over here!" I looked and it was the guy I met earlier who was going home soon. I must have looked terrible. He asked me what was wrong. I told him what had happened and about the single bullet. He got mad. "That fucking prick! He was fucking with your mind! Some of those guys in Saigon can't be an agent and try to stick you." He reached into his own belt and handed me a full clip. "If you need more, just ask!" So I asked for some more shells to fill up my clip. He threw me another clip and asked for my clip that had only one bullet in it. "I'll give it back personally to that captain tomorrow when I sign out." He then laughed.

"How come the Army attracts idiots like this? All the fuck-ups seem to find their way to the top," I said. He just shook his head. I then told him where I was being sent and he told me what he knew about it—which was not much, other than it was north and near the coast. Somebody probably had a map in the office. Then we got down to the serious business of drinking beer. The day had started out terrible but was ending pleasantly. The beer went down easily. I had learned something important today, and that was to listen to the guys who had experience. I would have talked to that agent all night if I could have, but he grew tired and went to bed. I stayed for another beer and to think about what he had said.

All my time in MI up to this time had been spent doing background investigations and interviewing people. I must have interviewed over 2,000 people so far. I had learned how to put people at ease, how to make them like me, and how to get them to tell me things they didn't want to. I had learned quickly that people talked to people they felt comfortable with. Once I had figured out what they were—religious, a drunk, liberal, conservative, a hippy,



or a bigot—I would make them believe I was one of them. Then they talked. I had understood early on that I was not there to judge people but rather to get information from them. If people thought you disliked them they would not be helpful. The agent who was leaving had noticed that about me right away. It was unusual for someone to fit in so quickly—and he told me that. He also told me to keep doing what I was doing and I would get a lot done. He was sure I would be a great agent. I was not so sure. I knew I could make people comfortable and talk—well, at least I could with Americans. I was not so sure about the Vietnamese. His words had somehow made me feel better. I finished my last beer and went to bed.

Dawn came up hot and sweaty. I didn't think I would ever get used to the steamy breeze, but with my new cover I could get into any Officers' Club—and they were mostly air-conditioned. There was going to be some heavy drinking in my future. I had to pack early. I was leaving. There was a jeep out front waiting for me. I jumped in and we went back to Tan Son Nhut airbase. This time they took me to the civilian part of the airport. I got out of the jeep and went to the counter where I presented my travel orders. I thought that it was pretty stupid for them to give me military travel orders and then claim I was a civilian. Seems it was nothing special. The clerk took my orders, looked at them and told me to go to gate 7. It seems there were a great many American civilians running around Vietnam. Most worked for a company called Pacific Architects and Engineers, with all of them using orders like mine to get around.

I didn't know where I was, where I had come from or where I was yesterday. I didn't even know where I was going. I could turn left and disappear and it would be months before I was even missed. I got onto a C-130 transport along with a motley crew of hung-over soldiers, Vietnamese in various uniforms—some in black pajamas. All were better armed than I was: they had rifles, pistols, grenades, knives, and who knows what else. There were also a large number of Vietnamese civilians—old men, women, and children—all smelling of a strange mixture of garlic and other things I didn't recognize. The women clearly didn't want to be on board. When they began to close the big tailgate that sealed the plane, the temperature rose quickly as we taxied and waited for take-off. I decided then and there that the first rule of travel is: Never travel with civilians. They

all became agitated and began babbling loudly to each other, their eyes getting bigger the longer we taxied. Then, almost in unison, they took these little bottles out and began to rub the contents on their upper lip—some, even on their cheeks and chins. I was curious and then it hit me as an incredible smell struck my face. Combined with the sweat, garlic, spices and fear was the overwhelming smell of camphor. The Vietnamese believed it would keep them from getting airsick. Luckily, we began to take off and, as we lifted off the ground, air rushed in through all the cracks in the plane. The smell eased as we got higher. I will never forget that smell. I was, unfortunately, still on my way to Nha Trang—wherever that was.

It wasn't a long flight, but it seemed to take forever. I was in a plane full of people—none of whom I knew. Most didn't speak English and looked at me with some fear and distrust. I had no military ID on me except for my Army Intelligence credentials, and they didn't say I was in the Army. It was a very lonely feeling that I slowly learned to embrace and, strangely, grew strength from. Whatever was going to happen to me was up to me. I could not go back. Hell, I didn't know where "back" was. We finally landed at the Nha Trang airport. There was a young guy in a Hawaiian shirt waiting for me. I threw my stuff into his jeep. As usual, there were no markings on it. We drove off.

Nha Trang was very different from Saigon. There were many people but no large buildings. There were also a great many stucco-looking houses, and even more shanties. We drove into a residential area and stopped at a pleasant-looking house for this area. It had a red tile roof and stucco over brick or cement walls, painted white. Inside were tile floors, windows—all of which were open—lights, and an indoor toilet. I got my stuff and was directed to put it in a room with a cot covered with a mosquito net. I went back to the Hawaiian shirt guy to ask what was going to happen next when, out of nowhere, the world exploded. We were both on the floor crawling to the wall as if we had practiced doing this for years.

"What the fuck is going on?" I yelled at him.

"It's the afternoon pot shot. Should be over in a minute or two," he said. Apparently, the VC in the area liked to fire rockets into the town almost every day around this time. There were no military targets involved. The rockets they fired looked like a couple of 50

gal drums welded together and could not be aimed. They shot them in the air, never knowing where they would come down. Because of prior bad experiences, they now ran a wire 100 meters or more away to fire them. Sometimes, they exploded in place and sometimes the US military would have artillery shells heading to the firing position before the rocket hit the ground. It was the ultimate game of chicken.

As I sat helplessly pressed against the wall, my thoughts raced in several directions. Sitting there, knowing at any minute a rocket randomly flying over the city could crash through the tile roof over my head, gave me a sense of reality that I had never had before. Death is the ultimate reality and my card was in play. This realization was like a brilliant light: I knew I wanted to survive—I was going to go home alive. I would have to get control of this situation. Sitting waiting for death was not going to be my path. Everything I had believed, everything I had done, changed in that instant while I waited for some randomly fired rockets to hit and possibly kill me. I would do what I had to do to survive and I didn't really care at the moment what it was that I would have to do. Amazingly, the random explosions gave me an adrenaline rush I had never felt before. Everything became brighter, more vivid, clearer. Time seemed to slow down. I realized every moment was precious and I was going to enjoy whatever moments I had left. I was filled with a kind of fatalism twisted with the joy of life. I wanted to make it out of this pile of shit alive, and I was not going to worry about the small stuff.

"Want a cigarette?" asked the Hawaiian shirt.

I had quit smoking about four months ago, but—without hesitation—I said, "Sure. I'm out." I didn't mention that I had been out for four months. He threw me the pack to keep and I lit up. It felt good. At that moment I was not going to worry any more about getting cancer from smoking. I had a better chance at being hit by one of those goddamned rockets that were hitting the town. The attack was over in a couple of minutes and we picked ourselves up off the floor and went back to headquarters and—for me—a different reality.

Headquarters was in a semi-military compound with a number of guys running around in civilian clothes, like me. The Hawaiian shirt took me to some officer who looked over my papers and said I would be going to Qui Nhon, which was the capital city of Binh

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Dinh Province. At least they had a map of Vietnam on the wall so I could see where I was going. He gave me some more papers, flight orders, and assignment papers. There seemed to be something still wrong with this process. I was supposed to be a civilian, but I was carrying a military travel voucher and military orders. Oh well, no one said the military was brilliant.

A couple of the agents at headquarters invited me to dinner so they could catch up on news from the US. We went to an Officers' Club somewhere in town. This was my first regular Officers' Club. When we went in I immediately stiffened. Who were all these people? Some were in black pajamas. I found out these were Ruff Puff's (RF-PF, Regional Forces/Popular Forces). They worked for the local province chief. They looked like pictures of VC I had been shown. There were also ARVN soldiers in regular uniforms—Army of the Republic of Vietnam. These looked like regular soldiers and some were quite good, depending on their leadership. Then there were some big Asiatic soldiers in extremely sharp, clean and pressed uniforms. They were Korean soldiers and they were impressive. I learned they were from Binh Dinh province where I was headed and they were part of the Korean Tiger Division. What I soon realized was that I could not tell any of them apart. They all looked alike to me and I didn't trust any of them. I sat with my back to a wall all night. Eventually, they took me back to the house where I was staying. I couldn't fall asleep. Even though I had had an enormous amount of alcohol, it didn't seem to have its normal effect. With all the drinks I had, it should have been easy to sleep. I thought about this effect for a bit. With the rocket attack this morning, something happened to me. It was like I was twisted tight inside my head. Alcohol did not have the same effect it did just the night before. Why it had such little effect worried me.

Morning came and I was taken to the airport again. Once more I was dumped onto a plane with scores of locals who stunk of camphor. I was heading to Qui Nhon. In two days it would be Christmas. Some fucking present the Army is giving me—a year in the boonies, alone. I was not happy, but I was curious.

## Chapter 4

**As we approached Qui Nhon I** was able to see a large, green peninsula east of the city with what looked like a group of Navy ships on the part of the peninsula that was across from the city. The airport seemed to be in the heart of the city, with many military compounds near it—the whole place surrounded by huts and houses. This place was much smaller than Nha Trang and obviously much closer to action, as the heavy military presence was obvious, even to me. Without all the military, Qui Nhon would look like a rather pretty city in a natural bay with blinding white sand and brilliantly clear, turquoise-colored water gently lapping the sandy shore—a tourist's dream!

We landed quickly and exited out the back of the plane. The airport was rather small and the landing strip was pointed directly out to sea so that it was surrounded on three sides by the city. The same oppressive, wet heat smacked us as we walked out the back. The smell was somehow different. I couldn't place it, but it was different. I struggled with my duffle bag and headed toward what looked like a gate. There was no one there. I went to the side of the gate and sat on the low wooden fence surrounding the field. It figured! Somehow, no one would be here. I had no phone number to call, but that didn't matter because there weren't any phones. I hadn't been told the address or name of the unit I was to go to. So sitting in the sweltering heat and waiting was the only option for now. Another plane came in and another crowd of people swarmed through the gate. At least they knew where the hell they were going!

Out of the chaos of this second mass debarkation came a loud, booming voice over the noises surrounding me: "Burdick, get your

butt over here!” I looked around and saw a short, bald, barrel-shaped man—a cigar hanging out his mouth—with a very short, flattop-style haircut, wearing brown slacks and an orange plaid, short-sleeve dress shirt glaring at me. He was sitting in a bright-green, unmarked jeep. I hurried over to him.

“Throw your fucking shit in the back and get your butt in the seat. I had to stop and get our mail. You didn’t get any.” The mail comment hurt. I missed my home and I missed my wife. No one knew where I was yet, so mail would be weeks away. I felt very alone and a bit homesick. I thought to myself, “Welcome to Qui Nhon” and wondered who the fuck this idiot is. Turns out, he was my Commanding Officer, Major Eugene Mullit. I threw my stuff in the jeep and hopped in. For once, I kept my mouth shut. I had no idea where he was coming from and it seemed to really piss him off that I was assigned to his unit.

“How long you been in this fucking country?” he shouted at me as he tore through unmarked streets.

“Five days!” I said.

“Shit,” was all he said. He beeped his horn and swore at everyone who even looked like they might be in his way. “Look at all this fucking dust. These people have been shitting and pissing on the ground for 100,000 years. So when you breathe this fucking dust and get it in your mouth, you know you’re breathing and eating shit. And that’s all this country is good for: Shit!”

I gathered he didn’t want to be here so I let him ramble. Every now and then I muttered a “Yes, sir” so he wouldn’t yell at me. He was the kind of officer that I dreaded: incompetent and full of himself. The Army seemed to attract these idiots. The way he was driving, I had to hold on for dear life—jeeps don’t have safety belts. Suddenly, the tires squealed and we turned through an open gate into a walled villa and slid to stop. He jumped out of the jeep and went into the main building without saying a word, taking the mail with him. I sat in the jeep alone wondering what to do. My new home, I thought. I was wrong again.

“Hi, I’m Billy,” came a voice from another building. “I see you met the major.” I just grinned. “He comes on a little strong, but he doesn’t go out often. By the way, since tomorrow is Christmas we will be having a party tonight. So we better get you to your new

quarters. Stay in the jeep.” He then went into the main building and quickly returned. We left the walled villa and I experienced a very confusing drive where he kept telling me what I was seeing and I nodded my head as if I understood—but I didn’t. Nothing made any sense. Finally, we drove up to another villa without a wall this time. It looked just like the houses in San Antonio. It had red roof tiles and white plaster walls but was not as nice as the house in Nha Trang. I was immediately worried. Anybody could walk up to this house and get in—there was no wall and no guards. We drove into the short driveway and stopped. “This is it,” said Billy. “Your room is in the back.” With that, he pointed to a dark doorway leading into a small room in a small building in back of the main house. This was where I was supposed to live for the next year. I took my duffle bag and went to see what I was getting. Not much! A rusty metal cot with a musty mattress and a dirty pillow, all covered with a slightly torn mosquito net. Great! I sat down on the metal cot and it squeaked loudly. I slowly shook my head. I threw my duffle bag against the wall and lay down on the mattress. I decided to wait for something to happen. It did.

“Hey, you want something to eat? I’m Larry.” I looked up and saw somebody new. I couldn’t guess where he came from. Larry was a tall, smiling, black guy. He seemed to know what he was doing—at least he looked like he did.

I said, “Sure,” and followed him to a jeep. I would have to wait to get to know these guys before I could figure them out. Me? I was an open book so far.

Larry took me to the local Officers’ Club for dinner. I wasn’t too hungry but I was thirsty. I was getting more used to seeing many different uniforms, but they still made me uncomfortable. I couldn’t tell one from the other. I did notice some big Asians whose uniforms seemed to be dipped in starch. The creases in their uniforms could cut somebody. They were impressive. These had to be the same Koreans that I had seen in Nha Trang. Well, not literally the same ones, but they looked alike for sure. Larry saw me looking at them and told me they were Koreans from the Tiger Division stationed just north of Qui Nhon. It seems the US hired them to help us here—and they were good, according to Larry.

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After the third or fourth beer I discovered that Larry was a captain who was previously stationed in Da Lat, which, I surmised from his description, was in the highlands somewhere. According to him, his previous commander thought he had gone too “country” and transferred him to our miserable unit. It was true. Larry knew the ropes. I figured that out in this first meeting and I decided, then and there, to stick to him until I got my legs under me, so to speak. Besides, from his comments it was apparent that he disliked the Army as much as I did. He seemed to like me and we talked a lot. When I mentioned that Billy had said something about a party tonight, Larry swore. I guess he forgot about it. So we got in the jeep, went and picked up Billy and went to the first villa I was driven to. It was our headquarters. I still had no idea where I was going. The streets seemed straight but I couldn’t seem to get the hang of it. I did notice more things, though. The street in front of our walled villa was wide, the equivalent of three or four lanes of traffic—if it had lanes and if it had been paved. It started at a traffic circle with several buildings around the circle and one ten-story apartment house, or maybe hotel—I couldn’t tell. The circle had spokes around it that were various roads. One of those spokes took me to the second villa, another to the Officers’ Club and another back to our headquarters. As we drove into the driveway again, I noticed that there were more jeeps there now. This time I got to go into the main building.

I was taken completely by surprise when I entered. Inside the door was a 6-foot long bamboo bar with a false wall behind it covered with 40 or 50 Playboy centerfolds. I stopped in my tracks and stared. I realized everyone in the room was laughing. I guess I looked stunned. I hadn’t expected this. So I quickly popped out with, “Damn, you guys know how to make a guy feel good and homesick, with all these Playboy pin-ups! Where the hell did you get all of them?”

Characteristically, that bald, barrel of a man who picked me up bellowed at me, “Those fucking pictures are mine. Keep your fucking hands off of them.”

Not knowing if I had pissed him off or not—it was my guess he was always pissed off—I said, “Thank you, sir, I needed those pictures because I was already beginning to miss round-eyed girls.”



He burst out laughing. I had guessed right: he was a fucking racist. I slowly turned my back on him, saw Larry, and winked at him. He was looking unhappy, but when I winked he understood immediately what I had done and began laughing.

I had learned early in my career as an agent that you had to get people on your side if you're going to get them to do what you want. From his comments on the way back from the airport, I figured the major was a racist and probably an idiot to boot—but I wasn't positive at the time. By acting as "sort of" a bigot myself, he was beginning to kind of like me. My "act" was to use code words that racists used. In this case when I said "round-eyed girl," he assumed I meant a white girl and that I didn't like "the yellow horde" I was sent to help. I already knew the major didn't like Vietnamese and I had tricked him into believing that I didn't too. Larry had caught what I said and had wondered if he had misjudged me. The major, though, was loving it. I had no idea how important that was going to be this night. My wink to Larry let him know I had messed with the major. He loved it.

They were pouring champagne so I got a glass and socked it down on top of all the beer I had been drinking with Larry. Someone else had seen the wink and was now at my side. "Smart damn move! Have another glass of champagne." He was an older guy named Karl, who turned out to be a master sergeant. Even though he was a lifer, we seemed to hit it off right away. Between Larry and Karl, I was beginning to feel safer and I knew I had found some guys who could help me learn whatever it was I was supposed to be doing here. We kept drinking and more and more bottles of champagne were emptied.

Whenever you get a few soldiers together, it's inevitable that the old war stories will begin to fill the air. I drank and listened since I didn't have any stories yet. I should have stopped drinking. Somewhere—I believe it came from one of the two lieutenants in the unit—a captured enemy pistol appeared and was passed around so we could all look at it and feel it. It was a 9mm automatic pistol from some European country, probably Czechoslovakia. Karl had it, cocked it, pointed it at the back wall where nobody was, and pulled the trigger. There was a loud click. He then asked me if I wanted to look at it. Until I had been in the Army, I had never touched anything

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but rifles, a .38 pistol and my current .45. I had never held a pistol like this. So I said, "Sure," and took the pistol from him. I held it in my hand, looked at it, turning it around with my hands. Wanting to show that I knew all about weapons, I pulled the slide back and cocked it like I knew what I was doing. Then, like Karl, I let it snap into place, pointed at that blank wall and pulled the trigger. The explosion deafened me and the flash blinded me. Because the wall was made of cement, the bullet didn't go through the wall, but did leave a big crater in it. Everybody was diving for the floor. Slowly, a mushroom-shaped bullet rolled across the room in an awkward way and settled against my left shoe. I reached down and slowly picked it up. It was hot. My hearing came back slowly. Karl and Larry were doubled over laughing. I guess the look on my face was worth gold. I looked at the major because I could be in plenty of trouble.

He was yelling at me but I couldn't understand what he was saying. He then started to laugh, so I started to laugh, too. I said, "How the fuck had that happened!" And everybody laughed even more. I put the pistol gently on the bar and Larry picked it up and dropped the magazine, cleared the weapon and kept on laughing.

Apparently, Karl had dropped the magazine before he cocked the weapon and dry-fired it. I didn't see that part of his action. So when I cocked it and fired it, everyone in the room started ducking, and when they saw the expression on my face they couldn't help but laugh. I didn't make the best impression for my first day. Everybody had a good, unforgettable time at my expense, though. I put that mushroomed shell in my pocket and carried it with me for the rest of my tour. I was lucky that being an idiot didn't get me killed and that I hadn't hurt anyone else. That mushroomed bullet was my reminder that I had used up my idiot points. The next idiot mistake would probably kill me.

We all piled into a jeep and went to the other villa and to bed. I went to my hole in the wall in the back of the villa, took off my pants and shirt and crawled onto the dirty bed. It was still pretty warm and humid even this late, so I laid down with my head near the nonexistent door, pulled the mosquito net over the bed as best I could, and then decided to put my .45 in its holster under my pillow. We had no guards. I never felt so alone. I had 360 more days! It was going to be a long journey and I still didn't know what I was

supposed to be doing and I doubted if anybody else did. I still felt like I was truly on my own and I knew I could never again make the mistake I made tonight. I needed to learn quickly—especially about weapons. Vietnam was not a party and this was not a joke. I had made my last mistake, I hoped. I reached for my pants, put my hand in the pocket and felt the mushroom bullet. My mistake! I left it in my pocket and took off my glasses. Great, now I was blind!

I was surprised that I wasn't more drunk. I had been drinking for most of the afternoon and evening. Maybe it was fear, but I didn't feel afraid. Maybe it was the danger—there is exhilaration in danger. There was no doubt that I was in a dangerous place and, as an intelligence agent in civilian clothes, a very dangerous occupation. I worried about what I was going to be asked to do. I tried to get some sleep. Every time I started to drop off there was a strange noise and I woke up again. It was a long night and not a Merry Christmas. There were a myriad of noises outside and it wasn't Santa delivering gifts. This was the first of many nights that I did not sleep well.

The next morning we all got up about the same time and wandered off to the Officers' Club. My cover was as a civilian working for the Civilian Rural Development Group. I had credentials of a civil servant with the rank of GS-9. That gave me entry into the Officers' Club. I went with Larry and Karl. We had a good breakfast and then they drove me around town so I could get my bearings. I saw where the PX was, where the provincial offices were, where the MPs were stationed, where the Green Beret C-team headquarters were, where the hospital was, where our ARVN counterpart's office was, and where all the bars and whorehouses were. There was more, but that was all I could absorb before I had another drink.

During the tour, both Karl and Larry gave me their impressions of our CO. He was not an intelligence officer and, according to them, he wasn't even fucking intelligent. He only took this job because he needed combat time to make rank and become a lieutenant colonel. That was his only goal in life. He knew nothing about what we did as agents and really didn't care much. He basically stayed in his room and called Nha Trang to complain about whatever it was that was bothering him on that day. Lately, he was upset that his promotion hadn't happened and he was blaming everyone else because of that.

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He was also becoming sort of paranoid. Our open exposure was bothering him. Larry told me that he was sandbagging the inside of his room. They were surprised that he had picked me up, but they decided that he really wanted to get the mail to see if the promotion list was out. I was a necessary evil, so he brought me back. I wasn't sure if they just didn't like him, or if he really was out of his mind. Time would tell.

## Chapter 5

**The days seemed to blur after** those first few days. Larry and Karl kept taking me around to visit some of the units that I would help them with in their liaison work. Larry told me what the Vietnamese expected of us, and how to treat them. I was learning a lot from both of them. I learned that our unit was new to the province so we had no active recruited agents. Our primary effort so far had been to meet and try to set up relationships with the other intelligence units and find out from them what was going on. Some day Larry hoped we would have our own agents, and that was something he wanted both Karl and me to work on. I had no idea how I could help in any of this. I was sure I was going to be useless. Larry kept on talking about it and telling us how he had done it in his last assignment. I listened and talked with Karl about it, but we just had no idea how to get started. In the meantime, we drank plenty of beer—it was hot here.

Acclimating to the heat of Vietnam was difficult—at best. One day, out of boredom or just from suffering in the oppressive heat, we got into an argument about whether it was hot enough to fry an egg on the hood of our jeep. I guess we didn't have many other things to do. The argument went on longer than usual until Karl just gave out with a loud "Shit" and walked out of the compound into the street. We wondered what he was ticked off about and where he was going. In a couple of minutes he returned with an egg in hand. We wanted to know where in hell he found one that quickly but he said nothing. He marched up to the hood of the jeep and cracked that egg right onto the jeep's hood. "Now we'll see if it cooks," he said. And it did! The moral we learned, however, was never to crack a raw egg on a hot jeep's hood unless you oil the hood first.

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That damn egg ate the paint right off the hood. We had a hard time scrapping the mess off. The dogs in the compound ate it, though, so there was no evidence! Nobody but those of us involved in the experiment ever knew how the paint came off the hood in such a neat circle. We blamed whoever painted the jeep as if they must have done something wrong. I kidded Karl for a long time after that about his cooking skills. At least we didn't have to argue about whether it was hot enough to fry an egg any more. It was!

Strange things happen to your mind the longer you are in Vietnam. Fear was always a companion. Worry that I would be found out, captured, and shot as a spy was a constant thought. I knew, if found out, I was dead. I knew that. It wouldn't be so bad if we were indeed able to recruit someone, but we just didn't have the skills or capability. It was just like the Army to send us out to do a job they had to know we couldn't do. Somehow, we were going to beat the Army and succeed—somehow. We didn't know how yet, but the challenge would keep us going. I also had to admit that the actual recruiting effort really interested me. It's hard to explain. We were charged with finding and eliminating VC and NVA infrastructure—a task we had no experience with and little capability for doing—but there was the excitement of the chase. This excitement became stronger the more we learned what we were expected to do and the better we got at doing it. There was a certain rush we got as we sat around discussing how we would recruit agents and then, using that information, strike at the enemy. We had not, in actual fact, recruited a single agent yet—or even tried to recruit one—but talking about how we would do it was still exciting.

All of these feelings together created a struggle in our minds, and left us in a constant state of intense turmoil. I guess that's the best way to describe it. Fear makes you want to run and hide. There is a panic constantly bubbling inside of you. Worry makes you careless and mistake-prone. Mistakes don't get you fired—they get you sent home in a box. Staying focused is the only way to stay alive. The excitement of the chase wipes out the worry and fear and makes focusing easier. Winning is always the way to keep yourself together. Each day I was in Vietnam all of these feelings became more intense. The adrenalin was being poured into my veins from this internal battle. It changed my view of life and was a drug I

struggled with during my whole tour. It takes a toll on your mind and body and has you doing things you thought you would never do. Our position gave us power. To most military, we were civilians. To those who knew who we were—or suspected who we were—we were people to be very wary of. Our power over their lives was complete and they knew it. Most didn't trust us and were not willing to be around us. We were, after all, targets. Everyone has read about intelligence agents, secret agents, and spies—whatever. Meeting one affected the person in our crosshairs. At first I wasn't too aware of it, but I learned to use it to great effect as time went on. For now, I was still learning.

One of our tasks was a weekly trip to the Evac Hospital next to the airfield. They took in enemy POWs and we were sent to check and see if any of them were worthwhile to us. But to get to them we had to go through what seemed like a hundred or more wounded American boys. Boys? These were men. But a wounded soldier seems to turn into a boy when bandaged and lying in a hospital bed. The first time I went I was not prepared for this. God, I did not want to be wounded like these guys. You had to toughen up. There was no time for grief—or terror. I began to learn just what that phrase I had heard when I got here signified: “It don't mean nothin'.” Feelings killed you. You had to hang tough or you would crack. If you became emotional about all the pain you would not be able to function. Like most of the people I met, I tried to hide my feelings about what I saw and become a stoic. What else could I do? Like most soldiers in Vietnam, I medicated myself with alcohol to keep the buzz down and the pain buried. Probably not the right thing to do, but then who knew? No matter how much I drank, I never seemed to get drunk like I did in the States. Oh, I was drunk but it was different and you seemed to be able to keep all of your faculties intact. Well, at least I thought I did. The visits to the Evac Hospital stayed with me. Each time I went I lost some of myself. You cannot ignore all that pain and suffering forever. It builds up like water behind a dam. For now, I was holding back the water. I thought I could continue doing this until I went home. But to hold back the water, I had to suppress any feelings I had for what I saw. From that moment on, the pressure began to build inside me. I felt I could contain it.

Larry was the one who gave me hope that we could do our job. We were supposed to locate and terminate local VC and NVA leaders. Well, that was one of our jobs. It seemed ridiculous to me. None of us spoke Vietnamese. How could we recruit anyone to work with us? Besides, I never really had any “super spook” training, which meant that I had no training in recruitment techniques. We also were to liaison with the Navy, Special Forces, the ARVN, the Province Chief, the Police Chief, MPs, Air Force, and the Koreans. We were to write reports on this and send them to Saigon. Sometimes, Saigon would ask us to investigate something or other, but Larry said he had never got one of those. Larry was short (meaning he was leaving Vietnam in about 90 days) so he was training Karl and me in how to liaison. At first, I took what we were doing seriously, but soon found out trying to liaison with intelligence agents is not a serious activity. It was done with innuendo, bullshit, knowledge, lies, and plenty of war stories. Bragging seemed to be part of the process. I found I was good at it. Ninety percent of what you heard, though, was pure crap. Knowing that most of what I heard was lies really made it easier to deal with our counterparts. Within a couple of weeks, most of them accepted Karl and me as one of their own. Karl and I made a good team. One of the groups we had no contact with was the local Phoenix group. Their headquarters were actually across the street from the house where I slept, in a huge, walled compound. Larry had been trying to get in touch with them but they were having none of it. I think that they looked at us as the Southeast Asia version of the Keystone Cops. In any case, we had not done anything, so why would they want to work with us.

Larry thought we should hire some guards for our unprotected compound. He then gave me a very valuable lesson on how to screw with the military bureaucracy in Vietnam. In one of our trips to the Provincial Compound, he talked to the US advisor there about our need to hire some guards. The advisor recommended some Nungs he knew. (Nungs were Chinese whose families had lived in Vietnam for well over a hundred years. They did not intermarry with the Vietnamese and kept their Chinese language and heritage.) Larry then had to hire the guards and find someone to pay for them, as we had no budget for guards. Believe it or not, though, there was a form for hiring guards. The form was sent to Saigon, routed through



various agencies and then to the authorizing body for payment. However, this could take months. There was a special provision in place once someone had been hired—because of the time it took to get the paperwork through—where we could pay the guards out of the funds we claimed they were going to be charged to. This meant they could start working the day we submitted the form. Bureaucracies are marvelous for having idiotic rules, but if you discover these rules you can do wonders.

Larry also requested security clearances for the guards he had hired. This stopped all processing until the security clearances were granted. In addition, Larry made the province chief's office responsible for the payment of the guards. That meant it would have to go through the Vietnamese bureaucracy before it could be processed by the Army bean counters. The Vietnamese generally approved without question any requests from the Army. Larry said he thought it would take six or seven months before all the paperwork would come back. It was a beautiful scam. Larry was short and when he returned to the States he planned to get out of the Army anyway. The mess he created might come back to us at some point or other, but in the meantime we had guards. I was getting a graduate-level course in manipulating bureaucracies.

The major, meanwhile, was getting more paranoid. He needed more sandbags. We were all ordered to go out and fill up sandbags for use at the office compound. We took a couple of jeeps and went to the beach for sand. With little speed and no skill we slowly filled up enough sandbags to fill the back of the jeeps. It seemed rather stupid for all the officers and noncoms (all agents) to be out in civilian clothes spending their time filling sandbags. Karl told me that the major had requested new quarters for us from the area commander. He wanted to get us under the protection of some unit. That was not our task. We were supposed to be civilians not supported by the Army, but the major wanted to be protected by somebody. Almost all of us disagreed with him, but he was the commander. The way the Army moved, though, we didn't think it would ever happen.

The work of filling sandbags was hot and our thirst was great so we stopped at a local bar for some black-market beer. The room was small and dark with a ceiling fan. There were three or four tables in the front part of the bar. The back part—I found out—was

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a whorehouse filled with various types of Vietnamese women. There were quite a few of these throughout the town. They must be keeping the medics busy, I thought. Karl turned to me and said, "This is not one of ours." I gave him a curious look so he went on to explain that in Ahn Khe we ran all the whorehouses as an intelligence activity. When we went up there he would show me and explain how it worked. This was wild! Noticing my perplexity, he continued on. "Look, soldiers who go out to die live on the edge. Fucking takes the edge off and gives them a softer moment now and then. We protect them by making sure that all the women are tested weekly and, if infected, are sent home until they are well." He then winked and said, "We send a lot of them to Laos."

I smiled inwardly at how naïve I was. What a great cover! My reaction to being in a whorehouse reflected my background as a semi-good Catholic. It was wrong, sinful, and an evil place. I realized that was true for me—until now—but now there was a new reality and the use of whores could possibly save American lives. I could do this. Not everything I was learning about or was shown would be right if I was in the States, but I wasn't in the States. I was in Vietnam and right and wrong was no longer the same as I knew at home.

We went back to making sandbags and every day Karl took me to different bars. It was an education. There were bars for blacks, for Mexicans, for whites, for Green Berets, for the PA&E workers, and mixed bars. The separation of the different groups was done by the soldiers themselves. Everybody wanted to be with somebody they were comfortable with. Finally, the sandbagging was done and we went back to our normal work. Besides, Tet was coming and it was supposed to be quite a party for the Vietnamese. I was curious how the Vietnamese partied. We were supposed to go to one given by Captain Trang, our Vietnamese counterpart, but that was a couple of days away.

My mail was beginning to arrive—which was good. I had looked forward to it for a long time. It was a little over a month since I had gotten to Vietnam and I had received nothing. I had been sending letters out, but not really saying too much about what I was about.

Why worry them. As far as they knew, I was in an office in some really safe place. I didn't disabuse them of this.

My mom wrote about my brothers and sister and how they were doing and what was going on in Santa Cruz. She told me to be careful and write. I could tell she was worried and I didn't want her to know how really dangerous the job I had was. I was just beginning to understand it myself. The letters from my wife were different. She was—in her first letter—evidently mad because I had stopped in Hawaii. She thought I did it on purpose and went surfing or something. It didn't make any sense. I was a little pissed off at first and thought that she couldn't be that stupid. She had learned about my stop in Hawaii from an agent friend of mine. So I wrote and explained that I had no control over where the Army sent me. After all, I had still gotten to Vietnam. I didn't tell her the details of the trip—no sense worrying her. I really missed her and holding her letters made me feel like I was almost holding her. I could smell her on the letters. I really wanted her now. But that couldn't happen and I couldn't talk to her. It left an ache on my soul. Valentine's Day was coming up next month so I went to the PX and found out that I could order roses to be delivered to her on Valentine's Day. So I wrote a short note about how much I missed her and sent her the flowers. Those somehow made me feel better. I liked giving her things and this was our first Valentine's Day since we had been married. I was sure she was not expecting anything from me—and this would be a pleasant surprise. I wasn't mad about the letter about Hawaii any more. Still, I had a hard time with her thinking process.

The one other thing I didn't like was that we had to destroy our mail after we read it. It could break our cover. I didn't do this right away, but after a couple of days I would comply. I hated that. If caught, the letters would give them information that they could use against me before I was shot. Not a good thought!

## Chapter 6

**I was never quite sure what** Tet was all about, but it was a big holiday and there was some kind of cease-fire going on because of it. We of course did not believe in cease-fires, so we went around and “touched” all our counterparts to find out what they thought was going on. The only one that seemed nervous was Captain Trang from the Provincial ARVN Intelligence Office. He felt something was going on, but could not place what it could be. He was worried enough to say he would be at his desk during Tet to monitor things and he cancelled all party-going—even the party he was going to throw. He also was reinforcing his office, thickening the walls and adding a back door. He seemed real paranoid to Karl and me. He was the only one who had any concerns. We really didn’t have any agents in place yet, so we had to rely on what our friends told us and—because of what they told us—we were ready to party. It was going to be a couple of extra days off. A group of us were planning to go to the Officers’ Club—which we did. Larry and I were the last ones to get home late in the evening of January 30, 1968. The guards were not in place yet. They had been hired, but because of Tet, were not going to start until it was over. It seemed like a good thing at the time. I was in bed around 11:00 PM and soon sound asleep.

I was dead to the world in my hole-in-the-wall room in the back when I was woken up by a burst of gunfire and explosions off in the distance. Typical, I thought. The New Year starts and everybody fires their guns off into the sky. Since I was awake now, I put my glasses on and went out and looked. There were tracers going through the sky—both red and green. The flashes of explosions could be seen off in the distance. They seemed to be at ground level so

I figured they were ground-level fireworks like I had seen in the States. The gunfire got louder. I guess the celebrations were larger than I thought. I watched for a few minutes and then went back to bed to get some sleep since it was sort of boring. The other guys didn't even bother to get up. The damn shooting continued, so I put the pillow over my head and tried to go to sleep, muttering about the idiots who were probably going to hurt someone if they didn't quit. Finally, I drifted off to sleep.

"Burdick, get your fuckin' ass out of bed. Get dressed and grab your toothbrush!" Someone was shouting in my ear. It was Larry. He was shaking me hard. "Hurry! Get into the house." I quickly dragged myself out of bed and dressed, grabbed my shaving kit with toothbrush, put on my .45 and grabbed the carbine I had acquired through Karl and went into the house. Everyone was in the main room of the house and they looked worried. There was still gunfire in the town. That wasn't right!

"OK, here it is," Larry said. "I just got a call from the major. The town has been overrun by VC. They seem to have taken over the Provincial Radio Station and some of the province chief's buildings around it." That was where Captain Trang was working yesterday. I wondered if he was still alive. He had been right. Shit! I thought. "The major has ordered us back to the office." None of us liked that. We would have to travel through the part of town that may or may not be under VC control. The Provincial Radio Station was across from our office and down the street about two blocks. They were long blocks—but not long enough.

"Here's my idea," Larry said. "I'm going to take a jeep with one of you riding shotgun. We'll go to the office the quickest way. If we get there, we'll call you—the phones still work—and tell you whether or not to come. If you don't hear from us, stay here and protect yourself as best you can. Try to find an American unit and get some protection. Karl, you are to stay here and be in charge. Take care of these guys and don't do anything stupid." We were stunned and a couple faces drained white. This was now a different world.

"Larry, I'll go with you," I heard myself say. I can't tell you why I said it. I was Larry's friend, but I was scared to the tips of my toes.

“Thanks. Load up on ammo, but don’t look too military, they might leave us alone.” I threw my stuff in the jeep, got some ammo boxes and threw them in the back seat. Larry put in some other stuff. I threw in a couple of changes of clothes in case we had to stay there for a couple of days. At the time, I never believed it would be over three weeks before we would return. Here I was wearing dirty tan pants, a shirt that needed washing a week ago, a jungle hat, a .45 on my hip, and a World War II carbine in my hands. I didn’t look like any soldier in the army but I was ready.

Karl came over and said, “No heroics. Keep your fat ass down!” He shook my hand and slapped me on the back. Larry started the engine and we were off.

It’s hard to describe how I felt. I believed nothing bad could happen to me. This was very exciting—and more—with the danger of death just down the street. Was I crazy? I was certainly very curious—and very excited—and ready to go. I kept telling myself nothing bad was going to happen. We started down the street as fast as we could go. From the compound across the street, several heads stuck over the wall. For some strange reason I waved—and felt foolish immediately. There was no response from the wall.

“Don’t shoot at anything unless I tell you, and take the damn safety off the rifle, you stupid shit!” Larry was nervous too. He had both hands squeezing the life out of the steering wheel and had scrunched down in the seat to try to make himself smaller. I sheepishly clicked the safety off and pointed the rifle to the side of the jeep. I tried to make myself smaller too, but at 6’2” in a country where a tall man was 5’4”, it was not possible. I tried to look mean—as if that would help. As we went down the street—with rocks and dust flying behind us—I saw strange faces sneaking looks through shuttered windows. They all disappeared as we got close. We were heading toward the circle where several streets came together. So far, there had been no trouble, but we were heading right into the middle of the action. I could already smell the blood and gun smoke and could hear gunfire nearby.

Two-hundred yards ahead I saw my first body! It was lying half in the street and had been shot in the head. Well, I guessed that it had been shot—half the head was missing. A terrible sight! It numbed me.

“Be alert! This is going to get hairy. Get ready to fire,” said Larry. I raised the gun to my shoulder. We had almost reached the circle. Directly across from the circle, as we approached it, was that 10-story apartment building/hotel that I had seen so often. I could see people on the roof and I told Larry. He nodded his head in understanding but said nothing. He was totally focused on driving as fast as he could and absorbed in speeding towards the circle. The street around the circle was one-way going to the right and passed directly in front of the tall building. I began to see soldiers around and in some of the houses near the circle. Now there were more bodies that we passed—10 to 12 of them. All were bloodied and looked dead. I did not look closely. We were almost at the circle. As we came to the circle Larry quickly turned left.

“Hey, we’re supposed to go right, it’s one-way,” came out of my mouth before I thought.

“Very funny, asshole!” Larry said, thinking I meant it as a joke. I just chuckled, trying to cover my error. Now we had only about 75 yards to go. It was the longest 75 yards of my life. Suddenly, there was firing from the roof of the building now behind us. It was aimed at us! About 30 feet behind the jeep little explosions of dirt were following us and they were quickly getting closer. I had nothing to shoot at. Everything was too far away and it was all happening too fast. Yet I felt I was watching it in slow motion. All I could do was watch the bullets hit the ground, closer and closer to us. I figured we weren’t going to make it. I yelled at Larry to get ready to jump. At the speed we were going, it was going to hurt—but maybe less than a bullet. Larry pushed harder on the accelerator but it was already all the way down. He nodded his head and waited for my shout.

Then, from all the buildings around the hotel, firing erupted. The top of the hotel was being sprayed with gunfire. The explosions of dirt behind us stopped less than 6 feet from the jeep. Larry didn’t see this happening and I didn’t tell him. He then slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel. I thought we were going to turn over, but somehow we didn’t. When we straightened out we were pointed at the gate of our office compound. Larry gunned the engine and headed for it. Luckily, someone was watching and opened the gate just as we were about to break through it. We skidded to a stop. Everything around us seemed in slow motion and we sat there

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waiting for our lives to catch up with us. Some of our friends ran up to us and patted us on the back. All Larry could say was, "That was hairy!" I just nodded my head in agreement. At least I hadn't soiled my pants. The adrenaline was still flowing from our wild ride. I had survived my first firefight, although I had not fired a shot. We were surely being shot at. It took me a little time to calm down. I could still see in my mind the bullets striking behind our jeep.

Everybody seemed to look at us differently now. They knew what we had been done to help them and you could see in their eyes that they wondered if they would have done for us what we had just done for them. Outside, there was a tremendous fight going on at the big building. We could hear it, but because of the two-story building next to us, we couldn't see a thing. Larry went to a phone and called back to our house. He told them to wait until the fighting at the circle was over. He would get back to them.

"Where the fuck are the rest of my men?" boomed over the whole parking area. It was the major. Larry went over and heatedly explained to him what was going on. The major was not pleased. "Get them here as soon as you can—even if it's risky." He went back to his room. Larry was swearing under his breath when he came back. I knew how he felt. We had just risked our lives to follow his first command and came within feet of dying for it—and all he wanted was for everybody to be with him. Not because it was safer for the men, but to help protect him. That was becoming very clear.

The firefight was still going on outside, but seemed to be slacking a bit. What had happened was that—unknowingly—we had stumbled into an attempt by the ARVN to retake the building. When they saw us coming they let us pass—not because they knew who we were, but because they thought we were just some dumb American PA&E workers who were curious to see what was going on. So they waited for us to draw VC fire so they would know what floor they were on. Once the VC started firing at us, the attack to retake the building began. We were very lucky that they didn't start firing at us as we were driving up to the circle. Larry and I would be dead if they had done that. I guess Larry's turning to the left at the circle surprised everybody—and probably saved our lives.



I stuck my head out the front gate every now and then to see what was going on. The building was now quiet, but you could still see bullets striking the building. ARVN soldiers were running into the building to clean it out. They seemed lightly armed to me: many just had pistols, a few had rifles and I saw nobody with any grenades. The explosions in the building, however, indicated that somebody had grenades. Hopefully, it was some ARVN soldiers that I hadn't seen. The second time I stuck my head out to check, the firing had just about died down.

I then remembered that the Provincial Radio Station had reportedly been overrun. I turned and looked down the street, away from the building at the circle and was greeted with an incredible site. The two-story radio station was a crumpled smoldering ruin—at least part of it was. The cement fence in front of it was broken in many places. Remnants of a fierce fight were everywhere. Past the radio station I could not see Captain Trang's building, but smoke was rising in that area. The poor guy was probably dead. As chief intelligence officer for the province, I'm sure the VC wanted his head. Further down the street, about 400 yards from where I had turned my head to look, was a body. An American! He was probably killed when the battle started. It looked to be a civilian and was most likely a real PA&E worker stumbling home from drinking and partying in a local whorehouse—there were several bars and whorehouses near where he was. I hope the poor guy's last party was worth it. Poor bastard! I shut the gate.

We waited until after 1:00 in the afternoon while the major spent the time calling Nha Trang, asking for rescue. They finally told him to shut up. There was no one to help. This battle was going on all over the country, and we would have to survive on our own. Larry also called our house and told the guys to get ready. He wanted all foodstuffs, plenty of ammo, and clothes for all of us to be brought with them when they came. It was unlikely anyone would be able to leave for some time once they got here. We were in the middle of it.

Something else was going on with the guys who were originally at the office. About seven lived here, while the rest lived at our other house, where I lived. They were frightened, but—where before they were indifferent about me—now they seemed to have more respect.

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It was a strange thing to think about in the midst of all the blood and chaos, but I had already learned that I should always check out the people around me. My life depended on it. If they were a little off-kilter, didn't understand, were frozen with fright, were liars, or just plain stupid—I had to know. You can't ask people these things—you have to observe them. It's the look in the eye, the tone of voice, the way their body moved, a strange comment—any of these should send up warning flares. I was learning how to read these signs, or just notice them. Larry had told me about this one night when we were particularly drunk and I told him how I noticed these differences. All he said was to keep practicing, it will save your life one day. Well it hadn't saved my life today—that was dumb luck. But my senses were never sharper and I noticed a change. They knew we risked our lives to help them and they felt guilty because they were not sure they would or could do the same thing. Larry noticed this too, but didn't want them to be embarrassed about what we did, so he started joking with everyone and so did I. They relaxed. We then made sure everyone was armed and posted around the compound until the other guys got here.

The firing from the circle had stopped. Larry called Karl and told him to bring everybody over now. They would be here in 15 minutes. After 10 minutes I opened the gates so they could enter easily and not have to stop in the street. We waited. Down at the building I could see the ARVN dragging bodies out the front door of the building. They were stacking them like cordwood in the center of the circle. They were not gentle about this—they were angry. There appeared to be around 15 or more bodies—I couldn't really tell. There was no way of telling who was VC and who was an innocent civilian—if there ever was such a thing. Sporadic firing still came from down the street in the area of the radio station, but it was not headed in our direction.

Just then our jeeps rounded the corner and headed our way. They didn't follow the one-way sign either. They drove quickly into our compound. They said they saw no one else as they drove here except for the dead bodies and the troops dragging bodies from the building. Karl asked what was going on so I briefed him on what we knew. I told him what had happened as we drove here.

His eyes widened. He understood the risk we took. I don't think I did yet. I told him about the major and the problem down the road. He didn't like either topic. We all then went into the office and Larry started telling us that we would be here for a while. We would all have guard duty from sunset to sunrise. He would post a list. Everyone—including the officers—was to pull duty. This was not unusual. In an intelligence group there was not much attention paid to rank although, generally, officers were treated with a bit more respect—but not much. You were judged by your ability, not your rank. Officers were in control of daily functions, but the intelligence work was led by the most able. It wasn't written, but everyone followed the guy with the most successful experience and not who had the highest rank. Generally, we worked as a team. Larry was by far the most experienced of our group and the one with the highest rank, outside of the major. Everyone knew it was best to do what he said. Strangely, my stock with everybody had gone up too. All I did was ride in a jeep, but I guess it counted.

We had two lieutenants—Paul Heinrich and Gary White—who were assigned to us, but they primarily kept to themselves. They were trained agents but had no field experience, even in the States. They felt that and tended to be loners—and we let them. Larry assigned sleeping stations. Everybody who was in the main house would keep his room. The rest of us would camp out in the front room where the bar was. They had six army cots for us. Larry was going to sleep in a room with one of the lieutenants since there was room for a cot in there. I asked if I could sleep in my office. The offices were nearer the front gate, offered no protection, and did not have a locking door—but at least I would have some privacy and not have to listen to a bunch of snorers. Also, there was more fresh air there because of the windows in the building. He said it was OK by him. What we risk for a little comfort!

Food and water were his next concern. We had little food at the office since we mostly ate out. The major had a stash, but he was not into sharing. Larry and Karl scrounged up what we had: some old World War II C-rations, some freeze-dried potatoes—and that was about it. Karl got on the phone and found somebody who would give us some more C-rations, but they would not bring them to us. It was too dangerous where we were. When we heard that we all

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grew a bit more silent. When even the regular Army thinks it is too dangerous to be where we were, it gives you pause. The one thing I was sure of was that we could not get out. Anyone leaving the area would probably be shot by the ARVN army soldiers, if not by the VC. So we had to hunker down for the duration. We had a well in the compound and, surprisingly, still had electricity. The well water was probably not potable but we had medicine, so we gambled that it would not kill us and drank what we needed. No one got sick. Water was the only thing we could drink. No beer and no alcohol of any kind. Nobody disagreed with that, but on those hot afternoons a cold beer really would have tasted great.

Karl somehow got the MPs to go to the building behind our compound, get on the roof of the building, and lower some supplies to us. This they did, but they told us that they did not think they would be back. We rationed our food to only two meals a day and all the water you dared to drink. All of us smoked, though, and the cigarettes were not going to last. I had started smoking during that first mortar barrage in Nha Trang and now I smoked like I had never quit. From the PX, a carton of 10 cigarette packs only cost \$2. One could afford to smoke here. Every C-ration, which came with a napkin, a candy bar of solid chocolate, and a couple of cans of food, also came with a box containing 4 cigarettes. All of this was almost 30 years old. The napkin would fall apart in your hands and the chocolate had turned to powder and was inedible. Every can we opened had a chunk of grease on top of it, no matter what it was. We had to eat them cold. At first, we gave the grease to our dogs, but later we started to mix it in with the mystery contents of the can. We needed the calories.

We avoided the cigarettes until we started to run out, at which time we began smoking them, too. A twenty-plus-year-old cigarette is not an easy thing to smoke. Forget about flavor. All you are going to get is nicotine—and old nicotine at that. Of course, the Army couldn't leave it at that. Almost all the cigarettes were menthol, KOOL by name. The menthol was hideous but we smoked them. We had to be careful with those cigarettes. They were dry—very dry. When they were lit they sometimes caught fire or burned very rapidly. In any case, they burned twice as hot as a normal cigarette.

You normally got three or four puffs before you got to the filter. What smokers will do to get a nicotine fix!

Our days were all the same. We couldn't get out and we hoped they didn't know where we were. It wouldn't take much for them to send a squad across the street and wipe us out. Over the next week the South Vietnamese attacked four times but they didn't have the firepower to force the VC out. It was a huge cement building and the rifle bullets just bounced off. The ARVN had surrounded the area and no one could get out, but then they couldn't get in either. We were inside the containment circle so we could not get out either. We were trapped with nowhere to go.

Before Tet, when we were getting the sandbags for the major, he had decided that we needed a guard post built outside our office. We complained that it would break our cover but he ordered us to build it anyway. Now we were glad it was built because we could put a guard there during the night, sitting behind the sandbags, and who could warn us if there was an attack. We still objected to the major, though, complaining it would show that we were somehow different from our neighbors. It would point us out as a potential target. He still ordered us to man it and we did. I spent several nights in there myself. We all did at least three-hour shifts from dusk to dawn. It was empty during the day.

One night about 3:00 AM, I was standing guard—well, sitting guard would be a better description. I really wanted a cigarette. We were not supposed to smoke while on guard duty—but who cared. So I squatted at the bottom of the guard post behind the sandbags and took one of those old KOOL cigarettes and lit up. This one must have been from World War I. When the match hit it as I took a puff, it caught fire like it was a roman candle. To me it seemed I had illuminated the whole city. I threw it on the ground and crushed it out with the butt of my rifle. Then I sat hiding and waiting. It seemed like an hour, but was only a few minutes before I stuck my head up to see who was coming to get me. There was no one moving anywhere. I never tried to smoke on guard duty again—at least not with a thirty-year-old cigarette.

While on guard duty you are alone with your thoughts—very alone. The first couple of nights, you stare into the realization that if

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anybody really attacked us there was no way they could be stopped. We did not have any machine guns and my old carbine would probably catch a few, but I would be dead quickly and all my firing would do would be to warn the others that they were about to die. At night your mind seems to dwell on the morbid. I did this for a couple of nights and then begin to think of home. That was harder. They must know what was going on here. The situation in Qui Nhon was not all that bad. The VC had invaded the town and taken the radio station and some surrounding buildings—but that was all. Most of the town was untouched. All the VC that came into the town were either dead or surrounded in the radio station, waiting to die. Unfortunately, because of our “brilliant” commander we were in the center of that noose of death with the VC. He should have moved to our house and escaped the danger, but he was too frightened to leave his sandbagged room. Well, as far as I was concerned, he was.

Anyway, the situation was stable but very dangerous. I later learned that, playing a part in the hysteria that this attack caused back in the US, Time magazine showed a picture of the damaged radio station in Qui Nhon and claimed that all the Americans in the town had been killed or captured. Like most news reports, it was a lie. They had no reporters in our province—we would have known that. Some reporter wrote the story from a bar in Saigon because it sounded good. Of course, at the time I didn’t know about that report but when I found out I worried what my wife and my family were thinking. Time magazine was off my reading list. Knowing they didn’t try to report the facts made me very angry. Anger was becoming more a part of me for some reason. I had never felt like this before, but the anger felt good now and I embraced it.

I was going to write some letters the week before the attack, but never got around to it. At least I had sent those flowers to my wife. She would know I was alive, then. I knew that because we could still contact Nha Trang on the phone and so weren’t listed as missing in action. That little wire saved a lot of people a great deal of anguish. Still, you wondered what they thought and I wondered what I would tell them. I was not about to tell them of the jeep ride or the battle and deaths I saw. I guessed my best bet was to minimize what was happening here to me. I could not tell them what was really happening to me or what I was seeing. They didn’t

have to know that, but from my letters I'm sure they would notice the change I was going through. So I spent my nights in the dark composing letters in my head that I would send to my family when I was able to get out of here. None of those letters ever got written. I just sent them all a short note saying that I was all right.

There was one more morbid thing I did every night when I was on guard duty. I watched that American's body way down the street. Most of the town in our area was dark at night. The province chief had the power turned off so the VC would have no electricity. It didn't affect our compound, but from our place all the way to where the American lay, it was dark except for a single street lamp near the body. You could clearly see it from our guard post. So, in the heat of Vietnam, I watched daily as the body grew in size as it was decomposing. During the day, from inside our compound, I saw the birds circling over it. I was glad it was not closer to us. The smell would have been terrible. After a certain point the body began to wither and shrink and I watched that, too. I felt sorry for his family. They would never see him whole again since he was only pieces of rotted flesh and bones. How would they recognize him? I guess I felt that that could very well have been me. I could be rotting into the blood-red dust of Vietnam, too. But I wasn't. These were not healthy thoughts, but I had to know what would happen to me if I died here. I watched that body every night we were surrounded and I was on guard duty.

After almost two weeks of sporadic fighting, something new was happening and we were worried. The ARVN army was pulling out. I happened to be the first to notice this strange event. My bed was nearest the front gate so I had heard the activity outside. The Vietnamese soldiers were leaving but the VC were still there. A bit of panic set in and I told Larry immediately. He went to the phone to call the MPs. Now the phone didn't work. We all became very worried. Something was going on. We had to know what was happening. We couldn't send anyone out—that would be suicidal. We sputtered around for a while and then I inquired about who lived next door in the two story building that blocked our view to the circle. Billy, the guy who first drove me to our other house, said he had talked to him once and that he was a Protestant minister

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who lived with his wife. He had been here for years. A minister, I thought—who but an ex-seminarian could talk to him.

There was a window on his house facing the front of our compound. I had never thought about it, but it was there. So I went to the window and began tapping on it, not too gently. In a short period of time a worried, white-haired old man appeared. I hoped he spoke English and he did. I wanted to tramp through his house and up to the roof. He probably wanted to stay neutral in all of this. I had to persuade him to let us in. As he slowly pulled back the curtain from the window—with worry on his face—he looked me in the eye. I smiled and signaled him with my hand to open the window. The look on his face showed his concern as he was deciding what to do. While he was deciding, I kept smiling. Finally, he pulled the window open. “Hi, I’m John Burdick. I work over here in the office,” I said as I held out my hand for him to shake.

He shook my hand, looking at me and wondering what I wanted. “I’m Reverend Johan Ludvig and this is my wife, Greta.” As he said this he pulled a very frightened woman to his side.

I kept smiling and said, “It’s nice to meet both of you. Too bad it has to be under all these conditions. How are you? Do you need anything? We don’t have much but we are willing to give you what we can.”

Reverend Ludvig finally smiled at me and said, “No we are all right. We have our own well. Do you know what’s happening out there?”

I told them about the VC attack and what was happening in town. At least I told him as much as I knew which at the time wasn’t a lot. “I have to ask,” I said, “What is a Protestant minister doing here? Most of the Vietnamese here are Buddhists or Catholics. The Catholics even have a cathedral here in town.”

He smiled. “I know, and I’ve been trying to change that. It has been difficult. I have been here about 15 years and we have only a small congregation, but they are fervent.”

“I am impressed by your perseverance. I once was a seminarian myself. I was going to be a Catholic priest but it was not for me. Still, I enjoyed the studies. By the way, I don’t recognize your accent. Where are you from?” I asked.



"I'm originally from Denmark but this is my home now. Where are you from?" he asked.

"Well my family is from California, in the States. I lived on the coast there, too. I'm also part Norwegian, so I guess we are almost countryman." I laughed and he laughed too. This banter might have seemed strange to anyone listening because all we wanted was someone on the roof of his house to let us know what was happening. But I was an agent and you never knew where your opportunities came from. Besides it was better if he agreed to let us into his house instead of us breaking in.

"Well, how can I help you?" he asked. I think he wanted to talk to someone because he was in the same boat as us. The VC did not like ministers of any kind—especially foreign ones. I had used the small talk to make him comfortable. I was becoming an expert in people-manipulation.

"Something is happening outside. The Vietnamese are pulling back and we don't know what is going on. Our phone just went dead. What I would like is if a couple of us could go up to your roof and see what is going on. I would really like to know if we are in for it or not," I said. He said he would be glad if we would go take a look. I could tell that he was too frightened to do anything by himself. Three of us entered his house, being careful not to break anything. We must have looked a sight—and smelled worse. Once in the room I could not help but notice that his wife had many dainty things around. I felt like a bull in a china shop. I took Billy with me and Marty Shoren, another agent in our group, after telling them to be careful and not to break anything. The minister showed us the way to the roof and I led our team up the stairs. Karl stayed by the window so I could send one of the other two down with information since we did not have any radio equipment.

When we came out on the roof we were behind another small room built on the roof for some reason. This small room was between us and the radio building. Other than that, the roof was flat. There was about a two-foot high wall around the whole roof with flowerpots evenly spaced. They were a little taller than the small wall. The flowerpots appeared to have small rose bushes in them. Whatever they were, they had huge thorns. From where I was now standing, I could clearly see the circle. The Vietnamese were

obviously marching away. However, a new force was approaching. Even from this distance I could tell from their heavily starched uniforms that they were Koreans. Part of the Tiger Division had shown up. I immediately told Billy to go tell Karl that the Koreans were coming—and coming with a vengeance. Prepare for an attack against the VC at any moment. These were well-armed troops and heavily disciplined. They had armored cars, recoilless guns, and a large number of other weapons. Many of the troops had two or three LAWs (Light Anti-tank Weapons) strapped to their backs. From what I saw, I knew this fight was going to end today. Marty and I crawled to the wall facing the radio station and watched as the Koreans proudly marched right up our street and spread out to any available cover.

Billy was back. Karl wanted more information. Billy found a way to climb up on the roof of the small building and did so. He could see better than we could from there. Marty and I kept popping our heads up to take a look and Billy gave us a rolling account of what he saw. Sporadic firing came from the radio station and this time it was aimed in our direction. We could see where the bullets were striking the street and the walls around us. I thought I could hear the bullets pass near my head. I told Billy and Marty to lie as flat as they could. I yelled to Billy on the small roof not to try to get off because he made too big a target and we were getting fire directed at us. Things then began to happen quickly. First, what I thought was artillery began to hit the radio station. It turned out to be fire from a recoilless gun—a sort of a cannon on a jeep that didn't recoil and knock the jeep over. The Koreans quickly began destroying the building floor by floor. Heavier fire began to come from the building and more of it seemed aimed at us. I thought I could hear the bullets go over our heads. Some did strike the cement wall I was hiding behind. That was too close for us and we hugged the roof with our faces. Billy began to make a lot of noise. He wanted off the little roof. I told him to shut up. I could see our compound and saw the major come out for one of his rare visits outside his room because of all the noise.

At this point a Korean recoilless gun pulled directly in front of our compound. I watched because I had never seen one of these fire up close. It didn't take long for it to fire its first shot and the world

blew up when it did. I quickly found out that recoilless guns aren't really recoilless, they just send all that recoil energy up and back of the vehicle. That was a direct line to us. I bounced up about a foot directly into a flowerpot full of thorns. My arm was scratched up rather badly and I bled heavily. I swore at the goddamned rose bush but gently pushed it away. I did not want to upset the minister by destroying his wife's precious roses. Marty had grabbed the pot in front of him and was holding his own. His pot was cemented to the roof.

Billy was now screaming at the top of his voice, "Get me off of here! Get me off of here!"

There was nothing I could do. I rolled on my back and shouted at him, "Shut the fuck up or I'll shoot you myself!" I only had to say it once. Maybe the tone of my voice or the fact I had pulled my rifle in his direction did the trick. Anyway, he shut up but whimpered every now and then. He was clearly scared—and rightly so. But he had to be shut up. He was drawing attention to us. After a moment I yelled, "Billy we will get you down. Don't worry. As soon as they stop we'll get you down." That seemed to calm him down some. We were going to help him. The look in his eyes, though, as he looked at me, told me he was really pissed at me. I guessed I shouldn't have threatened to shoot him.

I returned to watch the Koreans. The recoilless gun continued firing and we had to hang on for dear life. I then heard the major bellow, "Burdick, if you get your fat ass wounded up there we're going to leave you to bleed to death because you're too fucking big to haul down." For some reason I pissed this guy off today. Terry, another of our agents was just as big as I was, if not more so, and he had bright red hair. Of course, he wasn't on the roof. I ignored the major and he retreated into the main building again. Karl shouted up and asked if we were still all right. I shouted back that everyone was all right. I was scratched up from the rose bush, but that was all. I also shouted back that, at the first break, I would get off the roof. Five minutes later that happened. The Koreans began swarming into the compound to wipe out any remaining resistance. I got Billy off the little roof and we all reentered the minister's house. I helped Billy and Marty through the window but stopped to talk to the minister again.

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“Thanks for the use of your roof. I was able to let our team know what was going on. Sorry for the language I used, but that recoilless gun made havoc for us up on the roof and caused the remaining VC to shoot at us. Billy got a little frightened. By the way, the rose bushes on the roof are OK. The one I was behind broke loose but I held on to it,” I said. It was then that his wife saw the blood on my arm and, without saying anything, quickly went and got a clean white cloth and a washcloth. She washed my arm with the wet washcloth and then wrapped the white cloth around my arm. “Thanks! You really didn’t have to do that. You remind me of my mother when she would clean up my little scrapes and cuts. I really appreciate it,” I said.

“No, we must thank you. You tried to help us and risked your life. It was the least we could do,” she said. So she speaks English, too, I thought.

I looked at the Minister and said, “Thanks for letting us on your roof. I’m sure my friends next door appreciated the information I was able to give them. Did anything get broken down here with all that firing going on?” I asked

“No, we didn’t feel much of it down here. It was loud. Greta was frightened.” As he said this Greta reached over and squeezed his hand and smiled. It must be great to have someone love you that much, I thought.

“Well, I better get back and see if our phone is working again. I really want to thank you for your help.” I reached over and shook his hand but he did not let it go.

He looked at me seriously and said, “You guys are military, aren’t you? Some kind of intelligence unit?”

I winced. What was I to tell him? Out of nowhere, from my mouth came a “Yes.” Well, that broke all the rules, but how could I help it after he saw all those guys in our compound.

Seeing my distress he said, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.” And he said no more. I again thanked him and began to go to the window to leave.

“Look, can we meet for tea some time. I would like to talk to you some more,” he said.

As I was crawling out the window I said, “Sure, when this is all cleared up and things are a little bit quieter, I will come by for tea.”

I waved and crawled out the window. He smiled at me and shut the window behind me. Karl was still waiting for me.

“Shit, your arm is really all scratched up!” he said when he saw the blood oozing through the white cloth covering my arm.

“Don’t worry, it will heal. I just need to wash it off again and get some band-aids,” I replied.

“Let’s get you to a medic to clean those wounds. Hey, and you will get a Purple Heart for this,” he said.

“Like I’m going to get a Purple Heart for being wounded by a rose bush. I’m just going to go wash it off. Fucking lifers! All you ever think of is medals!” I headed to the water where I could wash my arm again. It was still bleeding. Karl was a good guy but lifers seemed to love those medals. I didn’t want one for this or anything else, especially for getting scratched by the thorns of a rose bush. Too many real soldiers were earning Purple Hearts, wounded by real bullets today. I just wanted to go home alive. I didn’t do anything that deserved a medal. Besides I didn’t want to be in the damn Army and was only in it because I was forced by the draft. I surely didn’t want a medal from an organization I wanted not to be in.

Larry also asked me about my arm. He wanted to put me in for a Purple Heart, too, but I refused. “Burdick, you earned it. Sure, it was friendly fire that caused it, but that was a battle and you were being shot at. The wounds are real, the blood soaking through that rag is real. You deserve it.” I just shook my head “No” and asked that maybe he could get some antibiotic cream or something so that it wouldn’t get infected. Larry looked at me for a moment, about to say something, and then turned around and went into the house and got the cream. He never said anything about it again. I think he understood.

After the Korean attack—or slaughter—whatever you called it, every VC that had entered town was now dead. At least this battle didn’t have to be fought with American troops. Well, we were there, but that didn’t count. After the attack our phone was back in order. Larry contacted the MPs and they said they needed four or five more days to pick up any sapper squads that still may be around. So we had to stay in our compound a little longer. The pressure eased up a

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bit and guard duty wasn't as scary. We just didn't have any food that was worthwhile and we were out of cigarettes.

We were all worried about what our families were hearing about us. The Armed Forces Radio did not help—the battle in Hue was consuming them. The dead and wounded were pouring out of Vietnam. Our families hadn't heard from any of us for three weeks and it would be another week—if we mailed letters today, which we couldn't—before they would hear from us. They had to be sitting at home dreading a knock on the door or a terrible telegram. Phone calls had to scare them every time the phone rang. They could not know what had happened to their husbands or sons and there was nothing we could do about it. The mood around the compound was very quiet.

I did not have guard duty that night so I thought I would splurge. Ever since I got here I had slept in the same clothes. I took my boots off some nights, but not many. Tonight, I was going to put on my last pair of clean underwear and sleep in a cot with sheets and a blanket and barefoot. Luxury indeed! I talked Lieutenant Gary out of a sheet that, if I folded it in half, would allow me to sleep between sheets. For once I was looking forward to nighttime. I still had the office area to myself. The reports of sapper squads kept everybody else inside. I went to bed early, around 8:00 PM. I was only wearing underwear, having even taken off my socks. The feel of my bare feet sliding down the sheet brought a smile to my face. Feeling the soft cool sheets against my body made me feel a little more human. But I was still cautious. I took my .45 dropped the magazine, cocked the pistol to make sure there was no cartridge in the chamber, and then slowly released the hammer down. I clicked the safety on and then shoved the magazine back in. I had made sure there was no round in the chamber and tucked the pistol under my pillow where I could get to it quickly. No sense not being prepared. I took off my glasses, laid them gently on the floor and slipped off to a very enjoyable sleep. It felt so good as I drifted into bliss.

A loud roar filled the room. Bright lights were flashing. There were explosions all around. Confused, I grabbed my glasses and immediately knew we were under attack. I could hear people run through the compound. Shit, they were already inside! I flew out of the bed, .45 in hand. By the time I hit the ground I had the safety off,

the pistol cocked and pointing at the frail door. I knew I was dead, but I was going to take one or two of those motherfuckers with me. I waited for the end. The firing grew louder. The flashes outside were everywhere. All I could think of was that they were going to find my body in my underwear and everybody would wonder what that was all about. I wanted to die with my clothes on. A calm came over me. When you're sure you are going to die, things change. The lights look different. Sounds are different. I never thought of it hurting. I just wanted to kill one of those sons of bitches before they killed me. I had answered the question that I had when I first came over here: I could kill—and I was ready to do it now.

Slowly, I became aware that something wasn't right. Nobody was running outside any more. The firing continued but didn't seem to be hitting anything in the compound. I stuck my head cautiously out the door and saw tracers going over our compound from the back. How could that be? The gate was open and there was nobody on guard duty. Strange! I went back inside and put on my pants and shirt. I stuffed my bare feet into my boots and took off for the house. Maybe I wasn't going to die today. As I was leaving the offices, the firing stopped. There was still a commotion. Karl came up to me, disgusted and pissed. He began to fill me in.

That MP outfit that gave us the food had moved into the compound behind us, at the request of the major. He had them dig a hole in the cement wall separating the two compounds. Then he covered it up and didn't tell anyone except the lieutenants. Lieutenants Paul and Gary were on guard duty tonight. I never found out why both of them got duty together. I had to do mine alone. A young private on the roof of the MP compound, manning a .50 caliber machine gun, thought he saw something and opened fire. Paul and Gary dropped their rifles and ran for the hidden hole in the wall. They were sure we were being overrun. I guess that's who I heard running through the compound. When they got to the back wall where the hole was, they yanked the chest of drawers away from the wall—it had taken four people to put it in place—ripped away the board covering the hole with their bare hands—it had been nailed to the wall—only to be met by four huge MPs, all pointing their bright, shiny new M16s in their faces. They practically wet their pants. They were lucky the MPs didn't shoot first. Karl wished they had. It's a terrible thing to

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show cowardice under fire, especially for an officer. They would be tainted forever. We all knew they could not work with us again. We never spoke or referred to the incident again. In a couple of weeks both lieutenants volunteered to man our office at Ahn Khe where the 173rd airborne was stationed. It had been unmanned for the last month. The agents there had gone to Nha Trang for the Tet celebration. They would not be going back. The lieutenants' request was approved without comment from anybody.

The night was ruined. I went back to my bed and crawled between the sheets, but it wasn't the same. I had mentally died just minutes ago. I had accepted it. The feeling of being dead or dying did not leave. Yet I was still alive. The adrenaline caused by the firing had still not subsided. As I sat on the edge of my bed, I was about to put my .45 under the pillow again. First, I had to clear the round in the chamber that I was going to use to kill the first person who came through the door. I dropped the magazine and pulled back the slide, expecting a round to pop out. Nothing was there. How did that happen? I was stunned. I had faced death with an empty gun. What a soldier! I guess that when I slept on the pillow with the gun under it, the release catch for the magazine was accidentally pushed. The magazine was tight in the handle so it dropped only about a quarter of an inch. That was enough for the bullet not to be slid into the barrel when I cocked it. What did all of this mean? How many mistakes was I going to make? I quickly put my hand into the pocket of my pants and pulled out the mushroom shaped bullet I had created in my first blunder in Qui Nhon. I rubbed it between my fingers for a time and then put it back in my pant's pocket. I did not sleep well that night or many nights thereafter. Life sucks! It seemed to me that I was not destined to live through my tour. I kept making stupid mistakes. My time was coming. I was now sure I was not going to live through my full tour, and there was little I could do about it. Knowing I was going to die made me think about what I was going to do differently. I never understood why it did—it just did. I had no idea about what I was going to do with the time I had left, no matter how long or short it was. I had to do what I could until I died. I would have to make sure I took as many of those little bastards with me. I tossed and turned the rest of the night. Sleeping in the sheets didn't help anymore.



We waited the four days the MPs said it would take to clear everything out. Larry called and asked about the situation in the area and was assured it had been taken care of. Larry came to Karl and me and asked us to get into a jeep and drive around to check on things. Particularly, he wanted to find out what happened to Captain Trang. We were eager to get out of the compound. Life was boring there and we were fed up with the major complaining all the time. This time I got to drive. We backed out the gate and headed up the street towards the radio station. The first thing I noticed was that whatever was left of the American I watched rot, was gone. I was glad I wouldn't have to look at that again. I wondered who he was and whatever happened to him, but not for long. I drove slowly up the street with Karl and his M16 at the ready. The radio station was a pile of rubble. There was a small Vietnamese flag on top of all the rubble. No one could have lived through that. They must have gotten all the bodies out because we didn't smell anything. Just past the station we turned right towards Captain Trang's building. It, too, was mostly destroyed. There were guards everywhere, though. We didn't stop, but drove by slowly. We could see the captain's office—or what was left of it. The front was pocked with bullet holes and the window was gone. It looked like something had blown up inside the room. The back door was open but did not look like it had been blown open. Maybe the captain was still alive! Two weeks later we found out that he was, and that he had barely escaped out his new back door. He was a lucky guy. He was also promoted to major.

We returned to the main street and continued away from the radio station. Everything else seemed relatively unchanged. The VC apparently achieved their first objective but got nowhere else. They were stopped by a poorly armed ARVN offensive. It appeared that most of the soldiers were on leave and took personal weapons and whatever they could find to the battle. That must have been why we saw so many with small arms at the tall building on the circle—brave soldiers protecting their homes. It was too bad they weren't better supported by the province chief's soldiers.

We found a bar that was open. "You want a cold beer?" Karl asked.

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“God yes, but just one, we got to get back,” I replied. I skidded the jeep to a halt and we both ran into the bar. There were a couple of whores in the back of the bar who quickly came to us. They were blunt and over-painted.

“You want fuck me,” one of them said to both of us.

“Nope! Just a cold beer,” I replied. They went back to their corner muttering something in Vietnamese that I was glad I didn’t understand. Three cold beers each later, we went back to the jeep and drove around the town some more. Having had no real food for a couple of weeks, the three beers gave us a buzz. I drove us back to the compound. They opened the gate and we drove in. Karl went and told Larry what we saw. I just sat in the jeep. I wanted another beer.

Larry came over, mad as hell, with Karl sheepishly trailing behind. “You guys have been drinking, damn it!” he yelled.

All I could think to say was, “Who me?”

Larry looked at me for a few seconds as if he was going to rip my head off. He then cracked a smile and laughed at the dumb answer and said, “Shit, if I had been there we would still be there.”

“Well, let’s go!” I replied.

“No, no. I’ve got to report this to the major. You guys stay away from him, he’ll smell the beer.” With that, he turned and went into the main building. We went into the office for a stale cigarette.

“Damn!” Karl said. “We should have bought some real cigarettes and made a fortune.” We both laughed and enjoyed the moment. In the morning we went back to our old house to stay. A hot shower and clean clothes made the world more bearable. Our house wasn’t much, but it felt good to be there. Even my hole-in-the-wall room in the back seemed like luxury. We had weathered the “Tet Offensive” and were still alive.

## Chapter 7

**When we got back to our** quarters, the Nung guards were there. They had been there since the day after Tet, guarding our house from anybody who would try to steal from us while we were gone. We hadn't issued them any weapons since we weren't there when they came, but they had gone and found some bat-like sticks to use on any evildoers. I was impressed. There were four of them and they all spoke in Chinese even though they had lived in Vietnam their entire lives. They could speak Vietnamese, but preferred Chinese. The Vietnamese and Chinese, I was told, don't believe in mixing very much. One of them spoke some English and Larry promised to get weapons for them in a few days—which he did. At night, I now slept a little better because someone was actually on guard protecting me and my friends, and it wasn't me.

As far as our intelligence activities were concerned, we were back to normal. We made the rounds of all our counterparts to see what they knew. Things were bustling with activity. It appeared that so many of the VC had been killed that the NVA troops were beginning to infiltrate to take their place. This was not a good thing. We were all desperate to find information on the newcomers so we could locate them and pay them back for what they did during the "cease-fire." Finding sources was difficult. You can't just walk up to someone on the street and say, "Hey, you want to spy for me?" Most of the people on the street didn't speak English anyway, and I didn't speak any Vietnamese. Our job was to find someone of interest. A good deal of my liaison time was spent drinking beer and bullshitting, waiting for a name to drop or a hint of where a potential source could be found. Once the person of interest was

identified, the dance would begin. By talking to everyone we could who had some contact with this person, we could learn if this was a possible source. Of course, no direct discussion of this person could be brought up. Innuendo was the code word—what someone said, or how someone said something was most important.

Interpreters could be used during this phase. If someone were to say to me, “This person is well-respected in her/his hamlet,” my ears would perk up and a check-mark would go by her/his name. The hard part was that you were always drinking or eating with someone and you had to pay attention to what was being inferred or said, without reacting or pushing the person who brought up the person of interest to give you more information. Recruiting takes time and requires an intense focus at all times. I was good at it but it was very hard work. There was no “goof-off” time for me. Wherever I was, I was listening for a clue that someone would be useful to us. The technique was simple. I played the part of the likable drunk who always had a story. When I had consumed six or seven beers or five or six drinks they believed I was polluted and would talk with a lot less caution. At times, one of the people I was trying to liaison with would give me a name or point me in a direction, but they were rarely worth the effort. Still, I would try.

Out of 20 persons of interest, maybe one would be of value, but the chance of a successful recruitment of that person was still very small. However, I was good at it. Larry and Karl were impressed at how quickly I had developed my recruitment technique. I was finding many persons of interest but had not got my first agent yet. Still, most of the other agents hadn’t even found a person of interest.

Until this time we had no contact with the Navy ONI (Office of Naval Investigation), a group we had actively sought out, but without much success. There was a strong naval presence in Qui Nhon. It was a port, after all, and the Navy had a base here out on the end of the peninsula across the bay. You couldn’t drive there but you could catch a boat ride to it. It was my good fortune to find Roger Morton—or maybe he found me, I don’t know. We met at the Officers’ Club bar and hit it off immediately. He was a Navy lieutenant, the equivalent of an Army captain. Navy rank can be a little confusing to anybody not in the Navy. Roger and I were about

the same age. I was 25 heading to 26 and he was around 27. We really seemed to enjoy each other and began to meet fairly regularly. Much was to come from this new friendship.

By now our mail had caught up with us. I had written home a couple of times after we were rescued by the Koreans, but had not received any response due to the disturbances across Vietnam. One day I received eight letters. Two were from my mom. She was worried, but she filled me in on what was happening to each of my five brothers and one sister. I could tell she was worried by how she rambled on. She said they were all praying for me—and I sure as hell needed it—but right then I wished I had a dozen of her chocolate chip cookies to munch on. Now that's home! I, of course, wrote her that all was fine and that we didn't have any problems where I was during the Tet Offensive. I hope she believed me. If I told her what really had happened it would have really bothered her. It was best to let her think that I was stationed in a headquarters-type unit far from any action—and that was what I said in every letter to her.

The letters from my wife were another thing. Lena kept writing and telling me to keep safe, not to do anything stupid. I guess she knew me better than I thought. I learned more about what goes on in a third grade class than I wanted to, but then she was, after all, a teacher. She had beautiful handwriting and the letters had a small amount of her perfume on them. It's amazing how the sense of smell can take your mind back home so clearly. She was probably aware of what was happening over here from talking to my fellow agents that I had worked with in San Antonio. One had been in Vietnam and he must have known what was going on. They would try not to tell her too much, but they knew I was in the middle of it. So she had to be worried. She told me a story about taking a nap after school and awaking from a nightmare, screaming, sure that I was dead. She got up immediately and called my mom in tears because she was sure I was dead. She wanted to know if my mom had heard anything. She was sure that something had happened. My mom reassured her and told her that she had heard nothing. She said she guessed it was just a bad dream. As I read her story my hands grew cold, and my breathing became shallow. By the date of the letter and the information she gave me about the date it happened,

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I realized that she was talking about the night I thought we were overrun and that I was sure I was dead. This was really weird and very scary! I guess I should have told her what happened that night, but I couldn't. I made light of the whole thing and told her to watch what she eats—I'm perfectly safe.

The next letter in the stack from her had her picture with the flowers I sent her. Damn, she looked good. I stared at it for a long time. She was incredible to look at and it hurt even more because we were separated. It would be nine long months before I would hold her in my arms again. Longing seems to turn to depression if you hold it too tightly. I had to move on. I put the picture in my wallet and put the wallet in my back pocket. I would have to make sure I didn't look at it too much. There were other letters, but they were more about school kids and her family. She also mentioned a cousin of hers who had just returned from Vietnam. He was wounded and in the hospital at Fort Sam Houston. She had visited him a couple of times. I thought that was real gracious of her and told her so in my letter. Finally, I ran out of letters and had to destroy all of them. I kept the picture, though.

About a week after we were back in our quarters, we were laying around on our beds when a little kitten came running into my room, turned around and ran out. It was foaming at the mouth. This was not good. I had never heard of rabid kittens, only dogs. It ran into the main house with me running after it, yelling for everybody to look out, a rabid kitten was on the way. Why I was chasing a rabid kitten I don't know. I didn't have anything to catch it with and no way to force it out of the house. You should have seen everybody jump. There was something definitely wrong with this kitten. It bounced off the wall like a furry ping-pong ball. It climbed up the drapes and fell off. It then ran in circles for a couple of minutes. Larry and Karl were outside looking for a piece of cardboard to force it out the door. The little thing was quick. Larry wasn't sure it was rabid. It may have eaten some rat poison, was his thought. We weren't taking any chances. The chase was comical as we kept stumbling over each other trying to get the kitten to leave. Nothing worked. Finally, we were all tired of the chase and stopped to rethink what was going on. The kitten then ran out the front door by itself and disappeared.

Karl and I went out the front door to see where it went—just as the guards in the compound across the street opened fire. We both hit the ground at the same time and looked to see what was happening. All I could see were what seemed like hundreds of tracers going down the street at somebody and, under the tracers, were our guards running back to our compound through the fire. Karl and I watched in disbelief. Were they nuts? They made it to our driveway, ran in back, and came out with their weapons, looking back down the street where they had run from. They ran back through all that fire to guard us! I was impressed again. I tried to look down the street, but I saw nothing. In a few minutes the firing had ceased. I got up and looked and there were no bodies or anything in the street. Larry and Karl had turned and headed back to the house. I turned but did not go back to the house.

“What the hell was that all about?” I yelled at them.

“Nothing,” Karl said, turning back to me.

“Like hell. I’m going to go ask them what the hell that was all about.” I turned and headed to the walled compound across the street, to what I thought was a door. I did not look back to see what Karl and Larry were doing, but I was sure they were watching me, waiting to laugh when the door was slammed in my face. I beat on the door with my fist and a small, very tough-looking Asian—I didn’t think he was Vietnamese—opened the door, pointing a rifle at me. “Who’s in charge?” I tried to bellow, but I think it had a wimpy sound to it.

A tall, blond, well-muscled man in jungle fatigues—the real kind—came over. He stopped, looked me over slowly, and said, “Come in.” I went through the door as it closed and I followed the blond guy. I couldn’t help but wonder what Karl and Larry were thinking.

We went into a kitchen area and I was asked to sit at the table. He asked if I wanted a beer and, of course, I did. Instead of going to the refrigerator, he went to a cupboard and pulled out a small bottle of Guinness Stout. I had never tried this before. Warm beer! He opened it, gave it to me, and began talking. Surprisingly, he knew who I was and what group I worked with and told me so.

I looked at him and around at what I could see and said, “Special Ops.” I looked around some more and then said what Larry had told me they were, “Probably Phoenix Program.” I took another swig

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of that warm, bitter beer. He laughed and told me that I had made a good guess. Of course, he didn't say whether I was right. The story he told me was that they had information that a group of sappers were coming to attack them, so they put their guards on alert. Evidently, as so often happens, a guard thought he saw something and opened fire. All the others on the wall followed suit. The blond guy said he was in charge of the guards and when he got to the wall he saw our guards and ordered his men not to shoot them. He was impressed that they ran into the fire to get back to their guard posts. He then had his men stop firing but remain on alert. The police had already been contacted and there would be no trouble. Surprisingly, no one was hit.

I told him about our adventure downtown, getting to the office on the first day of the Tet Offensive, and the ride we had to the main office and what happened up until the Korean attack. I also mentioned the firing by another guard over our compound at night. I left out the part about my thinking I was about to be dead. He liked the stories and I had to drink another beer. Then it was time to leave. As I was leaving, the blond guy gave me a phone number and said if we needed anything special to give him a call. All I would have to do is mention my name and what I wanted and someone would help me. I came to find out that I would need that as time went by.

When I got back, everybody wanted to know what it was like but I was not telling much except about the stupid, bitter, warm beer I had been forced to drink. Later, at the Officers' Club, trying to wash the bitter beer out of my mouth, I told Larry and Karl what the guy had to say. They were impressed. After all their efforts to contact the Phoenix Program people, it was I who finally was able to do it and now would be our contact with them. It was indeed a strange day.

The next day I thought I should get that cup of tea from the minister. It had been a couple of weeks since we met on the day of the Korean attack. So when we got to the office I told Karl that I was going next door to see the minister. Karl looked at me strangely. I guess he wasn't sure if I was getting religion or not. I allayed his curiosity by telling him that the minister had asked me to stop by sometime for tea, and I thought this should be the time. Karl shrugged his shoulders and I went next door. I knocked on the



door two times before it was finally carefully opened up by what must have been the minister's wife. She looked different than when I had seen her during Tet. I had not really looked at her closely when we went up to and down from their roof. She was an older woman, probably in her 50s with blond hair that was turning white. She had a pleasant, motherly smile. She did look at me strangely so I explained who I was.

"You look different now," she said.

"It's amazing what a shower and a change of clothes can do. Your husband asked me to stop by sometime and today seemed like a good day," I said. She explained that he wasn't there but he really wanted talk to me and to thank me for the protection we gave them. He would be back for tea about 3:00 this afternoon. She wanted to know if I could come back then. I agreed and went back to my office. I couldn't help wondering how he figured we protected him. We thought we were in serious trouble on his roof and left as quickly as we could. I guess if he thought that we were protecting him I would not disabuse him of that. Perception is always half the battle. Then I mentally kicked myself because the minister had mentioned tea and, if I had thought a minute, that is usually in the afternoon. Damn! No drinking until after tea. I can't be going to a minister's house half in the bag. But my curiosity was piqued. He was making a big effort to see me and he knows what I do. What does he want?

When the time came, I headed back over to the minister's house. Tea was tea. There were some tea cookies that didn't really taste that good, but at least they were cookies. The minister gave me some background of his time in Vietnam. He had been here over 20 years and was well respected in the community. Everyone seemed to know him, even though he was a Protestant minister. His church was outside of town near the highway to Ahn Khe. He had access to all these communities. After a fair amount of small talk we got around to what he wanted to talk to me about. He told me that when Diem ran the country—before the coup that killed him—the country was basically run by his Catholic cronies, including the intelligence services.

When he said that my attention became riveted to his every word. I tried not to show my interest. He continued.

When Diem was overthrown, so was his intelligence service. Every agent who was working for them was left in place but had

no one to report to. According to the minister, they were still there waiting to work for someone. He wanted to introduce me to one of the agents who was currently working for the VC and who would meet me on the steps of the Catholic Cathedral tomorrow. That I didn't fall out of my chair showed I had better control than I knew. I asked a few questions to make sure I had heard him right.

The agent had approached the minister just before Tet and asked for help. The minister said he had prayed over what to do. He wanted to stay neutral in this war that was imposed on South Vietnam. When I turned up at his window he was hoping I was the help this man wanted and the answer to his prayers. He knew he could not walk up to some intelligence office and give them the information. According to him, God had answered his prayers for this man by sending me to his window during Tet. I didn't disabuse him of his belief. If he wanted to think that God had sent me to him, then I would let him think it. It turned out that the minister was not going to go with me, but he did give me a note and told me where I could meet this guy tomorrow, if I wanted to. I did, of course. I told him that I would bring a translator with me. I also told him that I would meet this man, but, for the minister's own safety, I could never again contact him or his wife unless it was an emergency.

He smiled and said a blessing for me and, as I left with my note and my thoughts, he added, "I believe that this man works on the VC province chief's staff, but you will have to find that out for yourself." I could not believe my ears. This was incredible. Somehow, I managed to keep my composure as I left his house. It was the last time I saw the minister and the first time I had ever been the answer to someone's prayers.

I slowly walked the few feet back to the office. I couldn't believe what I had heard. This could be a trap—you never know who you can trust, and what did I know about the minister? After all, he had survived for a long time in Vietnam. He may use both sides to protect himself. I may be his "you get to live" chip with the VC, who he probably knows. On the other hand, if this information was correct, we had really struck it rich. With these thoughts in my head I walked into the offices and looked for Larry. "I need to talk to you now, and not here," I said. What little I knew told me that the fewer people who knew what I was thinking of doing, the better.

“Can Karl come too?” Larry said, with a wondering look on his face. I agreed. He called Karl and we all got in a jeep. Karl was confused. “Where do you want to go?” Larry asked.

“Let’s go to a beach where we can be alone,” I replied. We drove in silence. They wanted to talk but we remained quiet. It took us the longest 5 minutes I had ever experienced to reach the beach. It was empty except for some fishermen about a half-mile away. I sat on some rocks and so did they. I then told them what had happened at the minister’s house and showed them the note. Larry had the most experience and knowledge about Vietnam and we both asked him if what had happened to all those ARVN spies was true. All he knew was that he had heard that they were lost somehow, but it was never said how. There was a long gap in intelligence activity in the past and it was his belief that the story was probably true. It was something the Vietnamese were stupid enough to do. It was then that I told them that the minister thought this man was on the VC province chief’s staff.

Both of them said, “Shi-it!” at the same time.

Larry then said, “Thanks for saving that until the last, asshole! That changes everything. You may have stumbled onto the best damn source I’ve ever heard about. Congratulations! Now our work is cut out for us.”

I was worried that I didn’t have enough experience to pull this off. I might scare the guy off—or worse. I did tell them that I told the minister that I was going to bring an interpreter with me. Larry and Karl did not like the place of the meeting being in front of the Catholic Cathedral. I asked what was wrong with that—it’s a huge open square.

“Yeah, asshole! Tomorrow’s Sunday. It will be full of people going to church or the Sunday market,” Larry said, shaking his head. Karl already knew that. I felt really stupid. I had lost track of the days. I wasn’t the church-going type anymore, so Sunday was just a day people mentioned. The pit of my stomach tightened. If I went into that crowd I would be without any protection—and into that crowd I had to go to get to the door of the church where we were to meet. They didn’t ask, but their eyes were wondering, “What would he do?”

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“We’ve got to try it. This could be big. I will have to go alone with our best Nung interpreter,” I heard myself saying. Once again I was volunteering for a risky project. What was I thinking?

“Better make that a Vietnamese interpreter. Nungs aren’t Catholic,” said Larry. Again, he was right. We then got down to how the operation was going to happen. For the time being, we three would be the only ones to know about this. The first thing I had to get from my contact was something we could verify, to see if I was dealing with a genuine source. For this part of the operation I would be in control and call all the shots. Karl would back me up as best he could. If it felt squirrely I could abort and get the hell out of there. Larry’s comment was, “First, come back alive and second, get the info.” We spent some time discussing what I should ask that could be verified. We had a difficult time trying to figure something out, but we finally decided that I would try to get something written from him. A map of some VC positions or something like that, which could be verified one way or another. We had been talking at the beach for almost two hours and the sun was getting ready to set.

“OK, we’ve got to go back. Burdick, when we get back I want you to write a complete report describing everything that happened since you met the minister. That includes your first meeting, too. Karl, you write a report on our discussions here and our decisions. Between Burdick and you we will have two reports covering this whole planning process. Make only one carbon copy. Stamp both “SECRET” and give all copies to me. Tell no one what has happened today. This one is ours! I’ll tell the major, if appropriate.”

I didn’t really think about it at the time, but I was just put in charge of a potentially huge operation. Everyone would have to follow what I decided. If this were a good source, I would have to wrap him up so that he worked only for us. If I screwed up, we would never again have this chance. Getting an agent inside the VC infrastructure would save hundreds, if not thousands, of lives in this province. It was what every agent dreamed of. It had fallen into my lap because I stopped to talk to a worried minister and told the truth—one of the few times I did that. This was very exciting stuff and I was more than a little nervous. We went back to the office and wrote our reports, which we then gave to Larry. After Larry quickly read them we went to the Officers’ Club for dinner and a few drinks

to relax a bit. They didn't do the job. I had a hard time sleeping that night. Tomorrow I was going to church.

The next morning was bright and hot, just like every other morning had been. I went to the office and waited there, wasting time as fast as I could. About 11:00 AM Larry showed up with the interpreter. He got him from his contact with the province chief's office through its American advisor who vouched for his loyalty and discretion. I had never worked with an interpreter before, so we spent some time getting used to each other. He seemed like a competent guy and Larry trusted him. His name was Nguyen. He carried a pistol on his waist, which was unusual for the interpreters that I had seen. He knew we were up to something important. He would be the only translator I would ever use with this contact. We were ready.

At 11:30 Karl left by himself in a jeep. I had no idea where he was going. He was supposed to be my backup if things soured. I assumed he was going to find a place where he could watch me and help if needed. At 11:40 the interpreter and I left and headed to the cathedral. I had been by it a couple of times so I knew where it was. I had never been there on a Sunday. When we drove up to it I was shocked. The whole square was full of little people in black pajamas wearing the little straw colored conical hats they all wore. There was not an American in sight. We stopped and parked on a street off the edge of the square and started to walk to the cathedral. After about 20 feet into the square I was ready to quit. Here I was in the middle of all those Vietnamese, and all I could see was a solid floor of conical hats. The sensation was very unsettling. Everybody could see me—and all I could see was hats. I continued going forward, though.

We had walked and pushed about two-thirds of the way to the door when one of the hats began following the interpreter. Nguyen leaned over to me and said this guy was asking if I had a note for him. It was then that I understood how smart it was that they had chosen this place. While everyone could see me—I stood out in this crowd—no one could tell one hat from another. So if someone was watching, they could never tell who contacted me. There truly is safety in crowds. This guy apparently had some training!

I handed the note to Nguyen, who gave it to the questioner. After reading it, Nguyen was told to follow the hat and for me to follow

Nguyen. We headed away from the church and toward the business stalls. Nguyen deftly continued motioning me to follow him as we went down a series of stalls and quickly disappeared into one with a door that was closed after I entered. The closing door frightened me for a moment. The room was dark and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. It was my bet that Karl had lost me and I was now on my own. Nguyen motioned for me to sit with him at one of the tables with the person who had brought us here. The person who we followed here offered me some tea. I declined anything to drink. I was still strongly suspicious. I focused all my attention on the man. I watched his every move. It was as if I had covered him in a blanket of all my senses. I knew I could tell if an American was lying or hiding something, but I was not sure about a Vietnamese. I smiled to put him at ease. He began slowly talking to Nguyen. I had not a clue what he was saying, but there was intensity in his voice and in his very being. I did not feel a trap. He talked quickly as if he had sprung a leak and the pressure forced the words out of his mouth. I did not sense any deception so far. Then Nguyen stopped the man from talking and explained to me what he was saying. The man explained that he had been without any intelligence contact for over two years and had gone to the minister in desperation for help to talk to someone because he had much information to give. He was really glad to see me. He would be proud to work for the Americans. This was all hard to take. He was really too eager and I was getting nervous. I asked Nguyen if he thought he was telling the truth and Nguyen nodded his head "Yes." I decided maybe bluntness was called for.

Through Nguyen, I thanked the man for his effort to find us but, since we did not really know each other, I wished to be careful and needed something from him so I could tell if he really was what he said he was. He apparently liked what I had to say and I wondered if the translator was ad-libbing a bit. I would say a little thing and then they would talk to each other back and forth for a while. Nguyen then said that he could give us the villa where the VC province chief's wife and son were being hidden. I kept cool but inside I was ready to explode. This was major! I needed to know how he could have this kind of information. The minister had told me that this man was on the VC province chief's staff, but I had no confirmation from him on this. So before I asked about the wife of the VC province

chief, I needed to find out more about our informant. So I asked questions that Nguyen translated for me.

"What is your position on the VC province chief's staff?" I asked.

"I am not on the VC province chief's staff. I am attached to him as his chief personal guard and as a courier for him," he said.

"How long have you been in this position?" I asked.

"I have been with the VC for almost 6 years. I have been assigned to the province chief for the last 6 months. I joined with six other men who also are like me and want to see their destruction," he claimed.

So there was more than one man I could be working with. This was interesting and could lead to even more information. My excitement grew. I knew, though, that I had to be careful. He could be telling me things I wanted to hear.

"Why do you want to give me information on the men you work with?" I asked. This was important. I had no information on this soldier, only his word that he wanted to help us. Normally, I would know more about a proposed agent. I wanted to know how he would answer this question.

He paused and looked carefully at me before he spoke. "I am a Catholic. My family was driven from the North when the Communists took over. During the flight my mother and little sister died because the Communists drove us out without any food. I swore then to get even for their loss." His face became hard and you could feel the hate in his heart for the loss of his mother and sister. He stared at me and said no more.

"I am Catholic, too. My brother is a priest. I understand why you had to leave. I am sorry that your mother and sister died at the hands of the Communists," I said. "I think I can help you." I looked at him to see how he reacted. The hardness from his face seemed to melt.

"Your brother is a priest?" he asked. Apparently, he thought this was very important.

"Yes. I, too, was once in a seminary, but I was not meant to be a priest," I replied. I think even if I hadn't been a Catholic I would have said so to get him to accept me. By accident, I said the words that fully committed him to me. I thought I could tell from the look on his face that he felt he would trust me. Nguyen also verified that he thought so too.

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“Can you draw me a map where the VC province chief’s wife and son are currently hidden?” I asked. He nodded his head affirmatively. I handed him a piece of paper and a pencil and he began to draw.

Nguyen kept saying, “This is good. This is good.” He had caught some of the excitement, too. In a couple of minutes he handed back the paper and I saw a map showing highway 1 to LZ English and the road to Ahn Khe and there, clearly marked, was a group of villas with one circled.

He pointed at it and Nguyen said, “That is where she lives for now, maybe two weeks.” Before I took the map I asked where the guard positions were and could he mark them on the map. Nguyen related what I asked and the man took back the note and said something to Nguyen. When he finished updating the map he gave it to me and Nguyen told me that he said these positions change often but this was the last he knew where the guards would be posted.

I took the map, put it in my pocket and said, “In one week from today on the road to the American PX where the entry to the parking lot is, there is a broken telephone pole. At the back of the pole is a pile of grey rocks. If, on top of the pile of stones there, you see a single red brick, then we will meet again.” I suggested two different places we could meet and he chose the park next to the province chief’s house. “If this information does not check out I will not be there and you will not see me again.” He clearly wanted to meet again and assured us we would meet again. I was sure, too, because—whether it was true or not—I planned to meet him again. He left the hut and five minutes later so did we. Larry and Karl were going to be shocked.

Walking back to the jeep through all those Vietnamese did not bother me as much as entering the crowd had. This time they seemed to part in front of me. I could not wait to get back to the office. We got back to the jeep as fast as we could and I drove off to our offices. The map seemed to burn a hole in my pocket on the way home. If I wasn’t driving I would be holding it and staring at its meaning. Could this be true? How could we tell? When I got to the office I released the interpreter and said we would want him tomorrow to debrief him further. I did not have to warn him to say nothing about what we had just done. He knew what he heard was important and wanted to continue to be involved. He had done a



good job. I thanked him. Karl was waiting in Larry's office. I went in and closed the door.

"How did it go?" Larry asked. I gave him a verbal report about the whole meeting. As I was explaining what happened on the way to the cathedral doors, Karl said he lost me when I entered the crowd. There was no way he was going in there. He could hardly believe I did it.

"It was no big thing," I said. I guess I really didn't understand the danger I was in. I was telling my story and when I came to the part about the map and the VC province chief's wife and child, their eyes widened and they grabbed the map. I told them the guy seemed sincere—but who knows. He definitely was happy to have someone to report to. Larry had pulled out an area map and we all poured over it to see if it made any sense at all. It did! We all pointed to the spot the agent described.

"The villa has to be right there!" said Larry.

Karl chimed in, "That's within view of the highway." We continued discussing if it was really possible they could be living that close to the highway. We just didn't know. We had to find out for ourselves if it was true.

Karl said, "Why not just drive down the road tomorrow and look." Sometimes the hardest things are the simplest to do. We decided that in the morning Karl and I would drive down the road and see for ourselves. It turned out to be another dumb move on our part—but who knew that then?

Before we broke for the night, I asked Larry what we could do with this information? I could send it down to Nha Trang and then to Saigon, but then nothing would probably happen. We were not attached to a combat outfit so we had no American force we could use. By the time the information came back to a unit that could respond here, the VC province chief could have rowed to San Francisco. We needed a quick response. Larry and Karl thought about this. It was a real problem. We were supposed to eliminate VC infrastructure but not get involved in combat action. What I was asking was against MI policy. Our only option, according to policy, was to forward our information to higher echelons and let them decide what was to be done. It was just another example of the Army following its stupid

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bureaucratic rules. The very same bureaucracy that had forced me into the Army and to here was striking again. Karl and I looked at each other and immediately knew what our decision would be. We looked at Larry to see if he agreed. He smiled at us. He was with us on this one. So we decided to ignore the policy. Karl and I would check out the site and Larry would check with the American advisor to Saigon's province chief and see if they could somehow give us a force to use. It may seem like a simple thing, but we had just decided to start our own little war and if we got caught, the implications would be severe—unless we succeeded. We felt that the VC province chief's wife was a high-value target. If we eliminated or captured her by using our province chief's forces, then we would have fulfilled our mandate. Where this would take us we had no idea.

Before I went to bed for the night, I had to write a report on the meeting I had with the new agent I had just recruited. One part of the report required me to give him a cover name. I struggled with that seemingly simple task. Finally, I decided to call him "My Guy" since I had recruited him and he was, after all, really my guy. When Larry read my choice he started laughing but approved it. Saigon, I heard later, didn't like it either, but they let it stand. I thought it was a good choice. As part of the report I asked for my agent to be paid 3200 *piastres*, which was about \$20. Although My Guy had not requested any pay, I thought he should get something for the danger he was putting himself in. Saigon also approved the payment to My Guy.

The next day at mid-morning Karl and I jumped into our blue jeep—it was the only one available at the time—and headed for the road to LZ English. Karl drove and I looked for the villa. As we got near the intersection where the villa was supposed to be, I began looking as hard as I could for the villa. Riding in a jeep down a bumpy road at 30 to 40 miles an hour, trying to spot anything, is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, I spotted two villas, either of which could be the one we wanted. They were near the right place. So we went up the road out of site and turned around and came back, trying to drive a little slower and looked again. The two villas looked like they were near each other, but one was, in fact, several hundred yards behind the other. The one in the back looked like it could be the right one. We decided we had to drive back and check it again to verify that it was

the right one. Again, like the first time going north, we still could not be certain. So we drove back the way we had come one more time, and this time we agreed that the far villa was the right one, and even saw some people on the second floor balcony looking out toward the road. We still felt we needed one more look.

Apparently, neither of our heads were on straight—we had gone up and down the road four times in a blue jeep while every other vehicle going up and down that road was Army green. We stood out like an elephant among goats—but we didn’t think about that at the time. We just needed another look. So we went back again. This time we were sure. There were more men on the balcony and they were armed. A machine gun of some sort was on the lip of the balcony. We were also sure they were pointing at us. We were headed north and the only way back to the office was to turn around and drive south and pass that house again. Who knew what they would do? As we went up the road, Karl and I knew we had been stupid, but we didn’t dwell on that. How could we get out of this? I asked Karl if he had a map.

“No! What the fuck good would that do us? This is the only road,” he shouted. I looked in the back seat and saw a piece of brown cardboard that somebody had thrown there. I peeled the paper away from the corrugated part and folded the paper so that, from a distance, it would look like a map. I then told Karl my plan. We would drive back with me yelling at him and pointing to my “map.” I would point every which way, act mad, yell, and gesture at him. Maybe they would think that we were just stupid, dumb, lost Americans. It was worth a try. Karl thought I was nuts but he went along with it because he didn’t have a better idea. We headed back to town. This time there were even more people on the balcony. One looked like a woman. I was screaming at Karl, pointing fiercely at my “map,” and then at the road. I kept doing that—gesturing and berating him as we passed the villa. When we were next to the villa, the people on the balcony began to go back indoors. They must have bought the act. I was relieved but didn’t stop pointing and yelling at Karl until we were well past the villa and it was out of site. We then headed to a bar for several beers to calm us down. As we headed to the bar I put my hand in my pocket and took the mushroomed bullet between my fingers and rubbed it. I had screwed up again.

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We really had to be more careful. We had to remember that we were not trained in reconnaissance. We needed to stay focused, doing the job we were supposed to do—spying.

Now that we had more or less figured out that the information was correct, we had to decide what to do with it. We met again with Larry, who had already taken our radical idea to the province chief's American advisor. Normally, MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) was set up to control all activities in the province—and here we were plotting to cut them out of our activities. This would not be easy. Who could we get to attack and capture the target? Since I was the only contact with our agent, I had to limit my activities in the actual force development. I didn't quite understand at first, but it did make sense, so I went along. Larry went back to the American advisor to give him our analysis that the information looked to be good. I think Larry had already planned how the operation would be carried out. He came back from the meeting with the advisor, shaking his head.

"You won't believe it. These fucking idiots have never done a night attack. How many years have they been at war here?" he blurted out. It turned out that, though inexperienced, they would attempt this operation tonight. The first step would be to set up a night ambush near the villa. They wanted some prisoners to verify the information we had given them. The area was a known VC stronghold, which we had not known before. They were going to use the Regional Forces/Popular Force—RF/PF for short or, more usually, called Ruff Puff. (It was the American Army's belief that Ruff Puff clearly meant that when things got Rough—Puff, they were gone.) Thirty men were going to go out tonight to set up an ambush on some supposed VC site based on information I had gotten. This would not be an attempt to capture the VC province chief's wife and family. It was only an attempt to capture a few prisoners to help verify how good my source was, based on the guard locations I had given Larry. You would think I would be happy about this, but I was worried and nervous. You don't have to hold the gun to shoot the bullet. Clearly, what would happen tonight was on my head. Men were about to die. It didn't feel very good.

The next day Larry went to find out what happened as I waited anxiously and worried, not knowing how I should feel. When

Larry returned he told an unbelievable story. The thirty men had been divided into three ten-man squads and were to establish three ambush kill zones. Sadly, one of the squads got lost and stumbled into the partially established kill zone of the other two squads. A firefight broke out and three RF/PFs were killed and four were badly wounded. The only good thing was that two VC soldiers came into the area to see what was happening. One was killed while the other was captured. It turned out that the two VC were guards at the very location I had given them. So they had a captured prisoner and our province chief was happy. He wanted to try again. They wanted more information if we could get it.

But I wasn't listening any more. People died because of me and it bothered me at some unknown level—yet everyone else was happy. Our office had just gotten our first KIA and a prisoner. Naturally, we couldn't count the RF/PFs killed, but one VC was still a start. Again, my importance to the unit went up with everyone but the major. Still, even he lightened up a bit. I guess he thought that an actual report of a KIA at headquarters would boost his chances of getting promoted. After this action, he left me alone. My thoughts were that if I keep killing three of ours to one of theirs, they were going to take my credentials away. I will get better information next time. At least our unit now had its first source. We were all celebrating a bit and, after half a dozen drinks or so, I no longer cared how I felt.

When the time came, I left the red brick where I said it would be, as a signal to meet again. Before the meeting, we continued to lay night ambushes and, in over four firefights, managed to kill two more VC. We had no more losses. My KIA balance was evening out. I was drinking fairly heavily during this time. I guess there were just too many celebrations. My reputation was getting around and more of the agents I was going out of my way to liaison with were now making an effort to see me. While this was fun and a strange turnaround, I was not comfortable with the attention and began to limit access to only those who I thought could help me. We had developed our own strike force—even if it was RF/PFs. This was new and it was working. I didn't want other agencies interfering with our force build-up. If Saigon got wind of it, they would stop us in a flash.

At some level, what I was doing was bothering me, but I could not put my finger on it. Friendly deaths bothered me a lot. So far, none of my information had killed an American soldier. I lived in fear that it would. I did not know what I would do if that happened. I began to worry about my drinking, my ability to think straight, and the real possibility that I would be wrong and it would be entirely my fault. Everyone was expecting me to lead the way. I did not like being a leader. This fear became stronger and stronger. I would spend hours going over my reports and reading others to see if I was doing the right thing. I stopped drinking and didn't eat that much. I smoked like there was no tomorrow. Harder work was not better work. Who can tell what will happen in a firefight? I had to accept responsibility for what I was causing. I began to lose sleep and was getting quite irritable. Larry and Karl were getting worried. They were afraid I was going to crack up—and so was I. I even tried going to church again to see if that would help. I actually went to the Catholic services in a tent at the airbase run by some priest-chaplain from the Midwest. It made me feel a little better. I guess it helps to share your problems with God. It didn't last long, though.

At the time, because there were so many going to Mass, they gave general absolution for your sins to all the soldiers present. There was no way they could get to each one individually. It seemed like a good idea to me. Then a new Catholic administrator took over and, one Sunday, it was announced that the giving of general absolution was wrong and would no longer be provided. Furthermore, anyone who received absolution would have to go to confession again individually because the previous general absolution was invalid. I was furious. How dare they do that to these soldiers! They came in good faith and received absolution and then some went and were killed in action. Did that priest mean to say that these guys would go to hell because their sins were not forgiven? Is it the priest's presence or the act of confession that is important? The institution of the Church did not have the right to declare something right and then wrong. They did not have the right to do that. I flashed back to all those years when I was in Catholic schools and they told me that it was a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday and that one must fast the night before Communion. Then I went to Mexico—a Catholic country—and found out they never had to eat fish on Friday or fast before Communion. They even

laughed when I mentioned it. Well, this was even worse. Right is right and wrong is wrong—and this was wrong.

I was surprised by my reaction to this affront to the American soldiers. I had, at this time, little contact with any American soldiers, but nevertheless I had a great deal of empathy for them. These men were special. It was hard to imagine the pressure they were under. They had to fight and die or be wounded for some confused idea about what was important to the US Government. No one seemed to care about them. They were things that were moved from place to place based on some invisible chessboard that nobody could understand. All you had to do was walk through the Evac Hospital—which I did once or twice every week—to know the sacrifice these men made. Although I knew none of them, these men were my comrades and I had developed a strong protective feeling for the American soldier. Now, once again they were being screwed. I had, I think, no problem with what the church stood for, but it could no longer define for me what was right or wrong. If something is wrong, then it has to be for everybody and for all times and no institution was going to define it for me anymore. I got up and walked out. That was the last time I went to church in Vietnam.

But the pressure I was feeling did not go away. Something was crawling around my head that I couldn't grasp—and it hurt. I was edgy, nervous, and becoming nastier every day. I am a natural workaholic and now I became even more so. I studied maps. I checked my sources and other people's sources. I wrote report after report. I worried and smoked and drank more than all the other agents combined. I could not figure how to get out of this cycle of anger, fear, and frustration. While doing this, my KIA count was growing higher. The RF/PF force was working better every day. We were more successful in capturing and killing what we were identifying as NVA soldiers. But the work was hard and my stress level was unbelievable. We had even tried to capture the VC province chief's wife twice. We failed both times. My source—My Guy—was happy, though. He now had someone acting on his information. He had re-contacted the five other Catholic VC and more information was pouring in. Possible targets were multiplying.

One morning I stayed in bed late thinking and worrying about all the people who depended on me. It felt like my head was blown up

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like a big balloon and was going to burst. I couldn't get out of bed. I lay there and tried to figure out what to do. I remembered those damn Jesuits who always told me to think my way through it. Don't do it all, take it one piece at a time. You can't eat an elephant all at once—you eat it one bite at a time. I struggled to find that first bite. It finally struck me that all I could do was to do the best I can. There were sure to be friendly deaths, but, if I just did the best that I could, then I would have done all that I can. No one can be asked to do more than their best. Not trying to be perfect was a strange thought for me, but it seemed to release all the pressure in my head. Nobody is perfect. I just have to try as best I could and accept what happens. I would have to curb my drinking and ease my workload and accept the fact that I would make mistakes. All I could do was worry about today's problems and solve them the best that I could. There was one part of the elephant though that was especially hard to digest. I could not put into words my feeling of going home. It was so far away that it hurt to think about. I hated to look at calendars because they all reminded me that I was going to be here for just about another 300 days and nights. I had already changed the way I thought since I came here. Never in my life did I believe I would be sitting at a desk developing strategies to kill someone. They sure as hell never taught that in the seminary. Yet there I was, sitting at my desk with Larry, setting up kill zones and ambushes. What would happen to me when I went home? I already knew that after the first kill the others became easier and easier. Would I be able to change back to what I was? I didn't know. So now when I thought of going home my thoughts were tinged with hope and fear—hope that I would live to go home and fear that the person going home might be some kind of monster. Right now I felt the monster was winning and I wanted it to win because the monster was saving American soldier's lives. Every enemy soldier I killed would be one that could not kill an American soldier and I could live with that. I had to! The result was that I didn't feel like I would make it home. Well at least not alive. Maybe it would be better for everyone if the monster died in Vietnam. Reaching these decisions caused all that pressure in my head to quickly deflate and my pain left—a great weight was lifted from me. I knew I had escaped a meltdown by the skin of my teeth. Seeking perfection is deadly and I had escaped its sting for now. I went to our bar area and made a huge Bloody Mary



for breakfast. I was back! Not exactly the way to curb my drinking but I hadn't had anything for a few days. Now I knew that I could only do what I could for my fellow soldiers. My focus would always be protecting American soldiers as best I could. While most around me still thought of me as a wild man that would do anything, I knew the truth. I was no better than those poor lieutenants who ran under fire on the night I died mentally. I really didn't believe I would live through my tour, but I could only do my best until my end came. I knew I was no wild man. I was a dead man waiting to fall. I found comfort in that thought for some reason.

After my goof at the Christmas party and after what happened during Tet, I knew I had to get more familiar with weapons. It may be the only thing that would save my life. Immediately after Tet, Karl and Larry, myself, and a few of others would go out of town and practice firing almost daily. I spent most of my time learning what a .45 could do. I could take mine apart and clean it in a minute and put it back together in even less time. Except for Basic Training, I had never really even handled a rifle or pistol in my life. Well, that wasn't quite true. When I was about 12, at my grandparents' farm, one of my uncles gave me a small .22 pistol to use so that I could sit on the back of a mowing tractor and shoot the field mice that popped up. As I remember, I missed every one. Frankly, the little .22 scared me. The next time I held any kind of firearm was during Basic Training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. I passed—but barely. I could hit a big round target, but not consistently. With my first posting as an agent I was given a .38. I promptly locked it in our safe and never looked at it again until I signed out to go to Vietnam and had to turn it in. Now I knew I had to learn—and practice was what I needed. Karl helped me at first but after a while I became good—very good. I was particularly good with a pistol at distance. There wasn't any rifle—ours or the enemy's—that I didn't know how to fire. I would make no more mistakes.

I had been working more with Roger lately, wondering if I should bring him into our little “war.” During these meetings Roger had heard that I was good with weapons and offered me a chance to fire some captured weapons over at the Navy base. I immediately accepted. He had some AK 47s, an old Grease Gun, several different

types of pistols, a Swedish rifle or two—and more. This looked like fun to me and to Roger.

I had to hop on an old World War II landing craft for the short trip to the base across the bay where Roger was waiting for me. He said we had to go to lunch first to meet his boss. I didn't care because the Navy ate well—very well. I don't know how they do it, but their food was always great and they had fruit and vegetables that I hadn't seen in months. His boss was old Navy and I'm sure he was uncomfortable with me being there, but he put up with me anyway. He probably was wondering why I was there and who the hell I really was. I think, though, he just didn't like non-Navy personnel dirtying up his Mess.

After lunch, Roger and I got in a jeep with a big canvas sack in the back and headed for the west perimeter. There were soldiers on guard along it and Roger went and talked to the officer in charge and told him what we were going to do. This was an area where weapons were normally test-fired and Navy personnel practiced their aim. At first we tried our own weapons. Roger watched me as I carelessly fired a couple of rounds toward a metal fence-post almost a hundred yards away. I missed both times.

“What the hell are you doing? Those old .45s are no good past 30 or 40 yards. You'd never be able to hit a fence post at a hundred yards. Hell, you'd be lucky to hit within 6 feet of it!” he bellowed.

I smiled. I've got him now! “Look, smart ass, I'm willing to bet twenty dollars I can hit it within three shots. Put your money where your mouth is!” I don't know where that came from. I had never hit a fence post at a hundred yards. Close to it, but not at 100 yards. The fence post was only four inches wide, but hey, I had three shots. Roger accepted, laughing at me while he pulled out his money. The officer in charge had wandered over and was shaking his head at the impossible shot I had said I could make. Neither one of them knew how much practice I had—nor was the fact that I was sober a help. So I thought I could do it. As I readied my first shot, I was very slow and deliberate and gently pulled the trigger and fired at the post. I was lowering the pistol when the round hit about a foot directly in front of the post. A small dust cloud was clearly visible.

The Officer in charge said, “Well I'll be goddamned!”

Roger looked a bit incredulous. “That was dumb luck!” was all he could say.

I just smiled. I then relaxed and braced for my second shot. There was no wind so things should go better. I made a mental adjustment and slowly squeezed the trigger again. This time, as I was lowering the pistol, a loud clang could be heard by everyone. I had hit the post! Roger just laughed as I pulled the twenty from between his fingers. “You should have seen me shoot before you bet, Roger!” I said.

“Damn. So he can shoot too!” was Roger’s reply. He was impressed and I was just a bit lucky and way too cocky—but it did feel good to win the bet.

We then got down to business. Roger pulled weapon after weapon out of the bag and we fired them. First, taking turns, and then, firing at the same time. Grease Guns have very distinctive sounds and so did the other guns we fired. Suddenly, we heard sirens and shouting from back at the base area. People were running around.

The Duty Officer ran up to us and said, “You have to stop. They’ve called an alert. Someone heard enemy firing from the perimeter and all hell broke loose down at the base.”

Roger and I looked at each other with a big “OOPS” in our eyes. Roger said, “We’d better get out of here.” He knew the enemy fire they had heard was our firing of captured weapons on the perimeter. We quickly stuffed the weapons back in the canvas bag and hurried back to our jeep. Roger decided to drive me directly to the beach where the landing craft still was so I could get on it and back to the city before the alert locked me down on the Navy Base.

“What’ll you do?” I asked.

“Blame it on you, of course! Now get back to the city before they shut down transportation, too!” He shook my hand and muttered something about that damn shot of mine and left. I was taken back to the city. Roger got everything cleaned up. The guy who panicked and called the alert was in trouble, but we were not. Roger had permission to do what we did. I did enjoy spending Roger’s twenty dollars, though, and he never tired of telling the story of what I had done.

Unfortunately, during this time my communications with Lena went south for the duration. First, she announced that she had moved back in with her mother, which we had agreed, before I left,

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she would not do. Her mother was a bad influence on everybody. I knew immediately that all the money I was sending home each month would now go to her mother. Before we got married Lena lived at home and her mother took all of her teacher's pay. She did not like losing that income when we got married. Now she was going to get both Lena's teacher salary and the money that the Army automatically sent her from my pay every month. There was nothing I could do about that. She also kept talking about her cousin. He was taking her to dinner and dancing, he took her to movies, and they went shopping. He seemed to be following her around like a sick puppy. Well, at least in my mind it seemed that way. I was going through my own problems and adding the thought that my wife was fooling around finally took me over the hill with her. I have no doubt she wasn't fooling around, but in my mood I suspected everybody. It was my job, after all, to suspect everybody and trust no one. I couldn't help myself, but I lost my trust in her and that was the worst thing. After all, I was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of GIs who would screw any round-eye they could find. The nurses around here had to be careful. Nobody cared if they were married. How could I not expect this cousin to do the same thing? Finally, I blew up and wrote a stinging series of letters home about me not wanting to hear what she was doing with her cousin. I didn't want her to see him anymore and I didn't want to hear about him again. For some reason I don't remember exactly what I said, but I know I was expressive. I am sure that my near-meltdown caused me to be especially bitter in my letters to her. After that, our letters were always strained, and for a while there were several weeks to a month before we heard from each other. Our letters were never intimate again and were somewhat brief and formal. For the moment, I was okay, and that was enough. I fell back on the phrase every American soldier muttered at one time or another: "It don't mean nothin'!"

## Chapter 8

**Working with My Guy was proving** challenging. It was dangerous to meet and talk for obvious reasons. Most of the time he would pass information through notes left in dead drops or by physically passing them to me or to my interpreter. I tried to meet with him personally every couple of weeks to talk about what he was giving us and to make requests for information he might be able to get. During one of those meetings I offered him some of the money that Saigon was sending me for him. He refused it. He let me know he was not doing this for money and it was dangerous for him to have extra money. His superiors would wonder where he got it. I agreed and told him that I would keep it for him if he ever decided he wanted it. Now I had some Vietnamese money to keep for my agent. My Guy had reported that he had about six men—his Catholic friends—now helping him gather information. I had met none of them, but that was normal. The amount of information I was receiving would take several men to acquire. However, I was concerned that the net was growing too large and I wanted to begin to reduce it a little. I brought this up to My Guy. He was reluctant at first, but he eventually agreed. What he did was take two of his most trusted agents and place the other agents under them so that, supposedly, he was protected somewhat. I didn't like it at all. They all still knew him. He was sure, though, that they would never turn on him. I let it stand for now but was sure I would have to make him do something different if he was to be safe. He needed to be protected. When I got back to the office, I added these agents to my list of requests for pay to Saigon. I named them My Guy 1, 2, etc. I thought that was the easiest way to keep them straight. No one

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seemed happy with the arrangement but they had no ideas on how to make it better.

Working with my net was taking much of my time. I was meeting with My Guy by drop at least once a week. The report writing was continuous. Trying to make sense out of all the information was even more difficult than you would have thought. The other special agents in my office knew practically nothing about what I was doing. I guess they suspected, but I never let on. I was spending a good deal of time with Nguyen, but since I was responsible for many of the liaison activities, nobody thought much about my using him. After the new set-up was implemented, my meetings became less frequent. Sometimes I would not hear from the net for over two weeks. After three weeks, I would get nervous and begin to worry. I was extra careful until contact was made again. This meant that it could be three weeks between drops or meetings. One of my many tasks was to provide information on every man or woman in the net so I could pay them and, if something happened to me, they could be contacted by a new control. This was included in the reports I had to send to Saigon. God, the Army loved their paperwork.

And it was paperwork that almost did me in. I was at my desk going over some new information that I had just received when Larry came in with a worried look on his face.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“The shit has hit the fan!” he replied. What had I done? I thought I had been fairly good lately. Probably, somebody got wise to our use of our own forces. That would be bad for us but they couldn’t be too mad at us. We had been very successful so far.

“What shit?” I asked.

“I just received an order from the State Department and it has been approved by Saigon.” I thought: State Department? What the fuck did I do to get the State Department after me? Larry continued. “As hard as it is to understand, they have decreed that it is against US Department of State policy to recruit religious ministers, especially if they are from friendly countries we don’t want to offend. We are ordered to terminate our net and cease contact with said preacher and all the agents we have recruited through him.”

I was stunned. Had they lost their fucking minds! Where the hell is there a list of whom we can recruit or not recruit? Again I was

being blindsided by some ignorant bureaucrat who was interested only in his little piece of the world and the rules as he saw them and—worse—no one in Saigon told him to “fuck off” and go home. The cowards agreed with him.

“What the shit does that mean?” I almost shouted.

“We have to terminate working with all your agents,” he replied. I still had a hard time understanding what was happening.

“How the hell did they find out where I got my agents? I never told them.” It couldn’t be true! They couldn’t be that stupid, I thought.

“It’s my fault!” Larry said. “I sent the first reports that you wrote about your contact information with the minister to Saigon. Evidently, those documents got around to the State Department and some idiot decided that our recruitment was inappropriate.”

“Recruitment? Shit! He volunteered. They all did. I didn’t recruit anybody!” I exclaimed.

“We’re screwed, John” Larry replied. “They won’t authorize any more money for them and will bury all their reports from now on. Saigon was upset, too, but there’s nothing they can do. You have run into the true fuck-ups who are going to lose this war for us.” Larry sat down on the desk next to me. The anger in his face probably matched mine. I thought a minute.

“Shit. They didn’t want the money anyway. I was just keeping it for them if they decided to quit.” Maybe I shouldn’t have requested payment for them. That might have triggered everything, I thought. “I’m not shut down am I? I can still recruit agents, can’t I?” I asked.

“Of course you can. You just can’t use these agents,” he replied.

I thought about this for a minute or two. “I can’t believe they could be so stupid. We can’t even trust our own fucking government! Look, let me think and see what I can come up with,” I said. Larry shook his head in disgust.

“I can only guess how you feel. Sorry, but there is no time to think here. Saigon says they want your agent termination forms for all these agents in the morning courier pouch. I will need them by 2200 hours this evening so I can get them in the pouch with my cover letter. I’m sorry. We were, indeed for the first time since I’ve

been here, going to win one, and some jerk in the State Department screwed it up.” Larry got up and left my office.

I did the only adult thing I could—picked up my stapler and threw it with all my strength against the wall while shouting, “Fuck! Fuck!” The stapler broke into several pieces. I was beyond mad and frustrated. I put the form into my typewriter and stared at it. Willing it to go away was not working. I got up and went to our bar to have a beer. It didn’t taste right. Other agents stuck their heads in but saw that I was really pissed and decided to leave me alone. They knew I had some sources and they were good, but they knew nothing about what I was doing with them or where I got them. I stood at the bar staring at the wall trying to control my anger. An idea slowly boiled up from my infuriated brain. “If they want paperwork, I’ll give them fucking paperwork!” I said to no one in particular. I needed to see Karl. His experience would be critical if my idea was to work. I found Karl in the kitchen area.

“Karl, I need to talk to you. Can you come with me to my office?” He looked at me, concerned by my tone of voice and the angry look on my face. We were alone, after all. He nodded his head affirmatively and we went to my office—well, really my desk. Several agents used the same area I did but none were there now. I explained what Larry had told me, and Karl exploded too. Somehow, that made me feel better. In his whole career, the State Department had never interfered in an Army Intelligence operation like this. He was pissed that some pantywaist in Saigon would allow it. When he calmed down a bit I began to explain my idea.

“Look, I have reorganized my net but I have not yet sent the paperwork through. You know how I am on paperwork. So all this asshole wants is a form that says they were terminated. That makes him look good to whoever’s ass he is kissing and then he will brag about his power and disappear. I doubt he will trace anything more than I will do. Do you think I’m right?” I waited for his reply. Karl was probably trying to think where I was going with this. His face had a quizzical look on it.

“Yeah! Probably that will make him go away, but you will lose your agents too.”

“Look, here’s my idea,” I said. “It’s simple. I will send in my reorganization over time and claim them as new agents in a new



net. Essentially, it will look to Saigon like I'm hiring new agents because they will have different names and code words and came from a different recruitment scenario. No minister this time. It's that simple," I said. Karl looked at me worriedly.

"You know, if you get caught falsifying these recruitment documents, you could end up in prison."

I sat back in my chair. "Look, these guys are risking their lives for me. They are saving American soldiers' lives. This idiot in the State Department is wrong, and the light of day will make that apparent if I get caught. But my chances of getting caught are small to none. I will take the risk. What do you think?" I waited for his answer.

"If you are willing, what can I do to help? We're going to fuck this idiot over!" he volunteered.

"Good, but the risk is mine. I get caught, nobody goes down with me. The worst that can happen is that they will send me to prison in Kansas. You okay with that?" I asked Karl.

"Alright, I agree, but we won't get caught. I'm going to call some friends of mine in Saigon to make sure. They would love to screw the State Department but I will keep what is really going on from them."

With that, Karl and I spent the next few minutes typing up the termination order for my agents—which didn't take long. Then we wrote up a new recruiting report, listing a series of agents we were able to hire that had infiltrated the local VC infrastructure. It was a work of art. We dated it 10 days after the termination report. My people were still in place. My Guy, My Guy 1, My Guy 2, etc. were all terminated and no longer worked for me. From their ashes rose the agents now called, *để trả thù*, *để trả thù 1*, *để trả thù 2*, etc. I particularly liked the name because *để trả thù* means "in revenge" in English. Knowing the people who would see this, I was not concerned that they would figure out what I meant. I would have to be careful, but this should work. The last thing I had to do was get all this past Larry. Karl thought he would love it, but I wasn't so sure. The fact was, I was doing the worst thing an agent can do—falsify a recruitment document—but I was pissed and would not let an idiot from the State Department fuck me over. With this rolling

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around in my head, I went to Larry's room and knocked on his door and entered. He was lying on his bed.

"You still pissed, Burdick?" he asked.

"Here are the forms you requested," was all I said. "Would you look at them and see if they are good enough for the fucking State Department?" I said, still trying to sound angry. Role-playing can be fun at times. I was wondering how he would react when he understood what I was doing. He looked at me and then shook his head and began to read the papers. The first two pages he went over quickly. When he got to the third page, his eyes stalled on the page. He kind of shook his head and stared closer at the pages and then at the following pages. Out of the blue he burst out laughing.

"You are a son of a bitch!" was all he could get out through the laughs. "This is great! I wish I had thought of that. You even gave a 10-day break between reports. That's excellent!" He continued laughing.

"This is on me. Remember that," I said.

"Like hell it is!" he blurted out. "I want a piece of this. With this we screw every guy who didn't stand up for us. God, I like this. If they catch us they will be afraid to touch us. Don't worry!" After he finished talking, Karl came in. Apparently, he was waiting outside the door.

"Like it? Burdick can sure write the bullshit, huh?" he said to Larry.

"So you're in on this too. I should have guessed it. You two are as thick as thieves!" Larry said, still laughing.

"No way. This was Burdick's idea. I just helped with the forms and the recruitment scenario. It was a lot of fun. They don't teach this at Ft. Holabird," said Karl.

"Probably because it's illegal! How did you come up with the name 'Revenge'? It is fitting, though!" laughed Larry. I was surprised Larry knew the Vietnamese word, but I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

"It seemed appropriate," I said. Karl looked confused, so Larry told him what the name I gave my agents meant, and he broke up laughing.

We reviewed the documents and Larry signed them both with different dates, of course. "OK, I'll put the termination papers in

the pouch now. Major Mullit doesn't have to sign them if I do. Then let's go to the Officers' Club, I'm buying," Larry crowed. We all laughed. Larry put his pants and shirt on and dropped the report in the pouch as we left the office. We got home late that night and Larry did end up buying a lot. Disaster by some administrative idiots had slipped by us—barely. The important thing was that I would not lose my agents. The downside was that I might go back to the States in handcuffs. At the moment I didn't care.

Meanwhile, my information was golden. Since *đề trả thù* was also a courier, we learned the location of many units in our province. The province chief's RF/PF group was getting more successful in setting ambushes. I was already up to almost 50 KIA and it was growing. When I went to a unit and gave them an objective, they knew it was good—and it always was. My reputation was growing. By now I had about five US helicopter units I could call upon to participate in some action I had information on. Major Trang had even offered his unit to us for any special activities. At times, he was even able to bring the local ARVN division troops into one of our ambushes. Karl, Larry and I were waging our own war and no one knew. Probably, everyone was claiming responsibility for his own success. That was all right by me.

But I had to be even more careful. My cover was even more important to me now. If something happened to me, we would lose all the nets again. Nets are hard to share. I had the confidence of my agents and they trusted me. It took a while to get to that point. My agents knew they were having an effect because of all the reports coming into the VC province chief's office about losses in the field. The losses were not so high, though, that they would raise flags with the VC/NVA command, and were accepted as part of the war. I guess they thought we were just getting lucky. So, having someone replace me would be difficult and could only work if I was able to turn over my operation to new control person. If I were taken out without doing that, the net would go to ground and probably not be heard from again.

During this time, I began to check out some of my information by commandeering a helicopter from one of the support units to over fly an area where a VC unit was supposed to be. Mostly, I was

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checking to be sure that the trails they claimed were there, actually were. My first flight took a leap of faith on my part.

I had never been in a helicopter before, so I was unaware of the protocol or what to expect. Riding in a helicopter a few hundred feet off the ground with gunners at the door openings—there were no doors—seeing the jungle blur by, hearing only the roar of our engine, was powerful stuff. Everyone in the helicopter wore a flack jacket and a steel pot—except me. I was in my customary white shirt. The crews loved it for some reason. I guess they felt they had some crazy-assed VIP in their care. In reality, the first time I flew I never even thought about wearing any protection. If someone had mentioned it to me, I probably would have. But once in the flight, the respect everyone gave me made me realize what I was doing was worth the risk. I decided never to wear the protective gear unless required by the pilot. No pilot ever even suggested that I wear the normal equipment. Most times they gave me a headset so I could hear what was going on and help them find an area. Other times I stood by the open door next to the door-gunner and pointed out areas to him so he could relay to the pilot where I wanted to go. Standing in the open door of a flying helicopter is exhilarating and was a lot of fun for me. It sure got my adrenalin going. We rarely came under fire. It happened, but we were never hit. The first time was frightening, but I showed nothing to the crew.

Anyway, whenever I called for a flight there were always volunteers for the flight. They liked doing something other than flying supplies to forward troops. To help the illusion, I would tell them about ambushes we set up in areas they flew over. They would hear about the size of the battle and the number of KIAs they were responsible for. Most of the time I told them the truth. Of course, I never told anyone at the office what I was doing. Well, Karl knew after I invited him on a flight, but he didn't tell anyone. If Nha Trang or Saigon heard about it they would make me stop. There were already orders that told agents not to get involved in any type of action. I ignored them. I didn't feel aerial reconnaissance came under that rule and if I didn't ask I wouldn't hear what I didn't want to hear.

Meanwhile, Major Mullit finally became Lieutenant Colonel Mullit. The only thing the promotion did for him was to make it his

full-time job to be replaced. He wanted out! He was sure the VC were trying to kill him. He had sandbagged his room as thick as he could and seldom, if ever, went out of it. Daily, he would call Nha Trang requesting to be reassigned. This was not a post for the rank of lieutenant colonel, he continually wailed. His promotion was his way out and he wanted out in the worst way.

Things were still active around Qui Nhon and every now and then there were explosions for one reason or another. Sometimes, they were randomly aimed incoming rounds, but mostly they were outgoing. On a particular Thursday I was in the office and heard a loud “BANG” and I instinctively ducked. Some shrapnel fell into our yard but it was spent with no force to it. From inside the main building we heard an ear-splitting scream that could only have come from the mighty lungs of our new lieutenant colonel. I stayed where I was at my desk, as did the other agents. Larry went to see what happened. He came back trying desperately to hold back uncontrolled laughter. It seems a large piece of shrapnel had come through the lieutenant colonel’s ceiling in the room where he hid out every day. The lieutenant colonel was sure he was being targeted for assassination and immediately called Nha Trang to report that his room had been hit with a mortar round, and they needed to move him. This was when Larry walked in. Larry listened to what Mullit was saying and then looked around the room for what had hit it. He saw something and went and picked it up. It was a piece of shrapnel about the size of two or three silver dollars. It was obviously a spent piece. The ceiling had a small hole in it near the center of the room. The floor hadn’t even been scratched. He just shook his head and looked at Mullit in disbelief. Unexpectedly, the lieutenant colonel gave Larry the phone to confirm what had happened. Larry told them what he saw. They said they understood. Larry had to leave before he started laughing. Mullit had made an ass of himself, but the whole thing was hilarious to us. When Larry came out and shared the whole thing with Karl and me, we laughed until we cried. I thought of going outside and throwing rocks on the roof, but that seemed too cruel.

A couple of days later, I returned to the office after lunch and found that all the Playboy pictures were gone from the bar. I had

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gotten used to them and missed them. So I yelled out, "Who stole the fuckin' pictures?"

The colonel came out of his room and yelled, "They're mine and I'm taking them back with me!" That's when I learned he was leaving. Good riddance was my thought. He left that afternoon. There was no going-away party. I guess everybody was glad to see him go. Larry was in charge for now, but he was very short. It was the first week of March and he only had a few weeks to go. A new commander must be on the way to us.

While counterintelligence work was important, the Army also had other things they wanted us to do. Before the major was promoted and left, we were asked to look into a suspected sabotage activity at a helicopter supply company. Karl and I thought that this should be done by the MPs, but the major took the assignment, probably to help his chances for promotion. So even though he had gotten his promotion and left we still had to do the investigation. He also had requested that the lieutenants come back from Ahn Khe to help in this assignment. None of us liked this, but we accepted it. The helicopter company was just outside Qui Nhon. I had never used any helicopters from this unit. Larry, the lieutenants Paul and Gary, Karl, Billy (our clerk) and I were sent to solve the problem.

The first thing we noticed was that this was not a happy company. You could feel the angry attitude as soon as you came onto their base. Larry met with the company commander alone to try to find out what the problem was. We were given a large office where we waited for his return. All we got from the troops were angry looks and muttered threats. Well, they sounded like threats. These guys seemed to hate the Army as much as I did. I decided at that moment that I agreed with them and would help them if I could. But first we had to stop them from trying to hurt each other. Larry returned and told us that, in the last week, three helicopters suffered minor crashes on take-off due to sabotage of the guidance systems. None of us knew how a helicopter's guidance system worked, but I guess that didn't matter. Larry said that no Vietnamese were let in the helicopter maintenance area so the CO thought it was one of his own men doing this. None of us liked thinking this. Security didn't look that good, as far as we could tell. Karl asked Larry if the CO

mentioned anything about company morale. Larry said that all he said was that no one wanted to be here, but it was no worse than in any other unit. Karl and I shook our heads in disagreement. It was way different from any unit we had seen. We kept quiet.

We divided up and began to interview all the maintenance people. Paul and Gary would start with the officers and Karl and I would take the enlisted men. Larry would inspect the area and look into what happened to each helicopter that crashed. He would also check security. Billy would manage the people as they came in for their interview. He would also keep all our notes. We then discussed how we would interview the men. Everybody was on his guard, so we decided to play our agent status to the hilt. We weren't into too many civil rights. The sabotage had to be stopped before someone got killed. So far, the company had been lucky. Our interviews were extensive, covering everything from their mechanical ability to their sexual ability. They must have thought we were a bit crazy, as many of the questions had nothing to do with sabotage. We did get them to talk about the work they were doing and discovered everybody was "pissed." After the second and third interview, it became apparent that these guys were mad because they were risking their lives to supply troops in the field but were not getting the extra hazardous pay the other helicopter crews who flew the troops in did. They had to fly to the same location to re-supply the soldiers and usually into the same fire that the first helicopters did, but received no hazard pay for it. They felt that this was not fair to them. They didn't like the sabotage, but they understood it. It was also evident to us that they were poorly led. They did not feel their officers gave a shit about them and their mission. All the pilots transferred out when they could to get the extra pay.

We spent a day and a half interviewing, all with essentially the same results. At the end of the second day we met and talked about what we were finding out. Everyone more or less found out the same thing that Karl and I did. The one thing I had missed was that the unit was short. They had come over as a unit and were scheduled to leave in less than 45 days. I filed that away.

The lieutenants came up with a plan. When everyone was out of the hangar, one of them would climb up to the rafters and hide to see if someone approached the helicopters at night. It sounded stupid,

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but we all agreed and let Paul climb up to the rafters to hide. Larry went to the CO and told him we were leaving and would be back in the morning. No one but the CO was to know we were coming back. So we all noisily got into our jeeps and left—with Paul lying in the rafters.

The next morning we all returned. The CO had not allowed any aircraft to leave until we had arrived. We went into the hangar and got Paul out of the rafters. He said no one came in during the entire night. We then had one of the mechanics check one of the helicopters. Sure enough, the guidance cable in the first helicopter was cut. Paul swore that nobody came in. He obviously had missed whoever it was that did the damage. Nobody blamed him. He blamed himself, though. We all went to our temporary office to decide what we would do next. The question was, what do we do?

One of the things I had always been able to do was come up with non-traditional ways of achieving a goal. I had done it as an agent in San Antonio several times and it always surprised my officers. So far I had always been successful. I remembered once, as an agent in San Antonio, we had been given a practice assignment in surveillance during the Fiesta Del San Antonio Night Parade. Headquarters had selected a particular float. We were split into teams of two agents each and were required to follow the float over several blocks during the actual parade. This was difficult, at best, because we had to do this in a car. My solution was typically different. I looked at the parade route and realized that my blocks included a four-story parking garage almost in the middle of my assigned area. So, while everyone else was struggling through side streets to see the float pass, I went before the parade started and talked to the parking garage manager. After showing him my credentials and—being that he was retired military—he reserved a space on the top floor for me and my car.

On the day of the parade I went to the parking garage early. The office had given me a radio so we would be in contact with each other. I parked the car in my reserved spot and stood with my partner and watched the parade from my parking spot. When they passed the surveillance off to us, I had no trouble following the float through my entire area. As a matter of fact, I had to follow it a bit further because the unit that was to take over from me was



not in place. It was several days before anyone figured out what I had done—and it was not through any of the agents in our office. It turned out that the Army Security Agency (ASA) was also doing a practice assignment, trying to follow our radio signals as we moved through the crowds. In their report to my CO they noted that my signal had not moved. With that information, the CO came back to the office and called me and the lieutenant who was in charge of the exercise into his office and closed the door. I guessed he had figured out something, so I told the truth. The exercise was to follow the float over several blocks. I was to do it in a car. How I did it was up to me. I figured out an easy way to do it, was all. The lieutenant was about to explode but the CO just looked at me and then laughed. I had done the right thing, according to him. I looked at the problem and solved it in my own way. He appreciated that. I was thanked and sent back to my desk. The lieutenant had to stay and talk to the CO for a while. I did not find out what was said, but nobody ever complained about what I had done.

Now I saw another problem that might have a different solution. So, being the wise-assed, Jesuit-trained, troublemaker that I was, I asked, “What do we want to do? Capture the saboteur or stop the sabotage?” At first, they thought I was nuts. To them it was the same thing. I explained, “Look, almost everyone I talked to thought the guy doing this was justified. They will never turn him in unless we make it worth their while!”

Paul, who was still stiff from the rafters and somewhat embarrassed said, “You want to offer them money or something. That won’t work!”

“No,” I said. “I want to take something away from them that they all want!”

Larry said, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Look,” I said. “This unit is short. We need to go out and re-interview about twenty of them and tell them that if the sabotage happens one more time this unit will not be released to be shipped out. They don’t know what we can do, so we make them nervous. We tell them we’ll keep them here as long as it takes to find the culprit. Of course, if there are no more incidents, they can go home on time. Who wants to stay here to make a point? And maybe Larry can get the CO to let everyone know that he has put in for extra

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hazardous-duty pay. It will get rejected, but they will be gone before that happens. What do you think?"

Larry laughed. "Burdick, you son of a bitch, where did you get such an evil mind. It will probably work. What do the rest of you think?" After some discussion they accepted my idea—probably because they couldn't think of anything better. So we began interviewing people again. Larry talked the CO into putting in the request—which he knew would be rejected. At the end of the day we left.

A few days later, Larry called the CO and asked if there were any problems. He said things were going well and the troops were getting excited about going home. He said that if we ever needed anything, let him know and he would do what he could. He also said he would let the other commanders know how we helped, and that they, too, would help us if we needed it. It seemed we now had access to our own helicopter transports if we needed them, and I had another unit I could use in my flights. The unit eventually shipped back home and never had another event. Weird what a little lie can do!

Some time after this mission, March 10<sup>th</sup> to be exact, our counterpart, Lieutenant Joseph Mitchell in the Green Beret headquarters, was having a going-away party. In two days he would be heading back to the States. This was a trip that we could only dream about. Karl was one of Joe's close friends. He seemed to bond with him and I rarely went with him when he worked with Joe. Still, I had to go to his "Going-Away" party. Well, steaks and booze—what more could you want! I was hoping to meet his replacement but he had not arrived yet. It was some party! I drank even more than I usually do. Karl told me that Joe was going home and getting married the day after he got back. His girlfriend was waiting and very ready. Joe showed me her picture. She was a knockout! A year was a long time to be separated. The story made me feel a little sad, as I missed my wife, too. I was still pissed at her but didn't dwell on it and drank even more to numb the pain of the many months I had to go through before I could leave, even though I doubted I would make it. I left Karl there, figuring he could get home on his own. I went back to the villa and crashed.

The sun was up when the world began shaking again. I had learned that a shaking bed was a bad thing. I knew something bad had happened or was about to happen. I slowly opened my eyes and found it was only my bed shaking because Larry was kicking it. I groaned loudly and squinted at Larry as I grabbed my glasses. Luckily, I didn't poke an eye out trying to put them on. A jeep must have driven over my tongue. "Shit, stop that!" I groaned.

"Get up, we got a problem. A bad one!" Larry said to me with a tone in his voice that I did not like. This was serious.

Adrenalin brought me to almost normal faster than a cold shower could. I was already pulling my pants up. "What? What's going on?" I didn't hear any gunfire or explosions. What was going on? Larry made me sit on the bed.

"Joe went out on his last patrol this morning for some reason. He was checking out cleared bunkers—and one wasn't. A VC blew his head off!" I was stunned. The world twisted. There was a roaring in my head and things grew brighter. I was in shock. I had been drinking with him last night and now he's in a body bag. I went limp. His girlfriend is fitting her wedding dress today, expecting to be married in two days—and the groom is dead. God, the horror of dying on the last day in Vietnam was everyone's worst nightmare. And a friend was dead. The shock began to wear off and I shoved what was left of it into some dark corner in my head.

"Did they get the son of a bitch?" I asked.

Larry nodded his head "Yes." He was looking at me strangely. I was mad, madder than I had ever been. Then I thought of Karl! "Does Karl know?" I blurted out to Larry.

"No!" was all Larry could say. I realized he wanted me to go with him to tell Karl.

I nodded my head and said, "OK, let's go." I had no idea how Karl would take this. He was very close to Lieutenant Joe. He was in the kitchen drinking coffee when we found him.

"How's your head, Burdick?" he said to me laughingly. I just sat down and looked at him, holding in all I could. "What's up?" Karl looked worriedly at me and then at Larry.

I was getting choked up. "It's about Joe," I said. Larry told him what he had told me. I had never seen the life drain out of a man

before, but in front of my eyes Karl turned as pale as a ghost and tears formed in his eyes.

“No!” he said, as if the word was pulled from the bottom of his soul. “Are you sure?” Larry said he had gotten the call from Joe’s CO. Everyone was upset at the Green Beret HQ. “I’ve got to go there,” Karl shouted to no one in particular.

“I’ll go with you,” I offered.

“No, I’ll go by myself,” Karl said. I was about to insist, but Larry shook his head. We let him go. I couldn’t get the vision of Joe’s fiancé in her wedding dress, finding out at the altar that the man she was going to marry was dead. What a horrible thing to happen at what should have been a joyous time. Now she would be burying her fiancé. I was depressed—but also really angry. I wanted to get even. I was going to find out what VC unit had done this and annihilate it. I later found out that when Lieutenant Joe went out with the unit—like he had many times—this time he was looking for a VC flag to bring back as a souvenir. Expensive fucking souvenir!

Karl came back after a couple of hours. His eyes were red and all he could say was, “Half his head was gone. It was him.” He went and got a beer from the refrigerator. I tried to talk to him but he waved me away. The spirit seemed drained out of him. Each day he got quieter and quieter. I was beginning to be worried he would do something drastic.

There was a ceremony at the Green Beret HQs where they renamed the camp “Camp Mitchell,” after Lieutenant Joe. They all had really liked this guy. Karl went to the ceremony. I did not.

After a couple of days Karl came up to me and said, “I called a friend of mine in Saigon. I’m leaving tomorrow for another duty station in Saigon. I can’t do this anymore.” I looked at him, wondering what to say. I could see in his eyes he was done. This death had destroyed him. It was so useless. “You don’t need me anyway. You’ve got good instincts. Larry will work with you until a replacement comes. I will miss you, but if anybody I like dies again, I won’t make it.” I didn’t push it.

There is a point we all have that can’t be crossed without painful consequences. I had been reckless and he knew it. Hell, we both had been reckless. He just did not want to be with me when I died—which he must have believed was not far off. I took too many risks.

I understood Karl's pain. Losing a friend was too much. Losing a close friend is even harder to bear. Losing another close friend would have killed Karl, and I think he understood that. He also understood that it was unlikely I would make it out of this mess—I took too many chances. He could not stand to see another close friend die. I accepted his decision without argument. Somehow, he expedited getting his orders and he left the next day. It hurt a lot, but it was for the best. I decided then and there that, while in Vietnam, I would never get close to anyone again. Losing friends hurt too much.

In typical Army fashion, they never replaced Karl. I shook hands with him the day he left. I never heard from him again, but I was going to get even for what happened. I also had learned a lesson. Anybody can die. It's not hard to do. The hardest thing to do about death is get over it, and, the closer you are to the person, the more you will be hurt. Death not only ends the life of one person, but it can destroy the lives of those who remain—especially if you are close to them. I was not about to get close to anyone again. This was not a game and the VC were going to learn not to fuck with me or my friends!

After Karl left, Larry and I generally worked together, but I was more and more left to my own activities. The next Sunday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, Larry got a call from the American military officer assigned to the local ARVN unit in our area. He had a problem. He had to open his field safe, but the combination wasn't working. He desperately needed the paperwork that was in it. He had heard about us and wondered if we could help. Typically, for a Sunday morning, I was in our bar drinking Bloody Marys. It was my day off, after all.

Larry yelled at me, "Burdick, you know how to pick locks?" That caught me off guard.

"I took the basic DAME (Defense Against Methods of Entry) course at Fort Holabird. I was real good at picking warded padlocks." Of course, any idiot could pick a warded padlock with a coat hanger. Even I had done it several times. I heard Larry say we'd be there in an hour to see what we could do.

"Get your butt in the jeep, Burdick. We're off to ARVN headquarters," Larry shouted at me after he hung up the phone. It took us 45 minutes to get there and by then the Bloody Marys had

worn off. It was hot and I wanted a beer to smooth things out. But first we needed to do something about the safe. This poor lieutenant was upset and scared. He was sure he was going to get creamed for not being able to retrieve the classified documents in the safe.

Larry tried the safe first and then motioned for me to try it. These were really cheap safes and it felt like the numbers were not changing as I twisted the knob. I told Larry about this and shrugged my shoulders. This lieutenant was sure we could do something and kept begging us to do something to open this safe. So I asked him if he wanted the safe to work after we got it open. Larry looked at me quizzically. I really wanted out of the sun to have a cold beer. The lieutenant said he didn't care about the safe; he just needed the reports in it. So I went over to Larry and told him what I was thinking.

Larry's eyes grew wide. "You've got to be kidding!" he said.

"Why not?" was my answer. I had the lieutenant have a couple of men bring the safe outside and stack sandbags around it. I figured that if I was going to do this, then I'd better make a good show of it. "Lieutenant, you can't talk about what I'm going to do. It should work, but one never knows." He nodded his head affirmatively. Larry carried a .357 Magnum pistol and I asked him for it. I didn't think my .45 would work for what I had in mind. He gave it to me and stepped back some more, shaking his head. Someone who has been drinking should never hold a loaded gun, especially a .357.

I knew from my training that this type of field safe had a locking bar that slid into the top and bottom of the safe. My idea was that, if I fired the .357 at the locking bar, it would break and the safe would fly open. I was still a little loaded, so I wasn't sure if it would work. I took a careful, wobbly aim, said, "Fire in the hole," and fired. I had never fired a .357 before—I should have thought of that. The roar almost blew me over. I opened my eyes and papers were flying around the area, being chased by the lieutenant. The safe door was blown open, the bar was broken and there was a large hole in the back of the safe. There was nobody more surprised than me. I guess I could have shot a hole in that safe with a BB gun. The .357 was huge overkill. The lieutenant came to me with awe in his eyes. I played it to the hilt, like it was something I did every day. By the end of the day every intelligence unit in Binh Dinh Province would

be telling this story. The lieutenant offered to buy us a couple of beers, which I quickly agreed to. Larry was almost doubling over laughing but he wanted a beer, too.

This poor lieutenant was naïve. He had never seen a real agent before. He had heard of them and was told they were here. After what I had done, he was sure we were for real. Image for me was important. The more power people thought I had, and the more dangerous they thought I was, the more help and assistance I was going to get. My reputation in the intelligence community was growing greater with every KIA I was credited with, and with every action like today's that would be passed by word of mouth. Now I had done something that the regular Army understood. They really didn't know who I was, but how many civilians were there who wore white shirts, was 6'2" with thick glasses—and an attitude to be wary of? The word was out and would grow more before I was done. Larry, though, was still laughing. We went and let the lieutenant buy us a couple of beers at the Officers' Club. Larry kidded me about what I had done all the way back to the office.

There was one more gift from our new lieutenant colonel, and I was the recipient of it. Back in the States I had done hundreds of background investigations to see if the applicants would be able to get a high-level security clearance. In all their ignorance, the Army decided that they needed us to complete one more interview. I was asked to interview a staff sergeant in the Green Berets. Since Lieutenant Joe was killed and Karl had left, I had not been back to the Green Beret headquarters but, as I was the designated liaison for the Green Berets, I was given the task of doing this simple interview. This shouldn't have taken much time I thought, but I was wrong.

I went to their headquarters the next morning and looked up Lieutenant Joe's replacement. After telling him what I wanted, he took down the sergeant's name and went to find out where he was stationed. Obviously, he was not in Qui Nhon or he would have known him—it was a small command. This was looking like it was going to be harder to do than I thought. I was going to have to drive a bit to get wherever he was. When the replacement returned he went to a map and gestured for me to come over.

“The sergeant you want is right about here,” he said, pointing to a green area of jungle above Ahn Khe. “He is assigned to an A-team assisting a group of Montagnard soldiers establishing a forward base in a heavily contested area. The only way in is by plane or helicopter. He will be there for the next 90 days.” He looked at me, waiting for my response, while I was standing there cursing my luck.

“I guess I’m flying. Can I have a copy of that map?” He gave it to me and told me to be careful—it was an active area. I left, swearing to myself. Instead of going to the office, I went to the Qui Nhon airport and looked up a helicopter group there for a ride. They had heard about us from the CO of the group where we got the sabotage problem fixed. A couple of pilots looked at the map with me and said they couldn’t go there, but maybe I could hitch a ride with a FACS (Forward Air Controller Ship). A FACS was really just a big Piper Cub to me, but they gave me a name and told me where to go. I guess I should have asked them why they couldn’t go there but I didn’t. I found the pilot where they said he would be and he looked at the map and—when he understood who I was—agreed to take me there in the morning. He told me that the area we were going into was a bit dangerous but that he had made the trip several times so far.

“Helicopters are too big and too slow when landing there, but I can do it,” he said. This sounded like fun to me. I had never been in a small plane like this one and to fly in to see this sergeant would surprise him and the whole team because no one would know we were coming or what the hell I wanted there. I went back to the office and told Larry what I was going to do. He thought I was out of my mind and urged me not to go. At this point in my life I didn’t care much about anything. I was estranged from my wife. I really wanted to get even for Lieutenant Joe’s death. And I was bored with the pace of things. The adrenaline rush of danger and risk was hard to get away from. It was better than booze. To risk your life and live was the greatest rush you could get. I was going to go. By the look in his eye, I thought that Larry was going to stop me, but he didn’t.

I showed up the next morning at the airport full of excitement for the day’s adventure. I was wearing my customary white shirt, black pants and jungle hat. But this time I was carrying a briefcase. I was also wearing a .45 pistol in a holster on my hip.



The pilot shook his head. “Why the hell do you want to go to the A-team?” he asked.

I played my part. “Are you sure you want to fucking know!” I said but I didn’t say it jokingly, and the pilot, though he probably knew I was joking, in his heart he wasn’t sure. It was important that the pilot believe I was dangerous and that what I was doing was important and that he was privileged to be a part of it. I succeeded. He laughed nervously and told me to get into the back seat of the plane. We had a bumpy take-off. I guess light planes bump more than big ones. I put on my headset and the pilot described the country we were flying over. I was surprised at how low it felt we were flying. He pointed to the right, towards the ocean, and said there were a couple of destroyers just over those mountains. The mountains were VC territory. Below us was for the most part a free-fire zone. All the hamlets I could see were fairly well destroyed.

“Keep looking over these hamlets and let me know if you see anyone firing at us. Usually there are one or two stupid sons of bitches that try,” he said. So I looked and wondered if anyone could really hit us from the ground. I wasn’t afraid, mainly curious. I never saw anything and told the pilot that. We continued inland for about 30 minutes when we suddenly began to gain altitude.

“Got to get higher to get over the hills on the right front. The A- team is over those hills,” he said over the headset. We climbed quickly up to several thousand feet. I then figured that we had been flying low so that someone would fire at the plane and the pilot could then respond. Without telling me, he was using us as a target. I didn’t really care—it was exciting.

“Over there, to the left. That’s the A-team compound.” He pointed. I looked and all I could see was what looked like a short dirt road in front of a couple of large bunkers, numerous little foxholes and a couple of long trenches. The foxholes and trenches looked like they had little bugs in them. I found out they were Montagnard. In front of one of the bunkers was an American flag. Seeing the flag made me feel good. Any time I saw an American flag I felt safer, no matter where it was.

“Here we go,” the pilot said, and we began to dive at the bunkers. If you’ve never been in a plane in a power dive, you haven’t lived. Forget roller coasters! This was the real thing. The ground seemed

to scream up at us. There were hills all around the A-team base. I never understood why they always seemed to build their bases in the bottom of a valley. I began to see white and green flashes from the jungle on the hills. They were tiny but there were more of them as we got closer.

“I think we’re being shot at from the hill on the right,” I said.

“They do it every time I come here, which isn’t too often. This is always a bad flight,” replied the pilot. I now understood why the helicopter pilots refused to fly here. Helicopters are bigger and land a lot more slowly—making them better targets. I then wondered how I talked this pilot into flying out here. He really knew how dangerous it was—even if I didn’t—but he volunteered easily. He must have thought it was something very important for me to risk myself for. I had a twinge of guilt. My willingness to try these risky trips put us all in danger—and really for nothing. I could have refused to do this but I didn’t. The pilot must never know. So I had my role to play.

At what seemed like the very last second he pulled up, slowed down, and landed on that little piece of road. Now this was really bumpy. We jerked to a stop in front of a bunker and he turned off the engine after a minute or too. After he got out of the plane and ran to the bunker, I got out slowly and looked around. It seemed every eye from every foxhole and trench was on me. A sergeant came out of the bunker to meet the pilot and stopped in his tracks when he saw me. At the time, I was slowly walking over the dusty red dirt to the bunker. I showed this sergeant my credentials and he snapped a quick salute and said with disbelieving eyes, “Welcome, sir!”

“No need of that sergeant, I just need to talk to one of your men,” I said smilingly, and then gave him the sergeant’s name. His salute sort of melted off his head. He was really stunned. He kept looking around to see if something else was going on. Finally, he said he would find the sergeant and disappeared.

When the sergeant I was to interview appeared, we went through the same saluting ritual and I showed him my credentials. His eyes widened when I told him I needed to talk to him and asked if there was a place where we could talk alone. He took me to a room in the bunker and brought a chair in for me to sit on. He sat on the bunk. I knew I could finish this background investigation in less than five minutes, but I knew I had to make it longer so that everyone would

think I was doing something serious. I exchanged some small talk about the current situation around the unit here and something about his background. I could tell he was wondering what the hell I was here for, but I didn't let on. I started asking questions about his background, his family, his education and anything else that came to mind. During this process I brought up the guy we were doing the investigation on and got the information that I needed for my report. I ended up by saying that the next time I came here I think I will bring a case of beer, if that was all right with him. He smiled widely and said, "Yes, sir!" very enthusiastically. We then left the bunker.

Once out of the bunker I stopped and turned to the sergeant and stuck my hand out to shake his hand. "Sergeant I want to thank you for your help. It was an important thing you did and I want to thank you." I said this loudly enough for all to hear. The sergeant looked quizzically at me, shook my hand and said "Thank you" quietly. He probably couldn't figure out what the hell he had told me, but at least they wouldn't think he was in trouble. When important people meet you in the field, you are usually in trouble, and all his buddies had to be wondering what the hell this was all about. I didn't feel quite so guilty, knowing that the sergeant now would have a great story to tell and, because of my statement in front of everybody, they would know he was involved in something important. What he wouldn't get is that case of beer. I had no intention of returning here.

I climbed back into the plane and the pilot followed. After he started the engine we rolled to the far end of the dirt road and turned around. "Hold on, this could be a bit rough taking off. Those guys who were shooting at us are waiting for us to take off and gain altitude so they can shoot us down on the way out. I'm going out at ground level until we get through that pass straight ahead," he shouted over the intercom. I looked for the pass but couldn't tell where it was. We looked surrounded by mountains—well, large hills at least. The Adrenalin began to flow again.

"Go for it," was all I said. He did. We bounced down that road like a crazy rubber ball. How he kept it straight, I'll never know. Just before the end of the road he pulled up. I looked out my window and all I could see was a blur of grass—tall grass, grasping for the bottom of the plane. I was looking out the window, looking for those sparks again. I didn't see them. Suddenly, he pulled up steeply and we

began to gain altitude quickly. The higher he got the more relaxed I became. We should be home soon.

“Sorry. I decided, since I didn’t see any firing, to gain some altitude quickly. I thought they were waiting for me in the pass,” he said. I grunted a thanks to him. I sensed he was impressed that I had not panicked with all the strange and dangerous flying he was doing. We were now at what I thought was a safe altitude. I could afford to be calm.

In about ten minutes he came on the intercom and said, “I just got a call from some units down there. They spotted some hostiles near the village over to the right. Do you want to go and take a look?” He has to ask because to him I was a VIP and getting me hurt would cause him problems, but if I OK’d the action he was home free. Furthermore, he really wanted to assist the unit that called—it was his primary job after all.

“Sure,” I said without thinking. So we headed toward the village. On our first flight over it, there was no reaction. We didn’t see anybody.

“Let’s see if we can get their attention,” came over the intercom. This time, when we flew over the village we slowed and circled overhead. He then turned the plane over on its side, doing a very tight circle so that—from the ground—it seem like we were stationary. A good target! Sure enough, some eager VC began shooting at us—I could see the flashes. I pointed out the hut to the pilot and he headed towards it. I couldn’t figure out what he was going to do. Piper Cubs aren’t armed. Then I looked a little closer at the wings, and there were rockets on them, three on each side. Until that moment I had never noticed them.

“Let’s see what he does when we fire back now,” said the pilot as he fired two rockets simultaneously, one from each wing, at the hut. I had never been in a Piper Cub that fired rockets. As we were going down, firing the rockets, the plane went backwards—at least it felt like it did. It was the strangest feeling. The rockets were HE (High Explosive) and the hut disappeared. We returned to circling and the firing started again.

“This time we’re going to give them both rockets. One is some smoke and the other one is Willy Peter (white phosphorous). Look and see where they run to.” This was crazy! Again he dived and

when he lit off the rockets I was sure we went backwards even more. There was chaos on the ground. I saw people moving away from where the rockets hit. I told the pilot.

He stopped circling and gained a little altitude. He looked at his map and said, "I'm calling one of the destroyers and asking for a fire mission. Hold On." Where the hell could I go? After a few minutes he came back on and said, "OK, I gave them the coordinates. They will fire one round and if they get it right we will light up that pile of shit." He was excited, but he wanted me to know what was going to happen. I waited to see what the destroyer was going to do. Just then, I thought I saw something fly over us. I couldn't figure out what it was, but I could hear the pilot screaming over the radio at the guys in the destroyer that they almost shot us down. It was the shell they were firing at the village that went over our heads. They barely missed us—and missed the village by miles. Somebody got the coordinates wrong. After the pilot stopped screaming on the radio, the next shell hit the hamlet and then several more turned the whole area into a smoking hole. Nobody was shooting at us any more.

The pilot came back on the intercom, "Sorry about that first shell! Some fuckin' newbie got the coordinates reversed. First time I have ever had a shell go over me. I didn't like it. We're heading home."

"Sounds good to me," I replied. He pointed the plane towards the ocean and we began to fly back to Qui Nhon. On the way back he asked me if I wanted to try to fly the plane. There was a stick in front of me coming out of the floor. Again, I jumped at a chance to do something different. I grabbed the stick and he let me fly. I went right. I went left. I went straight, just as he told me. And then the stick came out of the floor. Evidently, it was held in by a cotter pin that must have shaken loose during all that bumping, and now the plane was going straight toward the mountains with nobody in control. I furiously tried to stuff the damn stick back into the hole it came out of, but it must have grown because it wouldn't fit.

"OK, you can turn us to the right any time and we will head back to Qui Nhon," said the pilot. That made me try even harder to get that damn stick in the hole. Finally, I quit being too proud to tell him I had screwed up and took the damn stick and tapped the pilot on the back of his head and held it over my head. He quickly turned and

*John G. Burdick*

began to laugh almost insanely. It must have been the look on my face. He took control and we headed back to the airport. On landing, I thanked him and told him I would report his actions positively to his CO—which I did. He seemed proud to have done what he did—and well he should be. He was a hero and I was just a guy out on a lark. Once again, I had pushed myself too close to the door that never reopens. I was exhausted. As I went to my jeep I stuck my hand in my pocket and rubbed the mushroom shaped bullet that was always there. Once again I had done something stupid and almost got myself killed.

When I got back, I typed up my report and then told Larry about the trip. He kept shaking his head while I was reeling off what had happened. When I was done, he was looking very serious and handed me a paper. It was orders from Saigon to all agents. In full military nonsense, it said that agents were to stay out of combat situations and take no risks of death or capture.

“Do you understand that, Burdick?” Larry said.

“How the fuck do they expect us to do our jobs? There’s no fucking place here that’s safe. Am I supposed to stay in bed until I go home? This is bullshit!” I yelled at him and threw the orders in the trash. Larry said nothing and left the room. I had pissed him off somehow. He never brought it up again, but I was careful what I told him after that. Only an idiot from Saigon would think of writing an order as stupid as that.

## Chapter 9

**As soon as I could after** Lieutenant Joe had been killed, I met with **để trả thù**, my chief agent. My orders were simple. I wanted to know where the major VC/NVA units were located and what their makeup was. I also requested maps to show me where they were. If we could catch the units in one area, then it would be possible to destroy all of them. **để trả thù** sensed my resolve. As I told him what I wanted to do, he looked me straight in the eye when I gave the orders. Vietnamese do not normally do that. He knew I was serious, but this was serious for him, too. It is one thing to report about what walks in front of you, but quite another to sneak around to find out things you are not supposed to know. The reason he was giving me information had been made clear to me: he seemed to want the VC/NVA in the area defeated. I had convinced my agents that this time someone was preparing to take action to see that the defeat happened soon. My limited actions so far had shown them that I could strike the enemy for them. He had evidently been waiting for this for years. Now he knew he had someone from America that was going to make that defeat happen—or at least try very hard to see it done. He was excited and ready. It was an awesome responsibility I had taken on. I felt every inch of it. I knew it would probably take me months to get all the information I needed to swing an operation that would decimate the VC/NVA units. It would take luck for me to catch them together in one area. For now, I would have to wait for my agents to do their work. If they were as eager as they claimed, I might have enough information to move on the enemy sooner than I thought. I would have to work with Roger to get the units ready for the action that was coming.

During the waiting time, little duties kept coming up. A week ago Larry had told me that the II Corps commander was coming for a briefing and that I would have to give it. I kind of spaced out and forgot about it. It was my opinion that headquarters people were idiots anyway, so I did nothing to prepare for it. In fact, I didn't even remember that I was supposed to prepare for it. I was supposed to go to my various sources and gather some order of battle information and present it to them. They were interested in unit names and locations and troop strength. What it would mean to them I didn't know. I guess, because we had been an active source of information, they decided to come and see who we were—and, since I was the prime provider of that information, they wanted to see me. I didn't want to see them, so I forgot the whole thing until Larry walked into my cave and said, "You ready for the briefing today?"

"What briefing? I don't know anything about a briefing," I sleepily replied. I had been out a little too late last night and hadn't yet recovered.

"The briefing you're supposed to give today. Don't you remember?"

"Oh Shit!" came out of my mouth. It was then that I remembered and realized I hadn't prepared anything. There was going to be hell to pay for this one. "What did they want to hear about?"

Larry quickly explained to me what they wanted and genuinely looked worried for me. I had absolutely nothing prepared and he knew it. The briefing was supposed to be in less than an hour. I hurriedly got cleaned up as best I could—all the time thinking about what I could tell them. Without telling Larry, I decided that if they really were idiots—like I thought—then I could tell them anything. Nobody would know what was true—except maybe Larry—and I didn't think he would say anything. It was a good time to try my theory on upper echelon idiots. Besides, I didn't have a choice. So off we went to the briefing.

I sat in the back while everyone was being introduced, looking for an impressive pointer. We had one somewhere that looked like a silver pen but telescoped to a three-foot-long pointer. Every little prop helps. All I knew was that, if I looked like I knew what I was talking about, and sounded like I knew what I was talking about, they would believe it. In my head I began to make up various VC



units and what type they were and where they were. I also thought that I might let them know about the first inkling of information my agents had brought me about the beginning of a gathering of forces north of Qui Nhon. I had no idea what they planned to do or where they were yet, and I wasn't sure if I should say anything. I hadn't sent in the report on it yet.

The next thing I knew, I was introduced to the II Corps staff. When I looked up, there was a general, a couple of colonels and about three other officers, plus our whole staff. For some reason, I had not figured that the II Corps staff would be of this high a rank and have so many people. In my head, all I could think was: "Here goes nothing." Larry was sitting in the back of the room with a worried look on his face. I turned to the map, extended my bright silver pointer, and slapped it on the map. It hit near the road to Ahn Khe, so I placed my first fictitious VC sapper unit there. I described their makeup and objectives and then went on and pointed out locations of various other fictitious units. I then decided I would tell them my new information and threw in some information that my agents had been bringing in, including a general location where the NVA/VC were massing. This information was real, but only Larry and I—and whoever read my reports—knew about some of it. From the look on their faces, this was new to them. I looked in the back of the room every now and then when I was going through the presentation to see Larry with his eyes about to burst out of his head, shaking his head in disbelief. He was trying as hard as he could to not break out in laughter. I tried not to look at him too much.

I then thought I should finish with my *Pink Elephant Story*. This also was a true story—but hardly believable. It would surely distract them from what I was saying, so I told it. About two weeks ago we had sent a FACS to look at an area where we suspected hostile activity. While saying this, I pointed to a random area on the map. He was to fly over it and look for any trace of activity or to see if he could draw any fire. While he was doing this, he announced, incredulously, that he was flying over a group of pink elephants. He began to circle because he couldn't believe his eyes. He counted them. There were seven, he thought, but was not sure. His descriptions on the radio were ecstatic. He still couldn't believe

what he was seeing. The ground controller thought he had lost it and immediately ordered him back to base.

The pilot replied, “But what about the pink elephants. Can’t we get one or get someone over here to take pictures of them.”

The ground controller thought he was losing his mind, or was going through the DTs, or something. He again ordered him back. The pilot finally confirmed he was returning. (I was watching my audience while I was telling the story. I had their full attention.) Immediately upon landing he was detained and taken to the hospital for psychiatric evaluation and blood tests, by order of his commander.

Since I was the one who had sent them out on the mission, they called me and told me the mission was a bust. They said the pilot cracked up and began seeing pink elephants and was now in the hospital. I slowly hung up the phone. I personally knew that pilot and I didn’t think he sounded nuts during the briefing. Something was wrong. I went to the airport and talked to the controller. He verified everything that had happened, but I couldn’t believe it. I left and went to a helicopter supply company and told a couple of pilots what had happened, to see if they thought a pilot would crack up like that. To a man, they didn’t believe it. So I asked if they could go investigate where this had happened. The ground controller had shown me on the map where the sighting was reported. One of them went off somewhere and came back in a few minutes.

“We can use that helicopter over there. It’s ready to go.”

They all piled into it—except—being as they were all pilots—there was some confusion about who was going to pilot it. Finally, the pilot whose helicopter this was decided who went where and they took off and headed for the area. For this trip, I stayed behind. Once there, they flew around for a bit looking for pink elephants. If they didn’t find them, the detained pilot’s career was ruined. Then one of the pilots spotted some elephants ahead and to the right. They went to look. They weren’t pink, though, and were crossing a small river. They seemed to like playing in the water. They heard the helicopter and exited the river to the bank and began doing something that I guess is normal elephant behavior: they began throwing clumps of dirt over their bodies. The dirt in Vietnam is bright red. Before their eyes, the elephants turned pink. The pilot had told the truth!

He had seen them just after they came out of the river and dusted their bodies with red dirt. He had truly seen pink elephants. They all started laughing.

They flew back to the airport and went to the pilot's commander and told their story. Since there were so many of them, he had to believe what they said. His only word spoken aloud was "Damn!" He called the hospital and had them release the pilot immediately and bring him back. The CO said there would be nothing on his record about this and was quite happy that we found out the truth. So I ended my briefing with the comment, "Remember, no matter how strange it may seem, every report should be checked out!"

Larry was about to burst in the back of the room. He was positively turning purple trying not to start laughing. With the story on the pink elephants, I ended my briefing. The II Corps commander thanked me and claimed it was the most interesting briefing he had heard lately. He also asked me if I could come to Nha Trang for a briefing in a couple of weeks and tell him more about the concentration of VC/NVA north of town. He added, though, that I should not tell the story of the pink elephants at the briefing because he intended to. I thanked him and said I would be glad to go do the briefing. I was a hit! They then left.

Larry could not hold it in any longer. He laughed so hard he almost cried and just about fell out of his chair. I was laughing too. "Burdick, you are the greatest bullshitter on the face of the earth. Hell, I almost believed you. The *Pink Elephant Story* was a killer. Did it really happen?" he said finally. I assured him it was true, but not quite where I put it to be. I had forgotten the location. I learned another lesson that day. While the corps commander may not be an idiot, if you look somebody in the eye and tell them truths mixed with half-truths and downright lies, they won't be able to figure out the difference and generally believe everything you tell them. If, however, there is someone around who really knows his stuff, you're going to be in big-time trouble. So, knowing your audience and when to lie was my lesson for the day. Truth is evidently colored by the situation you are in. I was in a tight spot and lied my way out of it. It felt good. I wondered if I was supposed to feel that way.

After a little under four months in-country, I had become a much different person than when I arrived. There were certain things that had become part of me. Surprising to me, the first thing I always felt whenever I visited my liaison units was a closeness, a responsibility for, and a deep respect for, my fellow American soldiers. Most of them worked hard at what they were given to do. They were willing to fight and die because their country sent them here. Not many wanted to be here, but they did their job. Whenever I asked a soldier for help, they always agreed, even if it risked their life. These were not men to be wasted on unimportant things. They did their job as they were ordered and they did everything they could to save each other. I felt I had to do everything I could to help them survive their tour. There were those who, as always, had problems, but even then I understood and was not willing to blame them. They probably would have been fine civilians, but Vietnam was not for civilians.

Because I respected our soldiers so much I felt a responsibility to help them whenever I could. Because of my occupation I was in a unique position to do that. Most of the time there was not much I could do, but if I could do something I would. This need to help our soldiers somehow alleviated most of my feelings about killing so many VC/NVA. While I had not had many killed yet I knew that what I was doing with my agents would kill hundreds. Those soldiers who knew what I was doing—the pilots, door gunners, and even cooks, mechanics, and clerks—were very supportive. My success saved lives and by helping me they saved lives too. Being the kind of person I was, I used this to get even more help. This was one of the reasons I tried so hard to build my reputation. People had to believe I could make a difference. It was one of the things that I had learned in the seminary: People like to believe they are doing good, and by showing them how they can do good they become better Christians and more willing to do more for God. I had substituted “killing the enemy” for Christians and “their fellow soldiers” for God. Turning killing into a “good” thing probably would have driven the Jesuits who taught me into fits, but I think they might have enjoyed my twist on things. In any case, people began to believe that I could get things done and they wanted to help if they could. For me this was a good thing.

Of course, the reason my methods were working was that they didn't see anyone else doing anything. The bureaucracy was so entrenched that everything had to be approved by someone else, with the result that nothing got approved. I knew that if Saigon got wind of what we were doing by bypassing them and using the intelligence that we had gathered locally to go out and kill the enemy as fast as we could, they would shut me down immediately. I was supposed to send my intelligence to them and they would decide what to do. Of course, they never did anything with it. The fiasco with the State Department toad telling me I couldn't recruit a minister from another country was enough proof for me. Their attempt to shut me down was incredibly stupid. My response to their stupidity was not exactly brilliant but I was learning how to defeat the bureaucrats—and that was also a lot of fun.

Internally, I had changed too. When Lieutenant Joe died, it had affected me in a way I could not have imagined. Showing grief didn't work for me. All the pain, all the emotions, and all the feelings his death brought to me had to be suppressed because it interfered with my effectiveness. So I buried my feelings. You cannot suppress just one feeling, though. As a result, I had become an almost one-dimensional person. I literally had no feelings of love or joy that I would let loose. I could joke around with my friends, laugh and drink with them. It was a shallow attempt to seem normal. But I was still determined to do whatever I had to do to survive. And emotions—I firmly believed—would stop me from being effective. So I dumped them—or at least I thought I had. What happened was that I exchanged the feelings of pain and hurt that losing a friend had caused, to those of anger, hate, and revenge. The code name of my agents said it all. Outside of Larry, I had no real friends. Larry would be going home soon. Soon there would be no one but myself to deal with every personal issue. It was a lonely existence—but I thought I could handle it.

One of the more unsavory places I visited was run by an American on contract to somebody. He ran the Provincial Interrogation Center. It was in a walled prison that used to be somebody's house. It had the highest walls of any building in the city. Since the Vietnamese prisoners that we had rounded up had been sent here, I felt he was

somebody I should get to know so I could get on his information line. It was not an easy decision. I had heard many stories—like everyone else—about the cruelty that went on during interrogations there, but I needed to know what the prisoners I had been sending there were saying. So I made an appointment and I took one of our younger agents, Jim Fletch, there with me. Fletch knew about the Provincial Interrogation Center and was not looking forward to it, but in some strange way, I was. So we went. Fletch was worried about what he might see and I was curious, hoping I would learn something new about interrogation techniques.

It didn't take us very long to get to the Center. Two Vietnamese guards opened the gate for us and took us to see the American interrogator, who actually called himself Mr. Smith, like the Phoenix Agent I had met earlier. I wondered if they all used the same name. I introduced ourselves to him and asked if he got any information from the people we had sent him. I gave him a list of names. He looked at the list and said they weren't too talkative and didn't have too much information. They were mostly low-level grunts who had been forced into the military. They talked easily, he told us. Still, I was very interested in how he interrogated his prisoners. Maybe I could learn something from him. Not all teachers are good guys and there might be something I could use from him. So I asked him what he did to them.

He did like to talk shop. He started by talking about all the things he could not do to them. Under the new laws, anything that brought bodily harm to them was out. No field telephone cranking up their genitals, water torture, whips, or knives, etc. He then went on to say he used to use a small whip made out of the same stuff that was used to hang dog tags on every GI. He got good enough with it that he could snap it and it would pop about two inches from an eye. The prisoners told him everything after a couple of pops. He really liked using the chain whip, you could tell. Then one day he was interrogating an old man and snapped the chain about six inches from his nose. The old man's eyes got huge and he dropped over dead. The paperwork was horrendous. He had never touched the prisoner so, technically, he was not guilty of anything. Since he came under Vietnamese law he had many reports to fill out, but was

eventually exonerated. He stopped using the chain after that. You could tell he missed his old toy.

Currently, he was using just plain fear. The VC knew what their interrogators did to their prisoners and he made them believe he would do the same. Lying was OK to get information, after all. I already believed that, too. He said yelling at them in English unnerved them, especially if they hadn't slept for a while. Anger, violence to objects in the room, and threats to kill them, slowly broke most down. He didn't claim to be very sophisticated, but clearly enjoyed his work. Of course, I was agreeing with him, giving him "pats on the back" for some of his ideas and thanking him for new ideas. He really liked talking about his work and my compliments kept him talking. Jim, I could tell, was horrified at what he heard, but at least kept his mouth shut. You could tell he wanted out of there right away. I kept talking to Mr. Smith for a bit longer and then said I had another meeting and that I had to go. He invited me to come back anytime and maybe I could watch him in action. I shook his hand and said I would like that, too.

I left but I never went back, even though I said I would. I had seen enough. Jim asked that he never have to go to "that mad man's place" again, too. Jim needed to grow up, but he was new and young, so I gave him some slack. In this place you do what you must to survive, and I had learned something about the use of fear. I had already noticed that, because of my size and generally angry demeanor, Vietnamese steered clear of me. I filed away all he had said about the use of fear. Perhaps I would use it some day.

It's difficult to talk about Vietnam without mentioning the sights and smells that surround you. These were not sophisticated people, especially the peasants. It was not uncommon to see women squat at the side of the road and either urinate or defecate down their pant leg. It took me a long time to figure out how they did it, but they were small people and the pants were big. They would do it anywhere. They didn't care who was watching. Women also had a habit of chewing betel nuts that turned their teeth from white to brown and then to black. When they smiled at you it was disgusting. Some men also chewed them, but women seemed to like them more, especially those in the small hamlets.

*John G. Burdick*

The next thing that always assaulted me were the smells that almost made you lose your breakfast. In war, the smell of cordite, fire, and dust was everywhere. Even in our town we would get it every now and then. After a battle, or when covering an area where a battle had just been fought, you could literally smell the blood. If it left a copper taste in your mouth then you knew it was fresh. Many times driving down the road, you would see piles of bodies stacked like cord wood and would breathe in the sweet, gagging smell of death. Many of those piles were mine. When possible, I always went and viewed the results of my information. I was becoming an expert at telling how old the blood smell was or how long a body had been dead by its odor alone.

Still, the worst thing about Vietnam was my weekly visits to the Evac Hospital next to the airport. Seeing wounded Americans— young kids, really—some dying, some without limbs, and many with wounds too horrible to describe, continued to eat at me. When the wounded looked at me, I could see the pain and fear in their eyes and a little bit of anger at me. They must be thinking, “What the hell is that fucking civilian doing in here!” In the beginning, I stopped and talked to a few. I no longer did that. If they motioned to me or looked like they wanted something I would just nod my head or wave at them and move on. I would always try to avoid going through the emergency part of the hospital if I could, but sometimes there were so many wounded I couldn’t. The whole reason I was at the hospital was to check on the VC/NVA wounded prisoners we had, to see if any would talk. None ever did, and the doctors would never leave me alone with them. That was probably a good idea because by the time I had gotten to where they were kept I was always angry. It was one emotion I couldn’t control, especially after seeing so many wounded Americans. But the wounded soldiers didn’t know that. If there is a hell, this is the place.

Part of my plan to get even with the VC/NVA in the area was to expand the circle of American intelligence agents who could really help me. For the Army, I was always considered the “Old Man” of the outfit because everyone else was younger. In the Army, all we worked with were men between 18 and 21. Even the officers were young. There were a few older ones but they tended not to be in the



field. All the other field agents in our office were younger than I was, including the officers—except for Karl, who was gone; the lieutenant colonel; and Larry, who was only a year or two older. Ever since I had first met Roger after Tet, we had kept in touch. I had related many of my exploits to him and he really enjoyed the stories. We had never really worked on an operation together before, but now I knew it was time to begin to see if he could help. When Roger and I met, we had a lot in common, including being risk takers. He wanted to be in the action and I wanted to cause some action.

Eventually, after all the partying we had done together, I told him my general plans for the hostiles in the area and the fact that I had agents in place. I felt he knew that, but you could see his eyes light up as I outlined what I wanted to do. I explained that I intended to do something with the information. I was tired of seeing good information go to Saigon and disappear. I outlined the activities and the groups that I was using to implement actions based on the information I was getting, but I needed more help and better units. I was hoping he could help. He immediately let me know that he wanted a piece, and that I had a partner and a helper. I further explained that already I was sure I was going to get some information and I wanted to act on it in a timely manner. The only time anything was done was when I talked someone into doing something. The information I was planning to come up with was major and I needed someone here to run with it so I could stay in the background and get more. Roger volunteered that he was that man. We did like going out drinking together and we had become good friends. Now we were partners in a plan to destroy the VC/NVA who were responsible for killing Lieutenant Joe.

Through Roger, I was introduced to the local CIA team, the Koreans from the Tiger Division, and the Air Force. I already had the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the ARVN army and the province chief's RF/PF forces plus myriad support forces and, of course, Roger brought the Navy with him. We were getting ready to rock and roll. Roger also had an Army nurse for a girlfriend. That he had a wife and kids at home didn't seem to bother him, and it didn't bother me either. I made no judgments at all and I understood why he did it. He needed someone to balance him out. Someone who could bring him back from the edge, and bring softness to his life

*John G. Burdick*

where he could share a few moments of what home was. They were both very involved but they also realized it only worked here. In any case, since she was in the Army I could get her out for him anytime he wanted—well, almost anytime. Roger liked that.

Somehow, I always tended to go too far, but still make it back. During the first weeks that I seriously started working with Roger, he had an urgent need to see his girlfriend and came to me for help. She was going on duty and he wanted to know if there was any way I could get her out of it so he could see her. After a few bourbon and waters I came up with an idea—or it seemed like a good one to me. I would call the airport where the Evac hospital was and put them on alert. That meant everybody stayed where they were until it was cleared. She would stay in her quarters and I would take him in my jeep to see her because I was the only one with a credential who could get through the gates. He liked the idea, so I called in the alert and we went to the airport. People were running around. Perimeter lights were going on. Attack helicopters were taking off. I began to think I had gone too far. We got to his girlfriend's quarters and we both went in. There were about ten nurses in the building, including his, who were standing around waiting. They were not happy. He and his nurse went off for a while and I sat against the wall facing nine angry nurses—some who wanted to go out, some who had duty where they were needed, and some who just didn't like alerts. They were particularly angry. I left them alone and just wanted to get out of there because, if they found out it was me who called the alert, it could get ugly.

After about 20 long minutes Roger and the nurse returned. At least he was smiling. We were going at last. Then his friend turned to the nurses and pointed at me and said I was the one who called the alert. I guess Roger had bragged to her how he got there. The nurses turned on me in a flash. One of them swore and threw a powder puff that was loaded with a fruity white powder at me and some of the others did the same. I retreated, covered with powder and looking like a clown. I quickly exited their barracks. Only a fool would try to face down a bevy of angry nurses. I was outside trying to pound it off me when Roger came out with tears in his eyes from laughing. Seeing me hightail out of that building with nine angry nurses chasing me was the funniest thing he had seen. He said he had made

it good and persuaded them they really shouldn't disembowel this guy. He promised them that I would throw a barbeque on the beach for them when our quarters were moved there in a couple of weeks. That seemed to stop them. So now I was still covered with powder and had a party to throw. I needed to get to a phone to cancel the alert and then I had to get the damn powder off me. It did smell good, though.

When I got back to the villa, Larry was there and said that our new quarters were ready and we would be moving into them in the next couple of days. We would be right on the beach. He also had found some furniture for us. An MI group out of the 173rd was pulling out and had a number of good, real beds and mattresses that they were willing to sell or trade. Larry had somehow found this out. He said he and I were going to Ahn Khe tomorrow morning to seal the deal. I had not been to Ahn Khe yet, so this was going to be interesting. Larry was a first-class scrounger. I learned a lot from how he did it—and he was the best. I was looking forward to a real bed instead of my old, rusty wire cot.

## Chapter 10

**The next morning we got up** early and headed for Ahn Khe. It was the near the end of March 1968. I had never been to the highlands and was interested to see if it really was cooler there. I also wanted to check out the lieutenants' (Gary and Paul's) digs. They had mentioned some things that had piqued my interest. The drive started out quite normally except, instead of going straight north to LZ English, we turned left, away from the ocean, and headed west. Larry was driving so I could play tourist. We were driving fast in an open jeep, so talking was difficult, but there was nothing to say anyway. I looked at the rice farms with Vietnamese of all sizes bent over sticking something in the muck, and women squatting next to their huts breast-feeding babies while chewing betel nuts and swatting at the numerous flies. These people could not know what was going on. We must seem like men from Mars to them. All they really wanted to do was farm and breed—and they did both well. I doubt that they had even the faintest idea of why we were here or why the VC/NVA were pestering them. If we both went away, they would still be farming and breeding. The ridiculousness of trying to change these people was overpowering, but we had to go on. I wasn't here to argue the merits of the war. I was here to survive it. If those poor bastards were in my way, I was sorry for them. Driving through this incredibly beautiful country, you would think my thoughts would be about the beauty I was seeing, not the horror I was bringing.

Slowly, the road began to twist and turn and we went over cement bridges that covered many small streams. Sometimes, the bridge would be blown up and we would have to slow down and go around the obstacle. Other times, there was a temporary bridge

and we had to drive through some mud and gravel. We kept going. As the road began to rise, I grabbed the M16 that Larry had brought along. We were about to go through hostile territory that not long ago I had joked and misled the II Corps general about. I wondered how close we were to the pink elephant sighting. Larry said to be careful with the rifle, as we were approaching a convoy in front of us. It looked to be about 20 or more trucks slowly going up the pass. There were armed soldiers on each truck. Some had machine guns attached to the roof of the cab, protected by sandbags. I didn't want to be around a convoy and Larry didn't want to be there either, so he sped up and began passing the trucks one or two at a time. Sometimes, the soldiers waved us on, sometimes they flipped us the finger. Mostly, they ignored us. The "don't pass on a curve" rule must not be in Larry's driving manual. We wove in and out of that convoy like pros. It didn't take us long to pass the convoy and get some distance between them and us. Our own intelligence reports told us that these convoys were ambushed often, though not as much lately since we had decimated their forces after Tet. Being in the center of an ambush was not in our plans. By the time we had passed the convoy, the mountain road had become a real mountain road. There were cliffs going up one side of the road and valleys down the other. There was no place to hide. After about 20 minutes of mountain driving, we came to a flat area. It was a little cooler here. Ahn Khe couldn't be too much farther on. We didn't want to miss it because the next stop was Pleiku and neither of us wanted to go there—not in a jeep and not by ourselves.

Damage was more apparent here. The bridges were guarded and showed the pockmarks of battle. A couple had holes blown in the side of them. One was completely destroyed, the cement looking like enormous rocks with the black spaghetti of rebar twisted all about them. We could not tell how long ago this had happened, but they had built a new bridge—and it looked like it had been built by someone who didn't know how to build bridges. Finally, we could get a glimpse of the city, and in a few minutes were there. Well, it really wasn't a city but rather a large hamlet with a number of little stores next to the road that got thicker the closer we came to the 173rd base.

*John G. Burdick*

There were quite a few soldiers walking around and all seemed to be heading into the town. We started looking for the lieutenants' house and found it easily. It was a pink stucco house on the corner of the main street and some other street. It was bigger than either villa we had in Qui Nhon. It did not have a wall around it, but rather a wire fence with concertina at the base of the fence and claymore mines intertwined every few feet with the concertina. This looked weird to me. Claymore mines were nothing to fool with. They killed a long distance in front of them, but they also had a killing field behind them of 10 or 12 feet. They looked too close to the house for my comfort. As we got closer to the house and entered a parking area behind the wire, my concern for the claymores in the fence became moot. Around the eaves of this house were tied—about every 12 feet—more claymore mines. If they fired those off, the house would be destroyed and all those inside would be hamburger. Good thinking, Paul and Gary! I guess it gave them comfort. I never mentioned it while I was there.

They showed us to our rooms. My room was better than anything I had been in since I got to Vietnam. They lived in style. Gary said he was going to set up a meeting with the MI group that had the beds we wanted and would meet with us later. Paul took us on a tour of Ahn Khe. At first, Ahn Khe didn't appear to be much—a lot of little stalls along the side of the highway that sold things, probably liberated from the US Army. There were soldiers going through the stalls, though. We briefly went onto the 173rd base and were shown where headquarters was and where the Officers' Club was. We did not stop, even though it was my fervent wish. I was thirsty and a beer would have been good. We then left the base and turned off the highway onto a dirt road between a couple of stalls. I had not seen this road when we passed it earlier. Once we got past the stalls we could see a large enclave of buildings surrounded by a high fence. We were heading to the gate in the fence, which was open.

"Up ahead is the famous 'Sin City' you may have heard of," said Paul. "The whole area is made up of bars and whorehouses and we are responsible for the security of the place. We bring a doctor in weekly to check the girls. Girls that are infected must go home immediately, or we will close the business. We have also recruited several of the girls who live in Laos to get information for us. It

makes duty here bearable. We'll stop and walk around and I'll get you a beer."

With that, Paul pulled over and stopped in front of one of the many bars while I absorbed what he had said. There were other jeeps in the area but most of the GIs had walked here. You could see that new faces were showing up at the doors as we got out. These were the managers or bosses, it was evident. They watched us nervously. With a word from Paul, they could be out of business. Having Paul show up with two new faces to whom he seemed to defer, didn't bode well in their minds. We went into the nearest bar and sat at a table. Immediately, three cold, long-neck Budweisers appeared on the table. There was no request for payment and none was offered.

"Your friends want see new girls? All Fresh. Never fuck no one," said a woman, well past her prime and with way too much makeup on, while she snapped her fingers.

Immediately, four girls popped out from a door near the back of the bar. They were startlingly beautiful. Paul said nothing. I guess he was waiting to see if I would jump on one. They, like the Vietnamese girls, looked like perfect china dolls, perfect in every respect except, unlike the Vietnamese girls, these were well-endowed. I pushed back that urge for the soft touch of a woman and kept my thoughts to myself and shook my head "No" and went back to drinking my beer. I had heard Paul say he used Laotian girls as agents and I guessed these had to be Laotians with some French blood in them. I knew from my training as an agent that you shouldn't get involved with the help. It was a sure path to disaster. It was hard not to stare at the girls, though. At that point Gary walked in and got his free Budweiser.

"Paul tried to set you up, didn't he?" Gary said. Paul laughed. Larry was laughing too. He knew this was going to happen. Always being tested sucks! We visited several more bars for the beer and the view. It was an interesting afternoon. We had to leave early because Paul and Gary were throwing a party for the civilians in the area. It was part of their cover. We were, of course, invited. Paul made arrangements at several of the bars for several of the girls to come, also. Before the party, Paul and Gary sat down with Larry and me and asked about some of the things we were doing. They had heard about a net I was working that was bringing in good information.

*John G. Burdick*

This was back-channel information and was none of their business. I said nothing.

Larry said, "That's Burdick's thing and we can't talk about it, period!" He told them more than I would have, but it shut them up.

"Were you the guy who showed up at the A-team in a white shirt and briefcase after landing in a FACS? It sounded like something you would do." Gary asked, looking at me. I just smiled.

"Damn! You gotta be nuts!" Paul said. "That story has been going around Intel like that damn *Pink Elephant Story* I heard. Half the people believe it's bullshit. Wait 'til I tell them it's true," Gary said. I smiled again, because, evidently, my damn *Pink Elephant Story* had been repeated by the II Corps general to someone. My campaign to build my reputation was working better than even I believed it would.

Larry laughed and said, "What can I tell you. He's nuts!" and slapped me on the back. They left it alone after that and went off to get the booze for the party. Larry and I went to a meeting with the MI group to lock down the deal on the beds. It was an easy deal to make—they were going to lose the beds anyway. Larry promised them a couple of cases of beer, a bottle of scotch and a bottle of bourbon. They were going to deliver them the next morning. The beer and booze would be there when they arrived.

We then went to the Officers' Club to have dinner and later returned to the house for the party, which was going well when we got there. Most of the partygoers were civilians as far as I could tell. Paul and Gary had told them we were coming—and probably something more. They all took notice of us, but kept their distance. We were not one of them. Paul waved us to his table in the front of the room next to what looked like a stage. The women serving drinks were some of the girls I had seen in the bars at "Sin City." Paul and Gary had good taste. After a few drinks I began to notice that many of the partygoers were going off with the girls for a while. Damn, I hoped they weren't using my bedroom! I tipped my head to Larry and he nodded his head knowingly. He had seen them before I had.

The music, which had been low, suddenly got louder and a girl jumped on the stage and began dancing right in front of us. You could have seen the freckles on her butt—if she had any freckles.



She didn't. She bumped, she ground, and she threw clothes into the audience and at us as everybody yelled for more. Another girl joined her and did a little different bump and a little different grind. Soon, all they were wearing was nothing but a G-string—a very small G-string—and they were dancing directly in front of Larry and me. It was evident that they were gifts to us from Paul and Gary—and everybody knew that. I had nothing against a little sex, but not where there were so many witnesses. Public debauchery can always come back and bite you on the ass. However, I had to come up with a way out that saved face and kept me out of possible trouble. I could see on Larry's face that he was thinking the same thing. He looked very uncomfortable. He was very short, with only a couple of weeks before he headed back to the States. He had no desire to catch anything before he left.

In the midst of all the bumping and grinding a plan was born! The girl dancing in front of me was slowly gyrating lower to look me in the eye when I reached over to her, gently touching her left breast—which brought a smile to her face and a roar from the crowd—while reaching around to softly grab her by the small of the back and pull her towards me. I could feel Larry watching me. In my other hand I had a 10-dollar military scrip note that I gently stuffed into the front of her G-string. She made an audible sound of pleasure and the crowd roared again. They certainly couldn't see what I had done with my hand, but their imaginations filled in the details. I pulled her face to me and whispered in her ear as she saw the ten dollars I had placed in her G-string, “Go fuck the guy with the mustache over there,” as I nodded my head in the direction of the civilian with the mustache. I never found out who he was, but he was about to get a gift. She smiled broadly, kissed me on the cheek, wiggled her butt and danced over to the surprised mustached civilian. Larry laughed and did essentially the same thing, sending the girl meant for him to another surprised partygoer.

The trouble with having a reputation is that you really can't control what people say about you. By the next morning, there were more stories than I could believe about what I did with my hands and with the kiss and other things. People love to tell stories and they sometimes get better in the telling. Overall though, it did help as people thought that I was capable of even more than I really was.

*John G. Burdick*

Immorality in spying is an advantage. For some reason, people trust an immoral person more than they do a saint. You can ask an immoral person for anything without fear of judgment. Saints are unapproachable and uncomfortable to share information with. If you want to gather information you have to be approachable. You have to make people believe you are corruptible because they are, and that is why they are turning on their friends. What took me the longest time to learn was that I had to have an internal moral compass always clear to me. I had to know what I was willing and not willing to do. It is so easy to do what everyone else does. For now, I was still finding my way. This time I had not fallen into the trap and everyone was impressed about it but me. The next morning we left to return to Qui Nhon. We ran into no convoys on the way back and I think we were both a bit hung over, for we barely said a word. The beds were on the way to us, so everything was good.

After we got back to town, Larry stopped the jeep before we got to our new home. While we were gone, our unit had moved into the barracks our old lieutenant colonel had requested be built for us. So Larry stopped and looked at it from a distance before we went in. The barracks were built right next to the bay of Qui Nhon. Forty or fifty feet from our back door was the beautiful blue Pacific with its waves gently lapping on the brilliant white sand. Naturally, the Army—in its brilliance—built a four-hole outhouse between the beach and the barracks and a shower building next to it. “Only the Army could fuck up a view like that!” he said. We then drove into the compound—our new home!

Our stuff had been moved while we were gone so we went and checked out our rooms. The beds were already in them. I lay on my new soft bed. A real bed! I looked forward to sleeping in it tonight. I then went and looked over the rest of the building. I spent the rest of the day setting up my desk and straightening up my files. My last act for the day was to use our new outhouse. I liked my old bathroom in the house we used to live in better, but I had no choice.

The outhouse had a single room and a room with three holes in it. Under each hole was half of a fifty-gallon barrel half filled with diesel fuel. When nearly full, or once a week, these barrels had to be pulled out from under the outhouse, have some gasoline poured

in as a starter, and lit. It was now time for us to do that. While they were burning it was some poor soul's job to stir the mess so that all would be burned. Then the half-barrels had to be refilled with diesel and pushed back under the holes. Obviously, nobody wanted that job and our Vietnamese worker, who acted as janitor for us, refused to do it. He was a short, extremely thin, wiry old man with a long white goatee. When he smiled, many missing teeth showed gaps in his mouth and the teeth that were still there were badly stained. No amount of arguing would make him burn those barrels. So Billy and I decided to show him how to do it. It was really difficult pulling the half-barrel out from under the outhouse and dragging it through the sand far enough away that, when we lit the barrels, we would not burn down the outhouse. The smell of the raw sewage mixed with diesel blinded us and choked the air out of our chests. We could only pull it a few feet before we had to move away and catch our breath. Finally, we had pulled them about eight feet from the building. Our janitor was quietly watching us the whole time. We had difficulty lighting the diesel until I remembered to get some gas and pour it into the barrels. Soon, all the barrels were burning and we took turns stirring the muck so it would all burn. Then I got the janitor to come over and stir the muck. I guess he decided that, if we could do this, then he could, too. So he gestured that he would do it and for us to go back inside. He also motioned that he would pour in the diesel and push the half-barrels back in. We did not have to be convinced, so we left but did not go in. We went to our new bath house and showered. No amount of soap seemed to get that smell out of our noses and the taste out of our mouths. Later, we checked and saw that the janitor had indeed finished the burning and refilled the barrels, but he had talked the guards into putting them back in place. When he saw us, he grinned broadly. He was proud of his work. We waved our thanks. Neither one of us wanted to get near that mess again, unless it was from the toilet seat end. The following week, we watched the janitor do it by himself with the help of one of the guards. That was one job we would never have to do again.

Later, Larry stopped me and said, "Look, next week I'm leaving. I don't want any party or anything. But I want to do one more thing before I leave. We need to supply our new home." Now I knew

*John G. Burdick*

Larry was a great scrounger and I had learned a lot from him, but what he outlined was mind-boggling.

“Burdick, we’ve got a new general here for II Corps. You met him not too long ago. His hold luggage is arriving tomorrow.” Why would I care about his hold luggage, I thought? “It has a chest freezer, two refrigerators, a color TV, some furniture, and a bar. We’re going to get it tomorrow.” He was laughing while he said this. How the hell were we going to do that? But Larry was a genius at this stuff.

The next morning—very early—we drove to the Qui Nhon Airport and up to a C-130. Somehow, he had acquired a C-130—and to think I had been proud of myself for acquiring a small FACS! The crew was waiting for us and, as we got in, the plane taxied for takeoff. We quickly sat in the seats on the side of the plane and belted ourselves in. The plane took off and gained altitude faster than I had ever seen before. We were heading for Nha Trang. A C-130 is a huge airplane for just two passengers. The noise in the plane was so loud that no conversation was possible. Larry was smiling broadly and I guess I was sitting there looking confused. Time would tell.

As we were starting to land, Larry went to the pilots and motioned them to do something. They radioed something to the Nha Trang Airport and we continued to land. After landing, we rolled over to a series of warehouses next to the tarmac. When they lowered the back ramp, Larry was down it and I followed. It was immediately clear that an alert had been called. Everybody was running to the shelters. I had done the same thing for Roger in Qui Nhon, but on a much smaller scale. Larry grabbed two sergeants and flashed his credential and said something to them. They stopped in their tracks and pointed to the warehouse directly behind the plane and went with Larry to it. I stayed with the plane. After what seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes, out came two forklifts with pallets containing some of the general’s goods. They were placed in the hold of the plane and tied down by the plane’s crew. There were three pallets in all. When the last of the pallets was in, Larry released the two sergeants—after swearing them to secrecy because of the “intelligence mission” we were on. I just stood there looking mean and serious as Larry pointed to me. The sergeants left and we both got back on the plane. The ramp was raised and we taxied to the runway. Just as quickly, we were in the air again. I couldn’t

believe we were getting away with this. Larry was incredible. Larry did not like the Army much—and generals even less. I guess that is why he liked my trick on the general and his staff so well. Stealing the general's personal stuff was the best he could think of to show his disdain for everything going on. After a half hour or so, Larry again went to the pilots and I guessed that another message was passed, calling off the alert.

Soon we landed back at Qui Nhon and taxied back to where we started. A forklift was there and took the three pallets off the plane and placed them on the edge of the Tarmac near a 3/4-ton truck that, surprisingly, Billy was driving with Marty. They began to break down the pallets and put the booty in the truck. I helped. Larry was talking to—and I guess thanking—the pilots. They were all laughing. He shook their hands and came over to us. The C-130 taxied away and disappeared down the runway. We had done it.

It took about four trips to get all that stuff on the truck and back to the new compound. I went with the last load. Larry was already at the compound and directing where things were to go. Our Rec-Room/Bar/Kitchen was almost complete. We almost split our sides laughing about what we had done. Nobody would believe it, but the fact was, the booty was in our barracks. The only thing we had to do was fill the refrigerators and freezer. We also had an electric stove now, so we could cook.

Everybody who was in Vietnam was issued a ration card stating how many things they could buy each month from the PX. There wasn't much on these cards for us to stock up with, but we had an in. One of our jobs was to do the security checks of the checkers at the PX. All the checkers were young Vietnamese girls whose job depended on the security check. In cooperation with the manager of the PX, we would keep his girls cleared as long as we could buy whatever we wanted. We did not ask for free items, but only to purchase as much as we needed—which was always a good amount of beer, booze, and cigarettes. So, when we went, we filled up our baskets with as much as we wanted and could afford. When we got to the checkout, we would hand the ration card to the girl—they all knew us—and they would punch the same hole as many times as needed to convince those around us that super ration cards existed

*John G. Burdick*

for civilians. Some GI's were probably pissed, but what could they do? All we had to do was keep a slush fund for booze. As a matter of fact, the bar served a very useful purpose for us since most people were happy to be invited to see us or visit us without an invitation, as we always had a free drink for them. Liaison work is tough.

The first day that we had our bar filled we had a small party that night celebrating our new acquisitions. It was the last day of March. Everybody was astonished with what Larry had done. Larry just felt satisfied that he had put one more thing over on the Army. I enjoyed the feeling too. I had hooked up the color TV and put it on a table by the back of the bar, near the water cooler we had found. I went to the PX and discovered that they sold rabbit ear antennas, so now we could get a signal for our TV. There was only one channel broadcast by MACV and it was broadcast out of Saigon to a transmitter in every province. When I finally adjusted the antenna, a news broadcast was on. They were going to play the President's speech about Vietnam that was recorded earlier. We all grabbed a beer and huddled around the set. Before the speech they showed pictures of demonstrators around the White House denouncing the war. There were a great many of them. Some of them were flying the Viet Cong flag. No one said anything. What could we say? I didn't want to be here. None of the other agents wanted to be here. We had no volunteers in our outfit. Yet here we were. Here we would stay until our politicians told us to leave. The support some of the demonstrators gave the Viet Cong especially hurt. Supporting an aggressor who wants to kill American soldiers seemed wrong. I was one of those American soldiers and I took that fairly personally. At the end of President Johnson's speech—in a surprise statement—he said he would drop out of the race for President and would not accept the position if offered. For a moment, we were struck dumb. Suddenly, Larry started shouting with joy and laughing hysterically. I had never seen him so motivated. He was really excited that Lyndon Johnson would be gone as President. His emotions were infective and everyone joined in. I did too, even though I was conflicted a bit about his departure. I had worked for LBJ's election while in college. I walked several precincts for him and celebrated with other Democrats his crushing of the Republicans. I liked his Civil Rights agenda and his War on Poverty. I didn't know if it would work, but it was a start. Lady Bird's

campaign to beautify America by removing all those billboards was a step in the right direction. Vietnam was a mistake. Hell, my being here was a mistake. But once a mistake is made, how do you get out of it without disastrous results? I didn't know. So we celebrated LBJ's last year in the White House late into the night.

The next day Larry left. I took him to the airport. I was losing a good friend but he was going home and I was happy for him. We shook hands and he said, "Burdick, watch your butt. You take way too many chances. You're like me when I first got here two years ago. You don't have to do everything. Just do enough to get home to your wife." He then got in line to the plane that would take him to Saigon and eventually home.

I hadn't thought about my wife much lately. Part of me missed her, part of me was still pissed, and part of me wanted to be rid of the whole thing. I was beginning to think I had made a mistake in ever getting married. The coldness in our letters was irritating. Most people who get letters from home enjoyed getting them. I dreaded them—and I guess it showed. Nobody asked me about home and I didn't talk to anybody about it. Every now and then I would look at that picture she sent me, with her holding my Valentine roses and smiling so happy, and I would feel miserable. I missed what I used to have and began to believe I could never have again. I was never more alone.

## Chapter 11

**Within a day after Larry left,** a new CO arrived. He was Captain David Theran and he was a trained agent—at least he had gone through the courses at Fort Holabird. He had some understanding of what we were doing. Like our previous CO, though, he was waiting to become a major and knew he would get it if he did a good job here. It seems that he and Larry had crossed paths in Nha Trang because he knew about me. I knew that because he acknowledged me when he introduced himself to me. He mentioned that Larry had spoken highly of me. He let me know that, as far as he was concerned, I was the ranking agent in the field. I also guessed he was smart enough to know that my contacts were mine alone, and I believed he would not interfere with me in keeping those arrangements to myself. Time would tell.

On his first day at the barracks he called me in for a talk. “Burdick, I’ve heard a lot about you. You’ve apparently developed a fairly extensive net and some good contacts within the intelligence community.” I was beginning to wonder how much he really knew. “You will continue to have a free hand in what you are doing, but keep me posted about any proposed aggressive activities and let me remind you that you are not to put yourself at risk without my permission. You are too valuable to lose. Understand?”

All I could say was, “I’ll try, sir!”

“Try pretty damn hard!” he replied.

I now was sure that Larry had talked to him. It was the same message I would always get from him. What it meant, of course, was that if I were going to do something, he would never hear of it. To my surprise, I liked the new captain already. I would have



to be careful of what I told him, though, and I would let him know what I was doing when I was ready. He seemed a little too regular Army for me. I did give him a general briefing on what my nets were gathering for me. He definitely wanted to be kept up on the activities and I was sure I would only tell him what I wanted him to know. We would get along, but he was no Larry and I didn't fully trust him. Hell, after Larry left I don't think I trusted anybody except maybe Roger and he wasn't even in the Army.

I guess in a new commander's rule book there must be a section about what you do when you take over a command. Rule number one has to be: Show that you are in charge. That's particularly hard in a group that is under cover, where no rank is to be openly shown, and—especially—where an individual agent can refuse an assignment if it bothers his perceived morality. What he can do, though, is assign regular menial tasks to a person—as long as it doesn't blow anyone's cover.

His first attempt at this was with Billy, who had been complaining that one of our jeeps was still Army-green and he thought it shouldn't be because people might think we were in the Army. I thought people would just think that the damn civilians had stolen an Army jeep. But Billy kept complaining. He went to our new CO and told him his worry. For his effort, he was ordered to paint the jeep. Now, he could have gone to some maintenance outfit and have them do a good paint job. He also could have come to me for help. He knew I could get someone to do it. But ever since I had threatened to shoot him on the roof, he understandably kept away from me most of the time.

But Billy had a mean streak in him and a wicked sense of humor. He found some dark-blue paint and got a brush and, when the captain left for a meeting and luncheon appointment, Billy went out to our parking area, pulled out a brush, and painted the whole thing blue. The paint brush left brush marks all over the jeep. It was a horrible paint job, but there was no more Army-green to be seen. We were all doubled up with laughter when we saw what he had done. When the captain returned, we were all at our desks looking like we were busier than ever doing our paperwork. Even Billy was at his desk, but he had blue paint on his hands and clothes. We saw the captain pull up next to the newly-blue jeep and stop. He did not get out of

his jeep right away, but when he did, he walked around the blue jeep staring, stopped, and then headed for the office. I felt like taking cover under the desk. Who knew what this guy would do?

“Billy, you missed a spot on the right front bumper. Fix it!” he ordered and then went into his office. We were all amazed. Billy sheepishly went out, looked over the jeep, and painted the area he had missed. This captain could be one of us. He enjoyed a good joke and took it in stride. Only time would tell if he really was one of us. Our first impression of him was a good one, though.

He had one more task to lay on us that none of us could get out of. Our new barracks were done, but there were no sidewalks from the building to the outhouse and shower area, and no sidewalk to our front door. None of us minded, but the red dirt and sand from outside was being tracked all over our office area and bar area, not to mention the second floor where we all had separate rooms. So the captain decided we needed to build some sidewalks, which was not a bad idea. None of us were engineers and the hardest thing we had been doing so far was carting cases of beer into our bar area. I offered to see if I could find a unit that would do it for us, but the captain thought we should do it—so we had to do it.

The captain actually got the cement mix and tools from somebody. None of us had done any cement work before, so we were not sure what to do. You also have to remember that we were not the typical unit—so who was supposed to be in charge? Interestingly, we decided that Billy, the lowest ranking person, should show us what to do. We had found out that he had had a little experience with concrete and that was enough for us.

One Saturday morning we all started working on the project. The captain was planning to be there, but a meeting came up that he had to go to and he left us to our own devices. I checked, and he really did have to go to a meeting. Prior planning was not our strong suit with this project. It didn’t take us long to frame in the sidewalk areas. We felt that we did it right. We had already procured the cement, the beach was full of sand, and our water tower bladder was full. We were ready. We had two wheelbarrows and we mixed the cement in them and began pouring the concrete into the frames.

We did the front door and along the side of the building quickly, and thought that, by the way the first part went, that this whole

project would be no problem. Then we came to the area by the outhouse and shower at the back door of our building. This area was bigger than we thought when we started, and it was difficult to get the cement into the frames. It was later in the day, now, and it was hot. The cement had to be mixed and poured quickly, or we would have a real mess. We were afraid that the cement would dry out before we smoothed it down. We began to run out of cement and began to throw rocks and sand into the frames so that we would not have to use so much concrete. By this time we were all dirty, sweaty and covered with concrete. Concrete, when it gets on your skin, burns a bit. Finally, sometime after 4:00 in the afternoon, we ran out of water. We had, however, finished the project—just barely. It was kind of rough, but you could walk from the building to the outhouse and the shower without getting your feet dirty. The captain should be happy. He still was not back by the time we finished the project.

Now there were about ten of us filthy, dirty, sweaty, sunburned, uncomfortable guys who wanted a shower—and there was no water. Our water was stored in the rubber bladder container on top of a tower next to the shower, and we had used it all to make the cement. The bladder was flat! Did I say we had not thought this through? Gary, who had come down from Ahn Khe and got roped into working with us, called the company that provided us water and asked for some more. The reply from the sergeant at the company was that there was no water until tomorrow or the next day. Well, Gary then tried the CO, who was a major, and he told Gary the same thing. So we sat there being miserable, drinking cold beer. The longer we waited, the madder we all became. So, not giving a shit, I reached for the phone and called the company that supplied the water.

“This is Colonel Burdick. Let me talk to your commander!” I yelled over the phone. Everybody in the room was staring at me in total disbelief. They thought I had gone nuts. Impersonating an officer was serious. Gary, I know, was thinking of ways to go hide and not hear this, but he couldn’t help himself, so he stayed to see what would happen. ”Major, my men need water now. They have been without it all day and we have operations tonight and we can’t do it without water!” I waited for the major’s reply. I suspected what he would do.

*John G. Burdick*

“Sorry, sir! I didn’t know what the problem was. I’ll get someone over there as soon as possible,” he said.

“Within the hour!” I said.

“Yes, sir!” was all he said and I hung up.

“Water will be here within an hour,” I told everyone. “Now give me another beer.”

Gary wanted to know what I would do if they came looking for Colonel Burdick. I just said I’d take care of it. I really had no idea what I would do, though. Thirty-five minutes later a water truck pulled into our compound and ran a hose to our flattened rubber bladder and began to fill it up. I went to the two soldiers who were there and invited them in for a cold beer. I took them to the bar and, through small talk, found that they did most of the water deliveries in the area. They were very impressed with our bar, so I made a deal on the spot. Every time they brought us water they could have use of our bar. They could drink whatever they wanted, and as much as they wanted. The only rule was that they had to be able to walk out when they left. They looked behind our bar and saw the bourbon, vodka, rum, scotch and other liquor. I told them the beer was always cold, if that’s all they wanted. When the bladder was full I thanked them and told them that Colonel Burdick thanked them too. They smiled. We were never out of water again. They always seemed to be around to top off our bladder and have a beer or a drink. We were happy, they were happy, and Colonel Burdick disappeared, never to appear again. I think Gary was glad to leave the next morning. Who knew what kind of story he would tell about this? Anyway, we all got to take a shower and clean up a bit so we could go to the Officers’ Club for dinner. Eventually, our water-bearers replaced the rubber bladder with a larger steel tank that fit on top of our tower. Unfortunately, it had previously held diesel fuel and, though they claimed they had cleaned it out, we tasted diesel oil for a couple of weeks. We always had water though!

When the captain came back, he was happy with the job done and congratulated Billy on managing the job. He wrote a commendation letter and put it in his 201 file. It was a kind gesture and we all thought he was good to do that. He looked at me kind of sideways a couple of times while he was congratulating Billy, and I suspected he had heard what I had done. Gary, being a fellow

officer, probably squealed on me. You can never trust an officer who ran. The captain never said anything to me, though. A couple of times he made a comment on the number of times the water guys were here. It seemed to me he was looking right at me when he said this. However, he never asked about Colonel Burdick and I think he knew I would never do that again. So we let it go.

The next day I got a call from Roger. He told me that he had heard that Martin Luther King had just been shot and killed. I was stunned! I couldn't believe it. I told Roger I would get back to him as soon as I checked to see if MACV was covering the story on TV. I hung up and immediately headed for the bar to turn on the TV. I motioned to the other agents to follow me. MACV was reporting his death and showing a video of where he was shot and killed. It was a terrible moment for me. He had been one of my heroes in college. I had been president of the first Civil Rights Group on the Santa Clara campus. We all watched as the terrible news was repeated over and over. They then began to show towns burning, where blacks were rioting and destroying cities out of frustration and pain that such a good man had been assassinated. We were watching town after town burning in America. We felt so helpless, seeing all that destruction and wanting to help, but we were thousands of miles away and could do nothing. Death was common to us. Young men were dying every day. I saw that weekly when I visited the Evac Hospital. You do get used to it. But this was different. King was a voice for peace, non-violence, and racial equality. It was so senseless that he be killed violently. I was also sure he would have been horrified that his death was being used as an excuse to do violence. We would continue watching this tragedy as it evolved over the next few weeks. We were ordered to check if there were any problems in our area because of his death. There were none. Soldiers continued to die no matter what was happening in the States.

The next day Captain Theran called us together to go over what had occurred at the meeting he had attended the day before. Among other things he was told that our unit needed better contact with Saigon. I guess we had gotten somebody's attention. The downside was that they wanted us to have a single-sideband radio installed

so that we could talk directly to Saigon Headquarters and pass our information on faster. The captain was explaining this to us in his office and I didn't like the direction the conversation was going. I was right! The downside was soon apparent to me as I was the one who was going to have to go to Saigon for training on the radio. I tried to explain that I didn't know anything about radios, but they knew I was brought up in a radio and TV business that my dad owned. No one else came even close to having any knowledge, so I was the guy, and that was that. I didn't like going at this time because my agents were getting some good information. I was promised that I would only be gone three days, so I got ready to go. Who knew? It might be interesting. It would be good to see Saigon with some experience under my belt. I was betting it would look much different from when I first came to Vietnam.

That night at the Officers' Club I ran into the CIA agents again. I kept bumping into them everywhere. I told them about having to go to Saigon for single-sideband radio training. They seemed interested and made a curious offer. They gave me a phone number to call to see if the CIA had any flights to Qui Nhon the day my training ended. That would get me back here faster than going through Nha Trang. I liked the idea so I put the slip of paper in my wallet and told them I would try to see if I could catch a flight. They weren't sure there would be one, but it was worth a try. Who knew what the CIA used for planes? I was always up for flying something different.

The next morning I flew out to Nha Trang where I stayed for the night. I was at the same house that I originally stayed in the first time I was headed to Qui Nhon. It felt different and wrong somehow. I did not like being there. It was hard to place what was causing my discomfort. I guess I was used to Qui Nhon and didn't like being in a place where I didn't know anyone or had information about. It was unsettling. I smiled when I landed at the main airport in Nha Trang. I remembered landing with Larry and picking up all those "supplies" from the general. I wondered what he did when he found out he had been ripped off. I would never know since I wasn't even supposed to know he had been ripped off. So asking questions was not possible. I enjoyed the memories of it, though.

Headquarters was too military for me. All the liaison work was done by senior officers, which left no activities for the regular agents.

Two agents who were assigned to Headquarters stayed with me the whole time I was there. They were bored and I guess I was the best diversion they had had since they got in-country. I was careful about what I said I was doing. It was clear they had heard some things, but I was quiet about my activities. After a while I realized they wanted to know what it felt like to be doing real agent work and not the secretarial work they were confined to. So after dinner I gave them some information about my flight to the A-team and the death of Lieutenant Joe. I also described what had happened to us during the Tet Offensive. They were entranced and listened to every word. I didn't say one word about current activities, but they thrived on the parts I did tell them. In their hearts, I think, they were glad to be secretaries. I was too close to the war for them. The next morning I flew to Saigon.

Saigon still looked like it did when I first arrived, but I was a much different person now. Part of me felt like a hick from the country. The big buildings and the bustling of the people impressed me. Now, however, I was ready to defend myself and felt that I could judge situations better. I recognized the different soldiers, but there were no Koreans here. Someone was waiting for me when the plane landed and I was driven quietly to the same compound where I spent my first night as an agent in Vietnam. I had not expected that! This time I was treated much differently since I was the experienced agent in from the forward area—a combat zone. Once I got my room I headed to the outside bar as quickly as I could. You could spot the experienced agents from the wannabes by the way an experienced agent looked: his eyes were always moving and evaluating, he looked tense and ready to strike, and he drank heavily and quickly. The experienced agents all recognized me as one of them immediately. I wondered if I looked like them. Of course we got right down to our best bragging stories. Like them, I did not talk about any active actions currently underway, but past actions were acceptable as long as they were not illegal. That cut off several of my best stories but I still had a lot to talk about. My suspicion about the stories of some of my activities being spread was true. They had heard of several of them and were impressed to meet the actual person who had accomplished them.

While we were bullshitting about our achievements, several other new agents came to sit around us just to hear the stories. Their big eyes and silent listening only spurred us on. They also bought us several rounds of drinks to keep us talking. Once during the evening I sat back and looked at those new agents. I hoped I didn't look that innocent when I first arrived. Finally, I staggered off to bed around midnight. I prayed that the class the next morning wouldn't be too boring, but I didn't give a shit at the moment and collapsed on my assigned cot.

The next morning we were taken to an engineering outfit somewhere. I didn't open my eyes the whole way there. As I had guessed, the training was a joke. Installing one of these radios and hooking it up to an antenna would take less than an hour, even if you did it using only one hand. They spent six hours explaining it to us. I was bored beyond belief. I guess that little prayer I made the night before didn't work. That night we all ended up at the bar trying to wash out the garbage we had to go through that day. We did not look forward to the next day. We would be proven right.

On day two they spent the whole time talking about antennas and how to place them for maximum effect and distance. Again, it was a 20-minute subject that they spent three hours on. They were trying to kill us with boredom. The next day was to be our last and we were to learn the codes we would have to use. That at least sparked a bit of interest in all of us. We were, after all, agents, and codes were our thing. So that night we celebrated the last day of training that we would get tomorrow. All of us were scheduled to fly out the fourth day, back to our units. That was when I remembered the number I had been given by the CIA agent. I would have to call and see if I could get a ride tomorrow. I was ready to get back to Qui Nhon. Getting back a day early would be great. To me it was home for now.

Before we left for training on the third day, I snuck off to the main office and grabbed a phone and dialed the number given me. I identified myself and asked if they had any flights to Qui Nhon. To my surprise, they were waiting for my call and that made me wonder a bit. I guess the CIA agents from Qui Nhon had greased the skids for me. They had a flight leaving at 3:00 PM that went directly to Qui Nhon. If I could get there they would fly me home. I said I



would be there, thanked them, and hung up. This felt good. I was getting some good support for a change. All I had to do was finish the damn class.

Teaching code the way they taught it was probably only a little more boring than watching a snail race. I explained to the instructor that I had to leave early for an operation. Lying was always easier than the truth. So at 1:00 PM I signed out my code book and ordered my radio, which they promised would show up in a couple of days. By Saturday I would have to be part of the net. I agreed to all of this. I think I would have signed anything to get out of the training and get back where I felt a little safer and where it wasn't so boring. I had things to do. I gave the jeep driver the address I wanted to be taken to at Tan Son Nhut Airport. He looked confused but drove off with me anyway. I guess he was only used to going to the regular civilian airplane. When we got to the place I had told him to go, I wasn't sure I was at the right place. There was only one plane there and it looked like a regular plane that held 20 to 30 people. There was nobody on it that I could see. I went to a guy standing by the stairs as my jeep drove away and asked if this was the plane going to Qui Nhon.

"You Mr. Burdick?" he said quietly. I was stunned he would know who I was, so all I could do was nod my head up and down. "Go on up and take any seat you want. We'll be taking off in a few minutes," he said.

I went up the steps and looked inside. It was like a regular commercial plane: comfortable seats, seat belts, ash trays, and even food trays. This was weird. There was nobody else on board that I could see so I went down the aisle and picked a window seat in front of the wing so I could see where we were going. Two more men came in and sat up near the pilot's cabin door, which was open. I could see two other men in there and an array of lights on the dashboard. I watched them flip numerous switches and talk to the tower. Although I had flown a lot, I had never seen the pilot's cabin or the view through the front window of any plane of this size. I was entranced and could not keep my eyes off what they were doing. One of them finally got up and came to shut the plane's exit door. The plane was pressurized and air conditioned. There were no Vietnamese stinking of camphor on this plane. I had fallen into

the lap of luxury. We taxied up the runway and began to take off. Watching a takeoff through the pilot's window was great fun and I was totally focused on it as we rose and gained altitude, hopefully heading for Qui Nhon.

To my surprise, I heard a woman's voice next to me asking if I wanted a Coke or coffee, and that they might have a donut or something if I was hungry. I turned to the unexpected voice and found a vision of loveliness—a 5'6" blond stewardess wearing a tight, short dress and blouse that left little to the imagination. She had a beautiful smile and clear blue eyes. I had forgotten such people existed. Of course, we had a group of nurses in Qui Nhon, but it was not the same. This woman seemed untouched by the war.

All I could say was, "You really have donuts? I'll take one and a Coke." She smiled and went to get my goodies. God, she was great to watch going down the aisle. In a few minutes she came back with my Coke and a bag of peanuts.

"I'm sorry. There are no more donuts. Someone must have taken them at our last stop. That always happens." I don't think I would have cared if she had served me rocks. I thanked her and watched her go ask the other two passengers if they wanted anything. Evidently they didn't, as she went to the back of the plane. I never saw her again. I guess the CIA had some great benefits. Soon we arrived at Qui Nhon and I got off the plane and watched it fly away. In the little time that I was on the plane I had gotten used to the air conditioning. Now the air of Qui Nhon seemed oppressive again. I walked over to the nearest unit and called my office and they sent someone to get me. I had to tell them the story of how I got back from Saigon. The really liked the part about the stewardess.

Two days later my equipment arrived. There was a generator, antenna, and radio. The men who brought it set it up quickly, checked it out, and I was on the net. This required calling Saigon at specific times daily to relay any information—if I had any. At first this was fun but it got boring quickly. I was an agent, not a goddamned radio operator. Unfortunately, I was the only one who was trained and had code clearance. So I was stuck with the task. Eventually, the boredom got to me. Needless to say, I came up with a way out of the mess, and, as usual, it was appropriately devious. When the engineers had hooked up the generator they had placed

the receptacle right next to the receptacle where we got Qui Nhon power. Our local power could be anywhere for 20 volts to 300 volts. It was more than a little erratic. My idea was simple. We were told to unplug the unit every day when we were through broadcasting our reports. We only ran our generator when we were broadcasting. If we left it plugged in while we started the generator, there was a chance that a spike in voltage could occur and the radio would have its insides fried. My idea was that all I had to do was plug it into the wrong receptacle and my problems would be over. But I could not be the one to make the mistake. I would have to trick someone else into doing it.

One day I went out and started the generator and then went to the bar for a beer. I asked poor Billy to go plug in the radio and turn it on so it would warm up while I finished my beer. (It was a solid state unit so no warm-up was really necessary, but he didn't know that.) Then somehow, I "inadvertently" told him to plug the unit into the wrong receptacle. The result was that the radio ceased to function. I was appropriately remorseful and would let no blame be laid on poor Billy. He was sure, though, that I had screwed with him again somehow. He still didn't really trust me. I was forced to call Saigon on the phone and report the death of our radio. They instructed me to take it to an engineering unit nearby that could fix it. That was not real good news to me, but at least I would get a few days' reprieve.

A couple of days later I took the unit to the engineering company on the outskirts of Qui Nhon for repair. I showed the unit to the sergeant at the desk and explained my problem.

"No problem, sir! We can fix that here in a couple of days," he jubilantly bragged.

For some reason I asked him, "If you can't fix it here where would it go?"

"We would have to send it stateside, probably to California or Oklahoma," he told me, becoming suspicious.

I replied, "Great! Send it to Oklahoma by row boat if you can. I really don't want to see it for a while." He smiled at me and seemed eager to help me rid myself of the damned radio.

"No problem, sir. It will take us several weeks to get the paperwork together and if I'm lucky we can send it by ship to the

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US.” He positively glowed as he said it. I thanked him and offered him a favor any time he wanted it. I gave him my number so he could call if it ever got back. The radio was gone! I was happy. With any luck, it wouldn’t get back until after I left this damned country. The next day I informed Saigon by phone that the unit was in for repair and I would let them know when it was repaired and back on-line. It shouldn’t take too long I told them. As I put the phone down I realized it was April 15<sup>th</sup>, Tax Day. Soldiers serving in Vietnam did not have to pay any taxes. In fact, they didn’t have any taxes taken out of their pay. Well, at least I didn’t have to send in a tax form to the IRS. It was nice not to have to do it but I think I would have rather been home and paying my damn taxes.

While all of this was going on, my agents were hard at work. Every week I was getting better and better information. We were on the trail of a large group of hostiles that our information hinted was also to include some political heads. It was rare when the political and military VC and NVA got together. Our reports indicated that not only were they together, but their families were also with them. Some large operation must be in progress. From the area where they were gathering, it had to be another attack on Qui Nhon—but I wasn’t sure. Of course, I was giving all this information to Roger who was getting really excited about it. He ran interference for me. We needed a large force if we were going to destroy my target and he had to get it for me. It was Roger who brought the CIA agents to see me for a briefing. After I told them of my successes and what I was after, they, too, got excited and wanted to help. They had no sources that could help, though, but they could pass on the information to units that could help. From then on I saw the agents weekly and briefed them on current activities. Putting them in the loop had an unexpected result.

Now, wherever I went I would run into the two CIA agents. They were following me! Not too well, though. At first I thought they were trying to identify my sources and get them for themselves. I was a bit paranoid. After a couple of weeks of this they began to try to get pictures of me. Whenever I saw them, they had a camera with them. They were not too good at this. With a small telephoto lens they could have gotten my picture without my knowing it. They did

not have one, though, and were always trying to take my picture when they were close to me. In the beginning, it was a good game. I would always turn, bend over quickly, or put an object in front of my face (a clipboard or hat). They kept trying for almost three weeks and finally gave up in frustration. At last they came up to me and asked if they could take a picture of me. They were blunt and told me they were preparing a report on me at the request of their headquarters in Saigon. Their people in Saigon were thinking I might make a good addition to their company after I left the Army in a few months. This took me back a bit. I was living day to day and for months had never thought what the future might hold for me. I knew that when my tour was over I would leave the Army if I lived to complete my year here. Doing more intelligence work did not really appeal to me but I let them take their picture. I was not yet ready to think about life after Vietnam. There probably wasn't one.

I was still making my reports to our headquarters, but they seemed to show no interest. It was my guess that they just forwarded them on to Saigon where some clerk filed them away. I didn't ask what they thought about the information, but I kept sending it. It was the only way I could get the pay for my agents that I was holding for them. So Roger and I continued with our plan which was simple enough. Once we had enough information we would put together an overwhelming force and crush the enemy. So far, we had not put together a force able to take out the enemy. Roger was working on it, but it was difficult. We were "backdooring" this operation. If we used normal channels, nothing would get done. We had to get the individual commands to agree to participate. This was Roger's job and he was good at it. He was meeting with various commands, but our information had not moved them to action yet. They were interested, though.

I had one major problem that I had to work out. While we had basically located the general area where the force was gathering, we still did not know what their target was or where they were. One of the first tasks I set for my agents was to map out all the pre-arranged escape routes the enemy could use. When we attacked I intended to have ambushes set to kill or capture all who tried to escape. I figured that whenever and wherever we hit them the first thing that would happen would be that the leaders would scurry away from the trap.

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By setting ambushes on their escape routes I could decapitate their leadership team. Getting this information would cause considerable risk for my agents. Even though they were on the VC province chief's staff, they were low on the totem pole. Mostly, they were guards who carried messages to various units in the area. This put them in a great position to get general information, but specific requests were hard to fill. As guards, they would probably be briefed on the various escape routes. So, while risky, it was not impossible for them to get this information. But that was not their biggest risk. The real problem for me was setting the trap without killing or capturing my own agents. If I could not come up with a way to get them out of the trap before it slammed shut, it was very probable that they would die, too. Strangely, I wasn't really too bothered by this, but thought I should see what could be done. I owed them that. I talked this over with Roger and his recommendation was to "kiss them off." Roger didn't like Vietnamese very much, but I felt I had to do something.

At my next meeting with my agent I told him the truth about my plan. I then realized that I had not really understood the strength of his motivation. He said he had guessed what I wanted to do, and he was fully supportive of it. All the agents he was working with would take the risk and survive the best way they could. They knew some of them would not make it through. This short, skinny, little yellow man was ready to die for his country and—even more amazing—he was willing to let an American be the instrument of his death. I did not understand the power of my presence to them. Although I did not speak their language and knew little about their culture, I had touched a feeling of respect and trust in them. I had no idea where I got that power over other men's lives. He and his friends were willing to die for me and were going to do it gladly. All I could say was that I would look for them in the groups of captured prisoners after the battle. I did not tell him that I didn't expect any prisoners. I made sure he did not know when, how or where the action was going to take place. While he was the only one who had met with me, his agents believed that I could get it done—whatever it was. After all, I had acted on most of the information they had given me. My success with their information boosted their faith in me.

For the next few weeks I met with my agents as often as possible. At these meetings I finally got maps of seven escape routes and a drawing of their headquarters' bunker, which turned out to be under a flooded rice paddy. I didn't know they built them under flooded land. At least I had never heard of it in all the briefing reports I had read. I was beginning to think that maybe I was getting bad information. This, however, was the information that I was waiting for. After getting it, I immediately called Roger and we met within the hour. I showed him the maps and we went to our military maps and compared them. They seemed to match. Roger had never heard of an underground bunker that was covered by water, either. The positions of the openings were clearly marked on the dikes surrounding the water-covered bunker. Then Roger did something he had never done before. He asked for the maps. I had no copier, so this was it. But without thinking too much, I gave them to him and said I needed them back to send in with my reports. As he left, he promised to get them back to me in a few days. I went back to our barracks and said nothing. I thought of telling the CO but decided not to. It was probably better to wait until Roger got back to me. I didn't drink much that night. The meetings with my agents had bothered me more than I thought. I knew in my heart that things were coming to a head and I was worried for them.

I went to bed that night a little early and as I lay in bed my head was full of many things. Suddenly it dawned on me that my first wedding anniversary was about three weeks away. I realized I needed to send a card or something to my wife. We weren't too friendly in our letters but I felt I should at least try. I promised myself that in the morning I would go to the PX and buy a card and a gift for her. I might as well try to be nice and see what that does. The next morning I went to the PX and bought a card and a watch with diamonds in the wristband for her. I sent the card and kept the watch to give her when I got home. Sadly the whole thing seemed more a duty than something I wanted to do but I wasn't in the best of moods at the time. Still, I sent a card for our first anniversary. A few weeks later I received one from her which also thanked me for sending her such a nice card. All I could think of was that she sent it after I sent her one. What did that mean? Probably nothing good! At least I still had the watch.

Two mornings later I got a call from Roger. He would be by in 15 minutes to pick me up. I waited until I heard his horn and went out and got into his Navy jeep. I guess this wouldn't hurt my cover. Roger was serious, which, by itself, was unusual.

"OK, Burdick. What's going to happen will never have happened!" he said. What the hell was he talking about? I know I looked confused. "We're going on a helicopter flight," Roger revealed. "These people who are going with us are not here, understood?"

I nodded my head "Yes," looked at him curiously and wondered what the hell he was talking about. Whatever was going on with him, he was more excited than I had ever seen him before. I had to wonder what the hell was really going on. He drove like a madman onto the airport and headed for a black helicopter. I had never seen a solid black helicopter before. Where'd that come from? There was a group of men standing around the helicopter in camouflage uniforms that I also hadn't seen before. They were neat and buffed—very buffed. I straightened my shirt out of reflex. We had stopped and Roger walked me up to the group of men. That's when I noticed that one of the men was a Navy Admiral and he was holding my maps! Roger introduced me to him. He was the leader of all the Navy SEALs in Vietnam and, somehow, Roger had gotten him interested in our little action. He decided to come and see for himself. Here was an officer who met with Westmoreland weekly and he was here to check out our little operation. What had Roger told him!

He wanted to fly over the area to verify my information and see it for himself. I didn't think that was a good idea, but something told me to keep quiet around this guy, and for once I did. He was too damn serious. Before we went airborne, though, he grilled me about my net and my information. For a second I thought to myself, "Should I be telling him anything about my operatives?" The thought was very brief. I knew immediately that this was an officer who could make things happen that I badly wanted and he was a damn Admiral. I told him then what he wanted to know. He was amazed about how I stumbled onto getting the net and approved of how I was using it. I think I impressed him. Well, at least he didn't think I was a dolt—as agents can sometimes be. He motioned me inside the helicopter and jumped in after me. There were flack



jackets on the seats but the SEALs didn't put them on, so I didn't either. It must have been a strange site. All of these soldiers in their dark camouflaged uniforms, Roger in his Navy outfit and me in a white shirt. I must have stood out like a road flare.

Soon we were approaching the area. This helicopter was the quietest that I had ever been on. We flew directly over where my map showed the entrances to the bunker were. The SEALs all pointed at the same time. I looked where they were pointing and it looked like just another dirt dike to me, but the SEALs saw something different. We flew on a little farther and then went out over the ocean and returned to the airport from the sea. Roger was talking with the Admiral all the way back. When we landed Roger and I got off and they took off again. I had no idea to where. Roger did not have my maps.

"Roger, when will I get my maps back?" I asked.

"The Admiral has OK'd a special Ops to go and verify at ground-level the existence of the openings and the presence of troops, the day after tomorrow. You'll get them back then. We're getting a SEAL team to do it!" Roger said. He was very excited. I guessed that was a big thing.

"Well, if they're here, invite them over to our place for a couple of drinks, if that's OK," I suggested to Roger. "Our guys would like to meet them." Roger agreed and would bring them over that night.

Now I had to go back and explain to my CO that I had just spent the morning clandestinely flying around with a Navy Admiral—and I knew he was not going to like it. Like all career military, he wanted to meet the brass whenever possible. It helps promotions. I was right. He wanted to have been in on the meet, but he got over it when I told him about the party I planned and explained that I did not know who I was going to meet when I went to the airport. Unsaid was the fact that I had not shared the information I had gotten with him or any one else in the Army but had shared it with the Navy. At least he would meet some real SEALs tonight.

They showed up that evening. I was impressed that they were very respectful, even though, amongst ourselves, we were never respectful. Every time they spoke they couldn't stop saying "Sir." They were all about the same height—5'10" to 6'0". Their camouflage uniforms were immaculate and pressed. Their boots glistened. They

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were very intelligent. They seemed to catch on quickly that they were seeing something they had only heard rumors of. It was kind of strange that they were as interested in us as we were in them. They asked many questions and none of them had more than a few drinks. They were controlled. All in all, they were the best soldiers I had seen. Roger, of course, was there and kept telling stories about what I had done and what he and I had done together. The stuff we had done together was mostly screw-ups, but they enjoyed having a good laugh, especially about our weapons tryout and its result. They all looked at me again when Roger told them about my pistol shooting. I got embarrassed. You could see them reassessing me after that.

A couple wanted more information about how I got to be so successful in recruiting agents since I didn't speak the language and was not part of the local culture. I tried to avoid answering too much, but finally decided to tell them what little I knew about recruiting. I told them that, first, it was helpful to get an introduction from someone they trusted. But that didn't mean they would do what I asked. Once introduced, I had to find what I called their "Tipping Point." The SEALs looked at each other and I could tell they were wondering what the hell a "Tipping Point" was. So I tried to explain it to them.

"Look, it's simple. Say you're trying to sell a car. You talk about its benefits, its good points. Once you get them interested in one of the options you push that option and they buy the car. Of course, I'm not selling cars. I want to talk them into helping me and working for me. They will not do it out of fear and if the only motivation is money their information may not be true, but only what they think we want to hear. So I have to find something that will make them want to work with me, something that tips the scales in my favor, so to speak. That is my 'Tipping Point.'" I stopped talking for a moment and waited to see if they understood. I had never really explained out loud how I was doing my job. This small group of SEALs' attention was riveted on my words.

One of them asked, "What is a Tipping Point that works for you with your agents?"

I had to stop and think a minute. I didn't want to give away the whole farm. "First, I try to find out something about them. This

helps me to get them to understand that what they want is what I want—that we believed in the same things. That is done through voice pitch, body language, and a look that said ‘We’re the same; you can trust me.’ They do not have to understand what I am saying. My interpreter makes what I am saying understandable to them. While he is translating, they will be watching me and deciding if they feel uncomfortable with me. If I look shifty and untrustworthy, they will never join me. These first few minutes are critical. They are evaluating me and I am evaluating them. Every little gesture or eye movement could mean something. I never asked for information immediately. I spend a long time asking about them. They have to believe I was concerned about what happened to them. I wanted to know how I could help them. During this discussion I would have found out something that pointed to a ‘Tipping Point.’

“In this province it’s fairly easy to find a ‘Tipping Point.’ Many of the locals are Catholics and, because of that, I talk to them about my seminary experience and that I have a brother who is a priest. I talk about the shrine of Guadalupe that I have been to in Mexico City and the miracles that I have seen there. My sharing of my Catholic background usually opens them up to trusting me. After that, before I can ask, they would start giving me a report—which I always appreciated. Of course, if they were Protestants, I would have used my history studying as a Protestant minister. If they were corrupt, I could act as such, too, so that they would be comfortable working with me. It’s all about finding the ‘Tipping Point’ and using it so that they will help me. The money I might give them was never for the reports they gave me, but for their families or friends and is always secondary. Some refuse it. The point is, I will be whatever it takes to get to their ‘Tipping Point.’ I might be a Catholic, a Protestant, or a drunk—whatever it takes to make them mine.” I stopped talking and wondered if any of this made any sense to them. I had been drinking a lot. To me this was relatively simple stuff, but to the SEALs it didn’t make much sense. Well, maybe a little, but they didn’t really grasp it until I began to demonstrate to them.

When I saw their consternation, I said, “Look, we’ve never met before. Yet, while I was talking, you felt very comfortable and open. A couple of you let me know about your personal lives.” I pointed to one of the SEALs. “You’re from Manistee, Michigan. You didn’t

much like the place. Your mom still lives there but you are not aware where your dad went. Your mom divorced him. You hated high school. Your specialty is communications.” I pointed to another one. “You’re from Sequin, Texas. You went to high school there and were a football player. A very good one, if I’m to believe you. You also were a hunter. You are a weapons specialist and probably a sniper. I could go on. I was just listening to all of you and picked up things that would be helpful in recruiting you as an agent if I wanted to. I mean, we are all on duty all the time here, aren’t we?” I laughed and stopped talking for a minute and they all looked at the two men I had pointed out. Of course I was right.

“You also told me about missions you had been on. Did I ask you about any of that? All I did was mention some I had been involved with and you shared yours.” They were all silent for a few moments. They realized I had made them comfortable and they talked. They were intelligent enough to get it. “It’s a little more complex and difficult with the Vietnamese, but you can do it. You just have to have a very good interpreter who knows what you’re looking for.”

Maybe what I was doing is not learned, but they sure were trying that night. They left early because they were going out on the mission early the next morning to prove or disprove my information. We shook hands with all of them as they left and wished them luck.

What appeared to be the team leader stopped in front of me and said, “Thanks for the lesson. Like them, I underestimated you. You’re good. I’d love to learn more about how you do that.”

“I’m not that good,” I replied as he left, smiling. I don’t know why I said what I did. Until that time I had never really thought much about why people found it easy to talk to me. I hoped it wasn’t the booze talking. Then I became worried for them. They were going out on a very dangerous mission—because of me. If they didn’t find any hostiles, then I was wrong. If they did, then I was right. But if they did, someone could get killed. I was hoping I was wrong. I liked these guys. Being right might kill one of them. Maybe meeting soldiers you are sending out on a mission is not such a good idea. I went back to the bar and drank quietly, trying to drown the thoughts that were in my head. Tomorrow, I would know.

Early the next morning I called Roger for a report. All he could say was there was no information yet. So I went to my desk and began to kill flies. Being close to the ocean seemed to attract these big, ugly, blue-green flies. The flies were incredibly enormous and slow. They were also loud and had the irritating habit of flying near your ears. So you were always flailing your hands at them. This pissed us off and we declared war on them. We acquired a big bag of rubber bands and tied two or three together. Then we put something that would attract flies on our desks. In reality, these flies were so pitiful, most times we didn't have to put bait out. The flies seemed so tired of flying their big bodies around that they would land on our desks or typewriters just to rest. When we saw them land we would pull back on the rubber band, let go, and splat! It was the end of another fly. When you did that on a typewriter they invariably fell inside and we would have to dig them out with a paper clip. No one wanted a dead fly smashed into his report. I tried to avoid attacking flies on my typewriter, but today I didn't care. Wherever they were, in an hour you could get 15 to 20 of them. We thought it was great sport and bragged about who got the biggest one. So I sat there waiting for Roger's call, killing flies and being generally bored. Waiting is the most difficult thing you can do sometimes.

Finally, Roger called and said he would be over in a half hour. Whatever he had to tell me couldn't be said over the phone. I didn't know what to think. When he came we went into the bar. The SEALs had verified my information. They barely got out and only had to kill two VC sentries. They hid the bodies, hoping it would be thought they deserted. (I thought, while he was talking, that I hoped one of those sentries didn't work for me.) Then came the bad news. Within a mile of the Navy base, while returning, they were attacked by an ARVN attack helicopter. Before they could get it called off, one of their men had been shot in the back. His spine was severed and he was paralyzed from the waist down.

"Who was it?" I asked immediately. I had met these guys. Roger gave me his name but I didn't recognize it and it was no good describing him to me because they all looked the same. I wanted to go see him but he had been flown to Saigon already. His team was looking for the pilot of the helicopter that attacked them, but Roger didn't know any more.

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What had happened to the soldier was terrible! The important point, though, was that the information had been verified. Yet hearing about the wounded SEAL was heartbreaking. It wasn't as bad as the shock when we lost Lieutenant Joe, but it hurt and we were both mad and talking of revenge. This time our thoughts of revenge were about a Vietnamese pilot who shot one of our men. We drank and talked until dinnertime when we went to the Officers' Club to eat and drink some more. I should have been excited about the confirmation, but the injury stole all that away. Still, now the operational planning would start for real. It would be out of my hands and in Roger's. He would be the one to pull an operation together and now he had the support of the SEAL's Admiral. We had talked about what we thought should be done, but it was up to him. My part was over. I wondered if my agents would get out, or even try to get out. Within a week I would know.

As I said, waiting is difficult. Not knowing what was going on was worse. When the operation was finally planned I would be briefed. Roger had also guaranteed that I would be in on the debriefing after the operation. The captain knew that something was being planned. I had told him that. He did not know the scope of the operation. I was guessing what it might be, but I also was not sure. If I found out more about the operation, even then I couldn't tell the captain because he had no "need to know." I think he knew that, but he was still damn curious. The other agents in the team only knew that I was up to something, but since I was a bit tense they left me alone. My thoughts were many. Would the enemy sense the trap they had put themselves in? Would the operation fail because my information was faulty? How many Americans would die in the operation? That thought really bothered me. Would I finally get even for what happened to Lieutenant Joe? My information so far had killed a little over a hundred hostiles. That was not enough. I wanted to destroy the entire unit that killed Lieutenant Joe. I wanted to see their dead carcasses stacked high. If this didn't work, I didn't know what I would do. I guess I would have to try again.

Ever since the CIA agents had let me know they wanted to recruit me, they seemed to seek me out just to talk. I was uncomfortable with that. If I were in the Officers' Club they would often show

up to share a drink or two with me. When they showed up, all my internal warning alarms went off. They wanted something from me. I always avoided personal questions about my background. They knew I was undercover. Why were they trying to break my cover? Eventually I just took it as a game. I would bob and weave and see how many questions I could escape from. I guessed they were trying to get some background information about me and see what they could learn about what I was doing. So far I hadn't told them anything except for the briefing on some of my early actions. I never told them anything about our planning for this current operation. They didn't need to know. Roger knew, of course, but he wouldn't tell them either. The whole attempt was becoming hilarious. I knew then they were putting a dossier together on me. I wasn't sure why—probably as part of their recruitment process. Well, I knew that wasn't going to happen. I guess that was when I decided that I would not be joining them. Whenever they were around, I always changed the subject or talked about nonsense things. Generally, I just avoided them. They had gotten wind of our proposed action and desperately wanted more information on it. I gave them nothing and even told them that I didn't know what they were talking about. They didn't believe me, but that was too bad as far as I was concerned. They would have to wait until it was over to find out what we had done.

Finally, Roger called. "Burdick, get ready! I'll be there in 15 minutes to pick you up." The answers were on the way. It was a long 15 minutes. My thoughts were on what kind of mission had been finally decided. Did they accept Roger's and my ideas? I really wanted to crush the whole bunch of them hiding in those rice paddies. Roger came and said nothing except that we had to go to a meeting at his office. I had no idea what all the secrecy was about, but I followed his lead and we took off to his office near the harbor. It was secure. His first words to me were, "Burdick, we're out of it now. We have to maintain security so nobody but us from this area will know what is happening. Of course, you are not to notify any of your agents that an attack is imminent." I nodded my head affirmatively. Hell, I had already decided that and Roger knew it. Roger then began to list the order of battle. This was way more than anything we planned.

They had verified my information completely and were going to act on it immediately. It was going to happen and it was going to be huge. Now I worried if I was right. What if they came and no one was there? I would have to go and hide somewhere. The shit was going to hit the fan and there was no stopping it now. Roger described a combined forces attack. God! Everybody was going to get involved. They had taken my escape route maps and placed ARVN troops to block them in the south and west. Behind the ARVN troops were the RF/PF who would inspect all refugees to see that no VC/NVA escaped. I didn't like the RF/PF much, but it did make sense to use them like that since they probably knew most of the people in the area. The 173rd Airborne was given the escape route that the VC province chief would be using. They were there to kill or capture him. That would be quite a coup if we pulled it off. I was confident they could do it. They were a good command. Offshore, there would be two Navy destroyers that would be firing at the pill boxes and tunnel entrances that I had mapped out. The Air Force was sending in several groups of jets, dropping bombs to destroy whatever part of the tunnel complex they could and any enemy soldiers that were above ground, and attempt to collapse some of the tunnels I had outlined. This would be followed by an ARVN Air Force attack using napalm to burn them out of their holes. Then a large force of the Korean Tiger division would sweep through the area and eliminate any other resistance.

It was hard for me to listen to all of this and know I would have to just sit still while it took place. Somehow, I had to see this happen. Roger also wanted to see it. We sat around trying to figure out what we were going to do. How could we talk our way into the battle or at least where we could watch the battle unfold? It was hard to imagine that my short talk with a minister had led to this. I was really going to get even with them for killing Lieutenant Joe. I didn't want even one of those sorry assholes to escape. The immensity of the operation was still hard to accept. For months I had worked up to this but I never really thought it would happen. Roger felt the same. My information was so good, everyone wanted to be in on the kill. I had caught the enemy with their pants down. They were bringing their forces together for an attack on Qui Nhon city. Were they going to be surprised!



Roger and I headed off to the Officers' Club for a few celebratory drinks and to try to think how we could get into it. After a good deal of bourbon I told Roger how all I really wanted to do was take my Zippo lighter and burn down just one of those damn thatched huts in the area. Roger liked the idea. That could be our contribution to the battle. Roger thought we could use one of the Navy's jet boats— a revamped PT boat with a jet engine rather than a propeller so that the weeds couldn't stop it. Roger went and made some calls. By late evening Roger had set it up. After the air attack started we would go up one of the canals, find one of those damned thatch huts and set it on fire with our lighters. Bourbon does not create Einsteins, but we had a plan. Roger called the next day to verify that the boat had been given to us. I only had to wait about 24 hours before I would go into a battle. I was excited.

On the day of the battle, I woke up very early with the taste of stale cigarettes and aged bourbon in my mouth. I dressed quickly and took one of our jeeps. There were not many people running around. It was a little after 0500 hours. I thought I heard some deep rumbling off in the distance but the jeep had a bad muffler, so I wasn't sure. When I got to the harbor, Roger was waiting impatiently. He was ready to go. He had a crisp, clean uniform on with a flack jacket and steel pot. He looked like a soldier. I didn't. I was dressed like always: white shirt (well dirty-white this time), and black pants, with a .45 on my hip secured with a web belt. I also was wearing my regular black street shoes. I should have put on some boots but it was too early for me to remember that.

"Burdick, you're late. What are you dressed for?" he roared at me as I stumbled into the boat and the engine immediately started up.

"Fuck you!" was my brilliant retort.

This boat was bigger than I thought it would be. A quick look and I saw about six sailors. All were heavily armed and wearing flack vests and steel pots. One sailor manned a .50 caliber machine gun near the front of the boat. All had M16s or an over and under thing with the M16 on top and an M80 grenade launcher underneath. I had never fired one of those. I hoped I would get a chance.

"Sir. Sir. Here put these on. Please, sir!" a little sailor standing next to me said as he handed me a vest and a steel pot. He was afraid

of me! I had no idea who Roger had told them I was, but they all kept sneaking curious looks at me. I looked at Roger and he was looking forward and snickering. I went up to him, feeling real stupid in a steel pot that didn't fit and a vest that seemed too small.

"Bastard!" I whispered and Roger broke out laughing. This seemed to bother the crew. I guess they heard my whisper and, in their world, anybody who could call a Navy lieutenant a bastard had clout.

We sped up the bay towards the battle. This little boat could move! In a few minutes the blowing salt air cleared my head. Ahead in the sky I could see American jets streaking in from over the water and dropping what looked like little dots. In a few seconds a big cloud would appear and immediately after we would hear the roar. I watched, fascinated, as they seemed to streak faster and faster so that the explosions seemed like a constant roar. Suddenly, away from where the bombs were hitting, I began to see another series of explosions. I pointed them out to Roger.

"What's causing that?" I yelled over the roar of our own engines and the bombs the jets were dropping.

"Our Destroyers! Damn isn't it beautiful! God, I wish I was on one of those ships!" Roger yelled at me.

No movie can show the true power of war. You have to be there to feel the power of the weapons, smell the cordite in the air, feel the concussion of the explosions, and see the beauty of the dance of death the jets were making. It was awesome and we were heading right into it. Well, it seemed we were. It was closer than I had ever been to a major battle with this much armament being fired. We suddenly slowed down and veered towards the shore. There was an impossibly small canal going inland and we were heading towards it. Instinctively I put my hand on my .45. At that moment I really wanted something bigger, but I didn't have anything, so the .45 would have to do. I began to respect the boat as we slowly moved up the canal, which broadened a bit but was still very shallow. It handled the situation just beautifully. As we were moving up the canal, the roar of the bombs died down to an eerie quiet. I looked up and saw the jets dart away.

Then, from a completely different direction came some lumbering, prop-driven planes heading to the battle. It was the ARVN Air Force!

Well, about 8 to 10 planes anyway. They looked like planes you would see from the newsreels of World War II. I watched as they slowly entered the fray and began their peculiar dance. When they got to where they wanted to be, they circled slowly until all planes were in what looked to be a very small and tight circle. It reminded me of the wagons circling before an Indian attack in an old western movie. Once they were in position one plane peeled off and dived straight down. Soon another plane did the same thing. They looked like they were heading straight into the earth, but, at the last second, veered up, so for a few seconds they were flying level, and then pulled straight up to return to the circle. While they were flying level they dropped what looked like the wiggling bombs of napalm I had seen before. When the flames rose, I knew it was napalm. Poor bastards under that! The planes kept this up until they had all done it four times. It was a beautiful sight and very dangerous flying. I had new respect for these Vietnamese pilots. They knew what they were doing in those old planes, which were perfect targets for anybody on the ground—but none were shot down. Well, I wasn't shot down either when I flew in that damn Piper Cub FACS plane. I guess it's harder to shoot them down than I thought.

I hadn't been paying too much attention to the boat we were on but it had slowed almost to a stop and then hit the bank. Roger tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to some poor peasant's straw hut at the top of the canal bank. The .50 caliber cut loose with a long burst into the house as Roger and I jumped on the shore. The sailors must have thought we were crazy. I could see they were not happy. They liked to keep their boat moving and we made them stop. I was sure they couldn't understand why we were attacking a miserable straw hut that was empty. But this was our battle and we were going to be part of it even if it was only to burn down a hut. As I climbed to the top of the bank with Roger I began to feel really foolish. What the hell were we doing? But it was fun. I hated to admit it, but it was exciting. You never think of the next moment when you're excited like that.

Roger went to the far side and I stayed nearer the boat. I pulled out my Zippo lighter, looked in the hole the sailor had blown in the side of the hut to see what was in the hut, and lit my lighter. The hut was empty. The hut seemed like it would never start burning. How

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stupid would it be to have gone all this way to find a wet hut that we could not burn? Slowly, though, it did catch fire on my side and Roger's side started a few seconds later. We both scrambled back to the boat, climbing in with huge smiles on our faces as if we really did something. Roger put his hand up in the air, circled it a couple of times, and then pointed back the way we came. Instantly the engines roared to life and we sped out of there like it was the boat that was on fire. As we pulled away Roger and I watched somebody's straw house become engulfed in flames and turned to an ashen pile. We patted each other on the back. At least we had done something. I went to the front where I could watch the boat hurry back to the harbor. The sailors were happy about this and so was I. I suspect they just thought we were a little nuts.

On the way back I felt the satisfaction of what I had done. Not the hut—that was sport, a diversion. The attack behind me was solely my effort. It came from my information. I was getting even for what had happened to Lieutenant Joe over four months ago. That sorry bastard that shot Lieutenant Joe in the head when he was looking for a souvenir never knew what he caused. As we were leaving the area I watched with some satisfaction the rain of death I had caused.

But the satisfaction didn't last long. I suddenly remembered how Lieutenant Joe had died and I felt a cold chill as my knees weakened a bit. The blood flowed from my head and I became light-headed. What had I done? I had just done the same thing Lieutenant Joe had done! I had stuck my head into a hole in the peasant hut that the sailors had fired into to open up part of it. I looked inside it to see if it was empty. Lieutenant Joe died doing the same thing, except he was looking for a souvenir. How could I be so stupid to do the same thing he had done when I knew what had happened to him. I guess it just wasn't my turn yet. This was about the fifth time I could have been killed, mostly by my own carelessness or outright stupidity. Once again I put my hand in my pocket and rubbed that mushroom bullet. When would I stop taking risks like this? You would think I would feel like I should be more careful, but that was not my thought at all. For some reason I felt I was not going to make it back home no matter how careful I was. So far, my number had just not come up. It would come up, but at this moment I really didn't care.

When it did, I would probably be the last to know. I was going to continue doing what I was doing and see if I could help even more Americans get home—even if I didn't. These strange thoughts of my impending doom and the satisfaction of getting even were rolling around in my head.

Eventually, we got back to the harbor from where we had left. Before Roger and I got off the boat, I shook the hand of every man on the boat I could find and thanked him for being with us on our mission. They all saluted me, which felt really weird. Roger and I then got off the boat. They probably were wondering what the hell we had been up to, but were too afraid to ask us. I doubt if I could have explained it to them anyway. Roger went to his headquarters to get the battle assessments and said he would get them to me as soon as possible. I went back to my headquarters to wait. My thoughts on the boat on the way back had really blackened my mood. I was nervous, too, about how the battle would come out. I could still hear explosions off in the distance. I guess I should inform Captain Theran about the operation. There was no way I was going to tell him about the boat ride. I was tired of him telling me to stay out of the action. I couldn't do that and he couldn't understand why. Once he tried to tell me I was too important to risk, but I didn't believe that. He just didn't want to fill out the paperwork. I also knew—as he did—that if he really wanted something, I would be the first one he would come to and I would get done whatever he wanted. For now, I had to return to my office and tell the captain what was going on. I was sure he would be pissed.

I was wrong! He was fascinated with my visual report. He even went outside and looked at the smoke, way off in the distance. He called Nha Trang and gave a short coded message about the battle. They were ecstatic. I didn't tell him about burning down somebody's house. I just told him about a boat trip to see the battle a little closer. He said he wished he could have been there too. I thought, "Oh boy, here it comes. I'm going to be chewed out for not taking him." But it did not happen. He said he understood battle security and that I couldn't tell him about it because of all the other agencies involved. Just the same, you could tell he really wanted a piece of this. I snuck off to our bar and opened a beer and waited for a preliminary report. I had no idea how long it would take.

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Everybody seemed to be in there waiting for me. I was unusually quiet. My thoughts on the ride back still bothered me. After a few beers I numbed the feeling a bit and described over and over what I saw to the other agents. My reputation with our own office had gone up another notch or two. It was clear before this that I was the lead agent, but now in their minds I had become a “super star.” They could not believe they knew someone who could pull off such a big operation. They asked question after question and gave me beer after beer. We eventually went to lunch at the Officers’ Club and then returned to the office to drink some more. It really became tiresome, so I eventually decided to skip dinner and went to my room to get some quiet and think. It was early evening, but it was the only way I could get away from everyone. I knew that it would be tomorrow before Roger would have the preliminary information. Then we would know if this really was a huge victory or just a big fireworks show. I was beginning to believe the latter. So I sat down on my bed and wondered what was going on in the battle north of town. I savored the feeling of crushing those who had killed my friend. Revenge is sweet no matter what anyone says! As I finally crawled into bed I wondered if any of my agents survived. They knew the risks. Maybe I should have done more for them. Sleep was difficult but it finally came.

In the morning I sat at my desk, continuing the war against the flies. I had racked up twelve when the phone rang. It was Roger. He had the preliminary reports and would be over. I couldn’t tell from his voice if it was good news or bad news so I went into our bar and made a Bloody Mary and waited and sipped slowly. Roger finally drove up and came bursting into the room. He was really excited.

“You won’t fucking believe it! We nailed the fucking bastards!” What did that mean? I wanted numbers. I wanted KIA reports and casualty reports. Roger saw my confused look, calmed down, took a deep breath and began to give me the numbers and a brief report. The ARVN and RF/PF detained around 3,000 to 4,000 suspects. Over 10,000 civilians were displaced. The 173rd was late in setting up their blocking force for the VC province chief. One American was killed. (I did not like hearing that.) The VC Province Chief escaped but we got his wife and child. Four months ago I had missed them.

Now, after all my early attempts I had her and her baby. That felt good. I wondered how the province interrogator would treat them. He was probably licking his chops. I would have to call him and find out.

“The Koreans are almost through sweeping the area and are reporting over 2,000 dead. Many are still buried in the tunnels so we may not know the total KIA—ever. The Koreans say they need two more weeks to finish the cleanup. The Navy wants to give you a medal. The Koreans want to give you a medal. Fuck, I want to give you a medal!” He shook my hand and pounded my back and was laughing at the same time. It took me a minute to absorb what I had done. I had expected casualties of several hundred, but thousands was hard to absorb. Roger made himself a drink while I kept muttering “Damn” over and over.

Finally I said to Roger. “No fucking medals! I didn’t do anything special. I was just lucky. I really don’t deserve any medals! The men who fought deserve the medals, not me.” He looked at me strangely for a minute and then I think he understood. You don’t deserve a medal for revenge!

“Well, I’ll see what I can do. The brass was really adamant. This is the best fucking operation they have pulled off and it only happened because of you. You know that.” He looked at me as if he was proud to be in the same room with me. I felt embarrassed and strange inside.

“Damn! Over 2,000 KIA! You think they are exaggerating the numbers?” I had to ask.

Roger knew what I meant and said, “The Koreans are stacking bodies now. The 2,000 is the current estimate. In a week we should have the exact number of bodies found. They are experts in this counting thing. They have never exaggerated before. I think you can count on the number.”

The other agents and the captain had come into the room while Roger was giving the report. They were shaking my hand and pounding my back, too. This is the first time some of them really knew how large the operation I had been working on was. They knew yesterday about the battle, but the numbers were awesome. I had started this to get even for the death of Lieutenant Joe and for what his death had done to Karl—and in some way to me. I wanted to

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get even. It was a very private thing for me. I was not happy sharing it with anyone. Hearing all the praise—or any praise—bothered me. I had not done this for glory. I had done this for my friends who were taken from me. I knew nobody could understand what I felt. I had enjoyed “getting even” so much that when I finally got even I felt I had lost everything. That saying of “Be careful of what you wish for, you may get it!” had great relevance for me at that moment. Without a battle I was always planning for and working toward, I had nothing more to do. Realizing that, the enormity of what I had done was slowly sinking in on me. Almost 20,000 people were touched by my anger over one death. I had never thought through what I was doing—and look what I had done!

My fears when I came to Vietnam about whether I could kill anyone had turned out to be unfounded. Given the opportunity, I had proved that I could kill thousands. I went to the bar and made myself another Bloody Mary, mostly with vodka, and talked to Roger some more. He was really excited. I have to admit I was too. This was a career move for him. The success of this operation would take him far and he knew it. What it would do for me I had not a clue and did not really care. I was satisfied that I had completed what I had started. So I celebrated with him late into the evening. During the evening he told the story of our boat trip to burn the hut. I knew I was going to hear once again about not taking risks, but that would be later. I think everybody thought we were nuts—and maybe in a way we were. Despite that, it was a great story. I finally staggered to bed more intoxicated about what I had done than from the booze. It was hard for me to get my thoughts around what had happened, even though it was what I had planned for the last four months. I was excited, proud, worried and troubled all at the same time. What would they expect me to do next? What did I want to do next? It took me a while to fall asleep.



## Chapter 12

**The next few days were difficult** for me. Success is great. Too much success can be painful. I liked my anonymity, but now everyone knew me or wanted to know me. I wanted to be left alone. The enormity of what I had done weighed heavily on me. I felt good that my work had succeeded, but inside me was a gnawing feeling that I had done too much. If you told me when I was on the plane to Vietnam that I would be responsible for affecting the lives of over 20,000 people and killing thousands, I would not have believed it. It's hard to grasp something like that. No matter what people thought in the States, I was in a war. People were trying to kill me and I was trying to kill them. So far, I was just luckier than they were. My anger about the death of Lieutenant Joe, and seeing Karl destroyed by it, made me work harder and more focused than most. No matter what my motivation, I did what I had to do and got even for what had happened. Knowing that did not make me feel any better. I had to tuck away my thoughts on this and move on to what I was going to do next. My dealings with the State Department had shown me that, at the highest level, they didn't have a clue about what they were doing. The enormous reaction of everyone to my success was because it was so unusual and it was unexpected. I had bypassed all those who could get in my way and was able to contact people who wanted to fight. Well, that is, Roger had. Now, what I had been working on was finished. I could not do it again. I wondered if those damn Army and State Department bureaucrats down in Saigon had any clue about what I had done. I knew that, if they did understand what I had done by bypassing them, they would do nothing for now, but would bide their time to get even with me. I had ignored them and done something successful.

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It embarrassed them and I knew they would try to get even. The race was on to see if I could get out of country and the Army before they retaliated. If they ever figured out that I had not fired the agents I had gotten from the minister but just renamed them, the whole weight of military justice would come down on me and they would make sure I would be in prison. For now I really didn't give a shit!

It was the just after the first of June and now I realized that I had to choose where I was going to go from here. I could not see myself sitting around doing nothing for the next five months, waiting for my tour to end. So what do I do next? I had never thought about what I was going to do after this operation was over. As always, my long-term planning sucked. You would think I would have been directed by our headquarters to a new objective or a new activity. That was not the way my war worked. My primary orders were to eliminate the VC infrastructure any way I could. Well, I had done that. There were still VC around, I guess, but they were very badly decimated after this last battle. The same directive was still in effect though, so I would have to figure out what I was going to do. My first priority would be to see if I could re-contact any of my agents. If they were alive they deserved any help I could give them. If alive perhaps they might still be in a position to give me more information. After all, the VC province chief had escaped and maybe there would be a possibility of reuniting him with his wife. The VC province chief had probably lost his job for letting this disaster occur. My agents were unlikely to be blamed for the fiasco. I had no idea where they would be reassigned. I would have to wait and see if any of them tried to make contact through one of our dead drops or by meeting directly with me. This would take patience and time. I would give them a month. If I did not hear from any of them, I would report them as "Killed in Action." I did not want to file that report.

Finally, after days of struggling to come up with a new plan, I came to the realization that, from now on, I would do what I had been doing so far. I would let fate take me to my next action. We had obviously decimated the enemy. Every agency was reporting that there was no activity to be found anywhere in our province. I was hoping that someone would carry the battle forward and chase the remnants down—but that was not to be. The Army stayed where it was

and let the enemy rebuild its resources. I was sure the VC would do a better job of it next time. Where had our will to win gone?

During this time of reflection on my part I spent most of my evenings at our bar. I liked to turn on the TV and watch the MACV news to see what was going on in the world. One evening when I turned it on they were reporting that Robert Kennedy had won the Primary in California and that somebody had shot and killed him after his rally celebrating his win. Those of us who saw the news were stunned. What the hell was going on in the States? I had seen so much death recently that one more didn't bother me that much. Still another Kennedy had been killed. I had vivid memories of how I felt when his brother was assassinated in Dallas. This was not the same, though still a tragedy. All I knew was that he wanted us out of Vietnam and that was alright with me. I knew, though, the reality was that when I left, the US would still be fighting here. Most of us were sorry to see him die but we did not linger over it and went back to our drinks.

That night as I lay in bed I realized that I was almost halfway through my tour. I had six more long months to go. My only plan so far at the end of my tour was to get out of the Army. It was strange. Through all of my life up to this time I could look forward in time and see myself doing this or that. Now when I looked to the future I saw nothing. It wasn't as if I didn't try, but there was nothing there. I could talk the game of going home with the other agents but I had no vision of it anymore. At this point I just didn't care anymore. I thought maybe I should go on an R&R somewhere to recharge my batteries and get away from the war for a few days. I could go to Hawaii and meet my wife. I wasn't sure if that was such a good idea. She probably didn't have the money to get there and it probably wouldn't be restful anyway. We had too many issues to settle in 6 days. I would check, though. My other choice was Singapore. It sounded like an interesting place. I checked the next day and once again the Army quashed any hope for an R&R. Hawaii was a popular trip and I could not go until December. I was going home in December so that was out. I was also told I couldn't go to Singapore until November. I got the message. There was no R&R for me. The Army wanted me to stay my whole tour in Vietnam. Once again I had gotten screwed.

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A month or two ago I had read about how a couple of POWs had escaped after they were caught during Tet. Well, they didn't actually escape. They had been captured along with a large number of civilians in a town called Da Lat and taken into the jungle. Along the way, they all stopped near a river and were fed some rice by the VC. After the meal, two POWs were given the bowls and sent over a small ridge to the river to wash them. The NVA had so many prisoners that the two Americans were forgotten and left at the river, washing bowls. When they realized they had been left behind, they dropped the bowls and quickly headed downriver while the rest of the POWs went upriver, under guard. A day later they waved down an American helicopter and were rescued. They were lucky and, surprisingly, these two civilian Americans happened to be agents like myself. I knew about this because I had been put on alert, after the two agents had been rescued, to accompany them back to the US. It was policy to place an MI agent with every recovered POW until they got back to the States. The idea was that maybe there was information about other POWs that could be gotten from them. Saigon let me know that I had been selected to go with them, but I didn't believe it for a minute. There was no way some officer from Saigon wasn't going to take my place. I had been screwed so many times by the Army, I knew better than to get excited about something that wasn't going to happen. Of course I was right. Some major down in Saigon got the job. I had forgotten about the whole incident until now. For me it was just a minor skirmish.

This whole fiasco did make me think about our POWs, though. So far, my only thought was not to become one. Now, though, I decided that I should take a crack at recovering a POW. It should keep me busy. We knew they were out there and we were constantly being sent requests for information about missing soldiers—but until now I had ignored them. It turns out that we had a couple of large binders with pictures and reports on all the missing POWs in Vietnam. I had never even looked at them, but today I took them out of the file cabinet and opened one and began to read. It was a horrible book. Soldiers at the point of impact of a 500-lb. bomb disappeared in a red fog of blood and “goo.” No part of the soldier could be found so he was listed as MIA. Some just wandered off to take a crap and never came back. It went on and on. There were dozens

of pictures of teenage boys in uniform—Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian. Death was an equal opportunity employer. So many lives stopped for nothing. It was sick! Finally, I realized the book was fairly useless and immensely depressing. It had no real information I could use. The Viet Cong didn't give a list of prisoners. From what information I had received so far, I got the impression that they tortured and killed most of them, but I didn't know that for sure. Maybe I could get my net back together—well, whatever was left—and send them out to find a POW. That didn't seem very likely, but at least I was thinking ahead now.

While I was going through this readjustment, Roger had decided we needed to celebrate our victory. I was reluctant to go along, but he was adamant, so we set up a party just for the intelligence personnel that we knew. I decided it should be a “taco party.” I hadn't had any Mexican food since I left San Antonio and I had a strong desire for some now. The party would have to wait until we had acquired all the stuff we would need for tacos. Where do you find taco shells in Vietnam? Roger, as always, stepped in and had everybody write home for packages of taco seasonings, salsa, tortillas, taco shells, and refried beans. He kept a list of who was going to bring what. I would supply the meat, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, and onions from a mess sergeant, who I would have to recruit for this. The party would happen in a couple of weeks, we thought.

While enjoying all this success, the war continued and new requests came from Saigon. We were notified that the 173rd had recovered an AWOL sergeant and we needed to talk to him. He had gone on R&R in Japan and not come back. He then reappeared in Saigon and was rounded up by the MPs and sent under guard to Ahn Khe and the 173rd Headquarters. He was an excellent soldier and had been awarded two Bronze Stars and was put in for a Silver Star, but that was not going to happen. His record was without blemish until now and we were asked to find out what had happened. The question was precisely this: “Was this an attempt to attack soldiers on R&R using drugs, alcohol, or sex—or maybe all three?” It appeared that increasingly more soldiers were disappearing on R&R and this was one of the few they had recovered. I jumped at the chance to

get out of the office and took Terry with me. He could use the trip and this certainly sounded like an interesting investigation. Every GI waited to get his R&R—even I did but I had already been told that R&R for me was not a possibility until my 12<sup>th</sup> month. The Army was still screwing with me. Who wants to go on R&R their last days in-country? Still this investigation had huge repercussions. We needed to get to the AWOL soldier as soon as possible, before he began manipulating his story. So we left immediately and drove the two hours to Ahn Khe and the 173rd Headquarters. I guessed that interview would take a couple of hours and we would be back by nightfall. It was going to be a pleasant trip out of the office.

When we got to Ahn Khe we had to find the adjutant general's office because that was where they were holding him. It took us a while to find it. We went in and identified ourselves to the clerk at the front desk. I told him what we wanted to do. Something was the matter because his face paled and he quickly hopped up and said, "Just a minute!" He then ran off into the next room. We were both surprised by his reaction to our request. Immediately, Lieutenant Colonel William Conkly came to the desk, introduced himself to us, and escorted us into a small room next to his office. We all sat down around a table. My antennae were up. Something was not right. I was worried that Terry would blow our chances here. I hadn't discussed his role in this interrogation so I signaled him to be quiet, and I thought he got my message.

"As you may or may not know, this is now a legal matter and the defendant has some rights," Colonel Conkly began. I was thinking, "Oh crap, here comes that legal mumbo jumbo." When it comes to bureaucracy, the lawyers are geniuses in building them. The Army lawyers live by their bureaucracy. Bureaucracies were my nemesis. This was not going to be an easy investigation. Without him saying anything, I knew this soldier was in deep trouble and about to be ground to dust by these damn lawyers. I would really have to be on my toes if I was going to be able to help this soldier and get the information I needed.

Colonel Conkly looked at our credentials, frowned and immediately began describing the situation to us. "This soldier is pretty well screwed-up and we haven't even been able to talk to him yet. He's high on something, for sure. When he arrived under

guard he broke out of the handcuffs somehow and beat the crap out of six MPs. He attacked the officer in charge and broke his jaw while destroying his office—it's all kindling wood now. We finally forced him into a Connex container and locked him in there. He somehow broke the latch and we had to secure it with two of our biggest padlocks. The MPs have charged him with destruction of government property, assault and battery, striking an officer, being AWOL, and desertion. He's in a lot of trouble." "Shit," was all I could think. They were going to throw the book at this guy.

"Sir, I understand he is in some trouble, but we have a major problem here. We have come into some information that he might have been purposefully drugged by an anti-war group in Japan. They are the ones that could have caused this whole thing. We need to know how he got to Saigon and how he got so screwed up. I need to talk to him. Other soldier's lives may depend on this. If our troops are being targeted on R&R we have to know. Shit, how does a 165 lb. man beat up six MPs! We need to know what they gave him." As always, some of what I said was true, but if I was going to talk to this guy, I had to spread it on thick. I had no idea if an anti-war group was involved—and Saigon had only insinuated that it might have occurred—but saying it made the Lieutenant Colonel sit back and think a minute. He knew that if any of what I told him was true his every action would be scrutinized by Saigon. He wasn't prepared for that. Finally, Lieutenant Colonel Conkly sat up in his chair and shook his head.

"Look, none of our MPs will open the door and let him out now, and I won't order them to."

"Sir, give me the keys and we will open the door and see if we can talk to him. The risk is ours. We really need the information." Terry was turning whiter as I spoke—and that's hard to do for a red-headed Irishman. He did not like my idea.

"Well, it's up to you," Conkly said after thinking it over. He ordered the MPs to give me the keys to the Connex container that was just outside the exit door in the room we were in. I asked for cold water and something for him to eat, which they provided. I guessed that he had to be thirsty after all the fighting he did. Also, roasting in a Connex container couldn't have done him any good. After they left I explained my rationale to Terry. He wasn't sold, but

would stay in the room, far behind me. I put the keys in the locks and twisted them open, one at a time.

I don't really know what I expected. I was ready for an explosion, but nothing happened. I slowly opened the door and looked inside. Sitting against the wall of the Connex container, about 10 feet from the door, was this dirty bundle of rags with feet sticking out. I took the water they gave me and walked into the Connex container. The smell was gagging inside the container. When I touched the bundle's feet it twisted away and uncovered itself. A scared, black face with horribly bloodshot eyes stared through me. Slowly, he focused on me and then became confused. I was wearing my normal white shirt and black pants with regular shoes and had long hair. If I were wearing a uniform, who knows what he would have done? I gave him the water and he quickly snatched it from me and drank the whole canteen. He looked around and then at me.

"Sir, where am I?" he chokingly whispered. I grabbed his arm and helped him walk out of the container to a desk and chair that were in a room in the building next to the container. I noticed several marks on his inner arm. He had been shooting up something. He really smelled terrible! I had him sit in the chair on one side of the desk and I went to the other side. I wanted him to know I was in control and he was supposed to do what I wanted.

Terry stood to my side with his hand on his .45, looking as mean as he could. As I looked past the soldier, I saw two MPs with their M16s pointed at the soldier, ready to fire. The only problem was, I was directly in the field of fire. I motioned to Terry to come to me.

"Get those motherfuckers to put those weapons down. Now," I whispered in his ear. He nodded his head "Yes" and headed for the door. He did a good job. I could hear him yelling at them to put the goddamn weapons down and go get some more water and food. They hesitated for a minute and then haltingly left. I would have to thank Terry for the good job he did on this. I then focused on the sergeant. I had to know how he got in this shape.

I needed to get him talking about something he would be comfortable with, so I asked him to tell me how he got into the Army. The story was quite simple. He was from the Chicago area and when he graduated from high school he joined the Army. His life before the Army was nothing unusual. He had never been in trouble



while in school. He was an average student and had avoided all the trouble that was around him through the strength and guidance of his parents and his own desire to better himself. He had a girlfriend that he had married before he joined up. According to him, it was a great marriage and he really loved his wife. They already had a son. He was slowly warming up and, about this time, Terry returned with more water and another sandwich that he devoured again. He was getting more comfortable with me. I thought I should turn it up a bit and see what happens.

“Soldier, what’s your name and rank? NOW!”

Startled, he said, “Sgt. E5, Calvin Baker, sir. RA18754246.”

“Good, sergeant. You seem to be coming back to us,” I said.

“Sir, where am I and how did I get here?” he asked. I saw the lieutenant colonel looking through the door behind the sergeant. He couldn’t believe I had not gotten the shit kicked out of me, and I could see he was worried about what I would tell his prisoner. Of course, the sergeant may not know he is a prisoner. So I waited a few seconds.

“Sergeant, here are my credentials. I am from Army Intelligence and I need your help.” No need to give him the bad news yet. He took my credentials and stared at them.

I couldn’t tell if he could read what they said, but after staring at them a few moments he handed them back and asked, “Sir, am I in some kind of trouble?”

“Sergeant, the short answer to that is yes. You are in a lot of trouble and you know it.” He looked at me and slowly lowered his eyes. They filled with tears. I had to stop any collapse he might fall into. “Sergeant, you can help me and maybe that might ease things for you. But you need to tell me the truth. Will you help me?” He nodded his head “Yes.” We began to talk about his odyssey.

After eight months in-country he had received orders to go to Japan for a week of R&R. He looked forward to it. He wanted to buy his wife and child a gift from Japan and at the same time just get away from the war for a week. The first couple of days of his R&R, he stayed at the R&R Center and went into town daily and did his shopping. He made friends with a few other soldiers at the center and they wanted to take him on a tour of some of the bars they had found that had girls and good, cheap booze and other enjoyments.

He took that to mean that he could get some good “grass” there, and that sounded good. So he went. The first time, the girls were pretty and friendly, the drinks were cheap, and the “grass” was excellent. So he went a second time, about a day later. This time one of the girls focused in on him—it had been a long time since he had sex—so he went to the back with her. It was great sex. He remembered that. When they were through and lying in bed she offered him a special type of grass. So while lying there he said “Sure!” It was the greatest weed he had ever had. After that things became blurred and confused. I guessed he had been given a “Thai stick” a marijuana cigarette dipped in liquid heroin.

The sergeant was tiring. His eyes were wandering and he was swaying back and forth on the chair. I didn’t want to push it, so I stopped asking questions and told him I had to leave the room for a moment. Terry would stay with him. Terry looked at me with panic in his eyes. I nodded my head as if to say everything would be all right and left him there. I went out the door and ran right into the lieutenant colonel. I suggested we go into his office, which we did. I closed the door.

“Preliminarily, it appears our information is correct and he was targeted by a group of some sort that turned him onto serious drugs. I need to talk to him more, but he is in pretty bad shape. I need to let him rest some more. Tomorrow I need to come back and talk some more with him. Right now I think he is about to pass out.”

Lieutenant Colonel Conkly was having none of this. So we began to argue gently with each other. He wanted him handcuffed and sent to the brig under guard. He intended to court-martial him and send him to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas as a prisoner for the next 20 years. This guy had struck an officer. I argued against any of this, saying we needed this guy to get further information, if we could. We need to know how he got back to Vietnam.

“Colonel, this sergeant has been wounded, just the same as if he was in a combat patrol—only he didn’t know he was at risk. This group attacked him just as viciously as if he wandered into an armed ambush, only this time they attacked his mind through drugs. He needs hospital time and psychiatric care, not prison!” The colonel said he would think about it, but doubted that could happen. Finally, we agreed I could talk to him the next day and that he would put the

sergeant under house arrest in a barracks by himself. They would get him cleaned up, fed, and back in uniform. I asked if some of his squad could talk to him and he denied that request. His squad wanted nothing to do with a “druggy.” That was not a good sign!

I went and got Terry and told Sergeant Baker that I would be back the next day. He was to rest until then. As I left, I was getting angry. This poor bastard was going to get screwed. They didn’t care about what happened to him, only what he did to them. His career in the Army was over and he would have made a great lifer. The worst thing that can happen to any soldier is to end up in the hands of the Army Military Justice system. They don’t care about anything but the law, and from the lieutenant colonel I was already aware that they were going to do whatever they could do to punish this guy. The only thing I could do is to see if I could get him removed from their clutches. Terry didn’t really agree with me. He despised drug addicts as being weak and sinful, but he agreed that we should try to get all the intelligence we could. So we went back to Qui Nhon.

Going from Ahn Khe to Qui Nhon is downhill, and we made good time. When I got there I called Nha Trang about the subject and my thoughts. I wanted some help to stop the damn lawyers—at least until we got our information. I was surprised that they agreed with me. My success must have given me some clout. They told me they would get back to me and see what they could do. So I waited, hoping for the best and knowing no matter what I did, this poor guy was going to get it for sure. That lieutenant colonel was looking for blood. Over an hour later I got a call back. There was nothing they could do. They did try—even called Saigon. Saigon said they would look into it and talk to the lieutenant colonel at Ahn Khe, but the charges were very serious and it was up to the local adjutant general’s office to decide the type of punishment this soldier should get. It could be anything from a full court-martial to an Article 15 hearing. It was their impression from Saigon that whatever it was going to be, it would be done quickly. I said I would be there tomorrow to re-interview the subject. They said they were sorry, urged me to get as much information from the soldier as possible, and wished me luck. I was very frustrated. This poor guy was heading to a terrible end and there was nothing I could do about it. I even tried to think of some kind of scam I could pull, but nothing felt like it would work.

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Well, tomorrow I will see if I can smooth-talk the lieutenant colonel into at least going easy on him. I went to bed without my usual buzz on. I wanted to be ready for tomorrow. I told Terry that we would leave as early as we could in the morning. I didn't have to worry about Terry—he didn't drink much.

In the morning we got up early, went to the Officers' Club for a quick breakfast, and headed for Ahn Khe. There wasn't much talk on the way there. I drove like a madman and made record time getting there. We went immediately to Lieutenant Colonel Conkly's office. Not surprisingly, he wasn't in his office, but left word that I could talk to the prisoner. I couldn't help but notice that our subject's title went from sergeant to prisoner since yesterday. Not a good sign.

Sergeant Baker was in a barracks all by himself. He was in a uniform with no rank on it, and sitting on his bed. I could see he had the shakes, or maybe he was just scared. Terry and I went to him. I sat down on the bed next to him and Terry stood behind the bed I was sitting on. He tried to look very stern.

"Sergeant, how do you feel today? Do you remember me from yesterday?" The sergeant looked at me.

"Yeah, you're a special agent or something like that. Why do you want to talk to me?" It was clear the he was having difficulty remembering what we had talked about yesterday, and he had developed an attitude since yesterday. It was going to take a while to see if I could get any real good information out of him. I ignored his question.

"Sergeant, yesterday you told me that you were in Japan for three days before you went to a local bar and they gave you some good pot. Is that right?" He looked at me and tried to figure out if he should answer me. I had not identified myself again. I wasn't a cop, after all.

After a moment he said, "That's right, sir."

"Why did you go back again?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "The pot was good and was pretty much free."

"Why did they give you free pot?" I asked.

He looked at me and shook his head. "Just thought they liked American soldiers."

“When did you get something more than pot?” I was now heading into a new area he had not told me about yesterday.

“I don’t know. One day they gave me what they called ‘some real good stuff!’ and I smoked it. It was the best thing I had ever had. I felt so good. It didn’t last long, though. I wanted more and they gave it to me. They were my friends.”

Well, there it was. Nobody gives out drugs for free unless they are trying to make you an addict or just trying to screw with your mind or, maybe in this case, just screw up a good soldier. Who were these guys, I wondered?

“Sergeant! Do you remember what your friends called themselves?” He looked at me hard, thought a minute, and didn’t answer. I thought I would try again. “Sergeant, were these fellow soldiers or civilians?” I waited as he thought it out.

“I don’t know. They were not wearing any uniforms, but neither was I. There were a couple of Japanese women there, too,” he said.

“Sergeant, were the men American or Japanese?” I was trying to find out if this was an anti-war group or just a Japanese gang trying to get more product sold to Americans by hooking new clients.

The sergeant looked confused. “Both!” he said. I thought maybe it was time to shake him up a bit.

“Sergeant, when did you begin to shoot up?” I blurted out.

He looked really startled. “I never shot up. I don’t do that,” he barked back at me.

“Sergeant, roll up your sleeves and look at your arms. Those little red marks are needle marks, and I see over a dozen of them. When did you start?” I asked again. While I was talking he rolled up his sleeves and stared at his arms and shook his head. His body started shaking and tears ran down his cheeks. He couldn’t believe it.

Sobbing, and staring at his arms, he slowly whispered, “I don’t know. I don’t know. How?”

I had taken the wrong path. He really was surprised that he had been injected with something. Maybe he didn’t do the injecting. I had to get him back away from the horror he had fallen into. “Sergeant. Sergeant!” I snapped.

He looked up from his arm in tears and with terror in his eyes. “Sir?”

“Sergeant, let’s cover another area. How did you get back to Vietnam?” I was hoping to move him away from the drugs he had taken and into an easier area for him. He didn’t answer. So I tried again. “Sergeant, you missed reporting back to the R&R Center when you were supposed to. Yet you showed up in Saigon in a bar 14 days later. How did that happen?” He hadn’t recovered yet, I could tell. Terry was daubing his own eyes now. He was finally feeling sorry for this poor guy. About time! “Sergeant, tell me now how you got to Saigon!”

Sergeant Baker looked at me slowly. “I don’t know. My friends took me to the R&R Center and I got on a plane and came here. When I got to Tan Son Nhut airfield I just walked to the main gate and got a pedicab and went to the bar that they had given me the name of. The MPs took me out of there. I don’t know why.”

He was very confused and his leg had begun to shake uncontrollably. His story of how he got here would have to be expanded, but until the drugs wore off, he would be in no position to talk and he was slipping away in front of me. I felt I had to warn him about what was going to happen. “Sergeant, you are in a lot of trouble.”

He looked at me as if I was speaking Greek. “Trouble? Why?” he asked.

“Sergeant, you went AWOL, consumed a great quantity of illegal drugs, injured several MPs and hit an officer. You can end up in prison for years with these charges. Do you understand?” He kept looking at me as if I was not there. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and just ignored me. I thought I would try to get his attention by talking about his family.

“Sergeant. Do you remember your wife?” I finally asked.

He smiled and said, “Cathy!”

“Sergeant, how are you going to explain all of this to her? You know you’re going to have to talk to her about this.” I probably shouldn’t have said this, but I wanted him to think of home. It did not have the effect I thought it would. He just looked scared and started shaking. To stop, he got up and started walking back and forth. The interview, I knew, was over. I should not have brought up his wife just yet. He was losing it. It was going to take months, if not longer, for him to get straightened out, and the Army was not good at doing this.

He needed a good psychiatrist and drug counselor. I was neither of these. I stood up and so did Terry. The sergeant stopped walking.

“Sergeant, I am going to have to go now. You’re going to need a lawyer. Ask for one. I may come back, but I don’t know. Take care of yourself.” I put out my hand to shake his but he turned away and walked over to his bunk and sat down. Terry and I left. I really shouldn’t have mentioned his wife. I had really fucked up this interview. I was upset and I knew I had blown the last chance to help this poor soldier. The information I did get was shaky at best but it did hint that somebody had done something to this soldier and maybe to other soldiers. I just didn’t know why.

Lieutenant Colonel Conkly was waiting for me. He asked me and Terry into his office. We sat down. “I got a call from Saigon this morning about this case.” He glared at me. He did not like my effort at intervention but was obviously impressed that I could get Saigon involved so quickly. Sadly he was taking this as a challenge to his own authority and I guess he was partly right.. “They expressed interest in your investigation and asked me to help you. Are you done yet?” he coldly asked.

You would have thought I had stepped on his dick. He did not like having Saigon question him and I was the one who caused it. Oh well, I had to stick it to him again. “Colonel, this man is too sick to interview now. He needs medical help and some psychiatric work before I can get much more out of him. Right now, his mind is all screwed up.”

He looked at me for awhile. “I’m sorry. We have to take an action now according to the Military Code of Justice. After talking with the MPs involved, I’m thinking about just an Article 15 hearing and to get him back to his unit,” he told me.

“Colonel, we need him alive to get the information. If he goes back to his unit without some kind of intervention, he’ll be dead in a week. He’s in an infantry outfit. He’s not fit for combat. If he doesn’t kill himself, his buddies might do it for him!” I snapped back.

“That will be up to his CO to see he gets the help he needs. We can only hope for the best,” he told me, smiling. There was nothing I could do. I gave up but decided to throw one more thing at him.

“Thanks for your help, colonel. I will mention you in my report to the Pentagon about this investigation when I get back to Qui Nhon,”

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I said. I mentioned the Pentagon just to let him know how much weight my report had. I don't report to Saigon. My reports can't be lost. Someone will read about it. The look on his face showed that he had reacted to the word "Pentagon."

"Thanks, Mr. Burdick. We will take care of Sergeant Baker and, hopefully, he will recover and not have to spend any time in prison."

We shook hands and Terry and I left. In my heart I knew they would give him his Article 15, bust him down to private, send him to a medic who would give him a couple of aspirins and then, on the first chance they get, put him on point in a patrol and Private Baker will die in battle. I just couldn't help this poor soul and I could not prove who gave him the drugs. We couldn't know whether it was by chance or whether he was targeted. In any case, in my mind he should have been put in an Evac hospital just like any soldier full of shrapnel. But that would not happen. By this time Terry, agreed with me. We went back to Qui Nhon depressed and frustrated. Maybe I should have tried to interview him one more time, but I had the information that Saigon wanted. It wasn't the whole story, but it was all I could get. I was not a psychiatrist so I didn't really know how to handle someone so screwed up on drugs. I had tried but failed. I knew in my heart, though, that Saigon would not follow through with this investigation. We had lost and this poor sergeant would be tossed to the dogs and probably be dead within the month.

After I got back to our offices I went to my desk to write up my final report on the AWOL sergeant investigation. While typing out the report, the phone rang and Billy answered it.

"Hey Burdick, I think this is for you!" he yelled out. I went to the phone and found myself talking to an MP master sergeant. What had I been caught doing now?

"Are you Mr. Burdick?" he asked. I admitted my guilt to that. "We haven't met yet but I think I have something of yours in my office," he said. He was right, I had not met with the master sergeant at the MP office. It wasn't high on my priorities but it just clicked up a notch with this call.

"Are you Sergeant Flores?" I asked.

"That's right, Master Sergeant George Flores," he said.



"I'm sorry I haven't been over to see you yet. What exactly do you have that is mine?" I asked.

"I have two men sitting in my office claiming to be military intelligence agents. We were sweeping one of the rougher parts of town looking for a couple of AWOL soldiers and found these guys happily doing their best in one of the ugliest whorehouses in the area," he told me.

I had no idea who he was talking about. All our guys were accounted for and, if they were going to use a whorehouse, they would do it in one that was in a better area. "Were they any good at what they were doing?" I jokingly asked.

He laughed. "From what I hear, they were too drunk to do anything except lose money."

"I better come over and make sure they're not from an out-of-town operation. I'll be there in about 15 minutes. Is that all right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I would like to meet you anyway, so come on over. I will hold these guys till you get here," he said.

"Sergeant, can you not start any paperwork on them until I verify who they are? No use causing problems if there is no reason," I asked.

He paused a moment and thought about it. "OK, but only until you get here," he said.

"Great, see you soon," I said and then headed out the door and jumped in a jeep, hoping I could find the MP headquarters.

I got there in about 20 minutes. I got lost for a while, but finally followed an MP and he guided me to his headquarters. I went to the Officer of the Day's desk and asked for Master Sergeant Flores. I showed my credentials. A corporal took me to Sergeant Flores' office. He was waiting to meet me. Sitting in his room were two embarrassed soldiers, still in handcuffs. I ignored them for now.

"Good to see you, Mr. Burdick—finally," he said as he stretched out his hand to shake mine.

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner," I said.

"You've made quite a splash since you got here," he said.

"Well, that's because nobody talks about my mistakes. Can I talk to these guys a minute to verify who the hell they are?" I said.

"Sure! Go ahead," he said.

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I walked over to the two guys in fatigues that had no marks on them of any rank or organization. I showed them my credentials and they visibly relaxed. "OK, tell me quietly who the hell you are and what the hell you are doing in my area!" I demanded.

The older one of the two said, "Glad you could come. We're attached to the 173rd MI group. We are helicopter pilots, used to search out VC. We fly a small reconnaissance helicopter for two that is unarmed and has little bulletproofing, but is fast. We left our IDs in the helicopter at the airfield. We've been in the field for months so when we landed we went with a couple of GIs to go get a drink and a piece of ass. Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Look, you stupid sons of bitches are in one hell of a lot of trouble. Why the hell didn't you check in with our group before you went whoring! You had to know we were here," I whispered forcefully to them.

This time the younger one said, "Well, we're not exactly supposed to be here. They sent us to look at a place we had been over dozens of times. There is never anything there. We decided to come to Qui Nhon instead."

I had to hold my smile. That was something I would do. I laughed a little and said, "OK, look remorseful and I'll see if I can get you off." I turned and went back to the sergeant. "Did you hear that?" I asked.

"Not all of it. I assume they are some of yours," he said.

"Yes, these idiots belong to MI. I need to get them back to their operation if that is all right with you," I asked.

He thought a minute. "What do I tell my CO?" he asked.

"Tell them they were MI and were attempting to make contact with a source when your men arrested them. Hopefully, the net isn't lost to us," I said with a smile on my face.

"You know, I like you for some goddamned reason. He will buy that, and I don't have to write another damn report," he said.

"Thanks, sergeant! I owe you one! Now can I kick these idiots out of here?" I asked.

"Be my guest, and keep them the hell out of my sight," he said. I shook his hand. He went over and removed their handcuffs and I turned and pointed out the door to the two men. They didn't need

any second gesture. I walked them to my jeep, told them to get in the back, and drove them to our offices without comment.

Naturally, I took them to our bar and gave them a drink. They thought they were in heaven. "Look, you guys, if you are coming into the area stop by here first. We have free drinks and can direct you to the best whorehouses. Well, at least Marty can." We shared some of the things we were doing. I sure wouldn't want to be flying around in an unarmed helicopter. They called it a "Mosquito." After a couple of drinks I had Billy drive them back to the airport and their helicopter. I invited them back anytime.

Less than a week later, our lead guard came running in to me looking alarmed. I was sitting at my desk. "Come, come quick!" he said.

I ran outside and there, preparing to land, was one of those damn small helicopters. It threw dust everywhere and landed behind our building where there was plenty of space. I shook my head and laughed. It was the same two agents. It turned out they just wanted to go to the PX. So we lent them a jeep and I went back to my desk. Within five minutes the phone rang and Billy answered it. A Master Sergeant Flores wanted to talk to me. Billy said he sounded upset.

I picked up the phone and before I could say anything I heard, "What the fuck are you doing. You can't just land a helicopter anywhere. The airport CO is blowing his stack. A helicopter landing on the beach has got to be you. What the hell is going on?"

There was no way I could tell him that the guys just wanted to buy some beer. "Sarge, I'm sorry. We just had some information from the field that we needed right away. I thought the crew would land at the airport like they normally do, but for some reason they landed here. I guess they thought that speed was the most important thing. They will be leaving within the hour." As I said this, the two agents were struggling in the door with six cases of beer. I signaled them to be quiet. "Sarge, who do I need to talk to, to make this right?" I asked.

He gave me a number and name to talk to. "He's going to burn you a new asshole, Burdick. Be prepared!"

I thanked Sergeant Flores and promised to take him to lunch or dinner for his troubles. Evidently, the MPs were going to be more necessary than I thought. I then called the number and was

transferred to a lieutenant colonel who was more than a little pissed. Our building was half a mile or more from the end of the runway and our little helicopter had screwed up their whole landing and takeoff system for the day. He ranted and I apologized. Finally, when his steam seemed to have run down I said, "Colonel, I know we made a mistake. The pilots who brought us the critical information forgot protocol, but we needed the information. It saved lives. I thought they had called in for permission to land and they thought we did. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. They are waiting for your permission to leave now. So if you can tell me when they are clear to take off, I can get them out of here."

He thought a minute. I swear I could feel him saying that the helicopter could rot before he would give it permission to leave, but he gave in. "In fifteen minutes—exactly—they can take off and head due east until they are out of our area of operation and then they can go to hell as far as I am concerned." I thanked him, but I doubt he heard it. He was busy slamming down the phone as I was talking.

I went and told the pilots to load up and get the hell out of here before they got shot down. I gave them the directions the colonel had given me. In fifteen minutes they lifted off and headed east. Our poor *mama-san* who cleaned our rooms and offices came shouting and shaking her broom at the helicopter. It had blown sand through the whole building and she was not happy. It was amusing to see a 78-pound, 4'6" grandmother shaking her broom at the helicopter and swearing in Vietnamese. Our guards were all laughing at what she had said.

I did take Master Sergeant George Flores out to dinner. We became good friends after our difficult beginning. Captain Theran was not in the office for either event, but after the last screw-up I knew I had to tell him about it. So when he came back later in the afternoon I went into his office and told him what I had done. He was not too happy, but thought he wouldn't have to get involved as everything had been handled by me. If they did it again he wanted to be the one to take action on them, though. I was sure they would never again try anything like they did today.

## Chapter 13

**Life went on while we waited** for all the goodies we would need for the “taco party.” June seemed to disappear in a flash. It was already the first week of July. Everyone had written home and asked for various things from their wives or girlfriends and families. I was going to get the lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, and meat from one of my military contacts. The tortillas, salsa, and seasonings we would need did not exist in Vietnam so we had to wait until we got them from the States. While waiting, I started looking for information sources that might help me find a POW. Again, I found the Army hadn’t assigned anybody to that. If they stumbled across a POW, they would be ecstatic, but, until then, they just hoped someone might accidentally come across one. I guess they believed in serendipity. I didn’t. I began to go around to all the other agencies and ask if there were any VC/NVA prisoners who said they had seen a POW or a prisoner that looked like an American. I let everyone know what I was looking for. Luckily, everyone was still impressed with my last action so they believed that if anyone could find a POW, I could, and they bent over backwards to help. I did not want them to inform their headquarters about my research for two reasons: First, it would do no good because they, while interested, had no orders to do anything. Second, by cutting out headquarters, everyone who was helping me felt they were somehow breaking loose from their shackles—and it felt GOOD! There wasn’t a person I asked who didn’t volunteer all they had or were even willing to risk their own lives to be part of this activity.

Again, I had blindly struck a nerve that every soldier kept hidden in the back of his mind: “If I get captured, who is going to come after me?” It was a fear we all had. No American POW

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captured in the south had ever been recovered. I knew that, if I were captured, I would be tortured and shot. If I was captured in civilian clothes, even according to the Geneva Accord, I could be shot. I was always in civilian clothes. The VC/NVA didn't abide by the Geneva Accord, but I would be dead anyway. Most of the regular soldiers in Vietnam knew that capture meant death, even if they didn't say it. Death did not occur quickly for most of the American POWs. The VC/NVA dragged the POWs from hamlet to hamlet, beating and torturing them so the villagers could see that the Americans were not invincible. Eventually, these soldiers died.

My best chance of recovering a POW was in their first six months of captivity, before they were beaten or starved to death. The soldiers in every command knew at least part of this truth, so when I started asking for help to see if we could find at least one of these guys, not one soldier ever refused to help when he found out that we were on a POW recovery mission. I wish I could say the same for the headquarter personnel, but they would always refuse permission to do these missions and could always come up with a reason for not doing them. My response was typical for me: I never told them. Even so, I had to tell my own CO, Captain Theran, that I would take a look at the POW recovery mission. He had no problem with me doing it and encouraged me to go ahead. We both decided that we would not write a report on any of these activities to our headquarters until we had something we could tell them. In short, we cut our headquarters out of the loop. I believe Captain Theran probably made some unofficial comment to Nha Trang about what I was doing, but they never interfered or even acknowledged any operation I proposed. I had the impression, though, that they unofficially supported my efforts.

I had one more thing to do. In our earlier operation that was so successful, the unit from the 173rd was late in arriving and I needed to find out what happened. To do that, I would have to drive up to LZ English, the forward base of the 173rd, and talk to their G2. I had talked to the MI agents assigned to the 173rd, but they couldn't tell me anything. I wasn't sure what the MI agents up there did, but they seemed somewhat bored. I called them and told them that I wanted to brief the G2 of the 173rd about the operation's results. It

was about time I met him anyway. They called back and said I had an appointment at 1100 hours tomorrow. I told them there would be two of us.

I decided not to take Terry. There was only so much he could do and liaison was not his strength. I decided to take Marty. Marty had been here longer than Terry and me and was very short. I believed he was scheduled to leave in about a month. He had stayed far away from me. The only action he wanted was in the local whorehouses. He did his part in drinking the bar dry, but he was not a loose cannon like Terry could be. Marty would hate going, but would do exactly what I said. I would have to remind him that, since our crushing victory over the VC/NVA forces, activity in our province had dropped to almost nothing. It was downright boring in the province now. There was little or no danger in driving up to LZ English. I knew the VC/NVA forces were building their forces back up, but for now we were more likely to be hit by lightening than run into an ambush. I went to the captain and explained what I was about to do and he agreed that Marty would be the best choice since he could not go himself. I have to give credit to the captain. He was not afraid to get involved. I think he would have gone if he didn't have another meeting. I realized he also wanted to get my sources to start looking to him, not me. I knew this had to happen, as I was not always going to be here. I would leave one way or the other. I told Marty we would be leaving early in the morning, so be ready. He was not happy. I guess with so little time left in-country he wanted to hide under his bunk. I was not going to let him. He was not going to enjoy this road trip.

We left early the next morning. Marty showed up in a steel pot and flack jacket, armed to the teeth. I was wearing my standard white shirt and jungle hat with a .45 at my waist. I just shook my head after I saw Marty. It was a beautiful morning and I was going to enjoy the drive. I said nothing to Marty. We headed off to LZ English. The trip was interesting for me. I had never been all the way up to LZ English. It was located all the way at the top of Binh Dinh Province. I was seeing new area that I had not been through before. As we got farther away from civilization, Marty grew tenser. I was enjoying myself. We passed the turn-off to Ahn Khe. Most were going that way. We passed Tuy Phuc where the Air Force Base

was located. I didn't like the base. I don't know why, the place just made me uncomfortable. We then passed the turn-off for the Korean Tiger Division HQ. I would have to go there one day, I knew, but not today. From that point on it was just rice paddies, little villages, and jungle. The road was good and the wind in my face felt good. Marty was trying to shrink down into his seat.

We finally came to the gate that led to the 173rd camp. The guards stopped us, looked at our credentials and, surprisingly, called their local MI group to report who was at the gate. The MI group had notified the guards to call them when we showed up so that they could come and escort us. So we pulled off to the side and waited. I lit a cigarette and Marty took off his steel pot and loosened his flak jacket. Within a few minutes two soldiers drove up. Turned out they were MI. I should have noticed—they had no rank on them. We shook hands and were asked to follow them to their office, which turned out to be a big tent. I couldn't help thinking that there, for the luck of the draw, I could be. Their whole office was there to meet us. They had little or no contact with any other MI outfit and were dying for information. I was early for our meeting with the G2 so I answered as many questions as I could. I told them about Tet and a few other things. Marty mentioned the successful battle I had been part of. They almost jumped at us to get more information. I finally said I had to get to my meeting with someone at the G2 office.

One of the agents said, "That would be Colonel Jim Bench. He's one of the good guys. Understands intelligence and really was an agent at one time. He doesn't talk about it, though. His aide is Captain Paul Wesley. He's in way over his head and doesn't know it. A general prick!"

"I guess I'll be careful of him," I said and laughed. It was good to get a heads-up and it was interesting that no one tried to say a good word for this captain.

"By the way, everyone on base is supposed to wear a steel pot and flack jacket and that includes civilians!" someone said.

I laughed and Marty put on his steel pot. "I guess I didn't know that. I'll see what the colonel says." We shook hands with everyone and, as we left, I said, "Look, anytime you make it to Qui Nhon stop by our office. The beer is cold and the booze is free. Maybe we can help you somehow."



They laughed and one of them said, “We’d love to, but we aren’t allowed off the base. If we do get off, though, we will definitely stop by your place. It will be good to see how the other side lives.” They all laughed. One of them told me how to find the G2 office and we left. I felt sorry for them and I think they felt sorry for me. Weird!

We were a few minutes early but the colonel had us come to his office anyway. He got up and shook our hands. “I’ve heard of you, Burdick. You’ve used a few of my helicopters! Or so I heard,” he said, looking me straight in the eye.

“Probably did, sir. Did you get them back?” I asked.

He laughed. “Well if I didn’t, I know where to look! How can I help you?” he asked. I knew immediately that this was a guy I could trust. Unauthorized use of a helicopter was big stuff to an airborne outfit, but it didn’t seem to bother him. I began to brief him on the whole operation that ended with me describing what his unit’s participation in the operation was supposed to be. He was impressed. I was telling him everything. Marty had never heard of some of this.

“You actually got the SEAL commander to look over the operation? How did you do that?” he asked. I told him of Roger and our operation plan. I had not yet mentioned anything about how the 173rd failed to arrive on time to participate in their part of the plan. I gave him the rough estimate of the casualty reports. He was astounded.

“I had heard that over 2,000 had been killed, but I thought it was bullshit. You telling me that it was the Koreans who did the count?” he asked.

I told him it was so and that I never really got a final count. I then got to the reason I was there. “Sir, one of the goals of this operation was to capture the VC province chief. Your unit was given that responsibility. From what I heard, your unit got there late and was almost ambushed by the VC. You did manage to capture his wife and child—but not the province chief. Do you know why?” I asked.

“You mean we let that guy get away?” he asked.

“Well, it’s what I have been told. I’m just trying to find out if one of my sources gave me the right info,” I replied.

He did not look happy. I didn't know why. "Just a minute!" He grabbed the phone and dialed. "Captain, come in here!" he ordered.

"Sir, the information I gave you is still highly classified. I had permission to tell you, but I would prefer it didn't go any further," I lied.

"Don't worry! I understand. I want to find out what happened to our unit." We waited and in seconds Captain Wesley showed up. He was a baby! He looked to be 18.

"Sir," he said. The colonel repeated my question. The captain began to look very uncomfortable. "Sir, the information we had was unsubstantiated by any other source so I told the commanding officer that. He decided to take his time, I guess," he blurted out. I couldn't believe my ears. The colonel's ears turned red.

"Go find out now! Please! We'll wait." The captain looked at me as he left and I was sure he was blaming me for his embarrassment and wondering who the hell I was at the same time. Daggers seemed to be coming from his eyes.

After he left, Colonel Bench relaxed and said, "He's young and has no field experience, but it's what they gave me. Oh well, it will be somebody else's problem soon. I'm returning to the States in three weeks." I realized it wasn't me he was mad at. I would hate to be on this guy's bad side.

"I'm glad you are going back, sir, but I really would have liked to work with you." I said.

"Me too," he replied. We spent the time while the captain was gone going over some of the things I was currently working on. He was especially interested in my POW recovery efforts. I had finally met someone in the command structure who cared.

When the captain returned to the room Colonel Bench said, "Look, anything we can do to help you on any of those operations, especially the POWs, let me know. You have my full support and I will leave a message for my replacement to that effect."

The captain then made his report, which was sure to show that it was not his fault. Evidently, the unit went to the ambush area with two APCs. One broke down and the field commander waited to see if it could be fixed. When it was decided it couldn't, they marched on to the ambush site. Unfortunately, the enemy had gotten there first and a firefight broke out. That is when they suffered their single

KIA. The men fought back and split the enemy force. They killed or captured the second half of the enemy force. He concluded by saying, "The 173rd did well in this operation, sir."

The Colonel did not say anything, but I couldn't stay quiet. "Unfortunately, captain, the purpose of ambushing the enemy unit—that was your responsibility—was the killing or preferably the capturing of the VC province chief who was in that first group. That was why I requested the 173rd to set this ambush," I said angrily.

"He's right captain. Were you notified that our unit was after a high-priority target?" asked the colonel. He got right to the heart of the question.

"I told the unit commander, sir, but I also told him that I was unable to verify the information, sir," he said.

"That will be all, captain," the colonel said before I could speak again. Verify! How the hell did he think he could verify this information? It was good enough for every other unit, even the RF/PF. I was going to jump down this asshole's throat and the colonel sensed it.

The captain left. "I'm sorry, Mr. Burdick. I'll talk to the captain. He's a good man but has little experience," he apologized.

"Thank you, sir. I just get a little pissed when the screw-up could have been avoided with just a little thought," I said.

We said our good-byes and, as I was leaving, he said, "By the way, Mr. Burdick, we have a policy on our post that everyone wears a steel pot and flack jacket, like your silent partner there, and I'm willing to bet that you probably know that and ignored it. Let me give you a note so that if the MPs stop you, you won't get a ticket." He then laughed and gave me the note. I took the note and laughed too. We shook hands and Marty and I left. It was the last time I would see the colonel. In a couple of weeks he would be in the US and I would still be here. Hopefully, his replacement will be as qualified as he was. We drove home without any problems. On the way home I realized my wife's birthday was coming up in the middle of the month. I needed to buy a card from the PX quickly. On the way back we stopped by the PX and I bought a card. Marty actually helped. I was looking at the sarcastic/joke cards but he suggested a nice card so I bought it. I then bought her a gift of a

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string of pearls. Like before, I sent the card and kept the gift. At least she liked the card.

While waiting for something to happen, we did what we always did: Drink! There is a wealth of boredom in war. Not every day was exciting and fulfilling. One Saturday night we had really tied one on. I went to bed after I finished the last bottle of bourbon we had. Muttering to no one in particular, I said that some poor bastard would have to go to the PX tomorrow and buy more booze. We seemed to be running out more often every week. I made it upstairs to my bed and fell into a dead sleep. I didn't remember anything until some bright lights made me open my eyes. Damn! It couldn't be morning already. I was still drunk. Then I realized that there were loud noises. BIG NOISES! It took me a moment to put them together and realize it was explosions. I tried to stand up but kept slipping back onto the bed. Finally, I made it up and fell against the window. Well, it wasn't a window, just a screen covering a hole in the wall. I looked out and saw lights or fireworks off in the distance. Slowly, I realized from where the activity was coming, that someone had blown up the ammo dump—or part of it anyway. The lights and sounds came from there. I staggered back to my bed and collapsed on it, pulling a pillow over my head. My last thought was, "I guess the NVA are here now. Not my problem!" I slipped back into my stupor again, waiting for the bourbon to work its way through my body. "Not My Problem!" I said again to nobody in particular as I drifted off to wherever a drunken mind goes. I was wrong about it not being my problem, though.

Sometimes, the problem with being in the military is that you have to do military things. Since the dump had been blown up, an intelligence unit was required to go look and see if there was any interest on their part. I could have told them we had no interest, but I had to go to the dump to do it. While I was in the shower mid-morning the CO stuck his head in and yelled that when I was done to come see him. He probably didn't really yell, but with the roar of the shower—which was barely sprinkling water out—it sounded to me like a yell. A bottle of bourbon, maybe, was too much for me to drink in a couple of hours. I would have to think about that. I

finished my shower and got dressed. Fifteen minutes after the CO had been to my shower, I was in his office.

“Mr. Burdick, take Billy and go out to the ammo dump that was blown up last night. They killed several of the attackers and Saigon wants any paperwork they have on them.”

I thought, “Great! I am going to have to search dead bodies before I even get any breakfast.” I asked the CO where the dump was located and he gave me directions. I was curious why he was sending Billy with me. Billy and I didn’t get along that well since Tet. Billy was a likable young kid but he wasn’t an agent. He was something like a company clerk. He never went out for any activity. I did not ask the CO, though. I just assumed Billy wanted to see something other than carbon paper. Maybe he wasn’t still pissed at me for threatening to shoot him during our Tet activities. I later found out I was only half right. He did just want to get out of the office, but he was still pissed at me. I went out and grabbed Billy and we took off.

I made Billy drive. I guess I could have, but I was not in the mood. Billy was clearly excited about the trip. I was not looking forward to searching dead bodies. I was hoping they were not in too many pieces. It took us a while to get to the dump and I felt every bump in the road. Billy seemed to hit them all. As we got closer you could smell the cordite in the air. There didn’t appear to be anything burning inside the dump. No smoke or anything like that. About half a mile up the road I could see the guard gate with four soldiers standing around.

When we got to the gate, the senior soldier—a teen-aged corporal—came to the jeep with rifle at the ready. “Sir, this area is closed. We were attacked last night.”

I was not in a mood to explain anything to him so I pulled out my credentials and shoved them in his face. “I’m from Military Intelligence. Do you see my credentials?”

The poor corporal could only squeak out, “Yes, sir!”

“We are here to inspect the area of the explosion and check the enemy bodies. Where the hell are they?” He paled and gave me directions to where the bodies were and explained that the explosions were kind of everywhere because shells went everywhere. “Open the gate and we’ll get this done quickly. Thanks for the directions!”

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I smiled and he looked like he wanted to run away. He tried to tell me something but I brushed it off. Briskly, he opened the gate and we drove through.

It was a mess! At first, we only saw boxes and large shells that had been stacked but were now knocked over here and there. As we got closer to where the bodies were, there was shrapnel and what appeared to be live shells everywhere, and we had to swerve to miss both the holes in the road and the shells laying there. I was surprised that EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) had not policed the area better. We kept going. Billy was not talking and the white knuckles on the steering wheel showed he was holding on for dear life. Finally, we began to see some bodies up ahead. There were 12 of them. We pulled to a stop and carefully got out. I was sure EOD had been in the area because it had occurred almost 12 hours ago, but it was best to be careful. Seven of the bodies were essentially left-over hamburger. The flies were thick and the blood was already dried black. We looked at them but there was nothing left on them that we could use. The other five were different. They all had web belts with pouches on them and they looked a little different from the first seven. My first thought was that these were NVA and the others were VC, but I wasn't sure. I didn't think the NVA were this active in our province yet. I told Billy I was going to go through their belongings. Billy hadn't gotten out of the jeep and was still gripping the wheel as if it was a shield of some kind. I guess he had gotten into more than he bargained for, seeing all the bodies and body pieces laying around. Very carefully, I opened each one of their pouches and removed all the contents. I was careful with the bodies because the VC liked to booby-trap them and, even if EOD had been here, there was no reason to take chances. Still, I had to roll over two of the bodies. I was careful, I thought. They had pictures of their families, ID Cards, and pages of Vietnamese documents, along with some propaganda pamphlets. My guess was that they were going to spread the pamphlets around as they left. Unfortunately for them, they didn't get to leave. I wasn't sure how they had been killed. It looked as if one of their satchel charges had gone off early and accidentally killed them all. The pictures in the pouches were hard to look at. These families would never see their husbands and fathers again. We would bury them in some

hole outside the dump and that would be that. It took me about 20 minutes to go through all their belongings. I left the weapons where they were. I didn't need any more.

I put what I had gathered into a bag I had brought with me and told Billy we could leave. He didn't need any encouragement. It was getting hot and I was already sweating profusely and so was Billy, who hadn't moved since we got here. The stench of death was growing stronger and I wanted to leave as quickly as possible. Slowly, we moved back and drove the way we came, missing every thing we could. When we arrived at the gate, all four guards were standing there, looking at us. The corporal was shaking his head and the rest had the look of disbelief on their faces.

"Billy, are we dragging something?" I asked, wondering why they were staring at us.

"No!" was all Billy said.

We stopped at the gate and waited for the guards to open it. The corporal came over to me. "You guys must really know what you're doing. You couldn't pay me to go in there!"

I looked at him kind of quizzically. "Why?"

He shook his head, "Hell, the EOD guys haven't been in there yet! We tried to tell you, but guessed you knew what you were doing."

My stomach sank as I remembered the large artillery shell and bombs we had driven around. Just one mistake and ... I didn't want to think about it. I thought Billy was going to pass out. The best way to hide stupidity is bravado, so I said, "Hey, we know our way around shit like this! Tell EOD to be careful. There is a lot of crap lying around out there. I already checked the dead VC. They are not booby-trapped but they can check if they want." I motioned to Billy to move out. I had to hit him on the shoulder to get him to react. We drove slowly back to our quarters. Billy swore most of the way back. When we got back he promptly went directly to the bar and poured himself a large shot of scotch—and he normally didn't drink. I was heading upstairs and back to bed.

Billy was screaming at me as I left, "I never want to go with you anywhere ever again!" as he choked down his scotch.

The CO heard this and came out of his office so I gave him the documents I had taken off the dead VC/NVA soldiers and told

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him I thought that some of them were definitely NVA. Saigon could check the documents to find out. I went upstairs. He went to talk to Billy. I had to lie down now and fell on my bed. While I was lying on the bed I stuck my hand in my pocket and rubbed the mushroom shaped bullet again. How many mistakes can I make!

I had taken a huge risk again. This time it was because I was hung over a bit. What we did was insane. You would think I would have some feeling about what I was just through, but there was nothing. I wasn't scared, worried, or even angry. I felt nothing and I didn't care at all. Up until this time, I had been told two or three times not to take so many risks and even received an order from Saigon once about it, but I never stopped doing what I was doing. I just didn't think I took that many risks. At some level, I knew that burning that hut in the middle of a battle was a little over the top. Sticking my head into an uncleared hut was stupid. Driving through an uncleared ammo depot after an attack was more than a bit foolish. I was making mistakes but they didn't bother me. I didn't know why and I didn't much care. I was not going to sit there and worry if I was going to die. If I died, I died. Worrying about it wouldn't change a thing. You either accept death or you spend every waking moment worrying about it. I guess I really didn't think I was going to live through my tour anyway, and I wasn't bothered by it. I still had a long time to go in-country—worrying wouldn't help. I would have to come up with a story for the CO so I'll just tell him I thought they said the area was cleared and take the heat for the mistake. Knowing him, he won't say anything to me. First, I had to get some sleep and work off some more of last night's bourbon and then I would face the CO. In any case, what could he do to me? I drifted off to sleep thinking about a late lunch and a cold beer at the Officers' Club.

I was right. After waking up from my nap, I went downstairs and figured I would face up to the CO and see what he would do. He was waiting for me in his office. As I went in I thought that it was kind of weird that I went to bed when I came back. It didn't bother him, as he never said anything about it.

"Those documents are what Saigon wants," he said as I came in.



"I'll write up my action report with a description of the dead soldiers. I think some of them were NVA," I said again.

"Well, get the report written quickly and we will send it and the documents down to Saigon by courier. You really think they were NVA?" he asked.

"I do. They were dressed a little different and just felt different. The documents will tell the final tale I think. If we had a camera I could have taken pictures of them, but we don't." He laughed briefly. I was always after something. I went to my desk and began typing my report. Billy was still in the bar, but it was Sunday.

I was halfway through the report when the captain came over and said, "The colonel in charge of the soldiers that guards the ammo dump wants to talk with you. He heard about your drive through the live ammo and wants to meet you. He also wants you to tour his facility and talk to some of his men. I think he wants to use you to intimidate some of his troops. He wants you to interview some of them about souvenirs that seem to be making it home from the depot. See what you can do."

I replied, "As soon as I finish the report. Should I take someone with me?"

"Take Terry, he can use the experience. I don't think Billy will ever go with you anywhere again!" he laughingly said.

I guess I wasn't in any trouble, like I thought. I finished the report, went and got Terry, and we went to the Officers' Club for a quick sandwich. While there, I came up with an idea that might make our visit worthwhile. If the colonel wanted me to talk to his soldiers, maybe I can get him to add one or two other persons to the list. It was worth a try. We would see.

I only had one beer with lunch and, by the time we got to the colonel's office, you wouldn't know it. We were brought into his office and he thanked us for our job in the morning. While he was doing that, I was thinking, "What did we do that we needed to be thanked for? Maybe for not blowing up more of his ammo." Finally, he got down to what he wanted. His unit was having a problem in the black market and the loss of supplies was getting heavy. He didn't want the MPs involved because, once that got started, who knew where it would lead. Besides, he wanted to frighten his men,

not arrest them. He asked if we could instill the fear of God into some of his men and he had a list of five men to talk to.

I thought a minute about what he wanted and then said, "Look, colonel, I can do that. I do it all the time, but let's not let them know you know who they are. Let's expand the list to include the motor pool sergeant and your mess sergeant and his assistant. That way the people involved will not know for sure they are targeted and will get the message and will be able to quit stealing without worrying about past sins."

He thought a minute, then smiled and agreed. "Good idea. How do you want to do it?" he asked.

"Give me a sergeant from your headquarter company, the higher-ranked the better, and have him take me to the various soldiers." He immediately made a call and a master sergeant came through the door as if he'd been waiting outside. The colonel gave me the list.

"Sir, I will call you when I have finished the investigation—if everything is all right. Otherwise, I will return with a verbal report. Thank You." I shook his hand. The colonel, knowing he was never going to hear from me again, thanked me and told the sergeant to take me wherever I wanted to go and to report back to him when we had left. The sergeant had a strange look on his face. He wasn't sure who we were but I had talked to the colonel as an equal and I was a hell of a lot younger than anyone else in the room. If the colonel deferred to me, so would he. The colonel wanted a report on my activities and he would get it from the master sergeant, too. My plan was working so far. I didn't much care for the colonel's problem but it could be fun, so I went for it. Terry looked confused. He wanted to know what I was up to. With my hands I signaled him to be quiet and just follow my lead.

So we began our little tour of the colonel's command. The poor soldiers never had a chance. To the first one I talked to, I showed my credentials, but he looked at them not understanding what was going on. Most soldiers never saw an agent in their whole career. Most didn't even know they existed, other than the rumors they heard about us. So, after I showed him my credentials, I read what was on them to him. He hadn't bothered to read the credential, but part of it was a direct written order from the Secretary of the Army, Stanley R. Reasor, that you were ordered to comply with all requests

of the holder of this order and do everything he says. The eyes of the sergeant I was talking with got wider and you could see confusion and fear in his face. The master sergeant was impressed, too. The order I had just read topped anything that he had ever heard. I then turned to the master sergeant and ordered him out of the room. He snapped to and quickly marched out of the room. This was fun! The sergeant sitting at the table in front of me was not having any fun, though.

I then began grilling him over his activities the last two weeks, hour by hour. Within 15 minutes he knew what I was looking for and he was scared. He had sold some items on the black market, but not many. He never admitted it, but I could tell. He almost jumped when I questioned him on it. I warned him about what could happen to him and, if he compromised the security of the operation of this camp through his activity, then he became mine and I didn't answer to anybody. Life would get very difficult for him. The look on his face showed that he was mentally kissing his ass goodbye. I had done what I wanted to do, so I let him go. The look on his face showed he couldn't believe his luck. He almost ran out of the room. The Master sergeant came in and was ready to take us to my next victim. But I wouldn't leave. I lit a cigarette and waited. The master sergeant didn't know what to do.

"Just wait a minute, sergeant! Give that guy time to get to a phone and warn his partners. I want the next guy to know we are coming and to sweat before we get there." The master sergeant smiled. I think he was glad I was not after him. Terry was learning and still wondering what my plan was.

I was right. My first victim had called his buddies and the word was out. I did the same procedure with each suspect. They got religion fast, I thought. I didn't really believe they would stop, but they would be a lot more careful and maybe not so greedy and that was probably all right. By the time I got to the last suspect, the whole camp knew we were there and were wondering if they were on my list. The master sergeant still didn't know what I was doing, but he saw the effect and the word was buzzing around the camp. Now it was time for my real plan. Our next visit was to the mess hall and the sergeant and his assistant who ran it.

This time I had the master sergeant bring in both men at the same time and then leave. I wanted a tour of their facilities. I looked at the mess sergeant's menu. I tasted his food. We went to his walk-in freezer and checked it for product. I never asked any hard questions until the very end, and they were not questions about missing equipment. I recruited him to help me. They both were eager to do it. I didn't want them to report on their fellow soldiers. I wanted them to help me with some counterintelligence activities I was involved in. Their help was simple. At times we needed extra food for our agents and other activities. I wanted to know if he could help me. Everybody wants to get into the spy business. He readily agreed and I now had the source for the food for my party and anything else I wanted. Maybe this wasn't exactly how I was supposed to do my job, but the food was for a liaison party for counterintelligence agents. So, technically, it was an intelligence activity. They were clearly excited to help and said they would do it as soon as I called.

The master sergeant was confused, because this time the victims seemed proud and purposeful when they left my gentle hands. I did the same thing to the motor pool sergeant and now we could have trucks and maintenance for our own vehicles if we needed it, and he could paint them any color we wanted—professionally. He even volunteered to procure us a new truck if we wanted it, but I didn't want one yet. It was a good day and I had my supplies for the party.

As we drove away Terry shook his head. He had a bit of a problem with my moral ambiguity and said so. I had to remind him we were not in church anymore. He, like me, had been in a seminary at one time to become a priest. We both left and ended up in Military Intelligence. But he couldn't do the work. Lying should come naturally to an agent, but Terry couldn't do it. Recruiting bothered him. Being responsible for killing someone was impossible for him. Using whores as agents, as we did, was morally reprehensible to him. Yet everything we were doing, he wanted to do. He just couldn't make himself do it and it brought deep frustration to him. The conflict he had within himself always worried me. If he couldn't come to grips with it, one day he would explode. He wanted to be a successful agent, and yet he failed at every task. But no one blamed him for it. We tried to direct him to tasks that he could do, but they

were menial and he knew it and that made it worse. I knew he was heading for a blow-up, but today was a good day and my lies weren't real lies. He could live with what I did. He seemed, at some level, to enjoy the whole process, but some part of him still thought of me as evil incarnate. Well, you can't win them all. The colonel knew what I did and Terry seemed to accept it somewhat. He was a bit frustrated about not being able to scare the interviewees as badly as I did. At the end of the day, though, he was laughing about the food I had scammed. So it was a good day for him. He didn't get many.

## Chapter 14

**It had been a quiet week.** It was already the middle of August. Roger had called about the party for the Intel agencies. He also reminded me about the party I was supposed to throw for the nurses. I had forgotten about that. Probably Carol, Roger's girlfriend, reminded him. Now I had to get stuff for another party. The Intel party would be held a week from today. Most everybody had gotten stuff in from home. I even got a package from Lena with a collection of canned Mexican food. No note with it, which was just as well. Our notes had been rather cold to each other and I didn't want to have to read another complaint about my notes. I did notice a couple of cans of tortillas. I didn't know they canned tortillas, but now I had some. I wondered what they would taste like.

Right after Roger's call, I received a call from the Korean Tiger division MI Group. It was from a Sergeant Kim and he invited me to a Tae Kwon Do demonstration and a lunch at the Korean Center in town. I was not normally on the Korean list of people they talked to, so my antenna was standing at attention again. Why did they want to talk to me? They did not ask for the captain, which I thought was unusual. After getting directions to the Korean Center—which I also did not know existed—I agreed to come and said I would bring someone with me, which they agreed to. Never go to a meeting alone if you don't know the people. I intended to follow that rule.

The captain was in his office, so I knocked and entered. He was reading a report. "Captain, I just got a call from the Koreans and they asked me to some kind of demonstration tomorrow. I have no idea why they want me. I said I would bring someone else. You want to go?"

He stopped and looked at me. “Well, I’ve been wanting to meet them, but they have not replied yet.” He stopped and thought a minute. “Take Terry with you. If they wanted me there they would have asked and maybe you can get them to open up a little to us. See if you can get a meeting with their CO. How did they know you?”

I thought a moment, “I have no idea. This came out of the blue. I’ll take Terry and see if I can figure out what they’re after. This could get interesting.” Captain Theran agreed.

I knew it was killing him not to go, but the Korean Army worked in strange ways. It would have been improper for me to bring someone of higher stature than myself when I was the one asked. I had no doubt that they knew a lot about all of us. I was being asked because they wanted to see if we were compatible and could do business. For that, they would want me. They probably thought that I was a guy they could do business with. They were right! Now I would have to find out what that business was. I went back to the office to tell Terry we were going to lunch tomorrow. I hoped this would get him out of the funk he was in. Terry was getting short. He had little more than a month to go. You would think he would be happy but he wasn’t. He was jittery and always ready to explode. He had gotten into a heated argument in the bar last night and almost came to throwing blows. If I hadn’t stepped in and stopped it, who knows what would have happened. I didn’t know what the disagreement was about—nobody was talking. Everybody laughed it off but Terry. I just couldn’t figure out what was bothering him. Maybe I could figure it out tomorrow.

We left at around 11:00 in the morning. Terry drove and I told him where to go. We found the center and there was a Sergeant Kim waiting to greet us. I introduced Terry. Sergeant Kim said the demonstration was just starting and we needed to hurry in to see it. I guess I was supposed to be there earlier, but nobody told me. I had no idea what Tae Kwon Do was. I figured it was some kind of wrestling or judo. I had vaguely heard of it. Terry had never heard of it. We were ushered into the gymnasium and were taken to the front row seats where all the brass was sitting. I was to sit next to what looked like was a “Bird” Colonel. Terry and Sergeant Kim were to sit behind me. All I could think of was, “What is going on? Why am

I sitting in the place of honor next to a commanding officer, the one who this whole demonstration was for?" I couldn't put it together.

The colonel stood up when I approached, bowed, and stuck out his hand, which I gripped and shook. He had a very firm grip. We sat down and he said something in Korean to me. Kim translated. "The colonel wishes to thank you for coming and for being so useful in our latest operation next to the city. He hopes you enjoy the demonstration." Now I knew what this was about. He had found out that I was the cause of that last operation and wanted to thank me, as it was very successful. "Damn! Roger had told him!" was the only thing I could think of.

I nodded to the colonel and thanked him. "I did what little I could," was all I said.

He smiled and pointed to the center of the gym. A soldier, naked to the waist, was out there. He bowed to the colonel and turned to the left. Six soldiers ran out on the floor. Each pair of soldiers held what looked like two 2"x8" planks about 30 inches long, held together with their hands. They braced themselves and the little soldier let out a roar and charged the six men. In a second he had broken all three stacks of wood held by the soldiers. It was impressive. For the next 30 minutes they broke more boards, cement blocks, ice blocks, and threw things at each other. These were not people to mess with. I was impressed. Then they began to fight each other. This was brutal and short. The killing blow stopped always just inches away from the victim. Then they bowed to each other and then to the colonel. We all clapped.

The final fight was between two of the best of these fighters. They stood in the middle of the gym and a soldier ran up to each one of them and handed them each a bayonet. It was covered with a sheath, so I wasn't worried. I should have been. They faced the colonel and then each other. With a flick of the wrist they flipped the protective covering off and began to fight with what looked like razor-sharp bayonets. To me, the fight looked in earnest. They stabbed. They slashed. They poked at each other. The bayonets looked very dangerous. One mistake and one of them would be seriously hurt. I began to feel like I was in the Roman Coliseum watching two gladiators fight. The fighting became more aggressive. The bayonet blades hit each other and sparks flew. I was glued to



the fight. Every now and then they would get in a clinch and try to throw each other. They were moving all over the floor. Suddenly, one got the advantage and twisted the other around and threw him over his back, bayonet and all. The soldier twisted around in the air so he would be ready to get up when he hit the ground. The only problem was that he was heading directly at me and there was nowhere to go. He hit the floor right in front of me and his bayonet—with a loud “thunk”—stuck in the floor between my huge feet. I had seen it coming and froze, not knowing what to do.

I heard a collective gasp from the crowd. The poor soldier had just realized what had almost happened and he was sure he had lost face and had embarrassed his commander. His eyes looked like he thought he was about to be sent to a firing squad. He was afraid of what was going to happen to him because of his error. The other soldier had also frozen. This was his fault, too. Before anyone could overreact I reached down, pried the bayonet from between my feet—it was stuck hard in the floor—and handed it to the terrified soldier. As I handed it back I said, “Never quit! Go get him!” Sergeant Kim, behind me, translated. The soldier quickly stood up and gave me a deep bow. The colonel clapped his hands and so did everybody else. I was their kind of guy. My soldier won the match quickly after that. By pure dumb luck I had made points with them. They were lucky I hadn’t pissed in my pants when that bayonet came my way, or that I hadn’t crawled away in fear. The truth was, I froze! They didn’t know that.

After the demonstration there was a banquet. I had never eaten any Korean food before, so this was an experience I looked forward to. Each dish was something I had never had before—and didn’t look like anything I ever wanted—but I had to try each one. They were spicy, garlicky, and were sure to clean out my system. Terry only ate some rice and some chicken that he could recognize. There was plenty of beer and that helped with the pain of the hot peppers. Terry would only drink Coke and they didn’t have much of that. They brought out one dish that I did recognize. It was crab in a dark sauce. I told Kim that I knew about this one. I deftly grabbed a piece of crab and tried to break the shell off it. Kim tried to stop me but was not fast enough. The crab cracked and inside of it was not crab meat, but more of the dark stuff and it splashed over my white shirt. That

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was the trouble with white shirts—I always spilled stuff on them. Kim laughed and said I was supposed to grab the crab pieces with my chopsticks and suck the meat out. I tried that and immediately needed a beer. It was very spicy and full of peppers. I had now had about enough of Korean food—but I did like their company. At the end of the meal I shook many hands and said goodbye to the colonel, who invited me to his HQ at the Korean base out of town. I was thankful and accepted. We parted as new friends.

Sergeant Kim walked me to my jeep and asked if we could help his people in a problem they were having with our PX. I wondered how he knew we had some control there. Apparently, Koreans were not allowed to buy things from the American PX because of some kind of red tape. His men needed some things and wanted me to see if I could get the problem straightened out. I told him I would look into it and get back to him. He gave me his card. I didn't have a card to give him but he already knew my number since he had called me. Maybe the whole purpose was to get PX access. I could not understand why they didn't have access. They were fighting the same people I was and they had saved my neck during Tet. For that reason alone, I would get them what they wanted one way or another. Terry and I went home. Terry did enjoy telling everyone about the Tae Kwon Do match and the bayonet between my feet. I just joked about it. Tomorrow I would check out the PX.

In the morning, I called the officer in charge of the PX and I asked him about the problem with Koreans using the PX. I realized immediately that it was a sore subject. The long and short of it was that usage of the PX was a MACV decision and one of the agreements with the Korean Government—at their request—was that their soldiers not get PX privileges. They were already being paid more than the soldiers who stayed in Korea. The PX Officer didn't think it was right—and neither did I—but that was the way it was. So I thanked him and called Sergeant Kim. I had an idea that might work. I told the sergeant that I could not get privileges for the PX for his men but if his men knew what they wanted and if they gave me a list I would get them what they wanted. He would just have to reimburse me for the stuff I purchased. He liked the idea and said he would get back to me with a list. It was the least I could do.

About two hours later he called back and had a list for me. It was basically some toiletries, a radio or two, and some beer and booze. I wrote it all down and said I would have it by tomorrow afternoon if it were in the PX. I guessed what he was asking for was around \$100 so I went to the kitty. Larry, Karl and I had started a kitty to pay for our booze. In the beginning, we covered all the drinks, but, as they left, that money dried up, so I was fronting for much of the booze while Roger and some of the others who used our booze also paid into it. Currently, I had \$110 plus some change in the kitty. I took out \$100 and called Billy. I explained to him what I wanted and who I wanted it for. He had no problem since it was for the Koreans and he agreed with me that keeping them out of the PX was chickenshit. I gave him the list and the \$100 and he went to the PX. I also gave him the special ration card, although I thought they would recognize him as he bought a great deal of booze for me. In an hour he returned with everything on the list. I decided to call Sergeant Kim and let him know we had everything already. He was very appreciative and we decided to meet at his Korean Center in an hour. I was hoping to get a beer or two from him for the favor. When I got there he was already waiting for me. We shook hands and I gave him the things on his list that he wanted from the PX. After we loaded his truck I told him that the items cost a total of \$98. He handed me an envelope and I looked in it. It looked like there was \$200 in it.

“Sergeant Kim, this is too much! I only want the \$98. You are a friend, after all.”

“No, that is right. We need these things and we could not get them. You did us a big favor and you, as my friend, must be paid. We thank you.” I tried again to give it back but it was a point of honor with him. That was the way the Koreans did business—or so he said. I shook his hand and left. With that transaction I doubled the kitty. From that point on, at least twice a month, we provided them with things they wanted. Our kitty was bursting at the seams and nobody knew why but me. Life can be good as long as you don’t get caught, but who would try to catch me?

When I got back to our office Captain Theran called me in. My guess was that he wanted to find out what the Korean colonel really

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wanted. I was wrong. “Mr. Burdick, your presence is requested tomorrow morning in Nha Trang for a promotion hearing. I’ve gotten you space on this afternoon’s flight,” he said.

What promotion board, I thought? “Do I have to go, sir?” came out of my mouth. He looked a little surprised.

“You don’t want to go?” he asked.

“I can go to the next one. Besides, they are never going to promote me. I haven’t the time in service yet. Can you check, sir?” I asked. I guess he had never had anyone not want to go to a promotion board before—and his surprise showed.

“I’ll check, but if I were you, I would throw a change of clothes in a bag. They want you there,” he said.

“Shit!” I thought. I went and packed a bag. At 1400 Terry took me to the airport and I got onto a plane for Nha Trang. Terry had even wished me good luck. That surprised me. I would have to find out what a promotion board does. If they are going to question me on military stuff I was doomed. This was going to be a waste of time. I didn’t like leaving so quickly.

When I arrived in Nha Trang they had somebody there to meet me. He took me to the headquarters and a briefing about what was going to happen tomorrow morning. I was right. I was going to be interviewed on my military knowledge, which was zilch! Oh well, tomorrow is tomorrow. I wanted to go to the house they used as a barracks and catch a nap. Before I left I made sure they made reservations for my flight back at 1300 tomorrow. They made the reservations and then took me to the house and I laid down for a nap. It didn’t last long. A group of agents from headquarters had come to visit and wanted to talk. They had heard about what I had done with my net and were having a hard time understanding how I could do it. I didn’t talk much about that, but I did mention the ammo depot and the AWOL sergeant. I also talked about Ahn Khe. They loved the stories about Sin City. It was time for dinner and they wanted to take me to a local Vietnamese restaurant they said was very good. I had never eaten on the local economy. I didn’t really like the idea, but maybe Vietnamese food could be good.

We took two jeeps and headed for the restaurant. I didn’t like the place. It was on the main street and was not protected by anything. It had big plate glass windows on the street side. I was getting

nervous. We went inside. I was glad I had my .45 with me. I told them I wanted to sit in the back. They let me and I sat with my back to the cement wall. They didn't seem to understand my discomfort. I really did not want to be in the restaurant with them. I ordered a beer but even it didn't taste good. They ordered and I ate what I could, but my eyes were always darting around, checking everyone that moved. I needed to get back to Qui Nhon. I just didn't feel safe here. Finally, I quieted down quite a bit. The food was actually quite good. We ate dinner fairly fast for them but it dragged for me. Afterwards, we went back to the house and had several more beers there. I asked about the board I was going to in the morning but they weren't any help there. I would just have to bluff my way through it. I did not sleep well that night.

In the morning I got up, showered and shaved. The other agents took me to headquarters. I didn't want any breakfast. The board started at 0800. My turn was supposed to be at 0900, so I waited and read *Stars and Stripes*. For a military newspaper, it wasn't that bad. I hadn't seen this edition yet. I usually got my news on the Armed Services TV. So I read it cover to cover while I waited.

Finally, my name was called. I went to the door and a master sergeant there said, "Just go in, do a right turn, face the board, and salute them. They then will ask you some questions. It shouldn't take long." He opened the door and I walked in.

My mind must have been in some other body. As I got to the center of the room I did a left turn and stood facing an empty wall. Wrong direction! So I did an about-face and there was the board. I really must have impressed them! Half the board was chuckling at my wall-facing move. I now knew this was really going to be a waste of time. How could they promote someone who didn't know his right from his left? They began to ask me questions. First, about my background and then questions about what was happening in Vietnam. I realized quickly that they were all from the *Stars and Stripes* I had just read before I entered the room. What the hell did that have to do with me becoming a staff sergeant? I answered all their questions and they dismissed me. This time I did a right turn and went out of the door correctly. I was sure my chance of getting a promotion was nil to zilch. Besides, most of the promotions were going to headquarter people anyway. They got me back to the airport

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and I made it back to Qui Nhon by 1400 hours—in time for afternoon drinks. It felt good to be back home. I felt safe here.

In two weeks the list came out and I was at the top of it. How did that happen? The first of next month I was promoted to Staff Sergeant, E-6. At least I would get a little more money. How they came to that decision was beyond me. When I told everyone about my saluting the wall when I went into the board they all had a good laugh. Maybe the Army did have a sense of humor after all.

At our beach barracks we still had the same Nung guards that Larry had scammed months ago. When Karl and Larry left, they had decided I was to be their new commander. That meant I had to approve the guard schedules and settle any disputes the guards might have with each other. The senior guard, Kim Dong, who acted as a translator when we needed him, brought their problems to me. This didn't sit too well with Captain Theran, but he put up with it. He knew the guards trusted me. I did have to tell him what I was doing with them, though. He was especially worried about substitute guards. We had two substitute guards we used when one of our regular guards was sick or on vacation. During emergencies, we could pull all our guards, including substitutes, in to protect us. I assured him that we had checked out the substitutes and they were fine. I also told him that no Nung has ever joined the VC. The Vietnamese and Chinese hate each other, even though they have lived together in Vietnam for over a hundred years. He wasn't happy, but he let it go.

Two days after I had returned from the Promotion Board, we were enjoying our bar and talking about the party that was coming up. It was going to happen this Saturday. Terry and I were going to see our friendly mess sergeant on Friday, and Billy would stock up the bar on Friday, too. I volunteered to cook the meat and do the prep work. Everybody was getting very enthusiastic about the party. It would be the first time all of us had gotten together as a group. It was going to be a great party. Around 11:00 PM I went to bed and quickly fell to sleep, dreaming of tacos and cold beer. The next thing I knew, somebody was gently shaking me. I grabbed my glasses and put them on. It was Kim, the senior guard. He motioned for me to be quiet and whispered, "Come now!" and pointed outside. I really hate

getting woken up in the middle of the night, was all I was thinking. It always meant something bad was happening. I pulled on my pants and shoes, grabbed my pistol and hurriedly went out.

One of the guards was up in the water tower, facing the ocean with his rifle pointing in that direction. I was motioned to the side of the outhouse and saw all of our guards lying on the sand, facing the beach, rifles pointed out to the ocean. What the hell was going on! Then Kim pointed out to the ocean, and I stared. At first I didn't see much, but I began to hear unusual noises—creaks and splashes that should not have been there. Then I saw the boats. Damn! The VC don't have boats! At least I didn't think they did. Maybe the NVA do, but they couldn't get here. What was going on? Then Kim signaled a request to me to turn on the lights facing the ocean and to open fire. I stopped him and went to the ladder and climbed up it a ways to where I could see what was going on better.

There definitely were four or five boats out there. They looked like rubber boats, and there were four or five men in each boat. I had a little more than a minute to decide whether we would fire on them. We had received no warning of any practice in our area, but I wasn't certain. I waited and motioned to the guards to hold on for a minute. More boats were appearing now. There looked to be twenty of them. I took a chance it was the Vietnamese Army doing a practice and waited. The guards looked like they were sweating blood, but they followed my command. As the first boats landed, the men in them jumped out and pulled their boats ashore. They were in uniform. I was beginning to relax. The VC and NVA don't wear American style uniforms. An officer ran up and saw where they were. He motioned everybody to head up the beach, away from the city. They obviously were in the wrong place. Now we had to keep out of their way. If they saw us they might just fire on us. It was still a dangerous situation. The Nungs were under control, though. I signaled them to stay in place and I went back inside and got the captain. I knocked on his door, which he promptly opened, pistol in hand.

"Outside! We have some activity, but I think it's all right." I turned and left. My knees were shaking. I couldn't stand still. The captain followed me.

He froze when he saw all the soldiers hitting the beach. "Shit!" was all he whispered. I signaled for quiet. From behind the outhouse,

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in a low voice, I explained what had happened. The captain wasn't happy. "You should have gotten me!" he whispered.

I replied, "There wasn't time. I didn't know what was happening until I saw it, and I had to make a decision then. I went and got you when I knew I had guessed right. Is there some asshole you can call and raise holy hell with over this? This could have gotten very messy. We're lucky our guards didn't fire first. We could all have been blown to shit."

He nodded his head in agreement. "You did good and some son of a bitch is going to hear loud and clear from me in the morning. Good work!"

I didn't feel I had done anything spectacular. The last soldiers had just landed and were heading up the beach. I was thinking of stealing one of the rubber boats just for the hell of it. I motioned to Kim to have his men stand down. The captain and I went in and had a drink and talked a bit. We were both really shook up. I went out and thanked all the guards before I went to bed. They really seemed to appreciate my talking to them before I went to bed. These guys were good!

The next morning, the rest of the team had gotten up and heard that something had happened last night. We had them meet us in the bar. The captain and I explained what occurred. They couldn't believe they had slept through all of that. We both complimented the guards. The captain had found out that it was a practice beach landing by some ARVN unit. They were dropped off at the wrong point and landed in our backyard by mistake. They missed their landing point by over three miles. That was quite a bit down the road. They did not know we were there and that we were prepared to attack the intruders until I recognized that they were ARVN. It was close to a catastrophe. He emphasized that to the ARVN HQ. Well, I didn't think it was that close, but they apologized profusely and promised to clean up any damage they had caused. Maybe I should have taken a boat. The team probably would not sleep as well tonight, but I trusted the Nungs and would have no trouble sleeping.

It was time for me to complete my scrounging for the party. I gave Billy some money to go get the beer and booze. I also asked



him to get some ice that we could store in the general's freezer. Terry and I drove out to the mess sergeant's supply room and picked up what we needed. It came in large boxes. The sergeant also gave me a large can that felt like it had nothing in it.

"Dehydrated shrimp! Just soak it in some salty water and it is like the real thing. There is some sauce in there, too," he said. I thanked him. He put a large can of catsup in the jeep. "For the sauce!" he said. We thanked him and headed home. I put everything I could in the backup refrigerator. The other refrigerator was for beer and sodas. We were ready!

I started preparing things in the morning. The meat was not quite defrosted so we took it out so it could get soft enough to cook by mid-afternoon. I had to send Billy back to the PX because we didn't have a can opener. We also needed napkins, paper plates, and some plastic spoons and knives. We had plenty of glasses. He thought of even more things when he got there and came back with some serving bowls, knives and other things. He used the money from our slush fund. Everyone was to bring what they had gotten from home—or wherever—and we would figure out what we were going to do with it when it arrived. Knowing the people coming, I guessed some would also be bringing some stuff we knew nothing about, so we would just wing it with the extra stuff. Sometime a little after 1200 hours I began to chop up the lettuce, onion, and tomatoes and shred some of the block of cheddar I had gotten from the mess sergeant. I put them in the refrigerator, which was getting full, and then I had a beer.

Next, was figuring out what to do with the canned shrimp. I opened it and found that it was full of dried shrimp with a packet of "dried sauce" as promised. I thought to tackle the sauce first. I took a medium-sized bowl and poured the "dried sauce" into it. There was only about 3 or 4 tablespoons of a whitish powder in the bottom of the bowl. So I took the catsup and poured about 2 cups into the bowl and stirred it. It seemed like it would make a credible sauce. I stuck it in the refrigerator. I would wait until later for the rest.

We brought a couple of desks in to use as serving tables and waited for people to begin showing up. Roger, of course, was the first. He had a bagful of goodies he had gotten from his wife and his girlfriend. I pulled the salsas out and put them in the refrigerator. I

put the taco seasoning mixes on the stove. I brought the meat out and began cooking it. Soon it began to smell wonderful. It wasn't a *taqueria*, but you knew it wasn't far from it. I then took the shrimp out and salted some water in a large bowl. I poured the shrimp into the bowl. I had to add some more water after a while as it had all soaked into the shrimp. In twenty minutes it was ready, and we had a huge bowl of fresh-looking shrimp. I drained the excess water and put the bowl in a box of crushed ice. I took out the shrimp sauce I had made earlier and found that it had turned to jelly. So I put more catsup in it and tried to mix it up some more. I tasted it with the shrimp. It was the hottest shrimp sauce I had ever had. My eyes watered but there was no more I could do with it now. Everybody loved it, though—a surprise hit.

As people showed up, more things were added to the table. Billy was serving booze to everybody as fast as he could. Terry was helping me over at the stove. The CIA team showed up next. We had people from the MACV advisory team for Binh Dinh province. People from Roger's ONI team showed up. Another MI team from the 524th MI group came. We had people from the Air Force intelligence unit at Tuy Phuc also show up. Paul and Gary even came down from Ahn Khe. There were about 20 of us there, all stuffing tacos into our mouths and drinking everything we could find. All the VC/NVA had to do was blow up the building and every intelligence team in the province would be decimated. I hoped there was no crisis tonight since no one was at home.

After about 10 lbs. of taco meat disappeared, I was able to sit down to eat a taco myself and relax with a beer. I sat on one of our couches near our TV set, which was off. Everyone just seemed to be relaxing and shooting the shit. Roger went by me headed for our outhouse, or—as he called it—"the head." I was tired from cooking and went and got another beer and taco and sat down again. Leave a group of guys alone and eventually they begin bragging about what they had done. One of the guys from the CIA started it. He didn't know everybody but he wanted to find out how good they were. He wanted to know who was responsible for the most KIAs since the first of the year. I shuddered. The CIA started with 22. The other MI Group claimed they had 11. Someone had stuck a piece of paper on the wall and they were writing the numbers down. A couple of

our agents and Captain Theran looked at me, but I decided to say nothing. Roger came back into the room and quickly got the gist of the discussion. He poured himself a drink. I knew what he was going to do because he looked at me and smirked. Shit!

“You guys are hopeless!” Roger laughed. “Burdick, what is your KIA count so far?” Roger shouted. I pretended to chew my taco and shrugged my shoulders. “Well, he’s modest, but I believe it’s around 2,200 to 2,500 by now. Right, Burdick?” I shrugged an embarrassed agreement with him. Even my people hadn’t put all the deaths that I had caused together, and seemed stunned. Everybody kind of stalled out at the same time. The number was staggering. It was still hard for me to believe. The first 100 or so were done before the big attack to the north, Roger pointed out. It is one thing to know an operation was successful. It’s quite another to wrap your mind around what it did. To them I must have seemed an incongruous taco maker/killer. The happy-go-lucky guy behind the bar was the biggest killer in the room. I enjoyed being the happy-go-lucky guy, and even though I knew I had caused more to be killed than anyone dreamed of, I didn’t like being called a “killer.” I was just a soldier doing his job.

Roger went on to tell them of some of my exploits and they hung onto every word. I was fucking embarrassed, but there was nothing I could do. Most of it was true, but when you put it all together it didn’t sound like me. So I had to go to the bar and have a few drinks with everybody. We drank a lot. They complained that they could never get anyone to do anything about their intelligence. I tried to shift the success to Roger, but he said that it was the quality of information I dredged up that impressed his support people, plus they were really impressed with my professionalism. It just didn’t feel like it was me that he was talking about. They now heard about the SEAL team activity and the wonder grew. I drank some more and grew silent.

I don’t remember who started it, but somewhere during the evening we all started talking about lists of people who were spying for the VC/NVA. There was nothing they could do about them, was the general consensus. The frustration in all their voices was overpowering. I felt it, too. All everyone in the room wanted was to get out of Vietnam with as few American casualties as possible. Like me, they thought they knew who and where the bad guys were.

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They were not able to take any action themselves, and there was no unit they could use to do their bidding. Saigon made it tough for them to recruit agents and had more regulations than sense when it came to taking action on what we learned. I was in the same position once, but, when told to disband my agents, I rebelled and created a non-existent group of agents. The only person in the room that knew that was me. If they knew, they would understand how I was successful: I cheated! For them, it was especially hard to notify your headquarters that the bad guys were planning this or that and get no response—or worse—have them ask for verification from other sources that they knew was impossible to get. We were all positive that the guys sitting in Saigon had totally lost it. The plan should have been simple: Destroy the enemy wherever he is! Instead, all they could do was ask for more verification. If we bothered to get permission, the enemy would have been long gone before we took any action. For a handler like me, it was extremely dangerous for our agents to get information a second time. The old story of going to the well too many times is true. I would have lost valuable assets and so would the other agents. What I had done was ignore Saigon and get the individual units locally involved before Saigon knew what was happening. Well, Roger had done most of that work, but we had planned it together. Nobody really knew how far I had gone in ignoring and tricking Saigon. I was sure I was on their radar now, and eventually I would have to dispose of my nets, or whatever was left of them.

While I was meditating about this, the conversation had gotten more intense. They wanted to do something—and do it now.

“What if we just got rid of them? Someone said.

“Get rid of who?” asked Roger.

“The local VC leaders!” said someone from the group. Soon they were talking scenarios about how to get rid of them. I guess the booze helped in the discussion.

Finally, I said, “Look! We are getting into serious areas. If there is anyone who doesn’t want to talk about this, they should leave now. You don’t want to know what we will be doing!” I was really hoping my comment would stop this discussion. It didn’t. The group suddenly got quiet.

Finally, the Air Force agents got up and said, “We have to get back to our base. We don’t have any real lists, anyway. We wish you guys good luck!” With that they left.

I went and sat back down on my couch. I wanted to see where this would end up. Planning is much more difficult than getting information. They first wanted a rough count of how many VC leaders we were talking about. After everyone gave an estimate, the count came to 33 suspects. That was too many to just shoot or take in a helicopter ride and shove out the door. We thought of giving the list to the Phoenix team to have them assassinated. I told them there was no way these guys could do that many at one time. If they did it over time, the suspects would figure it out and disappear into the jungle. We needed to do it all at once—over one day. One day they would be here, the next they would all be gone. Hell would be raised by everybody, but the message would go out. Roger came up with the idea of taking them out in a boat and using them for shark bait. They all liked that.

“Too many fucking guys will see what you are doing and somebody will talk!” I said. Roger had an answer to that. He thought that, if he just used people who lost a close friend, nothing would be said. They would love to get even. They all agreed and looked at me. They wanted 100% agreement before they went on. So I just shrugged compliance. They then began planning.

“Get me your lists and in two days we will arrest all of them in the middle of the night and take them for a swim with the sharks. Agreed?” Roger asked. Everyone nodded his head in agreement. Even I did. At the moment, it seemed like a great idea. At least we’ll get rid of a lot of trouble-makers. The party was beginning to break up. We were all full and had more than enough to drink.

I then realized that I had forgotten the one thing that Karl had always told me: “NEVER! NEVER! plan when you are drunk. You will always screw up!” I also realized that I had, just now, learned another lesson: “Once you do something, it is much easier to do it a second time, and it gets easier every time thereafter.” I had been ordering people killed for a long time. Now I had done it without a care in the world. It was too easy! It was then that I decided I had to put a stop to this now.

“Wait a minute! Let me put this diplomatically. Some of you may have one of my agents on your bad guy list. I don’t want to lose him or her. I especially am not going to tell you who they are. We need to rethink what you are proposing. Let’s not let our frustrations ruin our operations.” Nobody had thought of that. We probably did have each other’s agents on our bad-guy lists. It took just a few minutes for everybody to recognize the real problem I had brought up, and to agree that we would have to forget any operation like the one we were talking about. No one wanted to lose or reveal his assets. People then began to leave. I think they were all glad the operation had been called off. I needed to go to bed. After everybody had left, I crawled up to my room and passed out.

When I got up the next morning, I vaguely remembered what we had planned, but couldn’t believe we really meant it. I cleaned up and called Roger, first thing. I thought I had gotten us out of the operation. What we were planning was over the line and wrong. Surprisingly, Roger was there, bright and cheerful.

“We did cancel that operation last night, didn’t we?” I asked.

“Yeah! Your last piece of sober logic stopped everything, but it was fun to think about,” he stated, disappointedly.

“Well, I think some of my people would have been items on the other lists and I didn’t want to lose them or let anyone know they were mine. I thought I made a good point. Not good to plan when we are drinking,” I said.

Roger paused, “Yeah, I got it last night. Still, I would have loved to do it. That would have gotten everybody’s dander up. It was fun to think about, but you were right. So we will do nothing now but will talk to you later and see what we can do about some of these guys.” He hung up.

Damn! What the hell had we been thinking? There was no way I was going to let this idea go any further. It already went too far. The good thing was, they wouldn’t do it without me. I hoped that would be the end of it. I knew I would never let them put this back on the table. It was just a bad idea caused by jealousy and too much booze. I went back to bed. Let someone else clean up the party mess. I had already cleaned up another one.

When I finally got up, the captain called me into his office. “Tell me we didn’t do what I think we did last night?” he said worriedly.

I shook my head. “No! We all had too much to drink and put together one of the worst OP plans I had ever heard. I was glad I was able to talk them out of it last night. I already called Roger this morning and made sure everything had stopped. I told him that my agents were likely to be picked up and I could not allow that, nor would I tell anyone who they were. He agreed that everything had stopped,” I said.

“Thank God! Nice save! We got a little too drunk last night.” the captain said.

“Killing is easy! Winning is hard! That wasn’t going to help us,” I said. The captain nodded his head affirmatively, relieved that the problem was gone.

“I have another problem. Dave is going back to the States in four weeks. He has asked me to approve a request to marry a local, indigenous girl. Do you know anything about this?” he asked. I was surprised. Dave Farren was not in our command. He was under heavy cover, running some kind of network that never got any information, as far as I knew. He was in the first house I was in when I got in-country. As a matter of fact, it was his house and we took it over when our unit was enlarged. He still lived in that house while we were now living on the beach. He was always quiet. Spoke Vietnamese. I stayed away from him to help him maintain his cover. I knew the girl who he was seeing. If that was the girl he was planning to marry, we had a problem.

I replied, “I do, sir. Let me check out something and I will get back to you.” He agreed and I went out and talked to Kim, our Vietnamese translator. He also knew the girl. According to him, she was not the school girl she had convinced Dave she was. Like many Vietnamese girls, she had decided to live with an American on a semi-permanent basis until the American went back to the States. These girls made a good living and were able to live quite well. Before Dave, according to my translator, she had lived with another American for about seven or eight months. Now she had taken up with Dave. Dave was from a small town in Iowa. His family would probably be horrified at what he was bringing home. If she were, in reality, just a student as she had claimed to him, I would have left the whole thing alone. But she had lied to him and he didn’t know

it or didn't bother to check her story, as he should have. This would not work. She was taking advantage of an inexperienced American boy who probably had his first sexual experience with this girl. You would think that an agent who was trained in deep cover would know to check out all the people he lets into his circle. I decided I had to do something and it would not be pleasant. Dave needed to know the truth, whether he liked it or not, but just telling him would not work. There was no way he would believe me or anybody else.

I went back to the captain. "Can you get an R&R for Dave?" I asked. He wanted to ask me what I had planned, but thought better of it. He called headquarters and two days later Dave had orders to go on R&R to Singapore. He left for Saigon the next day. He had no time to fully explain anything to his girlfriend—we saw to that.

The day after he left I went and got my translator, Kim. My plan was simple. If she really loved him, then nothing would happen, but if she were just after a trip to the States, then she would fall into my trap. We went to where she lived, but she was not there. She worked in the PX so we went there and found her coming out of work. I couldn't have planned it better. She knew me, or at least had seen me with Dave once or twice. So she was not alarmed when I stopped to talk to her. She was not a pretty girl compared to other Vietnamese.

"How are you doing?" I asked as if I was really concerned. I knew she could speak some English but I gestured my translator to tell her what I said. I wanted her to understand every word I said. Kim told me she said she was doing fine. "Do you miss Dave?" I asked.

Again, she said "Yes."

"I'll be glad when I get to go back to the States, like Dave just did," I said. When my interpreter translated my comment you could see immediate confusion in her face. She began to animatedly talk to the interpreter, ignoring me. Of course, I had briefed him and he must have followed the line. She quickly left, ignoring me. You could see the anger in her face. My interpreter told me he had said what I had told him. He was sure she believed Dave had lied to her and had really gone back to the States. He had even told her that he had helped Dave with his entire luggage and it was heavy. He told me that he believed she had gotten angry—not the anger of a jilted



lover but the anger of a plan gone wrong. I didn't know how he knew that, but time would tell. Now we would have to wait.

Four days later I saw her with a new PA&E friend. According to my interpreter, they had moved in together. Old habits are hard to break. She went back to being a woman who hired herself out to civilian workers for the time they were in Vietnam. She would clean his house, cook his food and warm his bed for a monthly fee until he left. She had quickly given up on Dave. Dave was going to be back tomorrow and I was thinking of going to Ahn Khe—anywhere but here. I didn't want to tell him. However, it was my plan and I would have to see it through to the end.

I picked up Dave at the airport. He was telling me about all the fun he had had in Singapore. He seemed fascinated that it was against the law to chew gum there. I was trying to figure out how I was going to tell him about his intended. He began to tell me of the gifts he had bought for his girlfriend and I felt like crawling into a hole somewhere—except there are no holes in a jeep. He was happy. In two weeks he would be back in the States and, a month later or so, his fiancé would be there with him. He was as happy as I had ever seen him. I was feeling like a real asshole, but it had to be done. He wanted to stop by the PX to pick up some stuff he needed before he went home and I agreed to take him there on the way back to the office. I even volunteered to wait in the jeep until he got what he wanted. His bags were in the jeep and, if we left them alone there, they would be gone by the time we got back. He thanked me and got out of the jeep and froze. His girlfriend had just come out of the PX on the arm of some burly American civilian. She was smiling and hugging him. I was real glad Dave was not armed. We weren't that far away from her. He staggered over to her, tears in his eyes. They said a few words to each other and he turned and came back to the jeep. The anger in his eyes was overpowering.

He looked at me. "You did this, didn't you? You son of a bitch! If I had a gun I would kill you." I started the jeep and headed back to our barracks. He would get over it, but I would always be the guy he hated for chasing his lover away.

"Look, if she loved you, she would have waited or at least been distraught until you got back. She had a new boyfriend by the end of the day when she was told you were not coming back." I then

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shut up. I was making him madder. Before I had left for the airport I told the captain what I was going to do—so he was waiting when we came in. He could tell that Dave had gotten the message. Before I came to a stop, Dave jumped from the jeep and went into our office. The captain intercepted him and asked him into his office. I didn't want to hear what was going on and headed to the bar. I told the other agents what had happened.

Marty said, "Jesus, Burdick don't do me any fucking favors!" Nobody else said anything. They all sat quietly, drinking. I poured myself a strong bourbon and water and sipped it slowly. I did what I thought was right to help Dave. Maybe one day he will understand. The captain came in and walked over to me.

"He took it hard, very hard. He might not understand, but you did the right thing. How you did it is beyond me. But you broke the bond. He is heading for home tomorrow morning. Stay away from him."

I didn't have to be told twice. I checked with Billy and found out that Dave was scheduled for a 0900 flight. I went to my room. For some reason I decided to read a letter from my wife but that made me feel even worse. I tore it up and threw it in the trash. I crawled into bed and tossed and turned with my thoughts. I finally got to sleep. When I woke up in the morning I dressed and headed to the Officers' Club for breakfast. I would stay there until after the 0900 flight left. I never saw Dave again. Nobody ever disagreed with what I had done, but it was a hard thing and they wondered just what capacity for harm I really did have.

## Chapter 15

**The following Monday—in the States** it was Labor Day, September 2, 1968—the captain told me he had to go to Nha Trang to put out some fires. Evidently, Dave raised a huge stink when he got there and the captain felt he had to go and clear the air.

“Don’t worry, Burdick. You’re not in any trouble. They just want some information on what is going on here,” he told me. I read that as him telling me I wouldn’t get blamed for what I did. Why they even were bothering with it was beyond me. “I’m leaving after lunch and won’t be back until Wednesday or Thursday. You will be in charge until I get back. Don’t get crazy!” he jokingly added, while laughing.

I laughed and said, “Oh boy, now I really can have a party!” We both laughed.

“By the way, how much do I owe for the drinks I’ve been having and for all the people who we have drinking here all the time?” he asked.

Well, I didn’t want to tell him about my Korean connection, so I just said, “I’ll let you know when you get back.” He shrugged as I started to leave his office. Of course, I never intended to tell him, but for now that would hold him off.

“Another thing, Terry is very short. He should be leaving here in a little over two weeks. I talked to him yesterday and am a little bit concerned. He didn’t seem to care very much. Watch him while I’m gone.” I knew Terry had been getting stranger lately,” so I nodded my head in agreement. I had been watching him already. Something was churning in his head and I didn’t know what.

Immediately after the captain left, we decided we had worked enough and commenced to celebrate the afternoon with quantities of cold beer. As afternoon turned to evening, we switched to more substantial liquids and continued trying to quench our thirst. Everyone was there, including Terry, who didn't drink too much and had a sour look on his face. Billy tried to talk to him about going home, but Terry would have none of it and walked away.

One of our problems in our new office was that we had become infested with mice or rats—we weren't sure what they were. If they were mice, they were big mice. I thought they were small rats, just getting started. We had food around and they were probably eating some of our scraps. Everyone was complaining about it, so I sent Billy to the PX before it closed and he bought some traps to catch these critters. They were old-fashioned traps that sprang shut when the mouse ate the food on the trap. I had some leftover cheese from the taco party in the refrigerator. When Billy returned, he had six traps and I loaded them with cheese. Terry then placed them around our bar area and in the office area. We took bets on how quickly the traps would start snapping. Before we could decide on how to set up the betting, the first trap snapped loudly shut. We all were stunned to silence. Terry went to look and came back with what looked like a small rat in the trap. As he was walking back to show us, two more traps snapped.

"Shit! What am I going to do with all these dead rats?" Terry complained. Nobody had thought of what we would do with the dead rats. I told him to go drop them into the outhouse barrels that we burned once a week. When he came back he only had two traps. One had fallen into the barrel.

"I'm through with this. Somebody else can take them next time. Not me!" he bellowed. We all laughed, even Terry. So, since I was in charge, I set the order on emptying the traps, with me being the last one, which I claimed, to one and all, was only right. I re-cheesed the two empty traps that Terry had returned with and Billy placed them near to where we had placed them before. It seemed every 10 to 15 minutes we caught a rat. After a couple of hours we had killed nearly 15 rats. After the 10th one, it wasn't as much fun as before. None of us could believe we had that many rats in the building.

Finally, all the traps were out and we heard no more snapping. I was glad since, by this time, we were all pretty well toasted.

After over an hour of silence from the traps, I said, "Well I guess we got them. I got to go to bed. Damn, there were a lot of rats in here—besides you guys!" Just as I finished speaking, we heard a loud snap! "Not another fucking rat!" I muttered. This time, when I went looking for it, I found it in the trap behind the water cooler. It was the biggest rat of the night and it was still alive. Only its snout was caught in the trap.

"What do we do with that one? He's still alive!" Billy asked when he saw it.

There must be a rule somewhere not to ask a drunken person anything. I was hardly sober and I had another bright idea. "Shit, it's probably the leader of the pack. It's big enough. Let's take it out back and I will execute it with a shot to the back of its furry head," I said. I then headed to the back where the outhouse was, with Billy carrying the trap with the rat squirming in it and everyone else following excitedly, wondering if I really was going to do it. When I got there I told the guard I was going to shoot the rat and they got as far away from me as they could. I had Billy put it on the side of one of our foxholes out back, which had sandbags around it. Billy laid it up against the side of a couple of the bags. I didn't have a pistol, though.

"Hey, I need a pistol! Anybody got one?" I asked. Somebody gave me a 9mm pistol that I cocked and pointed at the hapless, squirming rat. Standing about three feet from it, I fired. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had missed it! Everybody was doubled over laughing. I could hit a fence-post at a hundred yards and yet miss a rat at three feet. I didn't think it was so funny! So I leaned to within a foot of it, fired, and missed again. Some of the agents were laughing so hard they were crying. I couldn't believe it. The rat was no longer moving, but the bullet had never touched him.

"All right, who gave me the pistol with a crooked barrel?" I said. They all laughed even harder. I even began to laugh. This was really hysterical! "OK, one more shot, right behind his ear," I said. So I leaned over as far as I could, with the barrel touching part of the rat's head, and fired one more time. This was too much. From less than a few inches I had still missed.

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The rat was untouched but was perfectly still. I had probably scared the damn rat to death. We were all laughing and didn't notice the flashing red lights that had driven into our compound. One of our guards came to my side and pointed them out. MPs! Shit, I was in trouble. I had to get rid of the gun. I didn't have a holster so I tried to slide it into my pants at the back. A gun that has just been fired several times has a very hot barrel and I almost burned my butt before I pulled it back out of my pants. Like an idiot, I decided to hold it in my hand behind my back and went to meet the MPs with a loaded weapon cocked and ready to fire, behind my back. This was not the best way to meet the police.

There were two 3/4-ton trucks arriving in our compound, and they started to unload MPs with M16s locked and loaded. We were in trouble. I went towards the soldiers and, lucky for me, I realized it was Master Sergeant George Flores who was in charge. I also realized that I had to get rid of that pistol somehow.

"Burdick, is that you?" he yelled at me.

"Sure enough!" I replied. He waved at the troops and they stopped unloading and moving toward us. He knew I was capable of almost anything. I began to wiggle the pistol behind me, hoping someone would see it and take it from me. Suddenly, a hand touched mine and took the gun. I took my hand from behind my back and walked to the sergeant. He had been watching my arm and was relieved when it came out empty of any weapon. He was no fool. He waved to his troops and they began to get back on the trucks.

"Burdick, do you want to tell me what you were doing here, or do I not want to know?" he asked.

I laughed. "I don't think you want to know. Did I do something wrong?" I said, knowing the answer. I had worked with the MPs many times and with George in particular. He knew me.

The sergeant shook his head and came over to me. "Is all the bullshit over?" he asked. I nodded my head "Yes." He turned to his men and yelled at them that they could go back. One truck was to wait for him. "What the hell were you doing here?" he asked. So I explained about our rat war and he started to chuckle. "You missed the fucking rat three times! That, I would have liked to see. What did you do with all the dead rats?"

"We put them in the outhouse barrels," I said.

He shook his head and went and looked. He came back, still shaking his head. "There must be twenty dead rats in there. Why did you have to shoot one?" he asked.

"Well, it was the last one and it seemed like a good idea at the time." I said.

He laughed again. "Well, I will take care of the paperwork. No more shooting here. OK?" he demanded.

"No problem. I owe you one," I said. He smiled and went to his truck and left. By that time, everyone realized how much trouble we could have been in, and had quieted down. I wanted to go to bed but I went to the bar first. We all laughed about it, but they were happy I knew this sergeant and was able to get us out of any trouble. The pistol I had used was now on the bar so I asked who had taken it. Nobody wanted to take credit, so I closed the bar and we all went to bed with our own thoughts. I had let things get out of hand one more time.

I woke up late the next morning and went down to the office after a cold shower. There wasn't much happening and I was about to call the MP sergeant to thank him again and to take the ration of shit I knew he was going to give me. Oh well, I earned it. I checked with Billy to see what was happening. He knew where everybody was except Terry. He hadn't seen him this morning. I went back upstairs to get him out of bed. Nobody gets to sleep longer than I do. I went to his room but he wasn't there. His bed looked like nobody had slept in it. Alarms went off in my head.

I quickly went downstairs and got everybody together. "Have any of you seen Terry this morning?" I asked them. They looked at me kind of strangely, wondering what was going on. No one had seen him since last night. Billy checked and one of our jeeps was gone. This was not good. We had to find him. I sent Jim Fletch upstairs to check if his weapons were gone and I had Billy call Ahn Khe to see if he went there. I sent Marty over to the PX and to the Officers' Clubs we used to see if he was there. Jim returned and said that Terry's pistol and rifle were missing.

I got a cold feeling in my stomach. I decided not to call the MPs about his AWOL status, but I sent Jim to see Sergeant Flores at the MP unit that came to our rat execution last night. He was

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to tell him that we were missing an agent and to ask if he could alert his people to look for him—unofficially. Jim was to give him a description of Terry and his vehicle. The basic description of Terry was: 6'3", white, red hair, about 240 lbs, in a bright blue jeep. There couldn't be too many of those around. I wanted the search to remain unofficial because Terry was supposed to be going home and if he was reported AWOL he might have to stay here a little longer. I didn't want that for him. I looked at my watch and mentally decided I would keep this up until noon and then I would have to contact headquarters in Nha Trang—at which time all hell would break loose. The fiasco with the damn rats was the least of my problems now.

Everybody was checking in with negative reports so far. Where could he be going? What was he doing? My real fear was that he went somewhere to put a bullet in his head. It was the thought we all had when we talked with Terry. He oozed failure, frustration, and depression. Vietnam is hard. We all had bad days. I had had mine, too, but Terry's were worse and we all knew it. Somehow, the rat shooting and the MPs had caused something to snap in his head. I felt bad, but I didn't know what I had done. I knew he compared himself to me all the time, but I couldn't help that. I was just a lucky screw-up who didn't give a shit. Things fell into my lap and I took advantage of them. It really bothered him that someone like me, who didn't give a shit and didn't care about what I did, was successful. And someone like him, who wanted to be successful, couldn't—or wouldn't—do what I did. I always tried to tell him it didn't make any difference, he was still a good soldier. But that only made him madder. What was he doing now? There has to be something we can do for him, if we could only find him.

Slowly, everybody came back to the office and sat around waiting to hear if he was found. I again thought of LZ English and called the MI unit up there to see if they had heard from or seen Terry. They had not, but would be on the lookout for him. So we waited.

Marty and Billy came up to me and started talking. "Burdick. Marty and me took Terry to lunch in town yesterday," Billy said. Marty and Billy looked very guilty.

"Did something happen? What did you do?" I asked.



“Well you know how he has been on such a downer and how he glowers and stares at all the whores we work with,” Marty said.

“What did you guys do?” I was getting worried.

Marty took almost daily visits to the local whorehouses. He said it took the edge off. Terry was always upset about it. “Well, I bought him a girl for lunch. I thought if he got his rocks off, maybe that would take some of that tension he carries with him off his back. It works for me,” Marty said. I just stared at him. Leave it to Marty to think that sex solves everything.

“Well, it didn’t work for him. She sat on his lap, grabbed around his neck and gave him a big kiss and started rubbing his thing, whispering in his ear what she wanted to do to him. His face turned redder than his hair and he exploded. He pushed the poor girl to the floor and staggered out the door yelling, ‘I can’t do that. I can’t do that.’ We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t mean to embarrass him. I thought he just needed a little push. I’m real sorry.” Marty sat down.

“We didn’t mean any harm, but it turned out horrible. I tried to talk to him, to apologize last night, but he just ignored me,” Billy said as he sat down next to Marty. Well, that explained the vibes I was getting from Terry last night. If I had not gotten so drunk maybe I could have talked to him some. My guess was that he was embarrassed by his reaction to the free whore and went to hide somewhere. What he would do after that was unknown.

I turned my attention back to Marty and Billy. “Look, you can’t be responsible for his hang-ups. Something has been boiling in his head for a long time. We all are under pressures we don’t understand. What Terry is going through could be happening to any one of us. If it weren’t you guys, it would have been something else. We’ll just have to wait and see,” I said, but I don’t think they believed a word I uttered.

We all sat around drinking sodas—which was unusual—waiting to hear something from somebody. We had notified everybody and had to wait until they gave us something we could use. I knew that at noon I would have to call Nha Trang and report to the captain what was going on. He would not be happy, but he was probably expecting it. After all, he had urged me to watch Terry while he was gone. I sure didn’t do a good job of that.

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We kept waiting. There were no reports coming in from anywhere. The reality of the worst-case scenario was marching into my mind. If that son of a bitch killed himself I will really be pissed. I kept thinking that and then realized how stupid it sounded. I didn't want to think about that any more.

It was almost noon when the phone rang. I grabbed it and gave them our cover name and asked who it was. It was a lieutenant from an EOD unit outside Qui Nhon. A civilian who identified himself as a special agent had just driven a blue jeep into his compound with a live RPG round in the seat next to him that had already been fired but had not yet exploded. The lieutenant had to forcefully remove the civilian and evacuate the compound until one of their trained EOD specialists could disarm the round. They had just completed the disarming and had called the MPs because they had arrested a civilian who was incoherent and asking for a medal after he had almost killed everybody in the compound. The MPs told him to call this number and that's what he did. I listened and then thanked him for calling. I told him I would be there in about a half hour to take possession of him. I also told him that he really was a special agent having some kind of breakdown and to please isolate him until I got there. The lieutenant seemed very confused, but agreed and hung up. I told everybody that we had found him and he was alive, but in trouble. Now what was I going to do?

I called my MP friends and asked for help. The master sergeant suggested I get him to the psych ward quickly so he could get some help. He gave me the name of a doctor who could help. I was uncomfortable with just showing up, but I remembered that Roger's girlfriend was a nurse and she might know if this was the best thing to do. I called Roger and explained my problem. He sympathized and said he would call Carol to see what she thought. Five minutes later Carol called me and asked me to describe what had happened. I gave her all the details that I knew. She gave me the name of a doctor and his location on base. She would meet me there. I would have to bring Terry there and get him to voluntarily sign in, though. I thought I could do that. So I said I would meet her there within the hour. Of course, I had no idea how I was going to accomplish this, but I would. I had to.

I needed to take someone with me to bring the jeep back. Obviously, I couldn't take Marty or Billy. Their stunt at lunch had sent Terry over the edge. It wasn't their fault, though. If it weren't this incident, it would have been something else. I told Jim Fletch he was coming with me. From the look on his face you would have thought he was going to have to burn the shit barrels by himself. I think he would have preferred that. This was not going to be easy. Jim drove to the EOD compound and I sat and thought. Somehow, I had to get Terry to voluntarily go to the psych ward when I knew he wouldn't want to go. My only thought was that, if he wanted to be a hero, maybe I could use that. That was one possibility.

As we drove up to the compound I could see our jeep in the middle of the compound and two soldiers with M16s guarding it. I heard Jim say "Shit!" This was a mess. Terry was being held by two MPs and was in handcuffs. He was screaming something at them but I couldn't tell what it was. It sounded like babble to me. There was a captain standing near the jeep, so when we stopped, Jim stayed in our jeep and I walked over to the captain. I thought formality would be needed. I also noticed a lieutenant standing next to the captain. He must have been the one who I talked to on the phone. Higher rank always means bigger problems. I would have to tread gently through all this crap.

"Captain, I am Mr. Burdick of Army Intelligence. Here are my credentials."

He looked at them. "These are just like that guy's credentials," he said. He then handed me Terry's credentials, which I quickly put in my pocket after verifying them to be his.

"I know. He is one of my agents. What happened here?" I asked.

"From what I can gather, your agent drove up to our gate to report some unexploded ordnance. Our guard asked him to identify himself and he showed those same credentials. Our guard would not let him in and called the OD to the gate. He got the same story the guard did. Our OD asked him where the ordnance was and your agent pointed to the seat next to him. The OD immediately recognized it as a RPG 40 round that been fired but had not exploded. It was live and could go off at any moment with just the smallest jolt. He couldn't believe your agent was able to get it here without it exploding. He

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immediately told your agent to get out of the jeep and get the hell away from the rocket round. Your agent refused to leave his vehicle, so we attempted to forcibly remove him from the jeep. He resisted our attempts and we had to stop. Jostling the vehicle might set off the ordnance. Then the OD and the guard decided to move away from the RPG round and get behind some vehicles about 30 yards away. They knew the slightest bump could set off the round. They took shelter behind the 3/4-ton trucks over there.” He pointed to where Terry was now being held.

“Your man then drove the jeep to where we are standing. The OD ordered him to stop and had to threaten to shoot him if he didn’t. He was afraid he was going to drive up to our HQ offices. If that rocket had gone off, it would have probably killed or wounded many of our headquarters personnel. He didn’t stop so the OD fired one shot in the air and then your agent stopped. We finally got him away from the vehicle without resistance after the shot had been fired. We arrested him and put him in handcuffs. Our men have just finished deactivating the shell. How he got it here without it blowing up, we don’t know. God must be good to crazy guys. Anyway, I had called the MPs and they said you would be coming over here to take charge of the prisoner.” He stopped talking at that point and looked questioningly at me. I guess he wanted me to say something. I thought a minute.

“What has he been saying?” I asked.

“It hasn’t made much sense. He keeps screaming about being a hero and that we should give him a medal for what he has done. Also, about being a secret agent and that we had no right to detain him. A lot of what he was saying was just gibberish. I think he’s gone off his rocker,” he told me.

I deliberately looked concerned and grabbed the captain’s arm and pulled him away from the jeep and away from where anyone could hear me, I hoped. “Look, he is one of our agents. He is just finishing his tour. A project he had been working on most of his tour just blew up last week. I can’t tell you what the project was, but it was major.” I was lying as fast as I could. “Spending so much time on it, and to fail so badly, was hard for him to take. It wasn’t his fault. We were sending him to Saigon tomorrow for some help, but he disappeared. We’ve been looking for him, as you can imagine.

Our work undercover is very, very stressful. He couldn't take it. Look, do you think I can talk to him and see if I can get him to go with me. If he will, I will take him to the psych ward for some help." I looked at him like a friend asking for help. He could not refuse.

"Well, sure. If he goes, he's yours. I don't need to do the paperwork. Just don't let him come back. If he does, next time we'll shoot first. What are you going to do with that ugly blue jeep?" he asked.

"Thanks captain! My driver will take the blue jeep back to our offices. I'll drive Terry to the doctor myself. Also, captain, can you tell your men to forget the whole incident? We try to keep a real low profile. This kind of thing is not supposed to happen," I smiled the request at him.

"Sure! No problem. I'll tell my men." He started to walk away.

"Thanks, and now I need to talk to my man and get him out of here." He went to his men and I went over to Jim.

"Get in the blue jeep and follow me in case Terry jumps out and takes off. If I get him to the doctor, take the jeep back to our office and wait for me." He nodded his head "Yes" and went and got in the blue jeep. The rocket had already been removed. I went to Terry. His eyes were wild and he was muttering something. I grabbed both his arms and shook him.

"Terry! Terry! Look at me. Listen!" He stopped muttering but was confused. I noticed he was slowly beginning to recognize me. "Terry, we're going to get out of here. Do you understand?" He looked at me and smiled a little and nodded his head "Yes." He was coming back from wherever he was. "Look, you've got to go with me on this. Just do as I tell you and I will fill you in when we get out of here," I said.

This time he nodded his head and said, "Sure!" Then he began to look worried. "Am I in trouble?" he worriedly asked me as he realized he was in handcuffs.

"Just a minute!" I said. I motioned to one of the guards to remove the handcuffs. He looked to his captain and the captain nodded his head. The handcuffs were removed and Terry rubbed his wrists. "You won't be in trouble if you do what I tell you. You know, if anybody can do it, I can," I said. He again nodded his head "Yes" and smiled at me. He knew that somehow I would get him out of his

jam. I didn't think he really knew what he had done or how close he had come to being killed. I took him and put him in the jeep. I got in the driver's side. I waved at the captain and slowly drove out of the compound. Step one was completed. Now the hard part was beginning. I had to get Terry into the psych ward.

I drove slowly to the hospital. Jim was following directly behind me. Terry was silent. "Terry, what is going on?" I asked. I didn't know if he would talk or not.

"I found a rocket and brought it to EOD and they arrested me. Shit, I did good!" he said.

"Terry that was a live rocket! You could have gotten killed. Do you understand?" I asked. He had to recognize what he did. He was silent. I realized that I was going to have to tell him what is about to happen to him. I thought for a bit and then decided: Here goes nothing.

"Terry, listen to me. You're in a lot of trouble. The EOD guys wanted me to have you arrested for endangering their lives." He looked at me questioningly, but said nothing. "I got you out of that so far, but I had to agree to take you to the hospital," I said.

"I don't need no fucking hospital. There's nothing wrong with me!" he shouted. He looked like he was going to jump out of the moving jeep.

"Listen carefully and shut up. You're going home in about ten days, right?" He looked at me and nodded his head "Yes." "If this gets official, you won't go home on time. You're going to have to stay here for an investigation. You've got to know that, right?" A strange look came over his face. The idea of not going home sank into his consciousness. His eyes began to look a bit wild. This was a living nightmare to him. "I see you understand. I have a scam in mind that might work for everybody. You ready to hear it?" I pulled the jeep to a stop by the side of the road. Jim pulled in behind me. He had no idea what was going on. I stared at Terry. I needed him to answer me before I said another word. He stared back and slowly his expression melted as he realized he needed help. He knew that if there was anyone who could run a scam that gets him out of this, it was me. He didn't know I was planning a triple scam.

Finally, he said, "How can you get me out of this jam?" I knew he didn't realize totally that he had come within a bump in the road

of killing himself and anyone around him. He had no idea that he was really screwed up inside.

“Look, you’re going to have to go to the hospital as a patient. That will get the EOD people off your butt.” He was about to say something but I held up my hand to stop him. “You will be undercover while in the hospital. The MPs have been after me to look into who was providing all the GIs in the hospital with pot. This is a perfect opportunity to help them. I want you in there finding the suppliers and buying product. I’ll turn over the product and sellers to the MPs and they will clean up their problem. You will be undercover so you will have to participate in any therapy or sessions they want you in. You cannot divulge your agent status, except to your psychiatrist. This visit will not go in your records. When your orders come I will check you out and send you home on the first plane. Does this work for you?” I waited for his reply.

His face brightened up. He smiled slightly. “I’m going undercover?” he asked. I nodded my head “Yes.” He was buying it! He nodded his head affirmatively. I started the jeep and began to drive a little faster to the hospital.

“I will check in with you after three days and then every other day unless I’m out of town. Then Jim will stop by and see you. You understand everything?” I asked.

He smiled. “You bet I do! How much pot you want?” he asked.

“Look, don’t push it. Wait for them to come to you. You can hint, but no more than that. We’re almost there, so get ready. You’ve had a hard day. Let it show. Just do what you’re told. OK?” He looked at me and nodded his head “Yes.”

I saw Carol up ahead and pulled over and parked my jeep. I yelled at Jim to go back to the office and waved him off. He left. Carol already had Terry by the arm. He recognized her. He had seen her with Roger at the Officers’ Club and at our offices. I went with Carol as she took him inside. She took care of all the paperwork while I waited, sitting with Terry. Finally, she said she was going to take him to his room. He looked at me a little frightened, but I winked and he brightened slightly and went off with Carol.

In a few minutes Carol came back, this time with a doctor. She introduced him to me. “I’ve given him a sedative and he should probably sleep for a long while. He was really upset,” she said.

The doctor wanted to know what had happened and I gave him all the details. "OK. To be honest, there is not much we can do for him except rest him and talk a little bit with him. His problems probably go rather deep," he said. I then explained how I had gotten him to come here and what I had asked him to do and what I had promised him. The doctor looked at me, amazed.

"You are something else. I guess I'm not selling any pot in this ward until he leaves," he said jokingly. "I will do what I can for him, but if he doesn't straighten out I will have to write him up and put it on his record. I'll let you know. Come back in three days—like you said—and we will know more by then." We shook hands and he left, laughing to himself. I thanked Carol.

"Roger was right. You really take care of your men. Not many would do what you are doing," she said.

"I do what I can," was all I could say. I shook her hand and left. Why I didn't give her a hug I don't know. Hugging officers just didn't seem right.

I went back to the office. I told everybody that everything was taken care of and went into the captain's office and called Nha Trang and asked to talk to Captain Theran. The clerk who answered said, "Oh, you mean Major Theran. His promotion just came through." So that was why he had to go to Nha Trang. Oh well, he deserved it. Not a bad guy. The new major came on the line and I congratulated him and then began to tell him what had happened to Terry and what I had done. I left out the part about the rat execution. As I was telling him the story I could actually feel him tensing up over the phone line. After I finished telling him how I got him into the hospital, he said he had to talk to the colonel and would be right back. I was to stay on the line until he got back to me.

I waited, and in a few minutes my call was transferred to the colonel's office. The colonel came on the phone and—surprisingly—thanked me for what I had done so far, but it was their thought that Terry would be best served in Saigon. I told them I disagreed and I argued that they couldn't help him through the next 72 hours, anyway, until we received the psychiatrist's report. Being where he was, was familiar to him, and having an undercover job would probably stabilize him more than any trip to Saigon. In any event, we need the doctor to tell us what he needs—which he will do in 72



hours. There was some give and take, but they eventually agreed with me. The colonel only asked that I not write anything down about infiltrating a hospital psych ward to find interns selling pot to patients. There were way too many toes I was stepping on.

“The major will re-evaluate the situation when he returns to his office. Good work, Mr. Burdick. We hear a lot about you,” was the last thing the colonel said to me. I thanked both of them and congratulated the new major again. I told him I would pass the word to the men and hung up. I had a strong need for a cold Bloody Mary and headed for the bar.

The next day the major returned and I spent the first two hours of his return in his office. I originally thought I was going to get royally chewed out, but it really was more about how I decided to do what I did. He had many questions about the process I went through. I didn’t really think it through and told him so. I told him my first thought was to protect our personnel and the second was to protect our unit. He finally admitted that he never would have thought about doing what I did. Both he and the colonel checked around in Nha Trang and they were told that, while what I did was totally off the wall, it was probably the best thing for the agent. In one quick action I restored the agent’s self esteem, gave him a productive task to do, forced him into counseling, and removed him from the pity of his peers. They recommended that I be the only contact between him and the unit, and the major agreed, so I was stuck.

Jim, of course, had told all the members of our unit about what had happened and they never said anything. None of us ever thought of the pressure we were under. We were, after all, in civilian clothes in a war zone. We lived without any protection to speak of. We wandered around the country, poorly armed and excellent targets. The pressure was always there. Everybody dealt with it differently. We all wondered if a breakdown could happen to us. What would tip us over into chaos? After a couple of days digesting this thought, I think we all just pushed it into a dark crevice of our minds and hoped it would not raise its ugly head again.

The major also brought news about my single-sideband radio. Saigon had found that it somehow ended up in Oklahoma and was now sending an engineering outfit to set up a new single-sideband

radio by the weekend. They were providing a generator, antenna, and all personnel needed to put it up and make it work. It looked like I was about to be back in the code business. I was not happy, but what could I do? Oh well, maybe it would be of some use. Knowing the Army, my only hope was that the engineers would probably get lost and not show up for another month. Hope springs eternal. He also said we would be getting some new agents to replace some of those who had left. They would be here in a week or two. There was no mention of the rat incident, but I was sure someone would tell him sooner or later. His last point was that he had Marty's orders to return to the States. He wanted me to throw a party for Marty Friday night, as he would be leaving Saturday morning. That gave me little time to prepare a surprise for Marty—a surprise I thought he deserved. I had thought about this for a long time.

During one of my many visits to the bar at the Officers' Club, I had talked to a doctor who told me about pills that he had prescribed to a soldier with internal parasites. He had him take them for a week. Just two days later the soldier was dragged into the hospital by his friends because he was sure he was dying. A side effect of the pills was that they turned your urine red—bright red. The poor soldier thought he was bleeding to death internally. The doctor had forgotten to tell him about that side effect. He thought it was very amusing. I felt sorry for the poor soldier, but it gave me an idea. Marty, I believe, had been in every whorehouse in town. I didn't judge him on that, but I saw an opening. During this last month he had avoided all of them, knowing that he would be tested in the States and, if he were infected with any venereal disease, he would be held until they were sure he was cured of it. So, for the first time since he got here, he was abstaining and complaining about it every night. We were all tired of hearing his laments. I went and found that doctor and sweet-talked him out of four of those pills. He told me that if Marty were given three or more fairly quickly, the reaction would be almost immediate and would dissipate in 72 hours—sooner if he drank a fair amount of beer. So I was ready.

Sure enough, Friday afternoon the engineering unit showed up and started measuring and marking where they were going to put all the equipment. According to the sergeant in charge, they would be done by Sunday. By Monday I should be on the air. He said it

like he thought that it was a good thing. From my point of view it wasn't. Now I had to get ready for Marty's party. As always (almost), I would be behind the bar serving drinks and drinking. The party started about 1600 hours Friday afternoon and everyone knew what I was going to do. Everyone was in on the prank.

The major came in and gave a brief farewell speech to Marty and toasted him, so we all—including Marty—had to drink. Marty downed his beer with pill number one. A short time later, I gave him beer two with pill number two. It seemed that everyone was looking out the corner of his eye to see if they could catch me dropping the pill into the beer bottle. I made sure they couldn't! After beer two was finished, Marty went to the outhouse. We put some salty snacks on the bar and I prepared another beer for Marty. Everyone was looking for some reaction, but there was none when he came back. He ate some snacks and had another beer (with pill number three). He downed that relatively quickly and I gave him another beer, but this time without any pill. I was concerned they might be going down too fast. He went to the outhouse again, but still with no reaction! Maybe this wasn't going to work. I gave him another beer with the last pill in it and toasted him. People were looking at me, but all I could do was shrug my shoulders. The pills didn't seem to work. So we all got serious and proceeded to drink a lot.

Some time later, Marty headed to the outhouse again. By this time nobody was paying attention. Suddenly, from the back of our building came a scream and Marty came running in with his belt unbuckled and his pants unzipped. There was a red stain on his shorts. He was in an absolute panic. All of us were doubled over laughing. Slowly, he realized something was up. Why were we laughing? Naturally, he looked at me.

"Burdick, what the fuck have you done to me!" he screamed. I was laughing so hard I was crying. So was almost everyone else. Marty, I think, was getting ready to kill me. Finally, someone told him that it was a joke. The red would disappear in a day or two. There would be no residue by the time he hit the States. Still, he was mad. I believe it was the major who finally explained to him what had been done to him and that he would be all right—in fact, better than all right—because the red stuff was an antibiotic that cleaned

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out his system. He would not have to worry about carrying anything extra home.

“Besides, none of us will ever forget the look on your face,” he told him.

He slowly began to see the humor and headed over to me. “You are a son of a bitch bastard. You know that, don’t you,” he said.

“Who me?” was my only reply. He punched me on the shoulder and finally began to laugh with us. The party ended sometime after midnight. At 0800 Marty was taken to the airport and left us. We would never forget his last day with us, though. I was going to make sure I opened my own beer when it came my time to leave.

Saturday morning, as the engineers showed up with all their equipment, I left. I had to go see Terry. It was not a visit I wanted to make, but it was one I couldn’t avoid. I took my time but I found my way to the hospital anyway.

I found Terry in a room with two beds in it. He looked happy to see me. I don’t know how I looked. “Well, how’s it going?” was all I could think of. Terry looked noticeably better than I had seen him ever before.

“Pretty good! I’ve been sleeping almost all the time. Didn’t know I was that tired,” he said, while looking around to see who might be listening. He motioned for me to sit in the chair next to his bed. “How’s everything at the office?” This time he had a note of concern in his voice. I guess he wanted to know if I pulled off the scam and he was off the hook.

“Everything is great. The captain became a major, so he was happy and liked the assignment you are doing for me. Once your orders come through, I will pick you up myself and take you to the airport. You’re going home on time.” He smiled and we began to make small talk. I basically complained about the damn radio. I told him what I did to the last radio we had.

“I thought so. I didn’t think Billy was that stupid,” he said.

We laughed. I wanted to go so I said, “Have you learned anything yet?” He looked around and reached under his pillow and gave me a piece of paper with the names of a corporal and a private on it and then handed me a plastic bag filled with what looked like pot in it.

He had actually done it. I took the pot and paper and put them in my pocket.

“Good work! Do you need some more money?” I said. He nodded his head “Yes,” so I gave him \$20. Thank God for the Koreans. I told him that I would be back Monday or Tuesday. We shook hands and I left. I did stop by his doctor’s office, but he was not in so I decided I would check with him when I came again in a couple of days. Now I had to do something with the pot.

I drove from the hospital to the MP’s. I looked for Master Sergeant Flores. He found me. “You sober yet, Burdick?” he laughed.

“I hate rats!” was all I could say.

He laughed. “What did you have behind your back when I drove up, by the way?” He asked.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, “Nothing!”

We both laughed. “George, you got a minute?” I asked. He motioned me to his office. He had a conference table in there and we both sat down around it.

“Is this about your agent?” he asked.

“Kind of,” I said and then explained in more detail what had happened and what I had set my agent to do in the hospital. “Are you interested if he comes up with anything?” I asked.

“Damn right! Saigon is driving me nuts about drugs in our hospital,” he said.

“Well good!” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the names and the stash and gave it to him. “He bought pot from those two guys and this is what he bought. It’s all yours. No charge. I think I owe you a favor or two,” I said.

He looked like a kid with a new Christmas present. He looked at the paper and the pot. “How long is he going to be there?” he asked.

“About two weeks, until he gets his orders to return to the States. I will see him every three or four days until then. Everything he gives me, I will give to you. You OK with that?” I asked.

He laughed. “Damn right! Can he stay there longer?” he half-jokingly asked.

“Don’t push your luck. You think this will make your headquarters a little happier?” I asked.

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He just smiled and nodded his head affirmatively and then shook my hand. "Thanks, Burdick! Now I owe you again!" he said. I laughed and he walked me out to the front desk.

"See you again, Monday or Tuesday," I said. I went to my jeep and drove back to my office. I had to write a report on what I did for the major. I doubted if it was going anywhere, but we did have to cover all our butts. When I got back to the office, the engineers had placed a huge generator behind our offices and were busy building a large sandbag building around it. I shrugged and went to my desk and typewriter to make out my report. I wasn't going to put anything in the report about the money I gave Terry. They might wonder where I was getting it.

For the last month I had been asking every intelligence outfit to let me know of any reports they had about US POWs, no matter how incongruous it might seem. So far, I had gotten little information that made any sense. I hadn't expected anything, but you have to try. When I returned from the hospital, I had a message from the colonel at the ammo dump. I had no idea what he wanted, but I called him back. He told me that his troops had captured a live VC outside the wires of the dump. The VC said he knew where American prisoners were being held and described the place. The colonel's men were able to locate the site on one of their maps. He was sending his sergeant major over to our offices with the debrief report and a copy of the map with the spot located on it. The sergeant should be there about now, said the colonel. I thanked him and told him I would let him know if it was good info. I hung up and—magically—the sergeant showed up. I took him into our bar and told him to help himself while I read the report and looked at the maps. It was possible it was credible, but it was more likely that the poor prisoner would say anything not to be killed.

"Sarge, what do you think? Do you think he's lying through his teeth?" I asked.

The sergeant was enjoying a cold beer. "Don't know. He told us awfully easy about this supposed American POW. I'd be careful," he said.

"Thanks, drink all you want and anytime you're by here, stop by for another one. The bar's always open," I said. He smiled

and I went into the office area and got on the phone to one of the helicopter units that liked to help me. I told them my needs and they told me that a ship was ready for me now if I wanted it. I said “Yes” and was on my way. I yelled at the sergeant that I had a helicopter ride to take and thanked him again. I hopped in a jeep and drove to the airport. I forgot to tell anybody else what I was doing, though. Of course, they wouldn’t like me to be flying over VC territory in a helicopter looking for God-knows-what. So if I had thought of it, I probably wouldn’t have told them anyway.

When I got to the unit HQ I was met by six pilots. They all wanted to go. I had no idea how many I needed, but told them I didn’t care. Let the pilots decide.

One of the officers stepped up. “That’s my ship and I can take all of them. Two of you guys man the guns. Mike, you’re my co-pilot. The rest of you are observers. Sit in the back. Can I see the map?” He said this all at once.

“Great.” I gave him the map and we looked at it.

He knew where the area was. Everybody loaded up. Once again I was the oddball. They were wearing steel pots and flak jackets, combat boots and uniforms. I was in a white shirt and black pants and carried a pistol on my belt. One of the officers gave me a headset to listen in and talk with the pilot as we took off.

It took us about 40 minutes to get to the map coordinates and we were all looking to see if we could find a POW camp. Nobody discussed what we would do if we found one. I knew I had no idea, but I had to look. We circled the area and saw nothing. There appeared to be an open area near the edge of one of the clearings that could have been a campsite, but we could not be sure. There was nothing there now. We circled three times and headed back.

When we landed I apologized to my makeshift crew. “Sorry I wasted your time, but I had to check it out. I don’t want to leave any American as a prisoner if I can help it,” I said.

“Hey, anytime you need flights to look for POWs call us. We would be more than willing to go even if we flew a hundred missions and still didn’t find one. At least you’re trying,” one of the pilots said. I was embarrassed, but shook their hands and told them they would be my first call to see if they were available. I then returned to my office, called the colonel and told him it was basically a dry

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run, but the information helped. I didn't ask about the VC prisoner. I didn't care. I explained further to the colonel that I had sent a helicopter to check out a possible POW site but it was a bust. There might have been something there at one time, but now there was nothing there but a cleared-off area on one side of the field. I said nothing about being on the flight. I thanked the colonel for his help and asked him to continue sending any information to me on POWs that he comes up with. Who knows when we will get lucky? I then hung up the phone.

I reported my activity to Major Theran. As always, the major was impressed about how quickly I got so many people to work with me without going through all the military channels. I think he wanted to go on some of these flights himself, but he never asked and never went. I wrote a report for him.

The next day the engineers were done. They showed me how everything worked. They left two 50-gallon drums of diesel to work the generator. The antenna was strung up nice and pretty. They made me go through a check-in with Saigon to let them know the system was working and I was back being the code writer for the unit. I would have to check in at least once a week and call to set up other times if I had urgent business that couldn't wait. I was betting I could wait. The major came through and looked at everything. He seemed pleased. I was not.

There was one good side to the whole radio issue, however. The large sandbag building the engineers had built had extra room in it. Our guards noticed this and asked me if they could move in and work out of there. I thought it was a good idea and let them use it. At least our guards were happy about the radio building.

It was time for me to see Terry again, so after lunch I went back to the hospital. This time Terry wanted to know whether his orders back to the States had come in. I had forgotten to check. I told him that they had not come in yet but I would call Nha Trang and see if they had them. As soon as I knew, he would know. He said he was even enjoying the therapy sessions and especially his one-on-one session with his psychiatrist. "The doc is real nice. He lets me tell stories about what you do. He thinks maybe he should be talking to



you,” he said laughingly. A joke from Terry was a big thing. He was getting a bit better. I will have to see his doctor before Terry goes home to confirm that, though.

He then gave me a piece of paper with one name on it and a bigger bag of pot. I put both in my pocket. I told him I would see him in a few days unless his orders came in. I also told him I would get his stuff packed and ready for him before he got out of the hospital. He wanted to pack his own stuff but understood there probably wouldn’t be enough time. We shook hands and I left. I again went looking for his doctor and this time I found him in his office. When he saw me he motioned me into his office.

“How’s he doing, doc?” I asked.

“Well, he was really screwed-up when he got here. He was barely getting an hour’s sleep a night. Just sleeping cleared up most of his problems. I don’t think he was trying to kill himself when he picked up that RPG round. He wanted to be a hero, to save someone’s life. He was quite confused,” he said.

“Will he be all right to send home?” I asked.

“Well, I think so. He will need more care, but we can’t do it here. I will recommend that he see someone when he gets home. Before you ask, I won’t put this in his record. He’s not dangerous. He just wants to be you and he can’t!” he said.

I was surprised. I knew he was bothered by me but I didn’t think it was that bad. “What? Why would anybody want to be me? Shit, I’m always in trouble,” I said.

“Look, he admires you. He would never say anything to you, but it’s been driving him nuts that he can’t do what you do. He understands better now that it is all right not to be like you,” he said.

“Yeah, and a hell of a lot safer!” I said. I was quiet for a moment. “I knew he had a problem with me, but I would never have guessed that it would drive him to do what he did. Do I have to do anything?” I asked.

“No, just keep doing what you are doing and whenever he gets his orders I will release him to your care and the records will get lost. OK?” he said.

I thanked him and said I would call when the orders came. I walked slowly to my jeep. I’ll never understand how I could be the

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focus of his illness. I had screwed up plenty. I should have been killed several times already. Why would he want to be me? I didn't even want to be me. I drove over to the MP's offices and gave George the name and the stash of pot. He was real happy. I went back to my office and asked Billy about Terry's orders and asked if he could pack up Terry's stuff. Billy hadn't received any orders, but readily agreed to pack Terry's stuff, which was strange because he almost never agrees to help anyone. I guess he still feels a little guilty about Terry. I went to my desk and stared at the wall for a while.

Billy came over and gave me my mail. It was a letter from Lena. That did not help. I held it between my hands and stared at it like it was dirty toilet paper. Ever since I had been in-country our relationship had shriveled and dried up. It was better when I didn't hear from her. I liked my letters from my mom. I could almost smell the cookies baking and the food sizzling for dinner as she talked about what was going on at home. With Lena, ever since I told her to stop seeing her cousin, there was a coldness that turned to bitterness in both our letters. I guess I was better at bitterness than she was. I didn't want to deal with it so I put the letter in my drawer. Maybe next week I would look at it. I had more important things to do now.

## Chapter 16

**Terry's orders finally came in.** I called him and told him that I would pick him up in the morning and he could come back to the office and get his things. I suggested that he check to see that we packed everything. He wanted to say goodbye to some of the guys. I also told him that the major wanted to see him before he went, to thank him for his service. I called his doctor and informed him that he was leaving in the morning, if that was all right with him. He agreed and then jokingly said, "Well, at least now I can buy the good pot again!" I laughed with him. I hoped he was joking because the MPs were moving in on all the buyers and sellers this week, once Terry was gone.

In the morning I picked Terry up. He gave me two more names and the biggest bag of pot so far. I laughed, "Did they give you a going-home special?" He just laughed and said "No." We drove to our offices. When we got there, Terry went upstairs to check on the packing job. I went to see the major and told him Terry was here and gave him the doctor's final report that Terry was all right now. He just needed plenty of sleep and rest. I left out the part of his wanting to be me. I didn't think it was necessary to say anything about that. Terry came into the office being very nervous, but the major made him feel at ease right away. He thanked him for his work and said how jealous he was of him to be going home. Terry thanked him for his last assignment in the hospital and hoped his last job made up for some of his mistakes. For a minute the major seemed a little confused. He must have forgotten the phony undercover assignment I had given Terry. But after a barely perceptual pause he carried it off. I knew I would have to answer more questions when Terry left.

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He'll probably want to know what I was doing with the pot. We then went to the bar for a last drink. Since Terry didn't drink, we all had Cokes and sat around and bullshitted for a while. Finally, I said it was time to go to the airport and Terry shook everybody's hand as he got into the jeep. I don't know why, but there were tears in his eyes as I drove him to the airport.

Naturally, the plane was late so we had to talk a little bit. I told him how much the MPs liked his information and the pot. For the first time ever, he talked of home and how he hoped he would fit in when he got there. Without saying anything, I was hoping the same thing. I was hoping I wasn't sending someone home who was a time bomb that would go off over some silly insult or perceived insult. I hoped he would see a doctor, like his psychiatrist recommended. But I would never know. His plane finally showed up and we shook hands as he left to get on the plane. I waited until he was inside the plane before I was going to leave. Just before he entered the plane he turned and waved. I waved back. I watched the plane leave for Nha Trang. I hoped he would have a good life. I went back to the office wondering if I would end up like Terry.

When I got back to the office, I was told I had a call from my Korean counterparts. I guess they needed something more. I called them back, only to hear they had lost their master sergeant. Their master sergeant was looked up to by all in the outfit. They were very disturbed. Yesterday, he had gone with a couple of other soldiers to a village right outside their base. They were on a goodwill mission, giving medicine and training to the villagers. Upon arriving at the village, they were ambushed and the master sergeant was killed in the first volley. The two soldiers with him were wounded but fought off the VC attackers. A group of soldiers that were returning to base stopped and helped the wounded. To the Koreans, this was a very sad day, as they all respected the master sergeant. They wanted me to know since I had met him once. I didn't remember meeting him, but it must have been during that Tae Kwon Do match I went to a month or so ago. Since they called me, I had to do something, so I said I would come over tomorrow to pay my respects for a great soldier and the loss of a friend. Respect was very important to the Koreans. I told the major but he could not go, so I took Jim instead.

We left around 0800 the next morning. It was approximately an hour's drive to the Korean camp. The day was calm and clear. Not too hot for Vietnam. The monsoon season was here and there was a damp coolness in the air. The rains would be here soon. The drive up there was uneventful. Since we knew that the VC was active near the Korean camp, we were on our guard as we approached the village. However, the village was no longer there. I slowed down and kept looking for it. Where the village used to be was a small clearing with palm trees that weren't there before. All that was there were rice paddies—not one pig, one dog, one chicken, or one person. I almost came to a stop. The village was gone. There would be no ambushes from there again. I was hoping that they had just moved the village but I didn't think so, and I knew better than to ask. The Koreans were determined fighters and responded to attacks as only an Asiatic would.

We drove on to the camp and paid our respects. I did not ask about the village. The Korean Intelligence Team was very impressed that I had come all the way out to their camp to offer my sorrow at the loss of a great soldier. They offered to take me to lunch but I had to get back to our office, so I declined. As I drove out of the compound I looked for the missing village again. I guess every Vietnamese in the area now knew what would happen to them if they messed with the Koreans.

During the next few weeks I spent more and more time flying around in helicopters looking for camps where American POWs might be found. We were not successful. Sometimes we found nothing—not even a clearing. A couple of times we found deserted camps that could have held prisoners, but did not look like they had American prisoners. We knew, from all our sources, that they put American prisoners in separate cages where they could be displayed and publicly tortured to impress the local villagers that the Americans could be defeated. As I heard more about what they did to our prisoners, I became angrier and tried even harder to find and rescue just one. Because of the six-month time limit a POW could survive after capture, I had to act fast whenever I had the slightest information about where a POW might be. Time was always against

me. I began to understand that I would have to do things differently if I was ever to have a chance.

I still had not heard from my net that had provided the information for our very successful attack. It had been over six weeks and still there was no word from them. As each week went by I kept extending my deadline when I would have to write the report that would list them as probable KIAs. I just couldn't get myself to write them off yet. Each week I had driven by all my dead drops to see if they left a message, but there was no mark where there should have been one to show that they were alive and trying to contact me again. Today was the day I was to check the drops again. My usual routine was to drive by them and then head to the Officers' Club for a drink. Today was no different than my previous trips. As I approached the second-to-last drop I was distracted and almost forgot to look. This was the original drop I had given my agent. Its mark was the red brick. I was right next to it when I remembered to look. I couldn't believe my eyes. The red brick was on top of the pile. I almost drove my jeep into the pedicab in front of me. I wanted to break protocol and stop the jeep right there so I could run and get the message. Training—and my repetitive policy on checking the drops—won out. After I finished checking out the last drop—it was not marked—I drove around to check that I wasn't followed and parked about two blocks away from the drop with, hopefully, a message in it. There was a note. I took it and put the red brick at the bottom of the pile. When I got back to the office I called Nguyen, our interpreter, and we read the message. Our agent would meet us in the park near the province chief's headquarters tomorrow. I could hardly wait.

We arrived at the park at the time we were told to be there in the note, and there, sitting on a bench, was *để trả thù* (in revenge), my first agent. I motioned him to follow me and we all went to my jeep. I drove us up to a deserted part of the beach and parked. After telling him how happy I was to see him, he briefed me about what had happened to him and his men. As I had guessed, he was with the VC province chief when he escaped from the battle. The attack was very successful. Many, many men died in the tunnels. As chance would have it, the VC province chief and his family were moving to a new location when the attack began. The firepower was incredible. He saw hundreds of bodies as they hurried away. No one

in his group thought they would make it to the escape route, but they did. When they reached the ambush site, he was surprised that the ambush was not in place. He was sure that he had reached the spot he had marked where it should be. They were halfway through the spot when they were finally attacked. He went with the province chief. He had three of his agents with him as guards. Only one made it out with him and the province chief. The whole group that escaped consisted of about 20 soldiers. They went to a place near LZ English in northern Binh Dinh province. There, *đề trả thù* was reassigned to a recruitment team. For the last month the VC had been trying to rebuild their forces but had not been too successful. A large group of NVA soldiers had been sent to the province and were now in control. They did not like the local soldiers and would not let them work with the regular NVA forces. He only knew where one of his agents was now. The rest were probably captured or killed. He did not know. His current job did not give him the access he had before, but he was still willing to tell me what he knew. He proceeded to give me information on the units that were in the area, including their strengths. He did not know where they were operating, though. I thanked him for the information. He said he would meet with us when he could. He was not as free as he was before. I told him that I would watch for his mark at the drops. I also asked him to check my drops to learn if I had any special requests. He agreed. I told him that I was especially interested in any information about American POWs. He had no information now but would look into it as best he could. We shook hands and I drove him back to town, near where we had picked him up, and dropped him off. He disappeared around the next corner. At least I knew that two of my agents were still alive.

When I got back to our office and thought about what had been said, it was evident to me that my original net was no longer of any use to me. They had helped me destroy the VC and NVA outside Qui Nhon, but their success now made them useless to me. The VC were almost totally destroyed during the Tet offensive. The NVA did not trust the local VC and the new units sent into our area were controlled by the NVA. My agents were not part of this new group and had little information on them. They would have to re-earn their access. Their only value was to give information about

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the recruiting success, or lack of it, and the location of some of the units as they re-entered Binh Dinh Province. This could be valuable information for those interested in the enemy's order of battle, but it did nothing for me. Besides, my net was a ghost unit that didn't really exist since I had had to falsify all their information in order to keep them. I now was feeling a little paranoid and thought I could hear the State Department slowly crawling around behind me trying to prove I had done something illegal—which I had. It was time to rid myself of my net. It took a while for me to come to this thought, but it was what had to be done. I would not be in-country that much longer. Somebody had to take them over, and it couldn't be anyone associated with the 525th MI Group. I wanted to keep them in the Army's control if I could. There was one chance. A unit of the 519th MI group was also in Qui Nhon. They were mostly involved in signal interception and, as far as I could tell, did little or nothing in the counterintelligence area. Maybe they could use them. They seemed interested in order of battle stuff so I went to them with a proposition to trade away my net. It didn't take much negotiation. They gave me a case of VO—good bourbon always worked for me!—and some captured weapons for our arsenal, and they got the net. It took about three weeks to make the change-over. My key agent knew I would be leaving anyway, so he took the change in good spirit. The agent who got them seemed competent. It was his first real net so he was very excited. Too bad he didn't know them when they really made a difference. Now, that had been exciting! I never told anyone at my office what I had done until I was just about to leave country. I just stopped sending in requests for pay for them. I did give the new control agent some of the money I had saved for my net. I warned him that they would not accept it now, but maybe later on they would be willing to accept it. In any case, I had saved it for them. I missed the meetings and visiting drop sites, but that went away over time. Now I could focus all my energy on recovering an American POW.

But I still had a debt to pay to Roger. A long time ago I had promised a party on the beach for the nurses but had not yet fulfilled that promise. In reality, I didn't want to have a party for the nurses at our offices, but Roger had been hinting at something the last couple



of times, so I would have to call and ask him what he wanted from me in lieu of the party for the nurses. It was already the first week of October. September seemed to have flown by. This was the day I would call Roger and find out when I would have to pay my debt. But Roger called me first. He knew I owed him.

"John, I'm throwing a birthday party for another Navy lieutenant and I need your particular expertise," he said. I wondered what he wanted. My expertise was consuming copious quantities of alcohol. I didn't think the Navy needed any help with that.

So I said, "Sure Roger, what can I do for you?"

"Instead of throwing a party for the nurses, I want to throw a party here on our base and I need some girls," he said.

"Roger, you know more nurses than I do. I don't think I can help you there," I said.

Roger paused for a few seconds. "I wasn't thinking of nurses. I wanted some working girls." It dawned on me what he really wanted.

"Roger, I can't get them across the bay for you. That area is restricted for Vietnamese."

Roger quietly said, "Not really. If their purpose here is an intelligence purpose, they are allowed." I knew then where he was heading. Only I would be able to, or would be crazy enough, to get a bunch of working girls classified as intelligence assets.

"Shit, Roger! Are you trying to get me keel-hauled by the Navy?" I blurted out.

"Hey, we don't do that any more. If anybody can pull this off, it's you," he said.

Damn. He was right and it was a challenge. Also, I did owe him one. "How many girls do you want?" I needed some data.

"Around ten. Seven would be the minimum. I'll help you get them over here," he said.

"OK. When do you want them there?" I asked.

"Can you do it day after tomorrow?" he quietly asked.

"Shit! Thanks for giving me so much fucking time. I'll call you back by 1800 hours. I should know by then. By the way, this will cost you or your buddies. I'll get the girls there, but you guys will have to pay them for the pleasure of their company, probably at \$10 for each guy. If you want them to do a strip tease, that will be extra.

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I'll only front for getting them there. At short notice, this will cost me," I said.

"Understood!" he said and hung up. I went looking for Billy.

Billy was at the bar and I told him what I wanted. I knew he had joined Marty on many of his excursions to the local whorehouses. At first, he was reluctant to get involved in anything I was doing. We had history, and for him it was all bad. But he liked Roger, so he decided to help me. He only knew of two or three houses that might send their girls out like that. We hopped in the jeep to find out who we could sign up. Now I was being the Navy's pimp, but they had helped me a lot. The first two bars we went to had no interest in what we wanted to do. The third bar was interested. The woman who ran it thought it would be exciting to go to the Navy base. She said she could get six girls and wanted a hundred dollars up front to do it. The negotiations began. Billy helped here. I wanted 10 girls and would pay \$50, but they could keep all they earned from the Navy. She liked the last part. I'm sure she had thought that I would want a piece of the take. We kept negotiating and—with Billy's help—we got a commitment of seven girls and I would pay her \$70 up front. It wasn't a very good deal, but I didn't have time to make any other arrangements.

We returned to our office and I called Roger and gave him the results of our negotiations. He was happy. "I knew you could do it, if anyone could!" he said.

"Yeah, Roger. I've got them, but now how do I get them to the peninsula. Are you going to send me a destroyer?" I said.

He laughed. "No, just go to pier 8 at the harbor in Qui Nhon and there will be a boat for you. It is an old World War II Landing Craft. Show your credentials to the captain of the boat and he will take you and your cargo to the peninsula where we will be waiting."

I thought a minute. "You mean I'm going to have to persuade these women to get into an old WWII Landing Craft and go to the peninsula. Thanks for making this so easy."

He laughed and said, "See you at 1800 hours Thursday."

"OK Roger, but I won't be staying. The Navy can take me back to my jeep."

"No Problem." And we both hung up

On Thursday Billy and I took two jeeps and went to the bar to pick up the girls. The woman who ran it was waiting for me. She informed me that she was going too. I think she was afraid the girls would keep all the extra money they might earn on this little trip. I told her that she could come if she wanted, but I was still only paying the \$70 fee. She accepted that payment. Thank God for my slush fund. I crammed four girls into my jeep and four into Billy's and we went to the pier where we were to meet the boat. We arrived just before 1730 hours. I was met by a young Navy enlisted man. I never could figure the ranks in the Navy. I showed him my credentials and asked him if he was ready to take on my passengers. He said he was, and then he saw the eight scantily-clad, obvious whores come to the boat. He couldn't believe his eyes. All I said to him was, "This mission is classified, Mister, so don't ask!" He didn't. I think he and his crew of two enjoyed helping them into the boat too much. The girls didn't seem to mind the old boat. I doubted the old boat—which was obviously leaking—would make it to the Navy station as we slowly chugged across the bay.

When we were close to the other pier, I asked him if he could put us ashore about 50 feet from the pier, on the beach. I wanted him to open the front and have the girls walk onto the base in class. At first he said that he didn't normally do that, but I just stared at him and he finally said, "If that's what you want."

So we crunched up onto the beach and the front part of the boat was dropped to the sand. All the girls screamed for some reason. There was Roger and a couple of other officers standing and waiting for the girls, who wriggled off the ship. I did not leave the boat but just waved to Roger and said, "Have fun! You have to get them back! I hope this damn thing doesn't sink before I get back to Qui Nhon." Roger just laughed as the front of the boat began to close and said, "No Problem! You can use a good swim and I'll get the girls back"

I rode back with the crew and crawled out of the still-leaking boat. I thanked the crew and went back to the office. Billy was there and wondered if they got there all right. I let him know they did. I learned the next day that the party was an incredible orgy. Everyone had a great time and wondered where the girls came from. Roger

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unselfishly pointed the finger at me. At least now I had paid the debt.

Our office was changing. Terry had left and Billy went home about two weeks after the party. Terry was not replaced but they sent us a replacement for Billy. His name was Gus Allegro—an Italian. He was scared when he came to our offices but he calmed down after a week or two. After the stories he had heard about me, he wanted little to do with anything I was working on. I didn't want to know him, anyway. He liked to listen to my stories and jokes, but that was it. Then the lieutenants in Ahn Khe were sent home. We shut down that office when they left and turned over the operation of Sin City to the MI unit attached to the 173rd Airborne. We abandoned the house and everything in it to the 173rd. We didn't need it. We found out later that they rented it to a PA&E group. Our little office was getting littler.

In all this change, I maintained my liaison activities. I was stopping by Major Trang's office almost weekly. Basically, I wanted to know if he had any information about American POWs. So far he didn't. On my next visit, though, he did have some information. He had personally interrogated a prisoner and was told that there was a POW compound about 20 to 30 clicks north of the city, in the jungle. It was built on the side of a hill. He had a map and showed me where it was supposed to be. I took the coordinates and thanked him. I promised to check it out and left.

I immediately drove to the airport and found my pilots. They had an aircraft available and we were off. This was the first time Major Trang had ever given me any information. I was hoping that it was a good omen. The weather was a little rough. Monsoon season was here but we could still fly. As we approached the area, we spotted the camp against the hill where he said it would be. There were people in it! We all got very excited. I asked them to fly high over it the first time. I wanted to see if there were any special cages in the camp where Americans would be held. My excitement died as we flew over it and I saw no cages, but there were about 40 to 50 people down there and this was not a village. I asked them to circle around and fly as low as they dared. The door gunners had their weapons

cocked and ready for any problems that might occur. It's hard to describe how intense the feelings were in the tiny helicopter. We were all hoping and wishing. I had the horrible thought that, if there were Americans there, what would we do? We came around and were now only 40 to 50 feet off the jungle roof. As we approached the camp, it became obvious it was a prison of some sort. The whole area was fenced with bamboo and there was only a single front gate to get in. When we got closer, we saw there were no guards. The gate was shut but the guards were gone. It was dangerous to do, but we hovered over the camp for what seemed like an eternity. The people in the camp were Vietnamese and they were all waving and yelling at us. They wanted rescue. These were captured ARVN soldiers and probably civilians the VC wanted. We carefully looked over the camp. There were no Americans there. Obviously, we could not take the Vietnamese with us since we had no room. So we had to leave. We all waved and I leaned out and gave an OK signal with my hand. I hoped they understood that I would try to get someone to save them. We headed back to the airport.

We had truly found a working POW camp! We were getting closer. No one had found one of these before. My crew was stoked. I wasn't that happy. I wanted an American POW, but I would do what I could for these poor prisoners. They did not look too well. I imagine the VC went and hid in the jungle until we left.

After getting back to Qui Nhon I went straight to Major Trang's office. I told him what I had just seen. He had a hard time believing I could move that quickly to verify his information. It was less than three hours and I was already back. He called the ARVN division outside of town and requested a rescue mission. I could not understand what was being said but it was loud and included plenty of shouting. Evidently, the major got his way. He really thanked me. He admitted that his contact at the ARVN unit did not want to do anything until he told them that, within three hours after I had received the information, I had been to the camp and confirmed it. Surely, the Vietnamese Army could do better than a lone American? That comment made the contact move and several helicopters were immediately sent to recover the POWs. I guess it was a big thing in the local press. I saw a picture of the camp in the local newspaper, but I couldn't read what was said. Major Trang, who got the credit

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for saving the POWs, was definitely now working with me on finding more POWs. So it was a good thing. In the next few weeks we found two more camps like that, but the weather was shutting us down. Monsoon season was really here and the storms roared like trains across the sky. It was dangerous to fly in this kind of weather. You could do it, but you had to fly around the storms—if that was possible.

The monsoon season really did slow things down and I was getting restless. I hated to admit it, but I was missing having active agents work for me. I liked checking the drop sites and picking up information. It was exciting and really kept the adrenaline flowing. I was wondering to myself if I should recruit new agents. I knew this was not a good idea. October started next week and I didn't have that much time left in-country and it took some time to train new agents and set them up to get the right type of information. Still, I wanted to do it.

Somehow during this time I became officially "short," meaning I had less than 90 days to go before I would go home. I didn't feel like I would be going home, though. A few weeks ago I had turned 25. I was really feeling "old" now. I wondered how the "90 day short" rule started—90 days is still a hell of a long time. It didn't matter anyway. I still felt that Vietnam was my last stop. I wasn't going anywhere. I was screwed over by the Army so many times that one more would not surprise me.

It was during this time of inactivity that we received a call for help from an engineering outfit on the outside of Qui Nhon. The Commander was newly in-country and was worried about his security. The unit had about 14 local Vietnamese working on base that had never been looked at to see if they were possible problems. He wanted us to look into the situation. The major assigned the case to me since I was the liaison to Major Trang's MI Group. They would know if there were any problem workers in the unit. I decided that I should talk to every one of the workers to see if there was anything that I could find out that might make them unfit to work on the base. I doubted that there was anything that I could do, but I was getting bored so this seemed to be a good diversion.

I gave the list of employees to Major Trang and within a week he reported that they had no adverse information on any of these civilians. The next morning I gathered up Nguyen, our Vietnamese translator, and headed to the unit. This was going to be a boring job but at least I was out of the office doing something. The engineering unit was small, with probably less than a 100 men. They were not involved in anything that was classified. They built barracks, made roads, and dug ditches—things like that. The Vietnamese help that they used was mostly very menial—janitorial, gardening and the like. I expected nothing adverse to come out of this. When we arrived at the unit I reported to the CO's office and requested a private room where I could interrogate the Vietnamese staff. He gave me a room that was two doors down from his office. Once I was in place and settled in, I had the Vietnamese brought to me one at a time. This should not take much time.

The first five interviews went well. I found out that all the Vietnamese I had talked to came from the same village near the camp. They were all Catholics and did not like the VC or NVA. At least that is what they told me. I suspected they were telling me what I wanted to hear, but I didn't catch them in any real lies. Something was making me question them a little harder each time, though. My urge to recruit an agent became overpowering. These were not highly-placed people by any means, but the challenge of recruiting one just for the hell of it became overpowering. So, as the sixth worker entered, I thought I would take a different tack. It was time to trot out my seminarian credentials. These were Catholics, after all, and maybe they would be willing to talk to a man who was almost a priest.

The next worker was a teenage girl named Cô Luong Hua. She was a little girl and stockier than most Vietnamese girls I had seen, but in her own way she was pretty. It was clear that she was scared to death of me. She did not like being in a room alone with Nguyen and me—not because I was an American and had a translator with me, but because we were male and she did not trust males who were not from her village. I started out the interview very different from the previous ones. Nguyen translated for me as I asked my questions. I could tell he was curious as to what the hell I was up to. The first questions were much the same as I used on the other

employees. I asked her name, where she lived and what her job was. Then I began my new questions. "Cô Luong, I understand you are a Catholic. Do you go to Mass at the cathedral in town?"

She looked surprised. Since everyone I had talked to was a Catholic, I assumed she was one, too. I was right. "I go to Mass at the church near our hamlet. I go to the cathedral on special holy days."

"When I was in the seminary, trying to become a priest, I went to our cathedral every Sunday. I sang in the choir most of the time. I was not that good a singer." I laughed.

"You were going to be a priest?" she exclaimed. Nguyen, who was translating all of this, was beginning to look at me, wondering what I was up to.

"Well, I thought I was, but it was not for me. My brother, though, did become a priest," I replied. At this point I knew I had changed her fear into interest. Having studied to be a priest, and having a brother who was a priest, made her begin to think I was someone to trust. This was exactly what I wanted her to think.

"You would have made a good priest," she said. She had relaxed finally. I had her!

"Well, I don't know about that. I did enjoy the singing, though." I was looking straight at her while I said that, smiling. She was smiling back. I now thought I should try to get a little more information from her than I had gotten from any of the others. "Did you move here from the North when the Communists chased all the Catholics out of North Vietnam?" I smoothly asked.

Without pausing, she said, "Yes, we used to live in a small hamlet south of Hanoi. One day the Communist troops arrived. They burned down our church and told us to leave and go to South Vietnam. We had to leave the next day. The trip was very hard. Many died on the way. After many months we ended up here and started again. We built our own church here." As she said this, there were tears in her eyes. The trip down here must have been brutal.

I casually asked her, "Have you seen any of the Northern soldiers here lately?" I was smiling and mentally coaxing her to tell me what she knew. Once I got her to start talking about this, I would have her and she would be my new source. I would have started a new net again. The truth was, I missed my old net and all that went with



it. I liked the drop-site visits and the adrenalin rush of seeing a new message. I wanted to do it again. I came here with the thought that I could recruit a new agent and I was almost there. This did not fit in with what I was currently working on, and I knew that. I think I just wanted a new net to play with.

She quickly answered, "Yes! They come at night with some old VC guards. They tell us of the evil of the Americans and how they want to free us from their capitalistic grip. They seem to have forgotten that it was they who chased us out of our homes in the North. We do not believe them, but they are armed, and if we disagree they will kill us." She seemed happy to tell me this. It was as if a heavy burden was taken off her shoulders. I knew immediately I had her. All I had to do was close the deal.

"Cô Luong, could you get me some more information about them, descriptions of them and where they are staying?" I asked. Ngyuen paused before he translated this. I knew he did not agree with what I was doing, but he continued.

"I will tell you what I can. These are evil men. They are forcing our young men to leave with them. We never see them after that," she said with an edge of fear in her voice. She knew this was dangerous, but she liked me and wanted to help.

"Good, I will be back in one week. I will come back to this same room and we can meet here. You can tell me then what you have learned. Is that all right?" I asked

"Yes, but what will I tell my friends who work here? I am a virtuous girl. I cannot lie to them," she asked. I hadn't thought about this. Most Vietnamese were not this protective of their virtue. I should have guessed this, though. She was a Catholic girl. I quickly came up with an idea.

"Tell them I am considering you for another job that pays more, but that first I need to teach you a little English over the next few weeks. Do you think they will believe that?" I asked.

"Yes! I would like to learn some English," she answered. I think she really wanted me to teach her some English. We would see about that. For now I would agree.

I set up our next meeting for one week from today at the same time as this meeting. I would be here and she would come to me. I explained some of the information I wanted: names, units, and

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numbers. Also, I would like to know if there were any collaborators in the village. She agreed to try to find out what she could. She seemed excited to help. I warned her to be careful. What she was doing was dangerous. She left then and went back to her work. Nguyen did not look happy, but I ignored him. It felt good again to be able to recruit an agent, even if it was a fairly low-level one. I finished the rest of the interviews and left after telling the CO of the unit that they all checked out. I would, however, come back in a week and talk to some of them again. I gave him no reason for this and left. After doing this it seemed easier to get back to the frustrating task of trying to find a POW. On the way back to our office Ngyuen complained about how worthless the information would be from the poor girl. I'm not sure if he just didn't like the girl or just wanted to work with a higher level agent like we had before. I just told him not to worry. Time would tell.

I really wanted to document some of the camps we were finding but I still didn't have a camera. I decided I would get one myself. Maybe some snapshots would be worthwhile. I mentioned to the major that I was going to the PX to look at cameras to buy. He said that he wanted some things there, too, so he would go with me. I drove the jeep the short distance to the PX and we went shopping. It didn't take me long to find a camera I thought I could use. It was a 35mm Topcon-Uni camera that came with a bag, telephoto lens, wide-angle lens, regular lens, and all kinds of filters. It cost me a little under a hundred dollars, plus the film I bought. I was ready. I found the major buying underwear. I was surprised to see, near him buying some shirts, the II Corps general I had briefed several times, before the major was here. So I walked up to him and said hello.

He looked at me—confused for a minute—and then you could see the recognition grow on his face. “Ah, the *Pink Elephant Story*!” he said.

“Yes sir, Mr. Burdick here. It was a great story. How are you sir?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, “Just shopping while I'm waiting for my next meeting. It's good to take a break every now and then.”

I could see Major Theran off to my side staring at me talking to a major general like he was an old buddy. I motioned him to come

over. "This is my new CO, Major Theran," I said. They shook hands and passed pleasantries to each other. "Sir, if you're just wandering around, you are more than welcome to rest at our offices. It's just across the street," I said.

You would have thought that I had stabbed Major Theran in the heart. All the blood in his face just drained away. For a minute I thought he was going to faint. He stared at me like I was a madman. I guess he knew that this was the general that we stole all our furniture and appliances from. Larry must have told him as he was leaving the country.

The general thought a minute—during which time I thought the major was going to have a heart attack. "No, I promised my wife a present, so I have to keep looking. Thank you, though." He said. We shook hands and we went our separate ways.

Once we paid and left the PX the major finally spoke. "Burdick, are you just nuts or do you really have a death wish. What in the hell were you thinking, inviting him to our offices? If he had come over we would all be in jail by now. Jesus Christ!" He was a little excited.

"Look! There was no way he would ever come to our office. We're a clandestine outfit, after all. I knew that and so did he. It takes special preparation for him to come to one of our offices. He knew he couldn't allow himself to come. Now, if anyone says to him that we have his goods he's going to know that we don't. We invited him to our house didn't we? You're home free!" I said.

"Do me a favor! Anytime you get another idea like that, tell me first so I know what the hell you're up to." He laughed weakly after that. I bet he doesn't go shopping with me again. Now I had a new camera to play with and I had to learn how to use it. I spent the rest of the afternoon doing just that. That night the major told everyone what I had done to him. It was great fun. None of them could believe it, either. After a few drinks all was forgiven.

It was a good thing I had practiced with the camera. The next morning I got another call from Major Trang and he had some more information. I took my camera and went to his office. Again, he gave me the map coordinates and showed me where this camp was. This time was different. His information said that an American was

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there previously and may be there again today. This poor guy was being hauled from camp to camp. According to his informer, he was scheduled to be there now. This was the first time we had actual information that an American would be somewhere. Maybe this would be the time. I took the information and headed to the airport. The sky was overcast and rain wasn't far away. I wasn't going to let the weather stop me. This time I met with the pilots and told them we had solid information that an American was at this camp or, at worst, had been. This was our best lead so far. You could see the excitement in their faces. They wanted to go, but the weather was bad where we would be going. They had to think if they could make it. They took out a map and decided they could.

They would fly out over the ocean, around the mountains on the Navy peninsula, and then cut across to the area where the camp was. If we couldn't make it, then we could circle back to town. The first time I took one of their flights we had all pilots in every position. After that, we had regular crews in place. This time every pilot wanted to go so this was going to be an all-pilot crew again. We went to the helicopter. I brought along my new camera. There might just be a chance for some good pictures. We all loaded up and took off. This time, for some reason, I put on a flack jacket. I wanted to protect my new camera, I guess.

We headed out over the bright blue ocean and towards the north, behind the mountains. Before we got behind the mountains you could see black clouds boiling off to the west and roaring towards us. I couldn't believe the speed of those clouds I was seeing. We were behind the mountain, about 1500 feet in the air, when the storm suddenly hit. It roared over the mountain and hit like a landslide, directly on top of us. Every light in the cockpit started blinking red and alarms were going off everywhere, blaring incessantly. We were going straight down. The pilots in the cockpit were flipping switches, twisting knobs, and swearing loudly. My new camera in its pretty bag floated in front of my face as we were falling. I grabbed it and saw the water rushing towards us. All I could think was, "Fuck, I'm going to lose my new camera before I develop any pictures with it. I wonder if it will work after it gets wet." I then realized how stupid that was. If we hit the water I would be dead, anyway. How do you get away from the big helicopter props? If I got out I would

get cut in half or the machine would explode when it hit the water. I sat waiting for the end as the waves below me became larger and larger.

Slowly, though, we came to a stop. Well, at least the waves were not getting any bigger. We were barely 200 feet over the water. The pilots had finally gotten control of the helicopter. We were slowly moving forward and rising a bit. The wind from the monsoon was almost holding us in place. There were still a considerable number of red lights on the pilot's control console and some alarm was blaring in my ear as we looked at each other. I wondered if my face was as pale as everyone else's. Our trip was over and everyone knew it. We would be lucky if we even got back to the airport. First, we needed to get over ground so that, if we had to set down, we wouldn't have to do it on the water. We would not survive that. No one spoke. What was there to say? We seemed to inch toward the beach. Our forward speed was not much more than a walk, it seemed to me. We were gaining some altitude, though. The monsoon was blowing right in our face now. The rain was hitting us like it was coming from a fire hose, directly in front of us. The pilots were trying everything they could. It was no help to talk to them.

Finally, we were over the beach and heading towards some rice paddies and a small village that obviously had been used for target practice by somebody, probably our Navy. Suddenly I recognized it. This was not a good place to be. This was part of the free fire zone I had flown over before. I didn't want to be here. I leaned over to one of the pilots who was acting as door gunner and yelled as loudly as I could, "Free Fire Zone! Can't land there!" as I pointed to the village.

He knew immediately what I meant and did what I didn't want to do. He told everyone what I had said. You could hear a chorus of "Shit!" coming from all the crew. We were in trouble. The pilot called and reported our problem. The answer was that we were on our own until the weather passed. By that time, we had made it over the village. I had never had the experience of crawling in the air before, but I did that day. Now I was going to lose my camera in a muddy, shit-filled rice paddy. As we neared the village, I noticed a spark on the ground. "Shit" was all I could say. We were being fired on by some lone VC hidden in the village. It must have looked to

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him like a big balloon floating in the sky. How could he not shoot at us? There was little we could do. He was directly in front of us and we couldn't fire in that direction.

Slowly, we moved over the village. I took off my flak jacket and sat on it, as did the other pilots. No use having your private parts blown off. I put my camera on my lap. He was not going to shoot my new camera, either. Suddenly, we heard a loud ping. One of his shots had hit the landing strut on the right side of the ship. Way too close for me! The pilot-gunners tried to get a shot off but couldn't get the gun to point towards the area where the sniper was firing from. In frustration, the pilot-gunner next to me fired off a burst into nowhere. The firing from below stopped. The VC sniper didn't know we couldn't hit him and left to hide somewhere. He disappeared as we slowly crept past the small village.

Now the question was: Will we make it back to Qui Nhon? I had no idea how badly the helicopter was damaged by the weather, but it must have been considerable, as every pilot on board was silent and seemed to be wishing himself home. Slowly, we made it back to the airport and came in hot to our landing spot. I did not feel good that there was a crowd of soldiers there with fire extinguishers. We crunched down on the ground and you could hear a loud sigh of relief from all of us. We all jumped out and walked a few feet past the prop and turned and looked at our damaged craft. I had my camera in my hand. I then realized I never took a picture during the whole flight.

We all had to go in and make a report about what had happened. There was no problem, though. As this was part of a POW recovery project, no one complained. I thanked all the pilots who went with me but told them next time we will use the regular crews. We can't be losing so many pilots in one craft. I also told them I was sorry about their helicopter. I hoped it could be fixed soon. I never realized a monsoon could be that strong and dangerous. As I drove away shaking my head I put my hand in my pocket to once again rub that mushroomed bullet and wondered: How many lives do I have?

When I got back to the office I immediately went to the bar and had a stiff drink. That was way too close. I stayed at the bar until the other agents wandered in and asked where I had been. So I told them. I joked about the flight and the near-crash and the lone sniper.

I made it sound somewhat entertaining and they all laughed—as did I. Just one more stupid thing I did. The next morning the major called me into his office and closed the door.

“Burdick, you remember me telling you that you were not to take any more flights over enemy areas. That would include looking for POWs. I believe I made that perfectly clear when I got here. I am not going to be the one to write your wife about your death. Do you understand?” he angrily said.

I knew the shit had hit the fan. Sometimes the truth will set you free, so I thought I’d try it. “Sir, it was the only way I could get the pilots to do the flyovers. They wouldn’t do it at first, unless I went. When we started finding POW camps I guess we all got excited,” I said.

“You found more than one camp?” he said, as if he were surprised. I guess he wouldn’t have been if I had reported any of my flights to him.

“Yes sir! Before that last flight we had found five camps. From two, we rescued Vietnamese army and civilian personnel. The last one, we couldn’t get to, but it was the first one we had definite information of an American POW being there. We couldn’t get there because of the weather. The pilots will check it out on their own when the weather clears. I don’t plan on going again. They are very eager to fly for me,” I said.

“God Damn it, Burdick. You make it hard for me to be pissed at you! What you did was commendable, but you’ve got to trust me enough to tell me what you are about. You understand?” he said while staring at me.

“Sir, to get this started I took a big risk. I didn’t think you should have to cover me if it blew up in my face. And, when it started to work, I just got carried away. To be honest, through regular channels nobody would have approved what I wanted to do. I didn’t have enough information to prove my hunches. I don’t think anyone really wants to spend their time to recover a POW, but I do, and so do a great many line officers. They have all jumped at the chance. You know, that for all the reports we have sent forward with information on POWs, not one word has come back with orders to do something about it. I want to do something and I’ve got people who will help.”

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I was hoping I didn't just dig myself into a hole somehow. We stared at each other while I waited for his reply.

"Yeah, I understand. What we do is frustrating and I really like your initiative. But please keep me in the loop and don't go flying unless you get my approval for the next one. You understand?" he said, still staring at me.

I think I won this one. We started this with me not being able to fly at all. Now he was saying I could if I just told him about it. "Yes sir. Maybe you would like to go on the next ride," I said.

"Don't bet on it. I'm not as crazy as you are!" he laughingly said. I left his office wondering if I got his permission to continue or not. I assumed I did.



## Chapter 17

**Things were quiet for a while** after the monsoon flight. Eventually, the pilots made a trip to the POW site, but it was empty by the time they got there. Who knew what we would have found if we had made it there that day? I called Major Trang to thank him for the information, but had to tell him we couldn't get there soon enough because of the weather. If he had more information, he promised to get it to me quickly. He also invited the major and me to a party the province chief was going to give for some national holiday. I said we would be glad to come but I would need to confirm it with the major, first. It was to be at the province chief's residence next Saturday. I thanked him and said we would see him then unless he had more information for me sooner. It looked like we were going to a party.

I told Major Theran about the party, and the next Saturday we were on our way to the province chief's villa—an impressive French villa complete with castle walls, guards, beautiful gardens, hidden gun emplacements, and an ornate front door. We had to show our credentials to get in. We were led into a huge dining room with a very long table decorated with flowers and silver candelabras. We were shown to our places and Major Trang came over and sat with us

“This is a party of celebration for our victory over the VC after Tet, in which you played a major part. The province chief will take the credit, of course, but we will know,” he said with a smile on his face. Both of us thanked him for inviting us and Major Trang disappeared for a while. I was thinking that it took them a long time to celebrate a victory that occurred several months ago. My guess was that there had been other parties we had not been invited to.

Major Trang had made sure we were at this party, so maybe he had something up his sleeve. I was going to wait and see what happens.

Servants in white gloves served cognac in all the glasses on the table. It was their job, we guessed, to keep the glasses full. Cognac is not my choice of drink by any means. It had a horrible taste that did not go away. I figured it was another French “gift” that they left these people. Another Vietnamese in a white silk shirt sat on the other side of me. He spoke English and introduced himself to me as the Chief Administrator of the *Chieu Hoi* unit outside of town. I struggled to remember what *Chieu Hoi* meant. While I was waiting for enlightenment, we talked about meaningless things and drank the gut-wrenching cognac. Finally, my mind clicked into gear and I remembered. I wanted to check with the major to make sure I was right, but he was busy talking to Major Trang. I would have to go with my own memory. As near as I could recall, the *Chieu Hoi* program was translated as the “Open Arms” program. It tried to persuade the VC and NVA troops to turn themselves in and receive food, money, and relocation. To me, it sounded like an R&R program for the enemy. All they had to do was turn themselves in and get rested, treated for any medical problems, given money, and sent out to a new village with a free piece of property where they could—if they desired—rejoin their old outfit.

I suddenly realized that here was another probable source of information for me. So far, I had used captured enemy soldiers. Maybe I could get better information from those who voluntarily turned themselves in. Of course, I was sure that there was probably some regulation against intelligence agents using these people as a source of information, but that wasn’t going to be a problem for me. I stuck to my cover story about being a civilian rural defense advisor. So, as I sat there I spun a story about how I was dedicated to seeing the hamlets become self-sufficient. Defense was not in the gun, but in rice, I kept saying. The Administrator, Nguyen Thieu, seemed interested in my efforts. I could see Major Theran look at me quizzically several times, but he was smart enough to realize that I was up to something, so he left me alone and waited for a cue from me.

At one point, Mr. Thieu made excuses and went to relieve himself. I watched as he headed to the restroom, but then turned and

walked over to Major Trang. I could see that he was checking me out with the major. Evidently, the major verified my story, which I knew he would. Mr. Thieu looked relieved and continued on his way to the bathroom. I turned to Major Theran and briefed him on what I was doing.

“This guy next to me runs the *Chieu Hoi* Program outside the city. I think he might be a good contact to get information on our POWs. Even if only some of these guys are legitimate, we might get some good information. What do you think?” I asked him.

The major thought a minute. “Be careful. We’re not supposed to recruit in the *Chieu Hoi* center and they’re not supposed to work with intelligence units. Are you using our cover story?” I nodded my head “Yes.” “Good. Let me know what I can do to help. I’ll mention to Major Trang that we are working and to use our cover story.”

“Don’t worry!” I said. “He already knows. The guy went over to him to check me out. My bet is that he arranged our seating to see if we could set this up and help us get a better source. I’m glad I helped recover those ARVN POWs.” The major again nodded his head “Yes” as Mr. Thieu sat down again. Once again I was walking a very fine line. We were all trying to achieve some kind of “plausible deniability” I guess.

We continued to drink and make small talk. Certain food dishes were sent around that—since I didn’t recognize them—I skipped. I didn’t want to spend the rest of the night in our outhouse. They then came out with plates of little green squares that everyone was looking forward to—I guessed that from their reactions. They set a plate between the major and me and a large bowl of raw garlic next to it. We waited to see what everyone else did. Mr. Thieu took the green square and then unwrapped it. The green square turned out to be a big banana leaf with a piece of pork in the middle. The whole thing looked like it had been steamed or smoked. The pork did not look raw. Mr. Thieu took the piece of pork in his fingers and placed a garlic clove on it and tossed them into his mouth. He seemed to enjoy it. As the old saying goes, “When in Rome ...,” I did the same thing. It wasn’t too bad, but a whole clove of garlic was a bit much, at least for the first one. I wasn’t quite sure what to do with the huge leaf until I noticed everyone throwing them under the table, so I followed suit and tossed mine there, too. I had eaten four

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of these “treats” when I felt something brush by my feet. I looked under the table and saw this little soldier crawling back and forth picking up those green leaves. Mr. Thieu thought my reaction was interesting and started laughing with me about it. We shared another drink. Other dishes came out—but nothing like the green squares.

Eventually, it was time to go. I turned to Mr. Thieu and thanked him for helping me through the meal. “Anything I can do for you, Mr. Burdick. I have enjoyed the evening with you. I would like to show you my operation and see what you think,” he offered. I had been hinting at this all evening and here he offered it up to me without a problem.

“Well, I would like that. When can I come out there and look around?” I asked.

“Can you come by the day after tomorrow? I will be away tomorrow.” I promptly accepted and set up a time around 1000 hours in the morning. This might lead to something. We shook hands and he left. I turned to the major, who was standing talking to Major Trang, and went over to them.

“Thank you, Major Trang!” I said. I wanted him to know I understood what he had done for me.

“I thought it might help you with your problem,” he said smilingly. The two majors then shook hands and we all departed and headed back to our offices.

When we got back to our office we created quite a stir. As we entered the bar area, all the guys shouted at us to stay away. I guess that, between the two of us, we had eaten 20 to 40 cloves of raw garlic and it oozed from every pore of our bodies. Some of them were sensitive, I guess, and claimed that we were blinding them. My attitude was, “Too bad!” I needed a drink to wash away all that foul cognac I had drunk. They made us drink on the other side of the room, though. I had a couple of beers to flush the system and then relaxed with some bourbon and water.

The major and I talked about what I would do when I went to the camp. He did compliment me on how I had worked the guy. Hell, it was set up for me—how could I not hit a homer? To the joy of the rest of the team, we both finally left and went to our rooms. Most of our odor finally dissipated by the end of the next day.

The next morning we had two new agents show up. We were getting back to near our proper unit strength again. One of the new agents, Brian Finney, was a captain who had worked as an agent in the States. From the first moment we met, you could tell he wanted to be one of the guys. He was not an officer like Major Theran. Time would tell if he would be any good. The other agent was Mike Wilson. He looked lost. I wasn't sure what he had heard about us, but he looked worried. He covered his worry by joking around from the minute he came in the door. I guess we could use a joker. Major Theran made me their trainer for some reason. I wasn't sure what he meant. I guess I had to babysit them until they were ready for real work. I threw them both in a jeep and gave them a quick tour of the area.

We eventually ended up in the Officers' Club—of course—where I made them buy me a few drinks as we talked. They were much like I was when I had first come to this assignment. I knew nothing then and they didn't know anything now. I could tell that Brian had been briefed by someone about me as he asked a couple of questions about things he should not have known. For the time being I decided not to trust him. Mike was just a comedian. He liked to drink, too. We spent a couple of hours learning about each other. During that time I decided I would take Mike with me to the *Chieu Hoi* center tomorrow morning. Brian, our new captain, would have to be briefed by Major Theran. I let Mike know before we left that we were going on a mission in the morning and that he should not be hung over. I would brief him on his role before we left. He seemed a little surprised. I guess he thought he would have some time to get used to things. Going on an operation the first full day he was here, scared him some, I could tell, but he did not complain. A good sign!

That evening they met the whole team. We took them to the Officers' Club for dinner and then back to our bar for drinks and stories. Most of the stories, unfortunately for Mike, were stories where I had almost come to disaster. Jim enjoyed telling them for some reason. I could tell that Brian had heard some of them before, but this was the first time Mike had heard them. I could see he was dying to know what he was getting into tomorrow. He would have to wait.

I met Mike at my desk at 0830. I had to tell him to lose the steel pot, flack jacket, grenades, and rifle. We were not going into battle. I wondered where the hell he had gotten all that shit. From the look on his face, you could see that he didn't want to do this, but he would try. He put all that equipment on his desk and left it there. I explained to him about the *Chieu Hoi* program and that I was going there to try to persuade the chief administrator to see if he could get any information from his returnees about American POWs. The administrator probably does know that we are intelligence agents, but we will not let him verify that. We will follow our cover story that we help hamlets set up defense perimeters and crop security. Supposedly, our interest in his operation is to see if we can help him place the returnees of his establishment in a safe hamlet. Our real interest is to recover an American POW. Listen to the dance we will do to get that information. He wants to give it and I want to get it, but it is never that simple.

My last words to him were, "You will not say a word while in his presence unless I tell you to. Just shake or nod your head. Do not screw this up by trying to help. If anybody is going to screw this up it will be me and me alone. Do you get it?" He nodded his head "Yes." "You are here to back me up if needed and to keep me from getting killed by one of these guys who might suddenly decide to become a VC as soon as they see us. You got that?" Again, he nodded his head "Yes." Mike looked confused. I was not the same guy who joked around last night and spent the evening drinking with everybody. He was scared. I made him drive. He had to learn somehow.

We arrived at the center about half an hour early. Mike drove faster than I thought he would to get there. I told the guard at the gate I was here to see Nguyen Thieu, the chief administrator. He picked up the phone and talked to someone while I looked over the operation. It was a strange place. I knew all the people in here were either VC or NVA. There seemed to be a few women, but not many. The fence around the complex was just a simple cyclone fence. There was no barbed wire or concertina wire anywhere. I guessed that made sense. Inside the compound was a house surrounded by a series of huts. The huts were all on cement pads with well-mown grass around all of them. The huts appeared to have room for about

eight cots each. The frightening thing was the looks we received from all these ex-enemy combatants. From the vibes I was getting, I was sure my first thought of this being an R&R Center for the VC/NVA was right. They did not look friendly, especially when they looked at us. We left our jeep outside the gate and were escorted to the house where Mr. Thieu lived.

Mike touched my shoulder. I turned and looked to see what he wanted. He was looking at several men staring hard at us from a couple of huts. I then saw it in his eyes. He was scared. "It will be all right. Just stare back!" I kept walking to the house. Most of the returnees, though, looked away or went into their huts. Way too many stared at us as if they could see us on the end of a bayonet. I stared back at those as if saying, "Try it, asshole!"

Mr. Thieu was waiting for us on his porch. We shook hands and I introduced Mike. Mike, obeying my instructions, just smiled and shook his hand. Mr. Thieu gave us the grand tour. They had a retraining school to inform the returnees of their rights and to teach them that democracy was best for them. From what I could see of these guys, they couldn't give a shit. There were about 300 men and a few women in this compound, he told us. Every province had one or two of these camps. They are considered very effective. I didn't believe it, but I smiled. He then said, "You know, we pay each returnee a cash payment when they are returned to hamlet life. This is to help them start up a farm again."

"You pay them? Are they able to accept other payments from other agencies?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking at me questioningly.

"Well, if one of these guys were to be stationed at a hamlet we are working with, would it be all right to pay them extra for work they do for us?" I asked. I could see Mike wondering where the hell I was going with this.

"Of course, if you wanted to hire them for some work, you could easily do that. How would you select the ones you wanted to use?" he asked.

I had guessed right. He was looking for placements for his returnees and thought I could help. He, of course, was expecting to get a piece of the money we would pay the ex-enemy soldiers. Well, if he wanted that, maybe he could do more. "I don't know yet.

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I would have to check with the hamlet chief, but maybe something could be worked out.” I paused for a few seconds. “By the way, I was talking to a helicopter crew the other day and the US Army is offering \$10,000 in gold for information that returns an American POW. I would sure like to get a piece of that!” I said.

“So would I!” said Mr. Thieu. Graft is good! It works every time, I thought.

“You would think that one of these guys would know something about where a POW is,” I said. We stopped. He turned and looked at me curiously.

“Could you make this happen?” he asked me.

“I think so, if I had some information. The pilots I use from the Army would help me in a flash. Why?” I asked. He turned and headed back to his house. He did not answer my question yet. We ended up sitting at a table on his porch. He served us tea. He looked at me hard, trying to figure out if he could trust me. I had offered a huge incentive—\$10,000 in gold. I changed the subject. “How many men do you want to place in a hamlet somewhere?” I asked.

He quickly replied, “20 to 25 now!”

“I don’t know if I can do that many, but I can come close. They will, of course, all be in Binh Dinh Province,” I said.

“How quickly can you do this?” He asked.

“It may take me two or three weeks to get all the approvals I would need,” I answered. “As to the other matter, if you were to find out something that might be beneficial to us, then we can move on that quicker.” I had made my offer.

“Yes, that could be helpful. I will check and see what I can find out.” He mentally accepted my bribe. I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote our office number on it.

“If you get something, call this number and I will come and get the information from you. In the meantime, I will attempt to find 25 places for your returnees. Is that acceptable?” We shook hands and said a few other things about his operation. Soon his guard showed up and walked us back to our jeep.

Once we were in the jeep, Mike asked, “What the hell was all of that and how can you find a place for 25 bad guys to live?”

I laughed. “You’re not in Kansas anymore. He doesn’t expect me to find any places for his returnees. That was for what he can tell



his superiors about this meeting. He doesn't expect me to place 25 people anywhere. If he did, I would have left with a list. When I don't place the men, he will just complain about another dumb American who can't do what he promised. What lit his fire is the gold! He wants it. All of it, if he can get it. That is like a million dollars here. We now wait for his call. If somebody here knows where a POW is, we will get a call." I paused for a moment. "I really don't look forward to going into there again. I felt a lot of those guys wanted to kill us. Did you get that feeling?" I asked. Mike nodded his head "Yes" and was quiet.

Hopefully, he learned something. Now it will take patience. If I don't hear from the administrator in two to three weeks I will have to go back and restart the fire in Thieu's belly. I might have to actually find a place for 25 guys to make this work. Well, I could do that. I had an in with the MACV Advisor Program in the province. It was their RF/PFs I used in my early attempts to catch the VC province chief. They would find hamlets for me. I was willing to bet I wouldn't have to do that, though.

Mike was just driving back into our compound when I stopped analyzing what could happen. I went to the bar for a beer. Mike and—surprisingly—Brian joined me. Mike asked several questions about how I had learned to do what I did with Mr. Thieu. The truth was, it came kind of naturally. Nobody trained me. I learned the hard way. If you listen, you know what somebody wants to hear. I don't look like I'm listening, but I am. I evaluate everybody I'm talking too. I tell them what they want to hear and I twist what they want to hear into what I want them to do. To me, it's a game. Not everyone can do it, though. The technique is very effective, especially if they don't think you are capable of doing it. I tried to explain this to them but I don't think they understood. We ended up going to the Officers' Club for dinner. I kept telling them stories of things I had done. They couldn't get enough. Strange!

Like most days, I had to spend my time waiting for things to happen. Intelligence can't be rushed, I had already found out. You can only set up the possibility of getting the information. Once you get it, then you can act. So I waited impatiently—but I waited. I had

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people to visit and little else to do. I spent most of my time at the bar washing away some of the boredom.

My week was about up and it was time to go back to the engineering company to talk to Cô Luong again. I had given her the code name of *con chim xanh* or “Bluebird.” I don’t know why, it just seemed to fit. I picked up Nguyen and we drove out there. We went to the same office we had gone to before and, minutes after arriving, Bluebird showed up. She seemed happy to see me again. I asked her what she had learned so far. What I learned from her was not very valuable. She was a teenage girl and they must be the same the world over. I learned who was flirting with whom, who she thought was sleeping with one of her friends, and that her father was drinking too much. Finally, she said no one had been to the hamlet since my last meeting with her. She gave me a list of people from her hamlet that she thought would work with the Communists. She had no proof of that. It just seemed that there were several families that she just did not like. I spent some time explaining to her what type of information I would like and I again warned her to be very careful about what she said and did around the hamlet. At the end of the meeting I gave her some money—\$20 US scrip—for her efforts. She seemed to be embarrassed, but took the money. I was sinking the hook in deeper. We set up our next meeting for two weeks from today.

Somehow, it had become a Saturday night and we were all in the bar drowning our sorrows. It was almost 2000 hours and all of us were toasted to some level. It was then that the phone rang. It was unusual for it to ring at night, so I went and answered it. It was Roger and he had a problem. Well, it really wasn’t his problem, but he had found one for us. He was on a date with Carol, his girlfriend, when another nurse asked him for some help. She was being recruited to be an agent for an Englishman who claimed to be part of MI6.

My response was immediate. “Jesus Christ, Roger, it’s just some idiot civilian using the spy ploy to get into her pants.”

“Well, she wants to talk to someone and make a report anyway. And that means you guys. Too bad!” He was laughing.

“Damn! Well, we can talk to her in the morning if we have to. How about bringing her here around 1000 hours?” I asked.

“Sorry old buddy! She wants to talk to someone immediately. You Army idiots have some kind of regulation that requires immediate report to the appropriate authority—and that is you—and to her, that means now! I’m bringing her over. I should be there in about 30 minutes. See you then.” He was laughing when he hung up. He knew we were probably all toasted—and he was right. I went back to the bar.

“OK, fellows, who is the soberest one here?” I yelled out. They all looked around, wondering who the fuck cared. I explained the problem. The major then took over the discussion, and they all agreed that I was the soberest one. That’s what I get for being able to hold my liquor! I swore under my breath that I would get even with Roger, but now I had to get ready for an interview and sworn statement. I got two cans of Coke and drank them down as quickly as I could. The caffeine in them might help a little bit and maybe flush some of the alcohol out of my system. I got a yellow pad, some pens, and a sworn statement form. I took them all to my radio room and moved the table to the center of the room, arranged the pad, pens, and sworn statement on the table and dragged another chair into the room. The stage was set. I went to the shower room and washed my face with cold water and then went to the head to take a leak. I walked around outside waiting for Roger to show up.

After about 15 minutes he drove into our compound with a blond-haired nurse in the jeep seat next to him. Of course, it had to be a blond. I went into the office area to meet them. Roger played his role to the hilt and introduced me to her and put her in my charge. I took her into the radio room I had prepared and closed the door. As I was closing the door, I saw Roger going into the bar area laughing. He would be drinking while I was stuck doing this dumb interview. I pointed to the chair I wanted the nurse to sit down in and sat down myself. I showed her my credentials and introduced myself. While doing this I kept thinking of my agent training days, about using the basic interrogatives (who, what, where, how, when, etc.). I began the interview.

It turned out she was a second lieutenant named Sheila Murphy. She had first met the man about a week ago at the Officers’ Club. His name was James Williams. She liked his accent. He had talked to her one or two times after that. The last time he talked to her he

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asked her to dinner at the Officers' Club, which took place tonight—that was only a couple of hours ago. I thought I would stop there and find out just what she does as a nurse. She was new in-country and so far all they had given her to do was hand out pills and change bandages and bedpans. She was hoping eventually to work in the operating room, but she didn't know when that would happen. Her family was from Bar Harbor, Maine where her dad was a retired schoolteacher and ran a small gift shop. She was an only child and had joined the Army for the nurses training and to get away from the boonies where she was living.

It turned out that she didn't even have a security clearance—and being interviewed by an intelligence agent was scaring her. I went through every tedious detail about her duties, and there seemed to be no reason to recruit her except as a ploy to get her into bed. I had her describe in detail the man who had tried to recruit her and exactly what he had said. All of this took about an hour. I then wrote out what she had said on the sworn statement and had her sign it. Tomorrow morning I would have to encode this and radio it to Saigon as an urgent message. My recommendation would be that they let me arrest the son of a bitch and scare the hell out of him. I did not tell her that, though. When I was done I went and got Roger, who was still really enjoying himself at my expense. He took her back to her quarters with my warning not to have anything to do with that man. We would deal with him.

I went to the bar and cracked open a beer. "That was a damn waste of time!" I said. I explained to the major and Brian that she had no value except for her blond hair and hourglass shape. "Besides, if MI6 is in Vietnam they are in Saigon, not in this backwater town trying to seduce a nurse." To my dismay though, I would have to send the report to Saigon along with my recommendation. The major agreed with me that we needed to punch this guy's ticket and get him out of our town. We would have to wait until we heard from Saigon, though.

The next morning I encoded the report and radioed Saigon so I could read the report in code to them, letter by letter, as they copied it down. Very boring work! When I was finished, I went and had a Bloody Mary. It was Sunday morning, after all.

About noon, Roger called. “Burdick, what did you do to that poor girl! She said she had never been interviewed by anyone as drunk as you were, but she was impressed that you never missed a beat and actually asked all the right questions.”

“Hey, I didn’t see your dumb ass in there. Next time—and there better not be a next time—you get to do the interview. Besides, I was the soberest one in the whole office. I won that by voice vote of all the other drunks!” I yelled over the phone at him.

“Was there any merit to what she reported?” he asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! The guy wants to get laid and was trying the master spy gambit. I think we should drag his ass out of town and boot him down the road,” I said.

“Can I be with you when you do it?” Roger asked.

“Well, Roger, I had to report this incident to Saigon and so can’t do anything until they reply. I put as my recommendation that we scare the crap out of him and send him on his way, though,” I said.

“No shit! You really put that in your report? You got to be nuts!”

“Hey, this guy’s an idiot and deserves all we can give him. I want to see what Saigon will say. At least they will have to make the decision on this one. Any bets on what will happen?” I asked.

“Shit, they won’t do anything. That guy will try his gambit on another nurse,” he replied.

“Bet I hear from them within three days, and they let me do what I want,” I said.

“You’re on! For Dinner!” he replied. So we had a bet. I was probably going to have to buy dinner, but—what the hell—I couldn’t let Roger just drop this mess on me without trying to get something out of it.

Two days later I got a call from Nha Trang. The incident had been referred to them for adjudication with a recommendation they follow my solution to the problem. Essentially, I was told to do what I thought needed to be done and end this incident. Roger was going to have to buy dinner. I could see a steak coming my way. I called him to let him know. At first he didn’t want to believe me, but I offered to show him their approval of my recommendation and he caved in. I didn’t have a written approval, but he didn’t know that. I

would have to figure out who would go with me when I bullied this guy out of town.

I checked with Major Theran and he agreed with me that I should take Brian. It might give him a taste for more action. He still had a stateside attitude and that could cause problems. This would be interesting. I briefed Brian later about what I planned.

His first comment was, "Can we do that? Isn't that illegal?" So I had to explain to him the facts of life in Vietnam.

"Mr. Williams has stepped onto our playing field, and now he is going to find out that there is a price to pay. We can't have people wandering around playing that they are one of us. They could accidentally blow our cover or make our presence known. They could also get themselves killed. If Williams goes around bragging he is in intelligence, the VC/NVA could hear about him and grab him. That would really screw him up. We are just going to explain to him that this is serious work and show him the way out of town," I said. Brian accepted this and understood that he was only a backup. The action was mine. We would gather Williams up tonight and he would leave tomorrow.

We went to the Officers' Club early that evening. I wanted to eat before we roused this guy and we needed to wait for Williams to show up. I discussed with Brian some of what I wanted to do and say. He took it in. He was very nervous, so I bought him a couple of drinks to calm him down. Finally, I saw Williams enter the club. He went right to the bar and chatted up a couple of nurses at the bar. He then went to a table and ordered dinner from the waiter. Now we would go into action. I motioned to Brian and pointed at Williams and said, "Let's go now. And try to look mean!" I went over to Williams and stared down at him from right across the table. He looked up and said, "Can I help you?"

"Are you James Williams?" I growled. He looked at me oddly. The first spark of fear was showing in his eyes.

"Who's asking?" he said.

"Yeah, you're the smart-ass we want all right. Pay for your dinner! You are going with us now!" I said with a deadly earnest voice. He was confused.

"I haven't got my dinner yet," he said.

“Look, we can do this the hard way. I can throw you down on the floor and handcuff you or you can walk out. Either way, you’re going with us. Your choice!” I said. At this moment Brian grabbed him by his neck and pulled him up. He then reached into William’s pocket and pulled out his money clip and dropped \$10 on the table.

“That should cover it!” he said. Boy, he was getting into it. I almost smiled, but that would have ruined the whole thing.

We each grabbed an arm and walked him out the door. We went to the side of the club where there was no one around. I slammed him against the wall and turned him so he was leaning against it so I could search him. I found his passport in his back pocket.

“So, wiseass, you are James Williams. You could have told us that inside,” I said. He tried to turn around so he wouldn’t be leaning on the wall. I forcibly shoved him back. I took my credentials out, with only my badge showing, and shoved it in his face. “That’s right! I’m the real intelligence agent.” I looked at Brian and said, “Search him carefully.” Brian got behind him and did a thorough job of searching him. Everything he found he threw on the ground after carefully looking at it. Brian did hand me an ID card he had found for PA&E. So, he was only a civilian worker. I threw it on the ground too. “We’re going for a ride. Pick up your stuff,” I said to him.

“Wait a minute, what have I done? Why are you after me?” he begged.

I shoved him on the ground. “Pick up that stuff, now,” I said harshly. He shifted around, quickly picking up his stuff and shoving it back into his pockets. When he was done, I made him stand up. He was shaking now. “We are going on a ride where we can talk to you. This man will be sitting behind you with a pistol pointed at your head. If you do anything stupid I’m going to have to clean up my jeep. Now, let him get in and then you sit in the passenger’s seat next to me.”

After he sat down, Brian poked him in the back of the head with his pistol. Williams’ eyes got bigger. He was shaking even more. Brian then reached around between Williams and me and grabbed Williams’ belt. “Now he won’t go anywhere!” he said. I couldn’t help myself. I smiled. Williams saw it, but to him it looked like I

was enjoying it. He tried to talk, but I hit him in the side and told him to shut up.

We drove out of the parking lot and towards our offices. I was not going to take him there. I drove past our place and down the beach about a mile, to a very dark and empty place. I stopped and told Williams to get out and forced him to walk towards the water, with us behind him. At the edge of the ocean I had him stop and turn around.

"Please, what have I done to you guys?" he begged.

"Did you or did you not say you were an agent from MI6 and did you not try to recruit one of our nurses?" I asked.

"Well, yeah I did, but I thought it would be a good way to get to know the nurses, you know. They like spies." It looked like he just realized what he had said to us.

"Listen, asshole. Do you mean you were just trying to fuck an American nurse and you're not a spy?" I yelled madly at him.

"I'm just a contractor. I didn't mean anything by it." He was practically crying now. He saw our guns pulled.

"Look, you've got one choice. Tomorrow, you're going to fly to wherever idiots go, and never come back here. I will have you on a watch list because of your activity here. Maybe you'd be better back in jolly old England." I paused and stared at him like I was about to just go ahead and shoot him.

"I'll take the first flight tomorrow. Please!" he begged. I reached over and shoved him into the water.

"We'll be watching. If you're still here after 1200 hours, your next bed will be in the bay out there." I motioned to Brian and we headed back to our jeep. This time Brian got in to drive. "Town's about a mile, the direction we will be driving. You better get moving before curfew. We will be watching. Don't mess with us!"

We left, hearing him say "Thank you. Thank you," as we left him in the sand. We went to our office bar and waited until we saw him walk by and go over to the Officers' Club, which was near our office. In a few minutes he drove on into town. Brian was having a ball telling everyone what we did to this guy. He kept telling them that I scared even him.

Well, that damn Englishman got the message. In the morning I checked with the airport and he was on the 0900 flight. One phony



agent gone! I hoped he learned a lesson. I wrote a report on our activity and put it in the bag for Nha Trang. Despite the “mess” Roger had given us, I enjoyed the action. It was somehow relaxing and enjoyable terrorizing that idiot. He was, after all, trying to take advantage of one of our nurses. Somewhere in the back of my head, a thought struck me that maybe I enjoyed it too much. I had never done anything like this before. But the thought of what I had done still brought a smile to my lips.

## Chapter 18

**I was beginning to wonder if** I was ever going to hear from Mr. Thieu. You cannot rush a source. He was either still thinking it through or he had not found anyone willing to give him any information on a POW. I thought I would wait until Monday of next week and then call him to dangle the money in front of him again. In the meantime, I would do the daily stuff. At the moment, I was continuing my war with the flies. My mighty rubber band had smashed 12 so far, when the phone rang. We only had two phones in the office, one at each end of the building. Naturally, the one farthest from me was ringing. I got up and answered it. It was George Flores from the MPs.

“Sorry to bother you, John, but we need you to come to our office,” he said.

Jesus, what had I done now? “What’s up, George?” I asked.

“It’s a mess. We picked up an officer—a second lieutenant—last night. He was drunk out of his mind in one of the bars and was tearing the place apart,” he said.

“Hey, it’s not one of mine again is it?” I asked.

“No! No! In a way I wish it was, but no, it’s not one of yours. He was a nobody who got dumped by his girlfriend at home—or something like that. Anyway, on the way to our office he pulled the shotgun that we have between the seats and put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger. It blew the back of his head off.” George was upset.

“God, that’s terrible! But what does it have to do with us?” I asked. I couldn’t figure out why we had any piece of this.

“Well, according to regulation, we need another MP or intelligence unit to look over our investigation and write a report.

I thought you could do that for us.” He was asking for help. How could I turn him down?

“OK, I can do it, but do I have to look at a dead body this early in the morning. I’m not up for that,” I told him.

“No, the body has been removed. You will have to inspect the vehicle and talk to the MPs. They are scared shitless. The stupid sons of bitches should have handcuffed him, but he was an officer so they let him get in the jeep un-cuffed. I’m dealing with that. You will have to look at some pictures, though. All you have to do is look at it and see if you agree with us that it was a suicide, and has no military interest.”

I agreed to do this for him and agreed to be there within the hour. I thought it wise to tell the major about this. God, I thought how close this had come to happening to me when Terry took off. People go off their rocker for the littlest things. I really hated to see an American dead. Every week I still went to the Evac Hospital to see the VC/NVA wounded we had captured. And every week I walked past dozens of injured Americans. I did not want to see any more missing limbs, burnt bodies, or bloody bandages. At some level, I was pissed off that we were repairing the guys who did this to our troops. I knew we had to do it, but it bothered me. Now I would have to look at an officer who had killed himself because he was here and not at home. This sucked.

I went to the major and explained what I had agreed to. He was aware of the regulation that required us to investigate—which surprised me. I myself had never heard about it. It must be an officer thing. I mentioned that, with the trouble we had with Terry, maybe Brian should come with me. He would then know what could happen to one of our own if we didn’t watch them carefully. Major Theran agreed with me. I went and told Brian. He did not like this assignment. It took us a minute or two to get ready, but eventually we got it together and left. It was a fifteen-minute ride to the MP compound. Both of us were silent until we got there.

George came out and met us as we drove onto the compound. He came over to where I had parked the jeep and I introduced him to Brian. George ignored Brian, for the most part. He knew and trusted me. He handed me a manila folder.

“Here is what we have so far. The jeep is over there.” He pointed to a jeep on the other side of the compound with an MP guard in front of it.

“Give us a minute to look over your reports here and then we will look at the vehicle,” I said.

So Brian and I sat in the jeep and started reading the report. The very first thing in the packet was the picture of the dead lieutenant. I hoped his mother would never have to see it. The mouth was agape and burned. The back of his head was mostly missing, but part of it had split off and wrapped around to the front of his face, where drops of blood had congealed on the front of his face from the flap of skin that used to be part of the back of his head, and had swung over to hit the side of his face. The jeep had its convertible cover up and an enormous amount of gore was splattered next to the hole where the buckshot exited the jeep. I wanted to throw up, but didn’t. I handed it to Brian who stared at it too, and got pale. I probably paled, too. The next piece of paper was in a plastic holder. It was a letter from his girlfriend telling him she met someone else. It was splattered with his blood. I’m sure she didn’t intend this, but it was what happened. Ever since Lieutenant Mitchell had been killed, I had worked hard to save American soldiers’ lives. Everything I did was for this end. Now, I was looking at a soldier who took his own life because of a stupid letter that normally would not have caused this. Every soldier had pressures on him and you could never tell what these pressures would do to him. This poor bastard snapped and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

We looked at the sworn statements of the two MPs who had arrested the lieutenant. They had followed current policy. Unless an officer was violent, they could not handcuff him. True, he had torn apart a bar, but by the time they got there he was sitting in a chair, crying. They thought he was OK, or would be OK by the morning. He would just have to pay the bar owner for the repairs, and everything would be forgotten. They were taking him to their office for some coffee and to work out the details. He said nothing and it was totally unexpected that he would blow his head off. They didn’t even know he had the shotgun until they heard it fire. Brian and I talked to the MPs and they were devastated. They thought they

had done everything right, but the lieutenant was dead. It was the first death for both of them.

We then sat down with George and asked what he would like us to write. We agreed with his assessment of the situation—that everybody had done everything by the book. I agreed to go back and write a report that reflected there was no MI interest in this case and that it appeared to us that the MPs did everything correctly. No one can read the mind of a man who wants to kill himself. I did make one more request, and that was that his blood be tested for drugs. I remembered the AWOL sergeant in Ahn Khe. He said I could get that in a couple of days.

“When I get that—and it’s negative—you get your report!” I told him. He agreed. I found out later he was supposed to check the blood, anyway. I guess he was surprised I picked up on it. On the way back to our office, I told Brian the story about the AWOL sergeant. He listened but didn’t say anything. When we got back to the office I dropped Brian off.

I then drove the jeep as close as I could to our beach. I walked past all our buildings and sat in the sand and stared at the beautiful, blue-green water and the seagulls flying in the bright sun. I sat there thinking about the poor lieutenant and all the waste this war was causing. I had seen enough ugliness. The small waves lapping up to our shore and the bright, white sand, somehow made me feel better. So, for about the next hour, I sat there smoking cigarette after cigarette and watched the sampans bobbing out at sea while the seagulls dived in the water, filling their bellies with fish foolish enough to swim too close to the surface, and tried to forget what I had seen earlier. When I got up, I saw Brian leaning against a building behind me. I had no idea how long he had been there. When I got close to him I said, “Want a beer?” He nodded his head affirmatively, and we went into the bar and drank a cold beer or two. What we had seen was very disturbing, but beer helped for now. A week later, the blood test came back negative for any drugs. I sent the report I had already typed over to George. He called to thank me after he read it.

Two days later, I was again at my desk, continuing the war on the flies. The phone again rang, but this time I did not get it. Since we

had had to go view the suicide, I avoided answering the telephone. Mike answered it.

“Hey, Burdick! It’s for you,” he yelled. Well, maybe I was going to hear from Mr. Thieu. It was not Mr. Thieu. It was Sergeant Kim from the Korean Tiger Division. Again, he wanted something. He explained that one of his units was rotating back to Korea and they wanted something from the PX. He wanted eight mini refrigerators—more if I could get them. I didn’t even know that they sold them at the PX. Apparently they did. The Koreans were rarely wrong. I told him I would look into it but that I didn’t think they had any. None ever showed up on the sales floor. After Billy left, Gus had been buying the stuff the Koreans wanted from the PX so I sent him over to find out. He came back a little pissed.

“There’s some goddamned lieutenant who thinks he’s god! The son of a bitch has 12 refrigerators but he won’t release any to us. He says we’re not authorized. I think the bastard is selling them at a premium to his friends. He treated me like shit!” Gus was pissed. I guess I would have to get involved. Since no one knew what I was really doing, I had to do this myself. I took Mike with me, though. A little backup was always good. I explained to Mike that we were trying to help the Koreans and just follow my lead, or say nothing. We left for the PX.

We found the lieutenant in his office. I went in without knocking. He looked up, “Who the hell are you?”

I motioned to Mike to close the door. I waited until he did. I then pulled out my credentials and handed them to him. He quickly handed them back to me. I did not take them back. “Read the written orders on them, please,” I said.

He took a minute and read them. He handed them back to me. “How can I help you?” he asked.

“This morning I sent one of my men to procure some equipment from your store. You refused to sell it to him.” He was about to say something. I held up my hand to silence him. “That equipment is payment to the Koreans who do special work for us and is authorized by MACV.” Well, I might as well lie big, as little. “We have been doing this for some time. Why are you interfering with our intelligence operation?” I asked.

He looked at me in disbelief for a minute, but wasn't going to give up easily. "As far as I know, the Koreans are not allowed to buy things from our PX." He looked at me, trying to figure who—or what—I was. I guess the credentials did not impress him.

"The Koreans are not buying from you, I am! Will you comply now?" I said. He looked at me. He still wasn't giving up.

"Well, we only have 12 and I can't give them all to one purchaser. I have other people who want them," he offered up. Well, there it was, the son of a bitch was selling them himself to his friends and probably making an extra buck or two.

"Maybe you don't understand. I want those refrigerators—all of them! You should also be aware that we have to approve all the security permits for your employees. As far as we know, most of your workers do not have those permits. So far I have overlooked this breach of regulations. Do I need to check if you are sleeping with your help, too? That is a security violation and you will lose your security classification and your job." I stared at him. He was about to explode. I had trumped him. He now had to decide whether he wanted to get in a fight with me or wait for his next opportunity for profit.

He slumped in his chair. I had him. "Look, I can give you 10, but I would like to keep the other 2. I made some commitments. I don't want any trouble," he whimpered.

I was pissed. "All 12! And I will have them picked up this afternoon. My man will give you the \$80 each, which is what they sell for. That is \$960. Is that right?" I asked.

"Yes, sir!" He said.

"Good. I'm glad we got that cleared up," I said as I turned to leave his office, but I didn't like the look in his eyes. He wanted to get even. Time would tell. I returned to the office and gave Gus the money. We had a 3/4-ton truck in our compound that I had finally accepted from that maintenance sergeant I had recruited. Gus drove it over to the PX, paid the lieutenant, and loaded the refrigerators into it and came back to our compound.

I waited until after lunch and was going to call the Koreans when George called from the MPs. "Hey John! I got a strange call about Koreans taking unauthorized supplies from the PX, 12 refrigerators to be exact. So I am setting up a roadblock by the airport to check

trucks. Are you involved in this somehow? I feel your hand in this,” he said

“Good guess! I owe the Koreans for saving my butt. So I see they get things not normally available to them. Everything is paid for, though. I bought those damn refrigerators, not the Koreans. Must be that fucking lieutenant who’s sleeping with his help, who called. Thanks for the heads-up,” I said.

“You want me to check up on that lieutenant and see if he is screwing the help?” he asked.

“Go for it! Let me know if you catch the bastard. If you can, leave him in place. He will know then that his days in the black market are over,” I said.

“Black Market! You think he’s doing that?” George asked.

I knew that my little remark had doomed that lieutenant. George hated the guys making money on the black market goods they could get their hands on. “I’m not sure, but he let slip a remark to me this morning that made me think so,” I replied.

“Well, I’ll take it from here. We’ll see what we can find out,” George replied.

We both then hung up. That poor lieutenant was going to be in shit city, with the MPs investigating everything he does from now on. That’ll teach him to mess with me! I then called Sergeant Kim and told him that I had 12 refrigerators for him. He was ecstatic—well, as ecstatic as a Korean gets. I told him my man would drive them over to the Korean Center now, but there was a problem. The MPs have set up a roadblock on the road out of town, by the airport. He would have to go out a different way so as not to have the refrigerators confiscated. He really liked that I would warn him and kept saying thank you. I told him what we had paid for the refrigerators. As I hung up I wondered why they couldn’t just buy the refrigerators in Korea when they got back. Most of those little refrigerators were manufactured there. I had no answer for that. It crossed my mind that he may be selling them to his own troops. They had a lot of extra money and probably would use it to get their hands on one of the little refrigerators. What Sergeant Kim did with the stuff we sold him was his business. He was a friend. In about an hour Gus returned and gave me the envelope that reimbursed my purchase. There was \$1600 in it—almost double what I paid to



the PX. I guess he was really happy about the warning I gave him about the roadblock. Our bar is going to be stocked well for the foreseeable future. I smiled about this. I wonder what they are going to do when I leave and there are no more slush funds. Oh well, that will be their problem.

I heard from George the next afternoon. Evidently, he entered the PX lieutenant's room at 0500 and found him with a young Vietnamese girl who worked for him. She had stayed on the base overnight—a definite violation of standing orders. The lieutenant was in a lot of trouble. George thought they would probably reassign him. They were still going over the inventory to see if he was getting any kickbacks, too. I thanked George and agreed the lieutenant was a bad dude. As I hung up the phone I was thinking, "That would teach that idiot for trying to screw with me," but I did have a little nagging thought that maybe I had been a little hard on him. He should have worked with me, but he will probably never realize that. He had a soft job and, because he had control of so much stuff that most soldiers wanted, he became arrogant. It was his sad luck that he ran into me. Still, I just didn't feel good about what had happened. Mike heard, though, and was impressed. He thought what I told the lieutenant was all bullshit. Now he knew that I could do what I say, if I want to. My connections were too good to be messed with. I was about to find out that my connections would force me to make a very difficult decision. The major called me into his office.

"Burdick, sit down for a minute. Please," he said as he got up and closed the door. Oh damn! I thought. He must have gotten wind of my PX activity. The only time I was in a closed-door situation with him was when I was in trouble. I had heard there had been a courier in a while ago—I had been out this morning. I couldn't imagine what I could have done. There were so many possibilities.

After he sat down he said, "I suppose you remember from your training in Fort Holabird that there are orders you can refuse to obey. You do remember that, don't you?"

Now I was curious. What the hell was he talking about? "Yes, I do, but it hasn't stopped me yet," I said.

He looked at me curiously. I guess what I had just said didn't make much sense. "A courier arrived this morning with an order

to eliminate a Vietnamese civilian who had infiltrated MACV and gathered some information that he is going to pass to his control in Da Nang. He will be taking a bus through our province tomorrow or the next day. They have his itinerary. I have been ordered to debrief and eliminate this individual. I am passing that request on to you. You have the best contacts and are our only possibility in getting it done. Would you accept this order?" He stopped talking and looked at me, waiting for my answer.

I had just been asked to kill someone. I stood up and walked over to the window and thought about this. I had been responsible for the deaths of thousands in battles. Well, I hadn't literally shot them, but if I hadn't infiltrated their organization and set up the troops to demolish them, they would still be alive. This was something different. Somehow, killing a group of people isn't the same as ordering the death of one man. I struggled inside my head. Should I do this? I needed more information. While I was looking out the window, wondering if one of the Vietnamese riding the busses past our compound could be the man I was being asked to kill, I asked, "Are you sure he deserves to be killed. Why does he have to go all the way to Da Nang? Couldn't he just disappear from Saigon?"

Dave thought for a moment. "I read the report. You can read it, too. It looks thin to me, but they are very adamant that he needs to go away. I'm also guessing that they are no different than we are. Your agents only report to you. No one else. Right?" I nodded my head "Yes." Agents trusted no one but their controller. "I'm also guessing, for some reason his controller is in Da Nang. Here, you read the file, and let me know what you think."

"I want to think about this. Can I take this outside so I can go over it carefully? I'll let you know in an hour. Is that all right?" I said.

Dave looked at me a moment. "One hour. No more. It is going to take plenty of coordination to get this done and you are the only one here who has any chance of pulling this off."

I took the folder and went into the radio room. I was the only one who used that room. There I could be free to read and decide. I sat down by the table and began to read. There wasn't much there—mostly his itinerary. He evidently had come into the possession of a list of a group of assets working for us and was trying to sell it

or turn it over to the NVA. The report said nothing about why he was doing this or what he expected to get for it. How many agents' names he had, they did not say. Was it 2 or was it 20? Did it matter? No! I knew I would have to do this. I know how I would have felt if my agents had been compromised. Nothing would stop me from eliminating the threat to them. My mind was made up! I took out my wallet and got out that piece of paper I had received over nine months ago. I had used it twice before, but they could not help me. One more time, I hoped, would be a charm. They were probably the only ones who could pull this off. I dialed the number. Someone picked up the phone. "Yes?" was all he said.

"This is John Burdick. I want to talk to Mr. Smith." There was no response from the phone. I did hear someone place the phone on the table. Then the phone was picked up. "Smith here, Burdick," was all I heard. "I was wondering if I could meet with you. We need some help and I have some information I would like to share with you," I said.

"Can you be here in a half hour?" he asked.

"Yes." I hung up the phone. I returned to the major's office and closed the door. "I will try to do this, Dave. It is going to be a close thing. I will know by this afternoon. I have to go meet some people now."

He looked surprised. "That's fast. Have you already talked to somebody?" I nodded my head "Yes" and left the office with the file. I got in a jeep and headed for the compound next to the first house I lived in. I was going to have to drink some more warm beer, but anything for the cause.

I parked in the street outside their compound and went and knocked on the same door I had hit so many months ago. The same blond-haired person met me again. "Good to see you again!" he said.

"Been a while, but I felt the need for some more Guinness." I laughed.

"It's an acquired taste. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Well, I do have something you can do for me. You got a minute, so I can show you something." He let me in and we went to the same kitchen. Damned if he didn't really give me another Guinness Stout. We sat at the table. "The short story is that Saigon fucked up

and gave some information to a bad guy. The bad guy will be here tomorrow. I have his itinerary in this folder.” I took a long drink of the beer. “Can you pick him up, debrief him to make sure he’s bad, and terminate him if he is?” There, I had said it. I felt cold and numb. He looked at me coldly, and then pulled the folder to himself and opened it and started reading. I drank some more warm beer as he turned the pages.

“Kind of thin, isn’t it?” he said, not expecting me to answer. “We can do this, but if we pick him up, he will be terminated, no matter what he says. Is that OK?” He looked coldly at me. It was my call.

“Saigon wanted him terminated. I was the one who thought we should give him a chance. The operation is yours to do, as you will. If you catch him, terminate him, but do try to debrief him if you can.” This felt so surreal. I had just ordered someone killed. I didn’t feel bad. To tell the truth, I was hoping they could get it done.

“We’ll get this going this afternoon and, as this is Tuesday, I should have a report for you by Thursday. I will call you. Give me your number.”

I gave him my number. “What name will you use?” I asked.

“Smith, of course.” He laughed. “Now, I’ve heard a lot about you, so can you answer some questions?” I sat there for the next hour giving him a briefing on all my activities, including my net that had infiltrated the VC province chief’s staff. He was impressed. He had a great many questions and I had plenty of stories.

At one point he asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to work for us. The pay is better.”

I just laughed and said, “Not in this lifetime.” I finally said I had to go. He reminded me that I would have his report by Thursday if the guy followed the itinerary I gave him. We shook hands and I left. I still felt strange driving back to the office. It sure is easy to kill somebody, I thought. Still, I didn’t feel bad about it and I think that was what was bothering me.

When I got back I went to the major’s office. He was in and alone so I went in and closed the door. “The action has been ordered,” I said. “I will get a report this Thursday and you can forward it to Saigon by courier. Hopefully, this comes off all right and they get the right guy. The information was light.” I could see that he wanted

to know how I did this. I wasn't talking, though. I excused myself and went and had a cold beer—well, several of them—to get that warm stout beer off my tongue.

The waiting was hard. It always is! Wednesday, time crawled and I felt every second. Worse, everyone knew something was afoot but no one was talking. They knew I was in the thick of it again, but I said nothing. I was quiet and that was a dead giveaway to everyone. They had no inkling what I was doing or was having done. They wanted to ask, but a look from me and they left me alone. I went for a drive Wednesday afternoon just to get away from all the nonsense. I thought of going to the PX but, with my luck, I would run into the PX manager. Ever since Karl and Larry had left, I had no one to talk to. No one I trusted. No one I could share my worries with. I had accepted being alone, but this night I wanted someone to bullshit with. There wasn't anyone. I went to bed early—for me. Sleep was tough. I got some, but not enough. I kept thinking. Has it happened already?

The next morning I stayed in bed later than usual. As I lay there, I thought of Cô Luong—Bluebird. I had put her in terrible danger just because I wanted the excitement of running a net again. It was not what I should be doing. The information that she could give me was not worth her death. I knew that the next time I met with her I would have to release her from my clutches. She was, after all, just a teenage girl who I tricked into working for me. If found out, they would kill her in an instant. Just like I had done, once I was told of an agent who had infiltrated one of our nets. I guess I knew from the beginning that I shouldn't be doing this. Nguyen will be happy. I knew he thought that this girl had no value, but went along because I wanted her as part of a new net. I fell back asleep for a little while longer. I was relieved that Bluebird was going to be released.

When I got up I went to the Officers' Club for a late breakfast and an early Bloody Mary. I took a long time with breakfast. I must have read *Stars and Stripes* at least three times. Finally, I drug myself back to the office. I spent the next hour warring with the flies. They were losing, but they still kept coming from somewhere, just like the damn VC and NVA. The phone had rung several times, but it was not for me. Around 1300 hours it rang again and Gus answered it.

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"Burdick, there is a Mr. Smith on the line for you," he shouted. I must have jumped out of my chair and halfway to the phone. Gus looked surprised at my reaction.

I took the phone from him. "This is Burdick," I said.

From the phone I heard, "I have your report. Be here in a half hour," and he hung up. I hung up the phone, too.

I strapped on my pistol and said, "I've got to go out. Should be back in an hour." I headed for the door. As I was leaving, Brian asked if I needed company. I just shook my head "No" and left. This was my contact and I wasn't going to share it with anyone. It didn't take me a half hour to get to the compound. I was let in when I arrived and was again taken to the kitchen. The guard gave me a Guinness and motioned for me to sit at the table. I sucked at the warm beer as I waited for someone to appear. Finally, Mr. Smith showed up.

"Just finished the report. It took a little longer to develop the picture," he said. Picture? What picture? I thought.

He handed me the report. I opened it. On the first page was a picture of a dead Vietnamese. It looked like he had two bullet holes in the back of his head. His hands were tied behind his back and his feet were tied together. It looked like they were tied with some kind of wire. He appeared to be a young man in his twenties, but it is hard to tell how old most Vietnamese are. Below the picture were the words: "Killed while attempting to escape." I guess he was trying to roll away.

The next page had the debriefing. He was an agent and had 17 names that he was going to turn over to his handlers. As I read the report, I was surprised to see that he mentioned two other agents he was working with at MACV. I had to get this back to Saigon immediately. They had more of a problem than they realized. "Smith" saw my reaction.

"I thought that would interest you. I don't know who is checking people out down in Saigon, but they surely need plenty of help." I nodded my head in agreement.

"Is there anything more that you want to tell me?" I asked.

"Nope! Unless you want to hear how he tried to bribe us before he was terminated." I shook my head and said, "No." We talked briefly and I thanked them.

“By the way, Saigon does not know of your involvement in this. It stops with me unless you want some credit,” I said.

“Nope! We like silence best. Let us know if we can help you again. This was a real bad guy. I like getting them, most of all. So if you’ve got another, just give me a call,” he said. I thanked him and apologized for leaving so quickly, but I had to get this back to Saigon.

“You going to use that single-sideband of yours,” he asked.

“Probably!” was all I could say. I wondered how the hell he knew about that. I headed as quickly as I could to our offices. Upon arriving, I went immediately to the major’s office and closed the door. I handed the debrief folder to him with the picture. He frowned when he saw the dead man. I probably did, too.

When he read the debrief he said, “SHIT!” I nodded my head too. “We have to get this to Saigon immediately!” he said.

I agreed. “Can we send it by radio, too? They need this quickly. I need your authority to make this Top Secret—if you think it should be that high,” I asked.

He thought a minute, “Do it!”

I took the report to the radio room and this time locked the door. It took me a half hour to encrypt the whole debrief document. I returned the debrief to the major. He put it in a locking bag and waved as he left for the airport to put it in with the other courier items heading to Saigon. This was a Top Secret bag, so it would get special attention all the way. I went back to the radio room and called Saigon to tell them I had an immediate message. I gave them this week’s code for ‘Top Secret’ and was notified to start broadcasting immediately. I hung up the phone and began broadcasting to Saigon. It took almost 40 minutes. I signed off and took my notes and encrypted message outside where we had a burn barrel. I lit the paper on fire and threw it into the barrel. I watched it burn until everything was ash. There was a stick next to the barrel that I used to break up the ashes.

When I finished crushing the ashes, I went to the bar. I needed to wash away the picture of that dead spy. The thought that someone on the other side could be sitting somewhere and making the same decision I did—only about me—made me more uncomfortable. I was glad I had decided to release Bluebird. This was a deadly business I was in. I realized, though, that there really was no difference between

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pointing a rifle at someone across a field and blowing their head off, and sneaking up to someone, tying them up and blowing their head off. Dead is dead. In war where is the right? Evidently, the other agents had somehow gotten word about what I had just had done. Major Theran probably told Brian, who was second in command and Brian couldn't help talking about it to the other agents. Brian never could keep his mouth shut. I would have to remember that about Brian. The other agents didn't know what to say to me. I guess it brought home what they may be asked to do. They may not have made the choice I did, but they were reluctant to talk to me about it. I must have been getting a bit paranoid because I thought I saw fear in the eyes of the new agents. They seemed to be afraid of me! I went to dinner alone that night and to bed early with my thoughts, which dragged me to places I didn't want to go. I felt I had done the right thing, but I guess I wasn't sure. As I was lying there, the two VC agents I had exposed were probably on their way to dying—even if they didn't know it yet. Do I count those in my totals? Finally, I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning was bright and shiny. There was a cool breeze blowing in from the ocean. It was a good morning to be alive. I was outside looking at the early morning ocean. The seagulls even seemed to be dancing in the sky. It was the first week of November and I was getting "short." It felt good! As I walked into the office, the phone rang. It was Mr. Thieu, the *Chieu Hoi* Administrator. He had the list I had asked about, but he had some questions. He wanted me to come out and see him this morning, if possible. I said I would be there around 1100 hours if that was all right and he agreed. It looked like there might be something coming my way on the POW front. I called Mike over and told him we were going back to the *Chieu Hoi* center.

"Mike, sit down for a minute," I asked. It was time for him to understand what was about to happen if the information was good. He pulled a chair over to my desk and sat down. "Things could get crazy very quickly today, and I need you to go with it and help me where you can," I said.

Mike was no fool. He looked at me worriedly and said, "What do you mean?"



"It's quite possible we will get some good information about the location of an American POW this morning. At least I hope we will. Once we have the information, things will happen fast. I will need your help. We will have to follow this through to the end. I really have a feeling that his will be a good lead."

Mike looked eager. "What can I do?"

"Cover my back!" I said. "All our plans will be made on the fly. Once we know the location, I will figure out a plan. I have a number of units waiting for the word to go. You're going to learn a lot today. Just don't get in my way." I looked at him.

"Do we tell the major?" he asked.

"Not until I know we have good information and I have an Ops plan in effect. There is no use telling him until we know we have some usable information." He nodded his head affirmatively. "We leave at 1030 hours. Wear a pistol." I turned back to my desk to begin thinking about an Ops plan that maybe I could use. I had my helicopter crews ready. I had men ready to go into the field to recover the POW if we found him. I hoped today would be the day.

We left on time. Neither one of us was talking. As a precaution, I took Kim Dong, our head guard, who I had used as an interpreter before. I wanted someone I could trust telling me what was being said to me by the returnee. I hadn't told Mr. Thieu about this, but it was a prudent step. Also, since Kim was Chinese, it would have an effect on whoever was doing the talking. The Vietnamese and Chinese do not like each other. They would know that Kim would tell me everything that was said. Sometimes, the Vietnamese interpreters would not do that.

When the three of us drove up to the gate of the *Chieu Hoi* Center, Mr. Thieu was waiting for us. That was unusual! We shook hands and I introduced my staff. Mr. Thieu's eyebrows rose as I introduced Kim.

"Very good!" he said. I guess he approved of Kim's attendance. "Let us go see the man who can give you the list," he said. We were still keeping in place the story of a list of workers I wanted to place in hamlets. Mr. Thieu led us through the huts this time. As we passed each hut the returnees stared at us. I was getting very uncomfortable. These, for the most part, were not stares of curiosity, but stares of hatred. Clearly, to them I was the enemy. Mike didn't

seem to notice, but Kim did, and had automatically put his hand on his pistol. I was resisting the same urge myself. We seemed to be wandering forever, until we came to a hut and Mr. Thieu stopped. We had arrived. He motioned us inside.

Coming from the bright outside, the inside was very dark. There was one light in the ceiling that was on but did not give much light. Our eyes slowly adjusted. The floor was cement and there were eight cots in the hut, as I had guessed earlier. Half the cots had people lying on them. Mr. Thieu said something and everyone left but one person in the cot to my left. "This man may be able to help you. He is interested in the reward, as am I," he said smilingly.

I motioned to Kim to come next to me and begin translating. "There is a reward of \$10,000 in gold if we recapture an American POW. If we can recapture the POW, I will give the money to Mr. Thieu and he will give it to you less, of course, his fee." I stopped and waited while Kim told him what I had said. I watched him closely to see if he reacted to Thieu's cut. We may have to negotiate that. The returnee said something and Kim raised his eyebrows.

"He asked, 'How much for two POWs?'" Kim was looking at me for a reaction. That was not what I expected. Two POWs was too much to expect. I could see that Mr. Thieu was surprised, too.

I looked at the man. "The reward is for each POW. That would be \$20,000 in gold," I said. Kim translated my remark and the man began to smile. It grew to a very large smile. Mr. Thieu was also smiling. "Remember, we have to get them before you get paid. The more information you can give us, the more likely we will succeed," I said. Kim again translated.

Mr. Thieu then came over to me. "I will go to my office now. I have reports to do. I hope to hear from you in a couple of days. Good luck." He left us then. He had no interest in the details.

I began to question the returnee. It turned out that he was with a unit near the 173rd base, that we call LZ English. Two days ago, two American POWs were brought to the base and placed in two bamboo cages not quite tall enough for them to stand. They had been prisoners for almost a month. Both were injured from beatings and were being fed very little. I produced a map of the area and asked him—if he could—to point out where the base was. The man could read our map. This was the first one I had seen do that. He pointed

to a hill just outside the LZ English base. I thought it was too close to the base to be true. He told us there were 80 to 100 men at the base at any time. The base was under the jungle cover and could not be seen from the air. He again pointed to the base and said the front of the base was well-guarded and he marked where the guard positions were. At the back of the base there was only one guard and, sometimes, there were none during the day. The base was not thought to be approachable from that side as they had mined and set traps for a distance of 100 meters on that side. Even their own troops were afraid to go there.

How could we take this position? I had stopped asking questions and was trying to think how we could get those men. I was beginning to feel that I had found them but would never be able to get them. With a force of the size he described, we would have to attack in even larger force. There would be no way we could do that quietly. The first thing they would do when we attacked would be to kill the prisoners. There appeared there was no way to get them without them getting killed. I was depressed. The returnee must have guessed my problem. He took the map again and explained to me the standard plan the VC used.

“On the side opposite from the mined area, about 3 to 4 clicks to the east, was a wide valley.” He pointed to the valley. “If a small American force were to come up the valley in a search-and-destroy mode, the VC soldiers would come down from the mountain and attempt to ambush them. He marked the areas where the VC would hide for the ambush. All we had to do was send a unit down the valley. They did not have to enter the ambush kill zone, but could get as near to it as they could. The VC would all have come down the mountain to ambush your men as they approached. Only a token force of six to eight men would remain at the base. You might be able to hold the VC in position for an hour or less.”

Kim translated what he had said and I looked at the man. How could he know this? I had Kim ask him that. He hesitated and finally admitted that he was a platoon leader and this was described at the last officers’ meeting he was at. If the Americans threatened their base, this was how the VC would protect it. A couple of days after the briefing, he was captured by the ARVN during a raid he had participated in on a local village. After capture he asked to join the

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*Chieu Hoi* program. That was how he got here. The money would be useful to him to restart his life, he thought.

I thanked my lucky stars. If what he said was true, we had struck gold. We then went over the whole thing again to see if there was anything we had missed. By the time we left we had everything he could give us. We had spent an hour, maybe a little more, rehashing what he had to tell us. It was time to leave. Mike and Kim went to the jeep and I walked over to the house where Mr. Thieu lived, even though he had hinted that he did not need to know more about what was to happen. I wanted to reassure him that we would do what we could to get the POWs and reminded him that everything was contingent on us actually getting the POWs back alive. He wished us luck and I left. There was much on my mind. Again, I had fallen into a gold mine of information. Now I had to figure out how to use it—and time was not on my side. At best, I probably had no more than three days to complete a recapture operation. How could it be done? Mike drove home while I went into deep thought about how I could use this information.

## Chapter 19

**By the time we got back** I had come up with an idea. I needed to talk to Roger right away. When we got to the office I rushed to the phone and called him. He would come by as quickly as he could. In a half hour he showed up and we went into the radio room. I told him about the information I had just gotten. His reaction was immediate.

“Shit, Burdick! How the hell do you come up with stuff like that? I’ve been working all year to find just one agent that can give me good information and they seem to fall into your fucking lap.”

I just smiled. “Must be my good looks!” was my only response and we both laughed at that. Part of my plan was to use the Navy SEALs again, but Roger said they couldn’t move that fast. We needed someone there today, not a week from today. He suggested I check with the Lurps (the nickname for LRRP—Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol). There were a couple of teams in Binh Dinh Province. I did not know that. He had a name and number so he went to our phone and made a call. He came back and gave me directions.

“They’re waiting for you now! I told them it was a POW recovery operation and they jumped at the chance,” he said.

I grabbed the piece of paper and thanked him while I headed for a jeep. I grabbed Mike on the way. He was going to be part of this. It took me about 20 minutes to find the Lurp compound and offices. They were waiting for me. There was a Major Roberts who seemed to be in charge and wanted to know what I had. I told him the whole story about the man from the *Chieu Hoi* Center.

All he could say was, “Damn, if that son of a bitch didn’t lie to you, we may have a good one here.”

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“That’s why I’m here. To see if we can somehow verify the VC camp,” I said to him. He motioned to me to follow him. I left Mike in the outer office as we went inside.

He went to a wall that had a map on it. He pointed to a group of pins and said, “Just so happens, we have a team within 3 clicks of the backside of that camp. Let’s see if we can get hold of them and move them toward your VC Camp.”

“Tell them to be careful of booby traps on that backside. They go for a 100 meters or more out the backside!” I said and then mentally crossed my fingers that the team could get near the camp. If they did, and if they verified my information, we had a chance. Major Roberts had left the room while I was talking to him. I sat and waited for what seemed forever.

Finally, he returned. “Looks like they can do it. Should be near there in a couple of hours. Then we will Evac them back here. Can you meet with us around 1800 hours? They should be here by then.” I agreed and went and got Mike and drove back to the office. Things were clicking. I had to tell Major Theran. Mike was excited.

The major liked what he heard. He wanted to make sure I kept him in the loop, but he understood that time was of the essence and I would have to make decisions on the run. I know he wanted to go with me to the meeting with the Lurp commander, but the operation was mine and his entrance would confuse things. Roger had introduced me—not him—and he knew it. It must have been frustrating for the major. I could really be a loose cannon, but I was lucky and things happened around me. He did not want to stop that. I had to wait until 1800 hours before I would know more. Then I would see what the next step would be. Patience never sat well with me. I only drank Cokes the rest of the afternoon. I had to be sharp for the debriefing. It was hard to do.

Just before 1800 hours Mike and I left for the Lurp compound. When we arrived, we went directly to Major Robert’s office. He was waiting for me.

“Good news! Come with me,” he said. We followed him out of the office into a barracks where eight men were sitting around, cleaning their gear and evidently waiting for us. The major pointed to a bunk for us to sit on. The men had jumped to attention as he came in, but he had signaled them to sit where they were. I could

easily see that he respected these men—and they him. It was obvious they had no idea how to treat us.

When everyone was seated, the major said, “I’ll let the sergeant here give the report. Sergeant Wilson!” The sergeant began to stand at attention.

“No need for that, Sarge. Just tell us what you saw and you can do it seated and smoke if you want,” I told him. He smiled and sat down.

“We got your message at about 1400 hours. At first, we thought you were nuts. Sorry, sir!” He looked at me.

“You wouldn’t be the first, Sarge!” I said laughing. He relaxed. I liked this guy.

“We were only about an hour from the location you were describing, and we had seen no indication of any enemy activity in our area. Our original job was a bust. That we could miss indications of a force the size you described seemed impossible to us. Since you told us it involved a couple of POWs, we were willing to give it a try. It was only about three clicks away. To our surprise, within a click we began to see trails that we had missed before. We went in quiet mode. Working our way up the mountain was not difficult. We could see no activity ahead of us, but there were plenty of trails. When we were very near your coordinates, about 300 meters, we heard camp sounds, but we couldn’t see anything. Private Roland, over there”—he pointed to a young man at the corner of the room—“thought if we went to the right we could get to a higher spot that was pretty much equal to the height of the camp. So we headed there. There was a ton of booby traps and mines, so we had to be careful. You were right about the booby-trapped area, but it was bigger than 100 meters. It took us about a half hour to crawl there. We could see some of the camp. I was surprised! There were a hell of a lot of VC and NVA there. I estimate we saw 50 to 60. Your estimate of about 100 is probably more correct because I could not see the soldiers on guard duty. We looked over the whole camp. Far to the right we saw the top of two bamboo cages.”

My heart skipped a beat. Had we really found our POWs?

The sergeant continued. “We could not see any POWs—maybe because we could only see the top foot of the cages. We did see that each cage had an armed guard next to it. They don’t guard empty

cages, sir.” He stopped and was looking directly at me. In those seconds my feelings were on a roller coaster, first high, then low, and finally high again. We really had found two POWs. Damn!

“Great work, sergeant. Now the hard part. How do we get them out of there without getting them killed?” I looked over all the men because what had to be done would risk all their lives, and it might not be successful. They did not respond. “Let me tell you what I know.” I took out our map and laid it on the bed. They all came over to look at what I was pointing at. “According to my intelligence—and so far it has been good—if I can get a small force, say a platoon or two, to come up this valley, the VC will leave the camp to set up ambush kill zones.” I pointed with my finger where I thought the ambush sites would be. “We think that is where these zones will be. If a decoy force does not enter the zones, but gets as close as they can, then we can hold the VC in place. I think you would have about 30 minutes to enter the camp, eliminate the guards—there should only be about eight in the camp—and release the POWs and get them out of the camp. I do not know the condition of the POWs. I suspect it is not good and you may have to carry them. We have to do this within the next 36 hours or they will be moved and we will never find them again. You should know that the guards are under orders to shoot the prisoners if a rescue attempt is made. Do you guys think this is possible?” I sat there and looked at them.

They were staring at the map and thinking. “Where would the force come from that will go up the valley, sir?” Private Roland asked.

“Good question! They will come from the 173rd, whose base is right there. I will have to get them to approve the operation, but with my last talk with the G2 he assured me that he would do everything needed to help me recover a POW. I bet he will do even more for two.” I smiled at them. I did not tell them that the G2 I dealt with was no longer there, but I was confident that I could get his replacement to support this action.

They all began talking at once and asking each other questions. When necessary, the major or I would tell them what we knew or thought possible. Time flew by. It was almost 2100 hours when we decided on an action. The plan was simple and efficient. They would be inserted in the area tomorrow night, just before dark. They



would work their way to the back side of the camp and make a path through the booby traps and mine fields. It would be sort of a zigzag path so that, if they were followed, the enemy following them would get caught in their own traps. When they were at the edge of the camp, they would wait until the VC would leave the camp to set up the kill zones. Once they had left, they would wait another 15 minutes to let the VC/NVA get far enough away so they couldn't return too soon to the camp. They would then terminate all the guards. We gave them 10 minutes to do this. Once firing came from the camp, the VC in the kill zones would quickly return to the camp to find out what the trouble was. The Lurps would have 10 to 15 minutes, we guessed, before the first soldiers returned. They had to have the POWs in hand and out of the minefield by that time. They would have about a click more to go to where they could all be recovered and brought home to Qui Nhon. It seemed like a simple enough plan. They liked it and Major Roberts and I thought it would work. I put two conditions on them. One, they could not enter the camp if the VC left more than 12 men in the camp—we would have to try something else, later. Two, they had to kill the guards covering the POWs, first.

The operation could not start until the 173rd agreed to their part in it. I was going to fly to LZ English in the morning and meet with them. As soon as I had their agreement I would call them from there and tell them "Start the training." If they did not hear from me by 1600 hours, the operation was off. If the 173rd refused to participate, the call would be "Stop the training!" None of us could see that as an option, but they might not have available troops for such a quick action. All the Lurps were excited. They would get to save somebody for a change. I went back with the major to his office.

"I want to thank you for your cooperation. You've got a great team there. I want to get them all back healthy," I said.

"I've got three other teams. They're all like this. Great kids. Willing to give their all. They know the jungle. They will get back OK!" he said.

"I've got to get back and get my flight set up and tell my people what is about to happen. I will be talking to you tomorrow. Thanks again for your help." We shook hands and Mike drove me off.

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“Damn, why do people do the things you ask? If you pull this off...” Mike didn’t finish what he was thinking. I was worried about the 173rd.

When I got back, I told Major Theran what we were doing. He was hopeful it would succeed, but reminded me that things could go sour in an instant. Just because it sounded like a good plan didn’t mean it would work. I agreed with him. I went over the Ops plan we had devised and he could find nothing to make it better. He was going to call Nha Trang to let them know what was about to happen. I suggested he wait. After the security problem we had uncovered in MACV, the fewer people who knew what we were doing, the better, was my thought. He agreed. We would tell them after the operation. He had to go look up the procedures for handling a recovered POW. He was sure they had to do something. That was his problem. Mine was to make this thing work. I called my helicopter people but, for the first time, they were tied up and had no craft available in the morning. They did tell me the CIA had a plane at the airport. I called my CIA friends and asked for it. They gave it to me with no questions. That was strange. But never look a gift horse in the mouth.

I called the MI team at LZ English. Somebody answered the phone, even though it was now 2200 hours. I told them I was flying up in the morning and needed to meet with the new G2 and the G3. I had an operation I wanted them to participate in, and I would explain it to them in person. We would have to move fast. It was then that I learned that the new G2 was Captain Wesley, now Major Wesley. This was not good news. I had crossed him the last time I was there. All I could hope for was that he would understand the importance of this mission and forget what he thought of me. Nothing is ever easy. I reminded them to have someone pick me up at the plane and take me to the meeting. Yes, tomorrow was going to be an interesting day.

I arose early the next morning and had Mike drive me to the plane. It was just a two-seater, so he could not go along. We went to where the plane was supposed to be, but there was nothing there. Was this how my day was going to go? A civilian came up to me and asked if I was Mr. Burdick. I said I was. He said the plane would be

here in a minute or so. The pilot had taken it somewhere to get gas. So I waited. In a few moments I saw a plane coming slowly down the runway. It looked odd. The closer it got the longer its wings appeared to be. It was not a Piper Cub. It turned out to be a plane built in Europe—Denmark, to be exact. At least that's what the pilot told me. Its wing length was huge compared to other planes I had seen. According to the pilot, this plane could take off in about a hundred yards and could land almost anywhere. All I wanted to do was get to LZ English. They had a normal-sized airfield. It turned out that the pilot had never been to LZ English. I told him all we had to do was go up highway 1 and we would run into it. He was OK with that. As soon as I got in and belted up, we rolled to the end of the strip and took off. Within what I thought was 75 yards, we were in the air. It really didn't need much space to fly in. I saw several pilots looking at the odd plane as we flew out. I waved at them.

We then headed up highway 1. In about a half hour the pilot pointed to an airstrip and asked if that was the place. As far as I knew, there was only one strip up here and that had to be it. We turned and began to land. The closer we got, the more it didn't look right. There were no planes or helicopters anywhere. I also didn't see any American troops. I told the pilot that it didn't look right. As we touched down men in black pajamas with rifles ran in at us from the sides of the runway. He hit the power and we shot out of there. Wrong airfield! I wondered who the hell it belonged to. We went another 5 minutes farther and found the right airfield—I could see the American flag flying at one end of the field. We landed without incident.

As we pulled to a stop the pilot said, "Let's not say anything about that other landing. Right?"

I laughed. "What other landing?" He laughed and we pulled to a stop. My jeep pulled in next to the plane. "I don't know how long this will take. Could take a couple of hours," I said.

"No problem. I'm yours until I get you back. Take your time. Besides, I can talk to the other pilots around here and maybe get some trading in." I nodded OK and got out of the plane. I had no idea what he was trading for, but it didn't matter. The local MI group had a jeep waiting for me. I got in and they drove me to headquarters.

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As we pulled to a stop the driver said, "They know you're coming. Wesley was not happy. I don't think he likes you very much." I had guessed right. I would have to work on getting him on the right side. I hoped I could do it

Major Wesley made me wait for him about 15 minutes. I had to grin and bear it. When he came in I congratulated him on his promotion and new position. He nodded to accept my comment and pointed to a chair for me to sit in. "What exactly do you have for me?" he asked.

"Before I begin, I had asked to see the operations officer along with you. Is he coming?" I asked.

"Yes, he will be here in about 10 minutes. I wanted to get a heads-up so I would be better able to respond to his questions," he said. My antennae went up. He was going to sandbag me. If he had the information first, he could have time to shoot down our operation. I was going to stall.

"We are in the midst of a POW recovery mission—actually two POWs." I stopped, waiting to see his reaction.

"What do we have to do with a POW recovery mission? Is it one of our men?" This was not the response I was hoping for. I could already tell he did not understand the importance of recovering a POW, or how big it potentially could be. He really was an idiot. Who cared from what unit the men were? They were Americans.

"We don't know what unit they are from. You know that MACV has put a high importance on recovering POWs?" I said. That stopped him for a minute.

"No, I didn't know that. I just got this position and have not got up to speed yet," he said. I was thinking that he was never going to get up to speed.

"Our information is current and needs action immediately. That is why I'm here, to see if the 173rd can help us. Colonel Bench assured me before that they would help us." Damn, I probably shouldn't have mentioned Colonel Bench. It probably would remind him about how I embarrassed him the last time I was here. From the look in his eyes, I was right. He remembered.

"Well, I'm in command now, not Colonel Bench. We'll see what we can do—if we can do anything." At that point a lieutenant colonel

came in. Major Wesley stood up. "This is Colonel King. He is our G3. Please be quick, as his schedule is very full."

I had stood up when Wesley stood up. I showed Colonel King my credentials. "What can I do for you, Mr. Burdick?" he said. I might as well find out what he knows right now.

"Colonel, we have located two American POWs within 10 clicks of your base. I want your help to rescue them." With that I shut up and waited. The colonel looked at me like he couldn't believe his ears.

"Are you saying that they are holding two Americans within 50 minutes of this Base? I can't believe it."

"Believe it, sir! We have already verified it," I said.

Wesley jumped in, "Who verified it? I didn't, nor have I heard of such a thing. This is crazy!"

I looked at him. "I received the information yesterday morning. Yesterday afternoon we sent a Lurp group out to verify the camp and the POWs. The camp was exactly where I told them it was. It was a difficult approach. They were not able to get very close. They did verify seeing two bamboo cages but they did not see the prisoners."

Wesley interrupted me. "So you don't know if there are any prisoners there, do you?"

I looked at him. "As I was saying, we did not see the prisoners but each cell had an armed guard next to it. Even the VC don't guard empty cells, major. The Lurps were positive that there were prisoners in the cells. I might add that the Lurps saw about 60 hostiles in the camp. My source says there are up to a hundred there. The Lurps agree with that number."

"My God!" said the colonel. "I had no idea that such a force was that close. You say the Lurps verified this?" he asked.

"Yes they did. Look, colonel, time is very precious here. The VC move the POWs every 8 to 10 days, automatically. According to my source, that is any day now. We have come up with a recovery plan, but we need your support if we are going to make it work."

Without waiting to hear from the major, the colonel asked, "What can we do to help? I want those men back." The major did not say anything and I could tell he did not agree with the colonel,

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but he said nothing. I went to the map and outlined our operation. It was simple, so it did not take much time to tell them all about it.

"That's an ingenious way to use the Lurps, Mr. Burdick," he said.

"Not my idea, sir. The Lurps came up with the plan. It has a chance to work. What we need is the worm at end of the hook to entice the little bastards off the hill," I said.

The major finally struck. "How sure are you about the kill zones you show on the map? If they are wrong our men could be slaughtered." Well, at least he found the same worry that I had struggled with all night. He didn't do it because he was worried about the men, though. He brought it up to kill the plan. There was a difference.

"Everything this source has given us has proven true. The Lurps even verified some of the guard positions he has given us. They were exactly where he said they would be. I know the risk, major. What I suggest is that we tell the troops what we are trying to do and ask for volunteers. At least, if it turns to shit, they will know what they were trying to do," I said, looking at the major.

The colonel smiled at my answer. "When do you want to do this, Mr. Burdick?" he asked.

"Well, we need to do this quickly. I have agreed to insert the Lurps this evening at 1800 hours. They will be in position by 1300 hours tomorrow. By 1200 hours we will need your men in that valley, approaching the kill zones. We don't want them to go into the kill zones, but to get close and try to keep the VC in position for an hour, if they can. At 1500 hours your men are to leave the valley and, if we are lucky, the POWs will be in the hospital in Qui Nhon." I shut up. The colonel was in thought.

The major spoke up. "That is awfully soon. I don't think we can put it together that fast."

"That's for me to say, and I think we can, major!" the colonel said. He was going to help.

"Do we need to change the plan as presented to you in any way, colonel," I asked. I thought I had better be politic. "Major, do you have any problems with what we are asking for?" I had to give him a chance to vent or try again to stop it.

“No, colonel, if it’s all right with you I will write the Ops plan and get the general to approve it,” he said. If you can’t beat them, join them was what I was thinking.

“Go ahead and write the plan, major. I have to be in Pleiku this afternoon but I like the plan Mr. Burdick outlined. So do it!” he said

“Major, can I use your phone for a minute. I need to give the Lurps the go-ahead. I was not going to insert them until we knew that we would have a force going into the valley tomorrow.” The colonel smiled. My men were ready to go and I was going to order it in their presence. He liked that. The major was pissed. He shoved the phone at me and I called the Lurps office. I identified myself. All I said was, “Start the training! I say again. Start the training.” I heard a loud “Yes, sir!” as I hung up. We were in it now. In about 30 hours we should have our POWs. I shook hands with the colonel and the major.

“I would suggest again that you ask for volunteers so the troops will know why they are doing such a stupid thing in that valley tomorrow, but that’s up to you,” I said as I left.

“Yes it is!” said the major. He still bothered me, but at least the colonel was on board.

The MI agent was still sitting in the jeep when I left the meeting. I had been in there over an hour. It was a little after 1200 hours. I told him to take me back to the airport. I needed to get back to Qui Nhon. He was dying to find out what I was doing, but security is security and there was nothing I could tell him. When I got back to that strange craft, I came upon a group of pilots who were around it, and my pilot was waxing thick about what this plane could do. He saw me and waved. He immediately started to make his excuses and was getting ready to leave. His “trading” must have gone well. He had a new box full of something behind his seat. He tucked it in as I got in from the other side.

“I hope we can land at the right airport this time.” I laughed.

“Did you get what you wanted?” he asked.

“Yes! And did you get what you wanted?” I said. He laughed. We went to the end of the runway. I guess to show off, he took off in less than 75 yards this time. I was impressed and the pilots I waved to on the ground also looked impressed. I didn’t have anything to do

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on the way back except wait. These next 30 to 40 hours were going to be hard to take. I didn't want to jinx anything by saying we were going to get a POW, but deep in my soul I believed we were. Mr. Thieu was likely to be a very happy man tomorrow.

We landed at Qui Nhon without any problems. I thanked the pilot and found a phone to call my office to get someone to pick me up. Major Theran himself came.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Well, it was a bit tougher than I thought. Their new G2 is an idiot who I've run into before. It took a while for him to join in the program. Colonel King, Head of Operations, was on board quickly. They bought our plan. The Lurps will be inserted within the hour. They know their job. By 1500 tomorrow we should be celebrating. We will just have to wait and see." I did not know how I could stand waiting all that time. There was no use going over anything. There was nothing I could change. The men were in the field. We were committed—very committed.

Major Theran asked about the problem I had with the G2, so I covered everything that happened as best as I could. He agreed with me that Major Wesley was a prick. His take on it was that Wesley wanted the credit for the operation and couldn't get it because I was obviously in charge. That fact alone made him oppose the operation. He believed that Wesley did not care if we recovered a POW or not. It wouldn't help him. He warned me to watch out for him. I agreed, but the people were in the field now. There was not much he could do—or so I thought.

Waiting was becoming worse for me each time I had to do it. I could remember the first operation of RF/PF that I sent out to kill some VC soldiers. I sweated bullets over whether I did it right. The problem was that I had to send men out to kill or capture someone, but there was nothing that I could do once they left. They only had my information to work on. If it were good, they would be successful. If it was not good, they might die. Once they were gone on patrol, there was no help or experience that I could give them. I had to wait and see if they succeeded or failed. Then it was either my fault or theirs. Or maybe the situation had just changed and it was no one's fault. This second guessing can drive you crazy. It got worse each



time I sent people out. The SEALs I sent out had the best knowledge I could give them and one was now paralyzed for life, not because of anything I did, but because of a friendly-fire accident. Still, it was hard to take. He would not have been there if I had not gathered the information. At times, the responsibility was crushing. That was probably why Roger and I had to get in the battle and burn that hut. Not for a lark—as it seemed—but because, if we were in the battle, at least we had some control over something. It made waiting for the rest of the battle a little easier to bear. Still, I hated the waiting.

I thought I was through with battles because I was trying to recover POWs. Now I was in it again. Once more, I had sent good men into danger for a good cause, and the Lurps were going to be in the thick of it. I knew all these men now and I was sick with worry that they might not come back. It was a big gamble that I hoped was worth it. I drew some comfort in the fact that every detail of what I had been told, so far, turned out to be true. Still, it could be a trap. I worried about the 173rd, too. If the ambushes and kill zones were in different places than I told them, they would be walking into a trap and many men would die. I did not sleep well the night before the rescue attempt. For once, I didn't drink. My thoughts were bad enough without alcohol added to them.

In the morning I went to the PX—out of frustration more than anything. I couldn't just sit there wondering if everything was working out right. I wandered around and finally bought a big tin of Ritz crackers. A tin was the only way you could keep crackers crisp. In a box, they would be soggy in a day. I also bought some peanut butter and jam. I was not planning to go anywhere once I was back at the office, so I decided I needed a snack. I brought my goodies back to the office and stashed them in my desk. I had a stack of reports from other agencies to read so I tried that, but my mind kept wandering away. Major Theran had given me a document to encrypt, so I did that. I was not scheduled to transmit anything today, so I put the encrypted message in the safe and locked it. I temporarily resumed my war on the flies, but my heart wasn't in it and I quit after a few minutes. I hadn't seen Major Trang in a few weeks so I drove over to his office. His jeep was not there so I kept going and drove around town for a minute or two. I thought of going to check on VC prisoners at the Evac Hospital but I didn't want to

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run the gauntlet of wounded Americans to do it. They needed to move those damn VC away from the Americans they shot.

By the time I returned to the office, it was noon. Everyone should almost be in place. If the Lurps were on time, they had just finished cleaning a path through the mine fields and booby traps. The platoon from the 173rd should almost be approaching the ambush area and they should have been spotted by the VC, who are, at this moment, beginning to move men to their prearranged kill zones. All this was going on while I sat at my desk and smoked a cigarette. All I could think of was: Damn, what will go wrong? I couldn't answer that question—I wasn't there. The major understood my problem.

"Burdick, how are you doing? We shouldn't hear anything for a couple more hours, right?" he asked.

Jolted out of my thoughts, I said, "The earliest we could hear anything would be 1500 hours—more likely around 1600 hours."

"Well, take it easy and let me know when you hear anything." He went back to his office.

I looked around and noticed everyone was trying to ignore me. Few knew the pressure I was under, but they knew I was trying to rescue some POWs and I was acting very strange again. The older agents had tried to explain it to the younger ones, but it's hard to understand unless you've been there. They could tell I was sweating blood, waiting to hear.

I decided to eat a few of my crackers with the peanut butter and jam. The food brought the flies and I resumed my war on them. The clock seemed to move like a stream trying to cut a new Grand Canyon—slowly, very slowly. I went outside and watched the birds and the sampans in Qui Nhon Bay. It was still a pretty sight. Too bad our outhouse had to be right there. I was surprised to see our guards in place. Usually, there was only one or two here during the day and all six or seven at night. Today they were all here. They could feel the tension in the air. Kim smiled at me and waved from his guard position. Of course, he knew, and had his men come in because something big was brewing. Well, I hoped something big was brewing. I decided to go upstairs and take a nap to kill the time.

As I lay down on my bed, my thoughts changed from the recovery to myself. I was short. My birthday had somehow slipped by me and

it was now the first week of November. Within five weeks I would be going home. Where was home? At that very moment I wasn't sure. My wife and I were not talking. Yes, we sent letters back and forth but they said nothing and we were rather nasty to each other. I didn't know what happened, but it had happened somewhere among my experiences in Vietnam. I kind of blamed it on her fling with her damn cousin. Well, maybe fling was too strong, but from that moment I no longer trusted her, and my loss of trust in her probably had nothing to do with what she was doing—which was probably innocent—but with me and my view of the world. In my current world, if you could not trust someone they were nothing to you. There was nothing as important as trust. Once trust was lost I did not believe it could be restored. She was not the one who lost trust in me—it was me who did not believe I could trust her. When first I got my orders to go to Vietnam I did not trust her enough to tell the truth. I started lying to her—and I hadn't stopped since. I never shared any of the horror I was going through—or my worries and hopes. I accepted that I had no future, so her being in my life was meaningless anyway. Personally, I was in a bad spot. I tried to look ahead and think what the future might have for me. I still saw nothing.

Now I was really short. I might just get back to the States. I had to admit it was an even bet so far. What would I do? I hadn't thought about life after Vietnam. When I left Vietnam I would be unemployed. I knew the CIA would hire me. They had hinted at it many times, but they wanted me to ask. I just didn't think I could do what I was doing any more. The pressure was just too great and I had too willing a nature to accept risk. I did it all the time here.

I thought of myself as a cat with nine lives—and that I had been using them up fast since I arrived in-country. The first life was used up when I fired that loaded pistol against the wall at my first Christmas party in Vietnam. The second was riding shotgun in the jeep that went to our main office under fire at the start of Tet. The third was coming under fire on the roof next to our office and almost being blown off it by the Korean recoilless gun. The fourth was walking unprotected into the Sunday market to meet a source I didn't know. The fifth was driving up and down highway 1 looking for the VC safe house. The sixth and seventh was flying to the Green Beret A-

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team in a Piper Cub and then, on the way back, agreeing to go on a fire mission. The eighth was riding the patrol boat into the edge of the battle to set a hut on fire. That was the battle that was going to destroy the people who had killed my friend. Putting my head in the hole in the hut makes that one special. The ninth was flying into a monsoon and almost being blown out of the sky by the weather and a lone VC sniper. The trouble was, I could think of more than nine times I had risked my life. My personal favorite was driving through the ammo dump that had not been cleared by EOD.

I thought of these things and realized that I had used up all of my nine lives—and more. I needed to not stay in this type of work. The major had been hinting about a direct commission for me, but I was thinking that I needed to get away from all this into a more sane life. I just didn't know what I wanted to do. I had to start thinking about it. What would I do? Somewhere among these thoughts I fell asleep. I heard a phone ringing. It might have been a dream. No, it was really ringing. I woke up and looked at my watch. It was a little after 1500 hours. I needed to get back to my desk. I should be hearing something soon. I shook my head to remove all those thoughts I was struggling with and headed downstairs. Now I would know.

## Chapter 20

**The call was not for me.** I sat at my desk and struggled to remain calm. This was the hardest time. I tried to look busy. Shuffling papers is an art. Unfortunately, it was not one that I was good at. Gus came over and asked if he could do anything to help. I just shook my head “No.” There was nothing anyone could do but wait. Brian came over and wanted to know if he could go with me when I went out the next time. I looked at him, perplexed. What the hell was he talking about? He realized something was up and got up to leave.

“I just want to meet some of the people you know. You’re getting short and ... well, you know,” he said.

I just stared at him like he was nuts. He was talking about me giving up my sources while I had a team out in the field whose lives were being risked by me. This was not a time to collaborate with anyone. I was smoking one cigarette after another, staring at the phone and out the door. Soon it was 1530 hours and then 1600 hours. I was getting sick to my stomach. Something had gone wrong. I could feel it. The major came out of his office and walked towards my desk and sat in the chair next to me.

“I know this is hard for you. It’s hard for me, too. I don’t know how you are doing it. Waiting sucks! Doesn’t it, John?” he said quietly. I just nodded my head. “By the way, I did look up procedures for returning POWs. They have a whole lot of regulations about it—most of which you’ve already ignored.” He laughed as he said this. I tried to smile while I looked at the clock. It seemed frozen. He began to go over some of the mundane ones. Some idiot must have had way too much time in Saigon to write all the nonsense that Dave was repeating.

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Suddenly, the phone rang again. Everything stopped. Gus answered it. It was for Brian. Dave and I relaxed again. He continued his monotonous recital of POW recovery procedures. "By the way, you will probably be assigned to go with them to the States. An intelligence agent is supposed to go with them for debriefing, etc. You ready for a trip?" he asked.

I looked at him. "We haven't got them yet. Let's worry about that after they are here," I said. I looked at the clock. It was close to 1700 hours. This was not good. Dave got up, patted me on the shoulder and went back to his own office to wait. My bad feeling was growing with every second. This was not good. They should have been here by now. I began to swear internally. What could have gone wrong!

At 1705 hours the phone rang and it was for me. Gus handed it to me. I put it to my ear, hoping for the words that would make the wait worth it. It was Major Roberts, the Lurp commander. "Mr. Burdick, can you come over and see the team now?" He then gave a location that was one of the wards at the Evac Hospital.

I had to know. "Major, were we successful?" It sounded like I was making a plea for mercy. His answer was like a piece of ice shoved onto my bare back.

"No! I need you here now, though." Major Theran was looking at me from his office door. I shook my head from left to right. I heard a loud "Shit!" from him. He never swears. I told Major Roberts I would be right there. I turned around and yelled at Mike, "Let's go!" I headed for the door. Mike almost fell off his chair struggling to catch up with me. We jumped into the jeep. I drove. Mike wanted to talk, but I would have none of it. Something had gone wrong. Mike later told me that I was driving like a madman down the road while I was intermittently swearing aloud. I had thought that I was swearing to myself. I was upset.

We got to the hospital in good time. I parked the jeep and headed for the ward Major Roberts had told me to go to. I went through the door and stopped immediately. Mike ran into my back, I had stopped so quickly. All the beds were full. Every one of the Lurp team was wounded. Two of them looked like they were seriously hurt with all the hoses connected up to them. The major saw me and came over.

“We ran into a buzz saw, Mr. Burdick, but I’ll let the sergeant give the report. This, you have to hear from the horse’s mouth.”

I looked for the sergeant. He was sitting on the bed to my right. I walked over to him. He started to get up but I motioned him to stay sitting. What had I done to these men? “What happened, sergeant?” I quietly asked.

“It was damn fucking incredible, sir. I mean, everything went perfect. We were inserted like we planned last night and slowly made our way to the camp. We immediately began to work our way through that minefield and all those booby traps. It wasn’t as hard as we thought. They had not policed the area for a long time. Most of the booby traps were inactive. The mines were touchy, though. Still, it was a little after 1000 hours when we had made it through the field. Corporal Murphy, over there”—he pointed to one of the men who was obviously badly hurt—“thought we should add some extra goodies to the trail we had made through the field. He went back and placed some goodies that would spoil the day of anyone who followed us as we escaped. We were able to really get a good look at the camp. Your map of it was exactly right, sir. All the guard positions were exactly where you said. Our job was easy. Around 1100 hours there was some activity around an area across the camp. I assumed that was the commander’s area. Soon, a small group of VC went into the hut where we saw the activity. Fifteen minutes later they came out and suddenly everybody was moving. It was just like you said. They must have seen the 173rd platoons entering the valley. By 1200 hours everyone was gone except for 10 men who remained to guard the camp and the prisoners. That was two more than we had planned for, but within our capabilities. While waiting, we had seen both of the POWs get up and try to move around the little cages they were in. One of the prisoners looked to be white, about 6’1”. He was very dirty and had been beaten up really badly. The other prisoner was black and was about 5’10” tall. He was in better shape and not as badly beat up as the other one. They were there, sir, just like you said!”

He looked at me with tears in his eyes. What had happened? “I gave the men their assignments. Corporal Murphy was to go with me to eliminate the guards and get to the POWs. Our first priority was to get them out of the camp. The other men were assigned the

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other targets. We waited until 1300 hours to begin our attack. We knew that once we started firing, the men who left would quickly return to the camp. At best, we had 15 minutes before they returned. I planned the operation to be done in 10 minutes. The corporal and I moved out first. We stayed on the edge of the camp until we were directly across from the cages. My other men had moved to their positions and were waiting for us to fire. The corporal and I fired, killing our targets immediately. I heard the firing behind me quickly start up and stop. The other guards had been eliminated. We started moving across the camp to the cages. It was only about 50 or 60 meters. We moved quickly. The POWs saw us and were standing up in disbelief. Their heads were bent at a strange angle because the cages were too small. I'll never forget the look in their eyes, sir."

He paused a minute. This really disturbed him. He wiped his eyes. I remained quiet. "Suddenly, 20 or so men ran into the camp. It was strange, sir. They weren't attacking us. In fact, one ran past us before he saw us and realized who we were. A quick firefight took place and they were eliminated. We again headed to the cages. Suddenly, a burst of fire began to come from the opposite edge of the camp. The fire was very heavy. The corporal got hit in the hip then. Private George—in the next bed—was hit in the stomach. Both were seriously hurt. We had to leave, sir. We were out in the open and my men were getting clobbered." He paused again and tried to regain his composure. "I had to leave them, sir. I had no choice. I had two men we had to carry out. We couldn't take the POWs. So I ordered us out. The POWs slumped to the ground and cried, sir. There was nothing we could do. I only had 20 to 30 meters to go and they would have been here with us. I'm sorry, sir." He looked at me.

I had never seen a man so miserable in my life. "Sergeant, you did what you had to do. What happened after that?" I asked. I wanted the whole story.

"Well, by the time we got back to our exit route the firing was extremely heavy. There must have been 30 to 40 men firing at us. Only myself and Private Martin over there were not hit. Most were minor, more or less. We retreated at once, back through the minefield. They began to use a mortar on us. That's when Martin and I got wounded with shrapnel. I'm not sure if it was from the mortar



shells or from secondary blasts from the ordnance in the minefield. We made it out quickly, but it was tough. I called in for Evac and we made a hot exit. Sir, why did they come back so early?" he asked.

I just shook my head. "I don't know why, sergeant, but I will find out. Something must have gone wrong on the 173rd side."

He then asked the question I knew was coming. "Sir, can't we go back and try to get them again? I was so close!"

I didn't want to tell him the truth. So I lied! "I'll talk to the major and see what we can do. In the meantime, you guys get better and let those wounds heal. When I know what happened, I'll let you know." For some reason I felt the need to go to each man and shake his hand and thank him for trying. For the two badly wounded men, I just covered their hand with mine and thanked them, even though they appeared to be asleep. I left the ward. The major followed me.

"Let me know, if you can, what happened. The operation should have worked. We were so damn close. Do you think we will get another chance?" he asked.

I had to tell him the truth. "If the POWs were not killed when the VC retook the camp—and that was what their orders were—they have already been moved to another site. I do not have anybody that can tell me where that site is. I believe they are dead. It's too bad your men didn't get a better look at them. Maybe we could have identified them and then their families would know that they were really gone—but don't tell the men that. They did a remarkable job. How they got out alive is incredible."

"They are good men, Mr. Burdick," he said.

"They sure are. Tell them that for me, please. I will let you know what happened when I know it. I'm going to the 173rd base tomorrow morning. Thanks for your help." With that I shook his hand and Mike followed me back to the jeep.

"Are we really going to the 173rd tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"Damn right! Something got fucked up and I'm going to find out what it was." In the back of my mind was the fear that the kill zones had not all been located and the 173rd ran into a trap. What else could it have been? If that was true, then why were the VC running from the battle? I would find out tomorrow. Now I would

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have to go back and tell Dave what happened. God, those Lurps were brave!

I drove slower back to our offices. In the short distance I fell into a deep depression over our failure. I had done something wrong! I had to wipe the tears from my eyes for those poor POWs. If they weren't already dead, seeing the Lurps fail to free them surely killed any hope of rescue they had. If they hadn't been killed, our failure surely would have hastened their death. I never felt so bad in my life. What had I done?

I still couldn't figure out what had happened. The operation was simple, it was clear. There was little that could go wrong. The answer had to be at the 173rd. All the same, I had failed to recover the POWs. The possibility of them being shot in the firefight was high. It was higher that they were shot deliberately by their captors. I felt terrible. After I got back to the office I went and had a couple of beers, but nothing helped. Major Theran, Mike and Brian tried to cheer me up some. They claimed what I had done was incredible. I had gotten closer than anyone ever before me. I had tried and almost succeeded where nobody else was even trying. It didn't help. I had failed and they had died. That was all I could think of. I hoped that moment of hope they got when they saw their rescue force meant something to them, and that watching the rescue force leave didn't destroy their will to survive. I went to bed that night with the guilt of the loss of two POWs on my soul. I hoped no more soldiers died because of my attempt to save those two. Tomorrow, I would find out. That night I dreamt of two soldiers staring at their last chance as the rescue force was forced to leave without them. I felt their fear, their hopelessness. It was a terrible night.

Morning came. I was in a terrible mood. Mike was ready and we took off for LZ English. I was silent the whole way there. I dreaded finding out what had happened. I was even wearing a steel pot and flack jacket, only because I knew I was about to get roasted by that damn G2 if I didn't have them on. He would enjoy my failure. No use in giving him even more to complain about. I was going to have to eat humble pie and I knew it. It already had a bitter taste in my mouth. When we got there I had Mike drive by the MI outfit to see

if they had heard anything. They had heard about the operation but something didn't go right and no one was talking much.

That got me to wondering what had gone wrong. It had to be from the 173rd side. They had no knowledge of what had happened at the VC camp. I was the only one who knew that. What could they have done wrong and why was no one being told? If they had screwed something up ... I let the thought slip away because, if it was their fault, my anger would be more than I could handle. I had to calm myself before I left them. I was beginning to think that somebody from the 173rd did something wrong. We left the MI team and headed to their headquarters and the G2's office. There was more to this than I thought.

When we got to headquarters we were let into the G2's office and told to wait a few minutes. I told Mike not to say anything, to let me do the questioning. My suspicions had made me angry and I had to control that. Major Wesley soon came in.

"Well, Mr. Burdick, did you get your POWs?" he asked. There was something smug about his question.

"No, we didn't, major. Everything went perfect until we went to get the men. Then, the VC your men were supposed to be holding at the ambush site suddenly began returning. Do you know why that happened?" I asked him. My question seemed to catch him off guard.

"No, I don't think I do," he said. Every bone in my body suddenly realized he was lying to me. Why? I had to be careful.

"Maybe I should go ask Colonel King since he is in charge of operations—and find out if something unusual happened." Major Wesley stiffened when I said that. Something had happened.

"I can answer about the operation. I was the one that wrote the Ops plan, remember?" I said nothing. "Look, Mr. Burdick, we have many things going on at the same time. Sometimes we have to change what we want to do." He paused and looked at me.

"You didn't change the Ops plan did you?" I don't know why I said that, but it's what I thought he was heading to. "You can't change an Ops plan with men in the field unless you tell them. We heard of no change. What could you change? You only had to walk down a valley and avoid an ambush?" My voice had gotten loud.

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“Our commanders were uncomfortable with walking into a trap, so we changed our end of the operation,” he said coldly.

“Look, I told you that you should tell them why they were going into the valley. There isn’t a soldier here who wouldn’t volunteer to go into that valley naked if we were going to get a couple of POWs back.” I was getting intense.

“It was our decision not to release information about the POW recovery mission. We thought we could catch the VC in their ambush locations and destroy them—and your mission would not be affected.”

There was silence in the room as we stared at each other. Finally, I said, “You mean to tell me that you decided on your own to change the Ops plan we had agreed on, just so you could kill a few more VC?” My voice was cold and filled with anger as I asked him the question.

“That was our decision. Besides, we didn’t know if there were any POWs at the camp or not,” he spit out at me.

“Let me tell you what happened at our end.” I gave him a detailed description about the attack at the camp and its result. “Did you not know that one of the highest priorities of MACV is the recovery of POWs? It’s not to see your damn KIA count go up. In your change, you almost killed eight of our own Lurps and, most likely, killed the two POWs who we were within 30 feet of being recaptured. Do you understand what you have done?” I was standing and yelling at him by this time.

He stood up. “Look, the general approved my change. It was a good one. We brought in two other platoons to catch the VC in their ambush sites. It was our intent to kill them all and that would not have affected your operation and it would have improved our KIA rate. Unfortunately, our troops were spotted and the VC escaped,” he said.

“If you think that was a good change, well you defend it to the wives and families of those prisoners. You’re sure as hell not going to prove it to me. You’re even afraid to let your own men know that you screwed up this operation. At least that’s what I hear.”

He looked at me, confused and very angry. “You can’t know that!” he said.

I do now, I thought. "I will make my report and we will see what they think of your actions," I yelled at him.

"Are you threatening me?" he shouted back.

I was about to answer when the general walked in. "What is going on here? Why the shouting?" he asked. I immediately answered.

"Sir, are you aware that the operation orders for our POW recovery mission was changed yesterday after our teams were inserted into the field?" I asked him, probably not as respectfully as I should have, and definitely louder than he had heard from anyone before.

He looked at the major and then at me. "Yes, I was made aware of the change. It was not to affect your part of the mission," he said, looking at me as if he was deciding why he had to answer questions from this civilian.

"Sir, our only mission was to recover our POWs. There was no other mission. What you did was against every policy I know of. Now let me tell you what happened, sir." I again told the story about what had happened when the Lurps attacked the camp. I noticed the general look at the major several times as I told the story. When he looked at me he seemed ready to explode. "Sir, the changes you approved almost killed all the men on this mission and it most probably killed the POWs. Your attempt to improve your damn KIA counts using a POW recovery mission was wrong, sir."

That made him mad, I could tell. He did not like some young agent telling him that he made a mistake. "We had a choice to make and we made it. Sometimes we don't get the results we want. That is my call to make!" he said.

"Sir, as I told the major, MACV has made recovery of POWs its highest priority. I was following that directive—as were the Lurps." He was staring at me now. It seemed he was getting ready to explode, but I couldn't stop. "How would the soldiers in your own command feel if they knew you deliberately blew a POW recovery mission just to improve your damn KIA rate? Shit, if the press got hold of this all of your careers would be over before the day is done." I was angrier than I ever had been yelling at the general. I had said too much.

He looked at me a moment with total fury on his face. "I would be very careful, Mr. Burdick. The operation was classified by yourself and I will have to approve any reports on its outcome."

I stared defiantly back at him. "That is mostly right, sir. The mission was classified until it was over. However, I did request that the soldiers who were going in as decoys be told what the mission was about. The major here decided that he didn't want to do that. But you should know that my report will not be approved by you. I work directly for MACV and that puts me in the command above the 173rd. My report will go directly to MACV with a copy to the Pentagon. We'll let them decide on this, sir."

"Yes we will!" he said. He then turned around and left, slamming the door. The major was stunned by what he had just seen. I had just taken on and threatened a general. I knew it was time to leave.

Louder than necessary and with fury in my voice I said, "I would like to thank you for your help, major, but I can't. I hope you never forget the men you killed today! Good bye, sir." I then walked out the same door the general did. Mike came scurrying up next to me.

"Where do we go?" He asked. I walked to the jeep and picked up my steel pot and threw it as hard as I could in the back seat. There was a loud thunk. I hopped in my seat and threw the flak jacket in the back seat for good measure.

"Get me out of this mother-fucking place. Now!" I yelled at him.

"Do we stop at the MI unit like we promised?" he asked as he started the jeep.

"I want out of this cock sucking camp now!" I said with as much anger as I have ever expressed. In minutes, we were driving out of the base. I couldn't believe what I had heard. I swore practically the whole way back.

When I got back, I found that Major Theran was out. I went to my desk and began to type my report. I was on the second page when Gus said I had a phone call from the 173rd MI unit. I took the call. "This is Mr. Burdick," I said.

"What the hell did you say to the general? He is more pissed than I've ever seen any officer. He tried to have you arrested before you left our camp, but you got away too quickly for the MPs to catch you."

My luck was holding. It was a good thing I left immediately. "He fucked up my POW recovery mission just to improve his KIA rate. I was pissed and told him so," I said.

"Well, he has ordered the MPs to arrest you if you come through that gate again and he added, 'If he objects, shoot the bastard!' I thought we should warn you. We were also ordered not to have anything to do with you anymore. I'm calling from a friend's phone now. Good Luck. I hope you get the bastard! We will let people know what happened."

I thanked him and went back to add what I was just told to my report. I finished my report, but Major Theran was not back. I decided to call the Lurp office to let them know what had happened. Major Roberts answered the phone. I identified myself.

"Burdick, what shit is going on? My whole team has just been med Evac'd to the States. I just got orders about an hour ago. They're going out the door now. Only two of them are hurt enough to be sent home."

I had no choice but to tell him what had happened. He kept saying "Shit" every now and then as the story developed. "Look, major, I suggest you forget you ever saw me. Things are going to get hot. I really pissed that general off. You have a career in the Army. You're a good man. Protect your career," I said.

"That son of a bitch almost killed all my team, not to say what he did to the POWs. If I'm asked, I'll tell what I know. Use me if you need me. I'll protect my own career," he said.

I knew he was a good man. I thanked him. "I hope I can get him for this!" I said.

"Me too!" he replied. We both hung up.

I went back to my report and added the part about the general using his rank to cover up what he had done. Just as I finished, Major Theran returned. He went into his office and I followed him.

"What happened?" he asked. "It's all in my report, major," I said as I gave it to him. I sat down as he began reading it.

"This is dynamite stuff, John! I hope you were respectful while talking to him," he asked.

"I thought I was, but I was pissed. You'll have to ask Mike," I answered. "I want to encrypt this and send it to Saigon classified as Secret. Can I?" I asked.

*John G. Burdick*

“Do it quickly. The shit will probably hit the fan soon.” He knew I was in trouble. I went to the radio room and encrypted the document in record time. I called Saigon and told them I was sending a document to them. Forty minutes later I was done. Now we would see what would happen.

It happened quicker than I thought. Major Theran saw me as I left the radio room and motioned me into his office. “Nha Trang has just called and ordered me to confine you to the barracks until a board of inquiry can decide what to do to you. I told them about your report that was sent to Saigon and they backed off a little. Evidently, the colonel down in Nha Trang is a friend of the general. When I told him the short on the story, he backed off some more. He wants to read the report, so I am sending him a copy tomorrow. He’s a good man, Burdick, and he likes you. Until we hear, though, you are restricted to the office and upstairs. You may go to the Officers’ Club for meals. You are not to participate in any activities. The hearing should be in two weeks. I will do what I can for you. Any questions?” he asked.

“The bar isn’t off limits is it?” I asked. “No” was his reply. “Then I have no problem. This could be like an in-house R&R,” I said. He laughed. I immediately went to the bar. The time to start celebrating my incarceration was now, and bourbon was going to be my instrument. I was planning to enjoy my restricted time, but my anger at those two officers had not abated.



## Chapter 21

**Of course, I wasn't on R&R,** and everybody knew it. Mike gave some thrilling descriptions of what I had said to the major and the general. I didn't quite remember it like he told it. My view was a bit tamer, but I was mad—so who knew? It was hard for everyone to believe that I had really taken on a general and chewed him out. I didn't look at it that way. I was right and what he did was wrong.

Major Theran had really gone to bat for me. My report was making the rounds in Saigon and people were really pissed. The major from the Lurps called me when he was contacted by some colonel from Saigon about his view of what happened. According to him, he blasted the general and the G2 also. He also requested that he get his men back that were illegally transferred to the States since their wounds were minor. He made that request official and in writing, like the colonel from Saigon requested. Someone was going to get in trouble for that. For the time being, I would have to just wait and let things take their natural course. The general was trying to silence me and there was nothing I could do to stop him except to tell the truth. For once, lying would not help. No matter what happened, I had found that I had a considerable number of friends out there. Some, evidently, I had never met. My best guess was that, at some point, the general would realize this was not a battle that he could win because what he did was wrong and there was no way around it. Once he realized that, he would blame his G2 and that officer's career would end. Major Wesley deserved to get his butt kicked, for sure, but the general should not go unscathed, either. His career should end too.

I called Roger and warned him to lay low. There was no need to get the Navy involved in this problem. Roger was a career Naval officer. I was worried that my mess might tarnish his record, so I asked him to stay away until things cooled down.

His response was pure Roger. "Bring the fuckers on! I'll make a few calls. We'll see who gets their career ruined. Remember that Admiral I brought to you?" He asked.

"Yeah, but he knows nothing about this operation," I answered.

"He met you and he worked with you. Believe it or not, he was impressed with your work. If someone fucked up one of his operations, you better believe he would raise fucking hell. Can you get me a copy of your report on the dispute?" he asked.

"Roger, it's classified. I can't just send it around to everybody," I answered.

"Look, I got clearance up to Top Secret Army documents. You know that! Give me a copy, OK?"

I thought a minute. "What the fuck! I guess I can't get into any more trouble. I can't bring it to you, though. They restricted me to the bar here for the time being," I told him.

"Only you could get restricted to a bar! I'll be there tonight to pick it up, but I would like to hear the story from your lips—and I'll even buy you a drink," he said.

"Yeah, you'll buy me a drink from my own free bar. That's generous! I'll see you when you get here." I hung up. Well, after the hearing I would know what would happen to me. I really didn't give a damn.

Roger showed up a little after 1800 hours and I gave him a copy of the report. He read it and was getting physically upset as he turned each page. "Those sons of bitches have to pay for this!" he muttered.

Mike was there and gave him a blow-by-blow rendition of what I had said. Every time he retold the story it got a little wilder. He described my confrontation with the general in explicit detail—some of which I know I hadn't said, but Mike liked to embellish a bit.

Roger stayed for a little over an hour and, as he left, he patted his pocket and said, "I've got your report. I know the Admiral will want to see this. He can be a great help. I know he is going to claim it may have been one of his men we were going to rescue, and he

will want the hide of anybody who got in the way. You've got a lot of friends, John. This will blow over."

He shook my hand and left. I felt better, but I was sure I would have to suffer somehow for this. We drank a lot that night. I finally crawled into bed at some unknown hour. At least I didn't have to get up early in the morning. I was restricted from working. God is good!

When I got up the next morning, I remembered that I had to call Mr. Thieu at the *Chieu Hoi* Center. He had to know we failed. Maybe I could talk him into trying again, but I doubted it. Without substantial money, he wouldn't take the risk a second time. I called and let him know that we were unable to complete the list, which, to him, meant we didn't get a POW. I felt he didn't believe me and that he was thinking that I kept the reward myself. He basically let me know not to bother him again. I had expected that. It's too bad—he could have been a great resource for us. Undoubtedly, targeting the *Chieu Hoi* center for information was probably considered unethical by someone in the State Department. They would have shut that operation down, too. I was just too damned frustrated with everything to give a damn anymore.

The next few days were very similar. I would wake up whenever I wanted and go down to the bar and make a Bloody Mary. I would read the *Stars and Stripes* or watch TV and drink more Bloody Marys until it got too hot—usually around 1100 hrs—and then I would switch to cold beer. A little after 1200 hours I would go to the Officers' Club and have lunch and a few more beers and then come back and take a nap. Some time around 1700 hours we would go to dinner and I would switch to Bourbon and water. I would drink that until I went to bed. It was a meaningless life, but I was surviving it. My anger about what had happened had not lessened, but each day I felt sadder and more responsible for not making sure the 173rd did their action properly. I knew I sensed deceit from that fucking major, but I did nothing to make sure he followed the plan. I should have known better. He had done it before, and I had ignored it then. It was a heavy price I had to pay for that. I kept this up for about a week. Still, I had heard nothing about the hearing. No news was probably good news.

*John G. Burdick*

At the end of the first week of my confinement, a new agent arrived. His name was Caleb Lee. He was my replacement. When I found out, I was not happy. They were already replacing me. Most replacements showed up after an agent left country. This made me feel very uncomfortable. I guess I was going to get hung out to dry. Caleb seemed like a nice guy. After Larry left, he was the first black agent most of the men had worked with. He was very green, but I guess I was, too, when I showed up that first day. At least he didn't shoot a hole in the wall like I did.

The next morning Major Theran called me into his office. I guess I was about to hear when and where the hearing was going to be. He closed the door behind me as I entered his office. "What do you think of Caleb?" he asked.

"Don't know yet. He seems like he could be a good agent. He's still a little nervous about being here. Let him settle down for a week or so, and we will see what he can do," I replied.

He pointed to a chair in front of his desk for me to sit in. "I haven't heard about the hearing yet, but I have gotten another request from Saigon," he said.

I was thinking: "What the hell do they want me to do now. Kill somebody else?"

"Before I start on the rest of this discussion, be aware that what we will be discussing is currently classified 'Top Secret' and you may not repeat any of what you hear to anyone. OK?" I nodded assent. "I'm sure you remember that AWOL sergeant you tried to help up at Ahn Khe?" I nodded my head "Yes" again. Why are they bringing that up? "Well, they have confirmed your suspicion that he was targeted by a group in Japan. They want someone to infiltrate that group." He was looking right at me.

I didn't have any American that could infiltrate that group. As I sat there listening to him, it seemed to me that Saigon—or someone in Japan—should be doing this.

"We are aware that your relationship with your wife is at an end, and, with your current problem, you make a perfect person to infiltrate this group." He stopped talking.

I couldn't believe my ears. How did they know about me and my wife? They wanted me to defect to this group. "What good

would my being recruited by this group be? They wouldn't trust me anyway. I am clearly an intelligence agent," I said.

"Surprisingly, that is why we think that they will want you. If we convict you of insubordination and break you to a private, then ship you to Tokyo with a punishment tour, we would expect you to act pissed off and to hit the bars where the group will contact you. As an ex-agent—which we expect you will loudly complain about since losing your job as an agent because of some general—we hope they will attempt to talk you into joining them. Eventually, you will succumb and they will put you in the pipeline that will take you through China and Russia until you get to Sweden where most of the defectors are ending up. There you will be an anti-war supporter and learn as much as you can about their structure and membership. We want information on this pipeline and we want you to collect it."

I could not believe my ears. Whose idiot idea was this? "How long will this take?" I asked.

"According to our best estimate, about a year," he said. I was stunned and sat silent for a minute trying to understand everything I was being asked to do. This was insanity. It did tweak my interest for a moment—but only for a moment.

"You've got to be joking. You want me to defect, leave my family and wife with no contact for a year, work through a pipeline—that, if I make the slightest mistake, I will get shot—and you want me to do it because I'm in trouble with some general right now. I know you're not nuts, but are they nuts?" I blurted out.

"Well, I had to ask. Someone in Saigon thought you would be a good candidate and I had to ask you," he said.

"How did they know about my wife and me? I have never talked to anyone about our problems," I asked.

He smiled. "That was my guess. You never talk about your wife. When you get a letter you look pained. What's happening must not be good. So I just guessed. They don't know anything. Sorry!" He looked a bit embarrassed.

"Well, at least it shows you are a good agent to notice that. Nobody else has. For your information, I am deciding what to do about it now." I don't know why I said that to him.

*John G. Burdick*

Dave thought a moment. "My only advice is to wait until you get home before you do something that you can't back away from. Making these decisions in Vietnam is not the best thing to do. It's up to you, of course," he said.

"Thanks, Dave. Tell those idiots that, after I stopped laughing, my answer was, 'No way in hell!' OK?" He laughed and said he would. I went and headed to the bar. I needed a drink after that crazy idea was put to me. The strange thing was, there was a small part of me that wanted to try it. Will I ever grow up?

Dave's comment about my wife made me start to think again about what I was going to do when I went home. Maybe I should stop at my mom and dad's place for a while to think the problem through without the smell of Vietnam in my head. They probably wouldn't understand why I didn't go back to Texas immediately, though. I don't think I could tell them why I didn't want to go. Thanksgiving was next week and then I would have just three more weeks to make my decision. Of course, the whole thing would be moot if I got blown away. That was still a possibility. I had decided, after this last fiasco with the fucking general that I would no longer try any more. The idiots are going to win and I'm tired of the frustration. Losing those POWs was more painful than I thought possible. If it had been an honest effort and we failed, that would have been more acceptable. The truth was, it was not an honest effort. The people I had relied on at the 173rd had decided that the POWs weren't that important and were more interested in their KIA numbers. It was so depressing. From the very moment I was forced into the Army by some simple-minded soldier who was upset because I broke his projector, I had been screwed by the people who used the military bureaucracy better than I did. Now I was to go home—and that didn't even feel good. Life sucked. I went back to the bar and poured myself a cold beer. At least the booze was still free.

The next day I felt a little better until I asked Gus if he had seen any Hold Baggage orders for me. I was supposed to get Hold Baggage orders 30 to 45 days before I left country. Generally, it was for putting those things that would not fit in a duffle bag in a big trunk that could be bought at the PX and then sent on a ship to my home. Since I hadn't gotten any orders, I hadn't bought a trunk. Gus

had called headquarters at Nha Trang to find out about them, but they did not have them and, apparently, were not going to check on what happened to them. Gus gave me a number at our Headquarters in Saigon that I could call and see what happened to them. So, since I had nothing better to do, I called and ran into an old master sergeant who should have retired long ago. He didn't want to do anything, but I kept after him, and finally he said he would take a look, but for me not to expect anything. I waited on the phone while he went off to check. I was sure he just went to get a cup of coffee and would come back and tell me he couldn't find anything.

"Mr. Burdick, you still there?" I said I was patiently waiting. "Well, I found out what happened to them. Apparently, you were supposed to be assigned to Bien Hoa when you came into country. I sent your orders there. Somehow, you were sent to Nha Trang, but I didn't know that." I was stunned. Bien Hoa was the in-country R&R location for Vietnam. I was supposed to be there, not in the boonies up here in Qui Nhon.

"But I've been getting my mail and pay here all year long!" I said.

"That doesn't mean anything. According to our records you're supposed to be in Bien Hoa. And that's not the worst of it. I can't send you Hold Baggage orders until I cancel the ones I sent to Bien Hoa and get an acknowledgement from them. Then I can write new Hold Baggage orders for you, but that will take five weeks and you will be gone."

I shook my head in disbelief. "So I'm fucked about getting to send any Hold Baggage. What about my orders to return to the States? Where will those be sent? This sucks!" I said.

"I will check on your return orders, but those are written by a different office and they should be all right. I will check for you, though. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do about your Hold Baggage. By the way, the reason that this happened was that when MACV originally wrote a requisition for more agents, the clerk who wrote the request inadvertently wrote it twice, and twice the number of agents we requested arrived. It's taken us all year to straighten out that mess."

*John G. Burdick*

Now that really pissed me off. “You mean I wasn’t supposed to be here at all?” I exclaimed with as much restraint as I could pull together.

“Well, maybe. I don’t know which list you were on.”

I was numb. I didn’t know what to say, so I thanked him and hung up the phone. Great! I’m screwed-over twice. I’m here by some clerk’s mistake. I should have been in Bien Hoa. I’m confined to barracks. What more can happen to me? And now I will have to figure out what I’m going to take back and what I will have to leave.

Later that night I told the team what I had been told about being assigned to Bien Hoa and the clerk’s mistake that got me here in the first place. They thought it was hilarious. I claimed that the Army had a vendetta going against me. I did plenty of swearing the rest of the night.

I was still angry the next morning when Major Theran caught up with me. “I want you to take Caleb and Brian around town and introduce them to some of your contacts.”

“What about my being confined to quarters?” I asked.

“That has been dropped as of this morning. Saigon is handling the investigation into the 173rd’s activities. There will be nothing on your record about this. You’ve been fully cleared. Evidently, even the general admitted that—although forceful—you were respectful to him.” I noticed he didn’t say anything about that damn major.

“Thanks for your support, sir. I hope something happens to those idiots.” He smiled at me and went back to his room. I went and got Caleb and Brian and took them for a ride. For the next couple of days I took them to the various agencies that I worked with. They were not impressive. Intelligence sometimes is a study of nuances. Little things can be important. Most of the agencies were not happy that I was leaving. I got it from everyone, though they said nothing. Caleb didn’t notice it at all. Brian mentioned it when we left Major Trang at his Intelligence Headquarters, but he didn’t notice it at any of the other places. I did not take them to my special activities people, the pilots I used, agents I still had in place, or the group I used to eliminate the spy. Most would not talk to them, anyway. I had built up a trust with them and they would not



trust a replacement for me even if I asked them. The replacements would have to prove themselves. Maybe, if I had more time to work with my replacements, it could have worked, but I was not able to do that because of my confinement. I had tried to explain to Caleb what to look and listen for when working with one of these sources, but he just didn't get it. When Larry and Karl explained it to me, I got it right away. But to Caleb it was nonsense. I could not help him. Brian kind of got it, but he was trapped in a place between being an officer and an agent. He thought they were different activities. If you do it right, they are not, but I could not get him to see that. It seemed strange to me, but I began to question the Army's 12-month tour rule. Just by the time I could really be effective, I was sent home and some newbie would have to try to learn the system all over again. It didn't make any sense, but I was not willing to stay to prove my point.

I knew I had one more thing to do. I needed to do it now. The next morning I picked up Nguyen and we went to the engineering company. I had to close the ridiculous net I had started with Cô Luong-Bluebird. I knew she was not expecting me, but I had missed our last meeting because of my confinement. After stopping by the CO's office I asked him to have Cô Luong sent to me in the next room. I went and waited. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but she was of no value to me and there was way too much risk for her. In a few minutes she came into the room looking worried, and then smiled brightly when she saw me. I motioned her to sit in the chair in front of me.

"Where were you? I was worried when you didn't make the last meeting," she said.

I waited a few seconds before I answered her. "Cô Luong, I am sorry I missed the meeting, but there were other things that I had to do. I am worried about your safety and I think we must stop meeting." I figured I might as well start by firing her. As Nguyen translated, you could see her smile disappear and be replaced with a look of worry and confusion.

"Did I do something wrong? I know my father found the money you gave me and he was very upset." She began to blush. "He thought it was payment for sleeping with you and wanted to beat

*John G. Burdick*

me. I did not tell him about the information I was giving you. I told him that you were trying to teach me English and the money was for me to buy books. I am not sure he believed me, but he accepted what I said. I did not tell him the truth.” There was a pleading look on her face. She wanted to be a spy! I had to stop this.

“Yes, I heard, and if I heard, other people heard, too. If the VC thought for one moment that you were giving me information, you would die tonight. I cannot let that happen. I want you to go home and forget you ever met me.” I was reaching in my pocket to get some more money to give her for her problems but thought better of it. Her father would probably crucify her if she came up with more money. She bowed her head down and I thought she was about to cry. Nguyen talked to her for a moment without my saying anything. She looked up and nodded her head up and down. She had accepted that she could not see me again. Slowly, she got up, looked at me, and turned and walked out of the room.

Nguyen said, “That was good for her to leave. Her information was little girl talk. Of no value.” I just nodded my head in agreement and we left and went back to our office. So my last net ended before it began. I knew I could recruit others, but there was no purpose to it any more. I was done.

## Chapter 22

**It had been a couple of weeks** since I had gone to check on the wounded VC at the Evac Hospital, so I figured it was time for me to do it again. Next time would be my last time and I would take Caleb. Today, like always, Kim and I went. It was a fine, sunny day—not too hot yet. The breeze felt good on my face. Kim was telling me about his son in school and how much his son wanted to learn English. Kim knew we were going to the hospital. I don't think he liked it much, either.

As we entered the hospital there seemed to be more activity than I had seen in a while. There were beds everywhere, with wounded soldiers lying in them. There must have been a bad battle somewhere, was my first thought. It passed through my mind to forget about checking on the VC wounded and just leave, but we were here, so we went. We had to weave between the beds and the wounded to get to where the VC prisoners were. Most of the men I saw were drugged and their eyes were closed, dreaming of visions I never wanted to have. We saw men with missing limbs and horrible burns. Some had their faces wrapped. I didn't know why, and I didn't want to know. Kim was getting uncomfortable, too. Some of the soldiers who were awake stared at him with fear and hate, from the pain they were suffering. He edged closer to me. I had never seen it this bad. The smells of medicinal alcohol, blood, urine, cordite, gunpowder, burnt flesh, and the putrid puss of infection were burning into my mind. It was something I would never forget. Today was the worst I had ever smelled—I could even taste it. I started walking slower. I needed to get away from this. So much suffering, such a smell and taste it was too much.

I was just about to turn around and come back another day when I saw him. He was right next to me. I had never seen someone so white. I could not tell where the sheets were and where he was. Then I realized there was no sheet. I stopped and stared. He was completely white. He was so young. I knew he had to be at least 18 years old, but, laying there so tranquil, he looked like a thirteen-year-old boy, a beautiful, white, sleeping cherub like you would see in a painting in a church. At first I thought he was dead. Nobody could be so white and not be dead. Why hadn't they put a sheet over him? Automatically, my eyes looked for the wound that killed him. I started at his head and moved down. I saw no bandages. When I got to his waist, there wasn't one. Just a plastic bag with some tubes coming out of it, holding his organs in. It dawned on me that he had no legs, no hips, no butt, and no penis. It was all gone. I staggered and stopped and looked at his face again. It hurt so much to see such a young man so horribly killed. As I stood frozen next to him, staring at his childlike face, his eyes slowly opened and looked towards me. I did not think he could see me, though. He looked around and his eyes had the look of a five-year-old who was hurt, saying, "Mommy, help me! It hurts. Make it go away!" His eyes seemed to be looking for his mother. My knees buckled. Kim grabbed me to hold me up. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was still alive. I almost fell over. Kim staggered a bit, too. The eyes of this boy were the brightest blue I had ever seen. He looked like he was looking for help, looking for relief from his pain. He looked at me, but I knew he did not see me. I touched his hand automatically. He grabbed my fingers so softly. A single tear slowly formed in his eye, and slowly, every so slowly, rolled down the side of his face. He squeezed my hand with the gentle touch of a baby. His fingers were ice cold. I put both my hands over his to give him some warmth. Another tear rolled from his eye. I started to sway. The smells were overcoming me. The whiteness that was him was spreading to everything around me. All I could think was, "What have we done?" I felt so sorry for this boy-soldier. Kim tried to pull me away from the bed but I would not move. As I watched, the soldier slowly closed his unseeing eyes and the gentle pressure of his cold fingers squeezing my hand disappeared. I gently put his hand down on the bed. The smells of the disinfectant, alcohol, and urine began to overcome me. I couldn't

breath. The whiteness would not go away. Kim kept jerking my arm, and somehow got me to turn around and head for the nearest exit. Like a drunk, I stumbled out of there.

The fresh air seemed to begin to wash the whiteness away. I tried to look back and see if the young boy had died, but every time I looked back the whiteness overcame me again. I knew I could never go back in there. All I knew was that I would forever see that boy's face, his blue eyes and the silent cry for his mother's help that they portrayed—forever. Tears of sadness filled my own eyes by the time we got back to the jeep. I couldn't move.

For the first time ever, I let Kim drive the jeep back to our compound. Slowly, the lightheadedness and white glow that I felt slipped away. For some reason, each time I turned and looked back at the Evac Hospital, I immediately was overcome with the same feeling, as if I was looking at that poor kid again. If I looked away, I was all right. If I looked back at it, I would begin to be overcome with that heavy whiteness and get dizzy and lightheaded. As we drove away, we had to move closer to the Evac Hospital tent and the smells assaulted me again and the whiteness returned. I was frightened. What was happening to me? I had to get away. Whatever was happening to me really frightened me. Somehow I was losing control. I sat in the jeep as Kim drove back to our compound trying to get control of myself. All I could think of was to stay away from the hospital from now on. Maybe what had happened would not return and go away with time?

I made it back to the office and swore to myself never to go there again. Kim asked me if I was all right now, and I nodded my head "Yes." I could see in his eyes that he did not believe me, but he left me alone. I went to our bar and had a beer—several beers, as a matter of fact. I could not get those deep blue eyes out of my mind. That poor bastard! Why didn't they let him die! I would never go back to the hospital, so I never found out if he lived or died. I was hoping he died. Nobody should have to live like that. I told no one about my experience. I just stayed away from the hospital. I couldn't go there again. The smell of the place alone was enough to make me nearly pass out. I knew now that I had to get away from this place—the sooner the better. Finally I wanted to go home.

Caleb was trying to get more information from me, but I had been unusually quiet. I did the normal things and he followed me around, but he was learning nothing. I had decided that what I had learned was going home with me. I wanted nothing more to do with the Army. I did not believe anyone in our office really understood my feelings about the military. I liked the soldiers who were in the Armed Forces, especially my fellow agents and the other soldiers I had worked with. Many risked their lives daily for their country—and you have to respect that. But the Armed Forces, unfortunately, also nurtured incompetence, mainly by men and women who hid their inabilities by blindly following regulations in an organizational structure that protected them. These people were experts at using the system to lord it over those who didn't know how to use it, or to protect themselves from the mistakes they made. I had run into too many of these people and I wanted nothing more to do with them. I was tired of working around them and being hindered by them. In the States, they didn't seem to bother me as much, but here their blundering caused deaths. I guess I was finally burned out after that dumb, blundering G2 of the 173rd showed his arrogance and petty need to get even and thus got those POWs killed. Then, seeing that poor soldier in the hospital finished my career as an agent.

Now, my only worry was about what I was going to take home with me. Since I had no hold baggage I would have to trim down what I could take back. I had a couple of items that I tried to sell to the other agents. One was a portable radio. It was the only one we had in the office, but no one wanted to buy it. The other item was a Rolleiflex camera. It was an old black and white camera that my dad had given me. I had brought it over here to take some photographs, but it was too difficult to use. It was one of those you had to look through the top to see the picture you were taking. It was an old camera, but it had a good lens and took great black and white pictures. However, I had bought a new camera and I didn't need this one any more. If I had hold baggage, I would have taken it home. I didn't want much for them, but no one would offer anything for either of them. I guess they thought—since I didn't have any room for them—I would have to leave them behind, so why buy them. They didn't know me.

I had Caleb come out with me to the oceanfront. I had the camera and radio with me. I looked at him and said, "Well, if they don't want these things, I'll be damned if I'm going to just leave them here." With that, I grabbed the radio by the handle and threw it as far as I could into Qui Nhon bay. I then grabbed the camera by its strap and swung it around my head several times until I let it fly into the bay. I watched it splash and disappear in the bay. "That felt good!" I said and went back to the office. I was going to leave Vietnam and I didn't care what happened to what I left behind. Caleb didn't know what to say. He wanted to say something, but he decided not to. There was anger in my eyes that he didn't understand.

When I went back in, Gus said a Sergeant Flores had called and wanted me to call him back as soon as possible. I wondered what the MP sergeant wanted. I called him. I asked for Sergeant Flores and was transferred to him immediately.

"Burdick, is that you? You picking on any more generals?" He laughed.

"Not lately. Got one you want picked on?" I asked.

"Nope. I leave that to you," he replied.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"There's a Signal outfit up on the mountain, down the road from you that has caught a Vietnamese civilian inside their wire. I thought maybe you should take a look at him. They're holding him for you. Are you interested?" he asked.

Of course I was, and I told him so. He gave me all the information and I told him I would go up there shortly. I was still mad and could use a good interrogation to get my frustrations out. I looked for Caleb and Kim. Caleb needed the experience and I needed Kim to interpret. Kim was also good at intimidating prisoners under interrogation. I found them both and told them to be ready in 15 minutes because we were leaving to do a hostile interrogation. I was looking forward to it. Caleb had never been to one. I guess this would be part of the training that I didn't want to give him.

It took us about 20 minutes to get there. It was on top of a mountain. I didn't know what they did there, but that didn't matter. We were met at the gate by a master sergeant. He took us to the

prisoner. Before we went in to talk to the prisoner, I needed some basic information about his capture.

The sergeant said, "We caught him about 30 meters inside our outer wire. He was checking out our defensive positions, it seemed to me. He claims he is a wood gatherer and was looking for some wood for his village. We don't have any wood lying around where he was." I nodded my head and gestured for him to take us to him. He was being held by two guards right inside headquarters building.

"Sarge, is there somewhere we can interview him? This is too open an area and we might get a little noisy." I smiled. He thought a minute.

"We just got a new CO. He isn't here yet but you can use his exec's office since he doesn't have one at this moment."

"That should work," I said. We took the prisoner down the hall to the room. "Sarge, can you leave a guard at the door to keep people out so we don't get disturbed until we are done? It sometimes gets a bit loud. Despite what it sounds like we won't hurt him much, though." I smiled again. The sergeant smiled, looked at the prisoner—who seemed a bit unnerved—and called a guard to stay by the door and not let anyone in. We grabbed the prisoner and yanked him into the office. I shoved him face first against the wall.

I turned to Caleb, who was closing the door. It was time to start some training and with the anger in me it would be something I was sure he had never seen before. "What do you notice about this guy?" I asked. He just shrugged. He didn't notice anything. "OK. Look at his height. He's tall for being around here. At his age, he should have been in or currently be in the military. He has some scars on his arms that bother me. It looks like he's had a run-in with concertina wire."

"Kim, take off his shirt and let's see!" I yelled. Caleb almost jumped away from me. Yelling and being loud was important. The prisoner most likely did not understand English but the loud voices would scare him since loudness is usually interpreted as anger and I wanted him to be afraid of this huge, angry American. Kim grabbed him and ripped off his shirt. I saw it immediately and so did Kim.

"Caleb, do you see it?" He didn't. I could tell by his face.

"The sergeant said he was a wood gatherer. Look at his right shoulder. See that deep indentation. That's not from carrying wood.



Wood gatherers from around here use a yoke-type carrier that covers both shoulders. Makes it easier to carry. What our man has here is a mark caused almost exclusively by carrying ammo and weapons down the Ho Chi Minh trail. I'm pretty sure we have a live NVA soldier here. We have to break him, Caleb. Watch, but don't interfere," I said.

I motioned to Kim and told him quickly what to do. He went back and stood next to the soldier. I started with questions that Kim interpreted. "What is your name? Where is your village? When were you in the military? What is your job?" I continued in this mode for about five minutes. I wanted the prisoner to get used to this level of interrogation before I upped it to another level. I knew that fear is caused a lot by not understanding what is going on, by losing control of the situation. He did not appear to understand any English, so I was pretty sure he did not know what was going on. Kim verified that he thought he did not know any English. He could tell by the man's lack of reaction to some of the things I shouted in English. He appeared to only understand what he heard from Kim. Like anyone, he also relied subconsciously on the tone of my voice. As I did not seem to be getting mad, he felt comfortable that his story was being bought. In a flash, that was going to change. Kim was waiting for my signal. He would translate my ranting almost simultaneously, begging the guy to talk because he didn't want to see another man killed by this monster. I had done this at the hospital once, and some wimpy doctor threw me out.

I signaled Kim. I screamed, "You're lying. Assume the position. I am going to beat your ugly butt into the ground. Are you stupid?" I briefly looked at Caleb. He was shocked—the transition was unexpected. I signaled him with my hand to be quiet. I continued. "Assume the position so I can beat your ugly ass better." I pushed him hard against the wall as Kim made him lean with his feet and arms spread out. He was leaning at about a 45 degree angle. He could not hold it long. I would have to notch it up. Caleb still looked confused. I made myself look even madder. I saw a wooden pointer on the desk. I picked it up. I slapped it on the wall near his face. He twisted to look at me. Kim was telling him something. "Why are you lying to me? We already know you are an NVA soldier. Why are you here? Look at you. You are not a wood gatherer!"

At the end of each question I slapped the wooden pointer against the board, each time getting closer to his eyes. I paused for a minute to let Kim catch up. Kim shook his head. He's not giving it up. "Do you want to die? Look at me. You are a soldier. Look at your shoulder. That indentation did not come from carrying wood. It came from carrying supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail. You NVA always use a two-man carry." I jabbed the notch in his collarbone with my pointer. He jumped and cried out like I had put a burning torch on his body. He was weakening. I needed something to push him over the edge quickly. Kim was still talking to him. I motioned to Kim to come over to me. Kim had a .38 revolver. I took it from him and removed the cartridges. I gave all but one to Kim. He knew what was next.

Caleb looked frightened. I went over to him. "We have to find out when the attack is coming, because it is coming. He knows. I won't really hurt him, but he has to think I will. Watch and learn," I said quietly. This little discussion actually worked for me. After yelling for as long as I had, the sudden whispering would indicate to him that I was up to something—and he would be worried.

Kim was telling the soldier that he had made me mad and that he didn't know what I would do next. He pleaded for the soldier to talk, because he didn't want to see the blood of another Vietnamese splattered against the wall. The soldier's arms were beginning to shake due to his leaning on the wall and the fear I was driving into him. He was getting stressed. I noticed his skin was turning a bit redder. I would have to stop soon. Everything I was doing was calculated to make him think he was about to die. He knew how Americans that were captured were treated. His fear had to be that I would do the same to him. I wanted him to believe that. His skin was continuing to change color. It was becoming a deep purple—because of the stress I had put him under—and showing marks on it now, but I had to ignore that. They were not mine. I took the pistol over to the prisoner and put it in front of his face. Coldly I said, "Look at the pistol." I put it right in front of his face. I opened the empty cylinder. "I am going to put one bullet in the cylinder and spin it." I did that and spun it several times. "I am going to ask you a question. If I think you are lying I will pull the trigger. You could die on the first lie or the sixth lie. That is your gamble."

Kim translated this while I went behind the prisoner with the gun and noiselessly removed the bullet. I held the gun over my head so that Kim and Caleb could see that the gun was emptied. I needed witnesses for that. I walked over to the prisoner slowly. He saw me coming. His arms and legs began shaking. I pressed the pistol against his temple. "Are you an NVA Soldier?" I asked. He said nothing. I yelled, "Tell me now!" Kim yelled at him too.

He said quietly, pinching his eyes tight, "No."

I pulled the trigger. It clicked. His body slumped to the floor. Kim yelled at him and pulled him back up. Caleb was staring as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. What Caleb didn't know was that I already knew how VC/NVA treated prisoners. This prisoner would expect me to do the same. He knew what was coming, and that fear worked for me. I went to him again. This time Kim and I were both shouting at the same time. "Now tell me the truth or die. Are you a NVA soldier?" I slowly pressed the pistol against his temple, pressing a little harder this time. He heard me pull the hammer back and the hammer click, ready to drop on a bullet. He fell to the floor again.

"I am a soldier! I am a soldier!" Kim translated for me. I smiled. We had him.

"When is the attack?" I yelled.

The soldier was crying. "Soon!" he said.

I yelled, "How many days until you attack?" He shook physically at my feet.

"About..." Suddenly the door banged open and we were interrupted.

"What the hell is going on in here?" came from behind me.

"Who the hell is interrupting me? I asked not to be disturbed." I yelled at the person who interrupted me without looking.

"I'm the new commander and I want to know what is going on here."

"Shit!" I thought, another officer I have pissed off. I quickly showed him my credentials. "We are debriefing this prisoner. He has just admitted to being a NVA soldier. He was caught getting information about an attack that he was just going to tell me about when you interrupted," I said as calmly as I could. While we were talking my prisoner was regaining his composure.

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"I don't care who you are. I do not condone torture and that is obviously what is going on here," he said.

"Sir, we have not touched this prisoner!" I immediately claimed. We really hadn't.

"I'm not blind. Look at that poor guy. What did you beat him with?" he said.

I looked at the prisoner now sitting up on the floor. His body was covered with old bruises and welts. It did look like we beat him badly. I was surprised. "Those are wounds and bruises he received before I got him. He probably got them from other attacks on our troops. You can ask anyone in here. We did not touch him."

"I have heard about your type. I will not have anyone tortured in my camp. Sergeant, take this man and clean him up. Give him some food and a couple of bucks and send him on his way." Looking at me, he said, "When you start beating someone they will tell you whatever you want to hear. I want you off my base as soon as possible." He turned and left.

The sergeant looked at me hopelessly and started to pick up the man. "Do you have any idea when they are going to attack?" he asked.

"Thanks to your new CO, no. It will probably be in the next two weeks. Five more minutes and I would have had the whole plan. I'm out of here!" I was still holding Kim's gun. I gave it back to him. He put his bullets back into it. Caleb and Kim followed me out of the door. "Fucking amateurs! His men are going to die and all he is worried about is that we mistreated the prisoner—which we did not. Damn!" I said.

Caleb drove us out of the compound. "I can't believe what happened. He broke and you had to give him up," he said.

"Yeah. Life sucks! This time another American will die because of an idiot. Somewhere, he must have read about torture of prisoners by Americans and he bought it. He walked into a situation he knew nothing about and assumed it was our fault. Maybe I was a little strong, but I was getting the information. Shit, if he knew what they did to our prisoners he probably still would have complained. I pity his men. Some will probably die because of him." I said. We were both pissed, but there was nothing we could do.

When we were silent Kim said, "He bad leader!" That said it all. We headed to the office and a cold drink.

Caleb wasn't done, though. "You know, when you started that interrogation I couldn't believe what I was seeing you do. I don't know how to do that. How can I take over for you? You know so much and I'm in way over my head!"

I looked at him. "When I started, I was a complete klutz. Take your time. Pay attention and don't do anything stupid. You will learn if you watch the other guys. It takes time to be a bastard. I had to be one today. I did it because I wanted to save some American lives, not because I enjoy it. I don't. That is the difference between me and most of the others who do this. Remember, the other side is afraid of you because they think you may do to them what they do to us. Never letting them think we won't, is the secret." I drove into the compound just then. Kim went to check on the guards. Caleb and I went in to have a drink. He had a totally new perspective of me from that point on. I was just pissed that another officer had screwed his men. If I hadn't already gotten into a scrape with the general, I knew I would have taken this idiot on. But if I got in another scrape with a Commander they would probably finally hang me out to dry somewhere. I would be going home in a little over two weeks. It just wasn't worth the fight anymore.

Three days later, the unit was attacked. Two Americans were killed and one was seriously wounded. I hoped that stupid colonel wished he had let me get the information. He probably doesn't. There is nothing worse than an officer who will let his men die rather than admit he made a mistake. There were too many of them in this goddamned Army for me. Caleb and I drank a lot the night we heard of the deaths. There was nothing we could do.

I was getting shorter. I had been alerted that my orders were coming. I was ready to leave. I was reasonably sure that now—if I didn't get too stupid—I could make it out of here in one piece. I was talking with Brian about the States and what was going on over there. I knew that there were a lot of people who opposed the war and I had no problem with that. What was confusing to me was that the soldiers were being blamed for all the problems. It wasn't the soldiers who decided to go to Vietnam. We were sent there by

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our government. We were being called baby killers, rapists, and drug addicts. There were over 500,000 of us here. I'm sure that the almost all of these soldiers were not in those categories, but that is not what we heard in the news. Every soldier I worked with was dedicated and worked hard to do what he was told to do. The people that really pissed me off were the ones who were sending money, medical supplies and other supplies to North Vietnam. They were helping the people who were trying to kill us. To me, that was a very personal assault. I supported free speech, but where was the outrage against our own citizens who were supplying money and equipment that would help kill their own soldiers? I was one of those soldiers and I didn't like it. As much as I disliked the Army, I felt a certain pride in what I had done and did not feel that I had done anything wrong. I joined the Army willingly to avoid the draft and Vietnam. Well, I avoided the draft, but still ended up in Vietnam. It wasn't all bad, though. I had met many good men and we shared something that not every man could. We had risked our lives for our country in a war that we probably shouldn't have been in. That made our service even more special. While politicians could argue about whether we should be recalled or left to fight, we were still here. We all did what we could to survive and complete the various missions assigned to us. For this we were being vilified and accused of crimes by the citizens of the very country that sent us here. Still, I was proud of what we had done and proud to have worked with the men and women who served in Vietnam. I had tried to give my life for my country, and so far nobody had accepted my offer. I was lucky. People in the States just had to pay their taxes. We were offering our blood. To me, that produced a special bond among those of us who served their country in good times and bad. This was a bad time. I guess when you get "short," thoughts like this stir around in your head as you try to understand what you were doing.

We were sitting there talking about this when the phone rang. Gus got it and said it was for me. I went to the phone and said, "Mr. Burdick!" It was Major Trang. He rarely called me except when there were problems in the area. I quickly focused on what he was going to tell me. "Mr. Burdick, you are in danger." My heart grew cold. Damn, what was going on? "We have solid information that

you have been targeted for assassination. A sapper squad is in town now, looking for you,” he said.

“Are you sure it’s me. Why would they be after me?” I asked. A couple of the agents heard what I said and this silenced everybody. They wanted to hear what I was talking about.

“The description is a tall, white man, wearing glasses with dark rims and a white shirt, who rides in a blue or white jeep. We are sure it is you. You have been very effective and they have decided to remove you. We are looking for the sapper squad, but you must be very careful. I will call you when we know more. Please be very careful. You have helped me many times. I do not want to lose you,” he said.

“Thank you, Major Trang. I will be careful. You know that in about two weeks I will be leaving anyway?” I said.

“Yes, I do. But we must make sure you go home alive. Be careful!” With that he hung up.

I stood there with the phone still held to my ear, trying to figure out what to do. My cover had been blown—that was obvious. I guess maybe I might not really get home. Two weeks to go and I am now an official target. It’s hard to describe how you feel when you know that you specifically are wanted dead by persons unknown and they are in town looking for you. I wondered what my chances were. Probably worse than I thought! How would they kill me? Would it be by sniper? Would it be a grenade, a knife or would it be something else? I needed to go tell Major Theran. He is going to be pissed. I went looking for the major. I guess from my reaction the rest of them knew that something bad was happening again. They had become very quiet. They had heard my part of the conversation.

The major was in his office, so I went in and closed the door. He knew that meant trouble and stopped what he was doing. “What is it, John?” he asked.

“We are going to have to warn all our personnel to be very careful over the next few days. Major Trang has just called and told me that the VC have ordered me assassinated and have sent a sapper squad into town to get me. According to Trang, they are already in town. We have to warn everybody to be very careful. I don’t want them killed because they were mistaken for me. Major Trang said that they are looking for a big white man, wearing glasses with dark

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rims and a white shirt. He usually drives a blue or white jeep. I guess that leaves Caleb out.” I felt the need to sit down. My knees were shaking. I sat in the chair next to his desk. I was no hero.

The major looked stunned. He thought a minute. “OK. First, you have to get out of that white shirt. Go to the PX and get a colored shirt. No, have Caleb go get one. We will have to quit using those two jeeps until we can get them repainted. Stay here. I’m going to warn the men. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He left. I was left with my own thoughts. There is now a very good chance I might not get home. I was just lucky that Major Trang had found out about the assassination order. It felt so weird to be a target. I knew it could happen. I was never that careful about my cover story. I also knew that I had tried, purposefully, since I had been in-country, to give myself a huge reputation because it would help me get the things done I wanted to do. Now they knew who I was. I wondered how they found out. Who told them? I came up with two possibilities. One was someone from the *Chieu Hoi* Center, and the other was that NVA soldier that that stupid colonel made me release. My bet was on the soldier. In any case, the damage had been done. I kept thinking about what I should do. It seemed unwise for me to leave. All my sources were here. All the people who could help were here. If I left, I would be jumping at shadows until I left country. I was comfortable here and so here I would stay until I had to go back to the States. My decision was made. I waited for the major to return. In another minute he came back and sat at his desk.

“OK, I have to call Nha Trang and let them know what has happened. Wait here while I call.” He picked up the phone and called Nha Trang. He was put through to the commanding officer. It was curious to sit and hear them talk about me while I was listening. The major finally said, “Mr. Burdick, the colonel would like to talk to you.” He handed me the phone. I was a bit confused by this. What could I tell him?

“Mr. Burdick here, sir.” I said.

“Mr. Burdick, this was a surprising turn of events. How are you?” he asked.

“Fine, sir. I could do without the attention, though.” I said.



He gave a short laugh. "Look, I think you should come down here until you have to report to Saigon to leave for the States. It's only a couple of weeks," he said.

"Sir, I would like to stay here. I know all the people here and all my friends in the other agencies will probably be working their butts off to find the sapper squad. If they catch them, I want to be here to question them about how they heard about me. I need to know who squealed on me. Plus, sir, Major Trang has been here for years. They have been trying to kill him the whole time and have not done it yet. How would it look to him if I just got up and ran with my first threat? It would be better for everyone if I stayed. I will be careful, sir," I said.

He paused a second or two. "Well, Mr. Burdick, you've got more guts than most. If that's what you want, I'll stand by your decision. Good luck, and be very careful. Give the phone back to the major." I did.

The major talked a minute with him and hung up the phone. "Well, it seems you are to stay here for the time being. The colonel was impressed with your courage, John," he said.

"Hell, I'm scared to death, but I have to stay. We have to know where the leak came from. I can only do that from here," I said.

"OK, but I want you to do the following—and I mean it this time. No more white shirts. You can only leave the office if someone goes with you. They probably should drive—and only in our green jeeps. You will be armed at all times and wearing a flack jacket. No sightseeing tours. You got that!" he said. I agreed and left the office.

The other agents quickly came up to me to offer any help that they could. I shook them off and went back to my desk. The word was out. All morning I got calls from intelligence friends offering support and any help they could provide. If the sapper squad were out there, they would find them. I felt better.

I got Caleb and we went to the PX so I could buy a couple of shirts. I was thinking of one with a target on it, but they didn't have one. I bought a khaki one and a lime-green one. I hated both of them. We then went to the Officers' Club for lunch. I could tell that Caleb was nervous being around me. Who could blame him?

The next day, all the guards showed up for duty. Somehow, they had heard about the threat. I believe one of the agents told them. Kim came to me and offered to be my personal guard until I left. I thanked him, but a personal bodyguard bothered me. I didn't tell him that. I just said I would mostly just be here and, if I felt I needed him, I would ask. I thanked him for his offer. He was a good man.

The next couple of days were strained and passed slowly. I mostly stayed in the office. Any agent I asked would go with me when I wanted to go somewhere, but I could tell how scared they were when they did. There was no need to stress them so much, so I stayed in the office. I ate an abundance of crackers with peanut butter and jam during that time. I was glad I had bought it.

On the third day, I received another call from Major Trang. He wanted me to come to his office. He had caught the sapper squad and wanted me to see them. I was curious, so I went. Caleb was out somewhere so I asked Brian to come with me. He agreed, but put on a flak jacket. I did not, although I was armed. We drove to Major Trang's office. As I entered the office I saw Major Trang yelling at some kids in his office. They were tiny and none could have been over 10 years old. There were five of them. I walked into the office. The five kids stared at me and crowded together at the other end of the room. One started crying and appeared to be peeing in his pants. A puddle was forming around his bare feet.

"These are your murderers, Mr. Burdick!" he said. I was surprised.

I just stared and said, "They are all little children."

"The VC took them from their village and trained them to fear you. They told many stories about how you loved to kill children. Cut them up. Rape them. Blind them. Stick them on a pole. They were told you are the devil, full of evil. They must kill you to save their village and their families because you were coming to get them. Look at the table. That is how they were going to do it."

I looked over to the table. I looked closely. There were three grenades on it. To add insult to injury, they were American grenades. The grenades were wrapped in fishing line with fish hooks appearing every so often. Evidently, they were trained to pull the pin and toss the grenade onto my lap in the jeep. The fishhooks would catch in my clothes or my hand if I grabbed it, and make it impossible for

me to get rid of it in the few seconds I would have. Very effective, I thought. I looked back at the children. The fear in all their eyes was apparent. They were afraid that they had failed and now they were mine. I started to say something but Major Trang signaled with his hand for me to remain silent. So I stared at the little kids. The major began asking them questions and they, looking at me with fear in their eyes, answered him. After a few minutes he took me into the other room.

“Thank you for coming. It has helped tremendously. They would not talk before you came. They are very afraid of you because of what they were told. From what they say, you are no longer in any danger. They were the only group trained to get you, as far as they know. That is probably true. It will take them some time to train another group and you will have left by then. I am happy to see that you have not left already,” he said.

“I could not go until I found out who betrayed me. Besides, your risk is much greater than any I am going through. I will be gone by next week, though. My tour is over for now. Do they know where the information came from that broke my cover,” I said.

He smiled. He must have appreciated my respect for his personal danger. “They did not know where the information came from. They were given the order by a local VC. They were trained by NVA, though. I don’t know if that helps you,” he said. It didn’t, but I thought that the released NVA soldier was still my best bet. I was now even more pissed at that damn colonel. I went over and looked at the little kids who were shaking in fear as I looked at them. I hoped Major Trang would help them lose that fear. I thanked Major Trang for his help in protecting me. Brian and I then left.

As we got to the jeep, Brian said, “I would never have thought that they would use little kids like that. Those grenades would have worked, you know.” I nodded my head, showing I knew.

When we got back I told the major that the crisis was over for now. They had caught the sapper squad. I also said I would still be careful. Brian filled him in about the makeup of the squad of killer children and how frightened of me they were. He thought it was important that one of the kids had pissed in his pants when he saw me. I knew I was going to be ribbed about that. I went to the bar for a cold beer. A heavy weight seemed to be lifted off my shoulders.

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Gus had just told me my orders were in. I was going home. They haven't killed me yet.

As usual, in the military there is always one more thing to do. This time the thing happened to be Ahn Khe. The major caught me that evening and told me that he and I were going to Ahn Khe in the morning. He wanted me to be with him when he made his normal visit to the 173rd MI office there. Since they had taken over our operation, he had gotten monthly reports from them.

I reminded him that the general had ordered his MPs to arrest me if I went on a 173rd base, and Ahn Khe was one of those. I didn't particularly want to be arrested by them just before I was to leave Vietnam. He didn't think that was a problem any more and we were going. I really didn't want to go. I had just missed being assassinated by some little kids. My name was on someone's hit list. Activity in the area we would drive through had been growing. Two months ago, there was no probability that we would run into an ambush on the way up there. Now, it was different. About 10% of our convoys going there had been hit recently. Activity was way up. We weren't going in a convoy, but we could run into one, and then who knew what would happen. One of every soldier's worst fears is to live for a year in Vietnam and then get killed the last week. This was well into my last week. I had to go, though.

I got up early and went out to the jeep. The major was waiting. I was wearing a steel pot and flack jacket with an M16 and my pistol. I did have my white shirt back on, though. The major was wearing a steel pot and a flack jacket, too. We were ready. I drove. He was quiet during most of the first part of the drive.

"Burdick, what are you going to do when you get out of the Army in a week?" he asked.

Could it really be a week? That sounded good. "I don't know. I think I'll just sleep for a month." I really had no idea about what I would do.

"Have you thought about staying in the Army? You'd make a great intelligence officer," he said.

I was quiet a moment. Staying in the Army didn't seem possible for three reasons. Number one, was that I knew I could never face another dead or wounded soldier. Hell, I couldn't even get myself

to go into the hospital in Qui Nhon without fainting from the smell. Two, was that I took too many risks and I liked taking risks. If I stayed, I would die taking risks. I didn't want to die. The third reason was that I couldn't stand all those in the military who protected their ineptitude through regulations they wrote or blindly followed. All I told him was, "I hadn't thought much about it, sir"

"Well, I'm sure I can get you a direct commission as a second lieutenant if you want." So that's what this trip was about. He was trying to recruit me to stay in the Army.

"I hadn't thought about it, sir, but I don't think I would want to be a second lieutenant anyway." Maybe that would get him off my back.

"Well, maybe we can do better than that. I'll check." He was going to say something else but we had just run into the end of a long convoy. I had to get around it before we started going up the cliffs to Ahn Khe. I began to drive like a maniac. I couldn't get around all of them before we got to the twisted road that led up to Ahn Khe plateau. Worst of all, I was stuck behind a truck carrying two large artillery barrels that looked to be 30 or 40 feet long. They were big—and a beautiful target for an ambush. I had to get around them, but it was nearly impossible as the road was curving right and left and I couldn't see ahead. Luckily, one of the front guards on the truck saw us and decided to help. The guard was on the roof of the cab of the truck with a .30 caliber machine gun that had been sandbagged. He kept signaling not to try to pass and eventually waved his hand to let me know it was clear to pass. I waved and yelled a "Thank you" when we went past. We got past the rest of the convoy without too much trouble.

We went to the base and got the briefing and left. No one tried to arrest me. I guess I was off the hook with that general. The drive back was quick and we ran into no convoys going down the hill. I was relieved when we got back to the office. I surmised that the only reason for me going on this trip was to try to recruit me to stay in the Army. I think I got out of that. I would never see Ahn Khe again and I was happy with that.

Once I had my orders, there were things I had to do. Most were not too hard. I had to get my uniforms up to date and cleaned. It was

not hard to get my new rank and patches on them. The two things I was trying to figure out how to get around were a doctor's checkup and a dental check. Both were in the Evac Hospital and I couldn't get myself to go in there again. It was physically impossible. I thought about it and remembered the doctor who gave me the pills I used on Marty. He was attached to one of the helicopter companies. I went and saw him. He did the checkup for me. Everything was fine except, probably, what was in my head—but he didn't know that. He signed me off. He got quite a kick when he found out that I was only a staff sergeant—my rank was in my records. I asked if he knew of a dentist I could see that was not in the hospital. He did, but he couldn't understand why it mattered. I just told him that I had to work with those doctors some more and rank might get in the way. He seemed to understand and let it go.

I drove over to the dentist's office he had told me about. I figured I would get it done right away. The dentist was in and was willing to take a look. The Army would not let a soldier leave Vietnam with a cavity. It was policy. The dentist kept poking around and found a cavity that had to be repaired. But there was a problem. He didn't have any Novocain. He was out. He could call over to the hospital and I could get it fixed over there tomorrow morning. But I could not go there. So I told him I had to leave tomorrow morning. I dreaded that hospital so much I asked him to fix it without using Novocain. He didn't want to, but finally agreed. It was a small cavity, but it hurt like hell while he drilled it out. The impressions of my fingers on the arms of his chair were probably there for six months. At least when I left his office I was ready to go home, according to a doctor and a dentist.

I had carefully packed all my stuff I could in my duffle bag. It was so full that it was hard to close. Duffel bags are not as large as they appear. In the morning I would put the last of my things in the little space left in the bag. Gus had my ticket to Nha Trang. I had to check out of there first. Now I had to turn over all my files to Caleb and my extra weapons to Major Theran. Caleb got my old encryption job. He didn't like it any more than I did. I trained him on how to work the radio and had him sign for my code books. I told Gus to use up my special fund until it was gone. They would then be on their own for drinks after that. I could see he wanted to

know who my contact was with the Koreans—which was how I was getting the money—but I wasn't going to tell anyone. He had met the Koreans who picked up the goods and gave him the money but not the guy who set up the deal. Only I knew who he was. They had planned a party for tonight and I was wondering what they would try. I hope they didn't try to do to me what I did to Marty.

I went out to the beach and looked at it one more time. Despite everything, I would miss this place and these guys. I had changed since I got here. Most of the change I didn't understand. There were things in me that I had let loose. I wondered if I could bottle them up again. Once you do something, it is much easier to do it again and again. I still hadn't decided about where I would land after I was ushered out of the Army. Lena had mentioned something about renting a home, but it didn't seem like she meant it. I didn't say anything. She had moved back in with her mother some months ago. That was not a good thing. Her mother was very religious but not very ethical. Anything she could take from you was all right in her world. I had no doubt that Lena was giving her mother the money I was sending home, plus getting Lena's own money that she was earning as a teacher. I would just have to figure it out when I got to the US, I guess. Maybe it is true that when you get closer to a problem you can solve it. I was hoping it was true. I had no solution to this problem yet.

I also knew I could not stay in the Army, no matter what they offered me. I would die in the Army if I stayed in. I just could not say no to a risk, no matter what it was. The first time I volunteered to go with Larry to relieve the main office during Tet, showed me I had a problem. I didn't know why I did it. I don't know why I still do it. I guess I don't know how to say no. If I stayed in the Army they would send me back here as soon as they could. I would die because of that. I was sure of that. I knew I would not join again, no matter what I was offered.

There was another reason that I tried not to think about. I was having a severe reaction to hospitals—all hospitals, not just the Evac Hospital. The feeling I got was getting stronger. I couldn't even look at the place without getting lightheaded and feeling faint. When I went to the clinic I felt a tinge of the same feeling, but I could control it. That I would let a dentist drill without Novocain

showed how strong my feeling was. Rather than go to the hospital I was willing to have a tooth drilled without any pain reliever. I didn't know what was going on in my head but I had to get out of this place. Maybe when I got home it would go away.

With these thoughts tumbling around in my head, I headed back to my desk to have my last war with the flies. I figured if I could splatter a few of them I would feel better. I didn't. Finally, Caleb and Brian came and took me to dinner. I had a steak and several beers. Afterwards, we went to our private bar where all the rest were gathered and already well on their way to oblivion. We joined in the drinking. Farewell parties are not as happy as you would think. The guys you left were feeling bad about the amount of time they still had to stay, while the one leaving knew he would miss his friends. So we were all a little down until they started telling stories about me. They all seemed to have their special "John" story. Some I didn't remember the way they were told. Roger showed up and he had a wealth of stories to tell about me. Since most of the agents were now new, they had not heard them. The stories were priceless. We all laughed. Someone had to bring up my "rat execution." The major couldn't believe his ears. I thought he knew. He laughed until his eyes filled with tears. He then said he was glad I was going if I couldn't even kill a little rat. The stories went on and on. Towards the end of the evening they gave me a special plaque. Engraved on it was "To John Burdick, CRD's friendly face behind the bar." I guess I had spent a lot of time behind the bar as well as in front of it.

Roger had to leave first. He was short, too. I went outside with him.

"Roger, I will miss you. We had a lot of fun and did a lot of things together. I hope I didn't hurt your chances for promotion."

He laughed. "Hell, you put me on the fast track. In a year or two I may get my own ship. I am really going to miss you." We shook hands and he got in his jeep and drove out of my life. I wished him well. He was a friend.

I went back inside and made my excuses. I wanted to get to bed so the morning would come and I could leave. I had one more drink and went to my room. Tomorrow morning I would be gone forever.



## Chapter 23

**When I woke up the next** morning, the sun was already up. I got cleaned up and packed the final items I had left into my duffle bag. I made sure I left my uniforms near the top of the bag. I would fly to Saigon in civilian clothes but, to get on the plane home, I would need to wear my uniform for the last time. I carried my duffle bag downstairs and put it by the door. Gus gave me my travel orders and my orders back to the States. He was going to drive me to the airfield. George—from the MPs—had offered me an MP escort to the airport. He didn't trust the Vietnamese and wanted to make sure I made it home alive. He thought they were still looking to kill me. Maybe they were, but I turned him down. I thanked him and told him I would be fine. He was sorry to see me go. The rest of the team came by and shook my hand for the last time. I was surprised how hard it was to leave.

Major Theran came up and said, "Burdick, I talked with Nha Trang about the direct commission. They said they could do better. Listen to them, please. The Army could use you, but if you still decide not to, I hope you do well as a civilian. I have never met someone like you. It was challenging to command you, but you were a pleasure to work with. We will all miss you." With that, he shook my hand. I couldn't think of anything to say. For some reason, I was choked up. I had risked myself for a year in this place. It was oddly difficult to go, but I got into the jeep anyway and waved to all of them while Gus drove me the first step towards home.

The plane was waiting when we got there. Gus shook my hand and I went on board the C-130. I looked out the back gate that was down and watched as they closed it. Qui Nhon slowly disappeared as the gate was closed. I could no longer see out from where

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I was sitting. I waited for takeoff and tried to understand what I was feeling. Curiously, part of me was already missing this place. Despite the danger, I was comfortable here and was already missing my work here. Yet, part of me wanted to go home, even if going home would be difficult, considering my problems with my wife. Then, there was still the Army's wish to keep me. Apparently, I was going to get another offer to become an officer. I would handle that when I got it. I was definitely going home. I was getting out of Binh Dinh Province alive. I bet that Karl, if he knew, would be surprised that I had actually gotten out of here alive. I was a little surprised myself.

The flight was uneventful and we arrived at Nha Trang on time. There was a jeep waiting for me. I was taken to the same residence I had gone to every time I had come to Nha Trang. I left my duffel bag there and took my orders with me to headquarters, which was where I had to go to sign out. When I got to headquarters they had me sign more papers. I didn't bother to look at many of them. The Army is known for mountains of paperwork and most of this was about changing my mail, redirecting pay, and removal from the II Corps duty roster. There were a few things relating to the code work I was doing before Caleb took it over from me. A couple of headquarter agents then took me to lunch.

We went to a local restaurant that they liked which was off the main street. I was nervous about going there—or anywhere—what with my recent problems in Qui Nhon. I went anyway. The food was good. They wanted to hear what had happened and how I was targeted. I felt they just wanted to meet someone that the VC had tried to assassinate. So I told them a few stories and about the child sapper squad, joking about their ages. They seemed impressed that I opted to stay when I knew of the plan. I shrugged that off and told them the story about the botched POW recovery. They were as pissed as I was when I finished. Somehow, that made me feel better. The truth of what happened, though, still raised a profound anger in me and brought tears to my eyes. I had to let the anger hide the tears.

We stayed at lunch too long and had to hurry back. When I got back I was told there was a major who wanted to talk to me. I went

to his office and walked in. "Mr. Burdick reporting, sir!" I said. I might as well get used to acting like a soldier for a couple of days.

"Sit right there, Mr. Burdick." He pointed to a chair in front of his desk. I sat down where he told me and waited. "I know Major Theran talked to you about a direct commission and that you were not interested then, as he only could offer you a second lieutenant's commission. I have checked and, with your record of accomplishments, I have been authorized to offer you a first lieutenant's commission upon completion of Officers' Training Classes, which should be simple for you to pass. Also, I have been told that, within six months, you could be a captain." He sat back in his chair like he had just offered me the Mona Lisa. I'm sure he felt that I should grab the offer and thank him profusely. He didn't know me. I did thank him for the offer, but said that, at the moment, I just wanted out of the Army. He talked some more and I turned it down some more. Finally, he wished me luck and I left his office. That should be that, I thought. What they offered was unheard of. Well, at least I hadn't heard of anybody getting a first lieutenant direct commission. "Things must be bad if they want me that much," was all I could think. I went out front to get my orders to fly to Saigon in the morning. I wanted out of here. They were not ready, so I sat down and waited for them to be ready. While sitting there, a sergeant came up to me and asked me to follow him.

Damn! Now what is it I wondered? I was taken to the commanding officer's office. I hadn't expected this. I went through the door and introduced myself like I did with the major, and was asked to sit in the chair in front of his desk. He was an older man and you could feel that he clearly had experience. I had heard that he was involved with the OSS during World War II. He was very interested in how I was able to recruit so many critical agents during my short time in-country. I answered, "It was just dumb luck, sir. I was in the right place at the right time and took advantage of what was offered. Anyone could have done it."

He looked at me for a second or two. "Bullshit! You may not understand it, but you have an awesome talent hidden behind that happy-go-lucky image you want everybody to see. What you have done with the help of your friends up there is unbelievable. I have never met an agent so young who has been able to do anything like

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you have done. Hell, you were not even trained to do what you were doing. So don't tell me it was luck. You have a damn great talent there, Mr. Burdick. I would have loved to have you work with me when I was a lead agent."

What could I say? I was a little embarrassed. I really didn't think what I did was all that great. "Thank you, sir," was all I could say.

"Now, I understand you have refused a direct commission twice. Is that right?" he said, looking me right in the eye as if he was trying to find out why I had done such a foolish thing. I was really afraid he would find out.

"Yes, sir!" I finally said.

"I notice from your 201 file that you have been to graduate school but had not completed it. Is that right?" he asked.

"Yes sir. The Army took me away both times." I said. This was true. I had started graduate school again in San Antonio but my office kept sending me out on TDY and I missed a lot of classes. When I talked to the teacher about it, he found out I was in the Army. My major was International Relations. The class I was in required us to work in teams of four. When the other students found out I was a soldier no one would let me on their team. The teacher would not intervene. If they knew I was an Intelligence Agent they probably would have hung me. It was not a fight I wanted and I withdrew. The Army paid for the class but did not make me pay back the fee—for obvious reasons. So in a sense, because of the TDY, I was taken out of graduate school.

Looking through the sheets of paper he had on his desk, he said, "Yes, we did. Sorry about that. But I have one more offer that I don't want you to answer just yet. Because of your record and the fact that we pulled you out of graduate school, I can get you a direct commission as a captain. Once you complete Officers' Candidate School, within six months you will be promoted to a major. I will put this in writing for you and make it part of your re-up papers. I don't know what is making you turn all this down so far, but think carefully about what I just offered you. Don't answer me now. You are scheduled to leave first thing tomorrow morning. Let me know one way or the other before you leave. If you still choose not to stay in the Army, I will see that you are not bothered again. I hope you choose the commission. We could use men like you in the Army. In

any case, I am proud to have had you in my command. Thanks for stopping by.”

With that, he stood up and reached over his desk to shake my hand, which I let him. I turned—without saying anything—and left his office. I had a lot to think about, but my brain wasn’t working very well. I was very confused. I received my papers and was taken back to the house where I was staying. I sat on the porch and smoked a number of cigarettes. I tried to think of a way I could do what he wanted. There just wasn’t one. I did not want to die anymore. If I stayed in, they would have me back here within a year. I couldn’t do a second year, nor did I want to be responsible for a number of young soldiers I would have to lead. Then, there was also that hospital thing that I didn’t know how to cope with. Finally, I decided there was no way I could stay in the Army despite what he had offered me, which was still unbelievable to me. I knew what my response had to be.

Right at that moment the agents came from the office and wanted to go out for a beer. This time we went to the Officers’ Club. I told them more stories and I got free beer. They wanted to know what the colonel wanted with me, but I just ignored the question. There was no need to make the offer public and be further pressured to accept. I was willing to bet that no one had heard of such an offer. We got something to eat and eventually made it back to the house. I slept—but not comfortably.

In the morning I packed my stuff in preparation to be driven to the airport. I asked to be driven back to headquarters, first. I had the jeep wait for me and I went to the duty NCO. I asked for a piece of paper and wrote “No Thanks. SSG John G Burdick RA18752037”. I folded the paper and put the colonel’s name on it and gave it to the duty NCO and left. When I got in the jeep, we drove to the airport where I got on another C-130, heading for Saigon. I would not miss Nha Trang. I was also sure I had made the right decision not to accept a direct commission, even though part of me was feeling like I should risk it. When the door closed on the plane, I was glad I would not have to come back to this place again. I had made another step towards home.

It took longer than I remembered to get to Saigon—or maybe it just seemed like that. We landed at Tan Son Nhut airfield just before noon. There was a jeep waiting for me. I threw my gear in it and hopped in. The driver did not introduce himself but just said “Hi!” I just smiled. We drove off the airfield and I began to realize again how small Qui Nhon had been. This town had real traffic. There were cars, trucks, busses, pedicabs, jeeps and bicycles everywhere. There seemed to be no order to their movement. They went where they wanted. I guess I had been out in the field a little too long. Of course, this was the feeling I got every time I came to Saigon. The driver worked his way through all this mess, beeping his horn and swearing at the other drivers. It was great fun. I realized we were heading for the same compound I went to when I arrived in-country and when I had the code training. I had come full circle—I was now heading home. It was a pleasant feeling. When we got there they assigned me a room. I threw my duffel bag into it and headed to the gazebo bar by the gate. If anybody wanted me, they could find me there.

I entered the bar and ordered a beer. I looked around. It was just after 1300 hours and somebody had beaten me here. I already liked him. I went over and introduced myself. His name was Ralph.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Qui Nhon!” was my answer. “Where are you from?” I asked him.

“Just Saigon. I’m going home tomorrow. How about you?” he replied.

“Day after tomorrow, I think.”

We then drank our beers, telling each other how much the Army sucked. We had a couple more beers and then Ralph had some food brought in from somewhere. So we ate and drank the rest of the afternoon. Soon, somebody showed up from the office looking for me. I was told I would be going into Saigon in the morning to turn in my gun and credentials and to sign out of the unit. I was unimpressed, but thanked him. Ralph asked me what I did and when I told him about some of my escapades he just shook his head.

“Damn! I’ve been sitting at a desk all year long with little to do and you were out there really doing it. Let me shake your hand.” He was a little drunk.

Later in the afternoon more agents appeared. Two of these were newly in-country—they just showed up yesterday. I wonder if I looked that young and bewildered when I showed up. Probably! I was no longer buying any drinks. It seemed that everyone had questions to ask and bought me drinks to get answers out of me. I really didn't tell them much about what I did. Some of the stuff was still a little too hot to handle. Surprisingly, a couple of them had heard about me, or at least about the operations I was involved in. I wonder how they knew. I had never advised Saigon on many of them. Probably Dave did, though. Who can you trust? At last I dragged myself off to bed to the sound of explosions, helicopters, and diesel trucks. I slept well for a change.

In the morning I dragged myself out of bed and cleaned up. I wore civilian clothes and carried my pistol and credentials. I made sure that the pistol only had one bullet in it. They had only given me one when I got here, so I was only giving one back. I got into a jeep and saw Ralph getting into another. He was in uniform, a Sergeant E-5. Looks like I outranked him. I waved to him and we were driven off in different directions. I was taken to the center of town to the same white building I had been brought to about a year ago. This time, though, I was ready for them.

They had the routine down to a simple science. Each place they sent me to would lead me to another. Most were innocuous, but some made me think a minute or two. Because of my activity, I was required to sign a document agreeing not to travel to any "Iron Curtain" or Communist state for 15 years. That seemed like a long time to me, but, then, going there would not make any sense if they knew I was a counterintelligence agent—and I had been told they knew. I would really have to be an idiot to go there. I signed the documents. They had more documents to sign concerning any classified activities I was involved in, and I had to agree never to release any information on them without their approval.

Then I went into a room where they had my 201 file. They were making some new entries in it. I now had to hand over my cover credentials and my ration card. The guy behind the counter looked at me curiously when he saw that the ration card had not been used. I just smiled and let him wonder. He did not ask. Since I had been

promoted while in Vietnam, the military ID I had given them when I came into country was no longer valid. They took me into a room and took my picture for a new one. I had to wait until it was ready. When it was, they gave me the new one together with my old one. I was shocked. The picture on my old card showed a young man with a full head of hair, smiling, and with a smooth, cherubic face. The new one could not have been me. Most of the hair was missing from the front of my head. I was smiling, but had the look of someone who was standing in shit and not liking it. My face was haggard, and my eyes looked like they could bore a hole through granite. Was I that pissed? Someone finally broke my train of thought and took me to the last desk, where I was to turn in my pistol and credentials. There was a second lieutenant there who—I could tell from a distance—was going to be a prick.

“Your pistol, please.” I handed it to him. He took it and made sure the chamber was cleared. He dropped the magazine and looked unhappy. “You have only one bullet in this magazine. There should be more. It’s supposed to be returned with a full clip,” he said, looking at me like I had just pissed on his shoe.

“They only gave me one when they issued me the damn pistol, so I am returning it with one.” I already knew there was no requirement to return it with ammo. My first impression of the guy was true—he was going to be a jerk.

“That’s ‘Sir!’ I am an officer, Sergeant Burdick.” He looked at me, waiting for a response.

I looked at him in disbelief for a moment, and then said, “Yes, SIR!” He didn’t like that either, as I meant it to sound sarcastic and it did. Too bad.

“Your credentials, please!” I handed them to him. I really didn’t like giving them up. These I would never have again and I hated to give them to a bastard. He shoved a card over for me to sign, stating that I had turned in my credentials. I signed it and he signed it, to indicate that he had taken them in. Our credentials were special. If any were lost, there would be hell to pay. You could be court-martialed if you lost credentials in your care. No one took them lightly. That was why I was uncomfortable giving them to another person. I was given a copy of the card and the lieutenant signed the proper form in my 201 file. Then he ignored me for a minute,



when a sergeant came up and asked him a question that must have flustered him, because he turned his back on me. I don't know why, but I reached down and picked up my credentials and stuck them back in my pocket. He should have put them in the container that was behind his desk. He turned around and abruptly dismissed me. I quickly turned and left, wondering how long it would take this idiot to realize that he was in big trouble. I went back to the front desk and picked up my travel papers. I was to leave in the morning. Right now I wanted a drink and to chuckle with somebody over what I had done. As always, they had one more person for me to see, and that was the recruiting officer. I dreaded this. What were they going to offer me now? I thought I wouldn't have to deal with this any more! When I went in, all he had me do was sign a paper saying I was not interested. The colonel had kept his word!

Out by the front desk there was a group of NCOs who were headed to lunch. They asked me to go along with them and I agreed. At least I would now be able to say I ate in Saigon. I was not very comfortable, as I had no idea what was going on anywhere near here and I was hoping the rest of them did. We ended up in a French-Vietnamese restaurant somewhere near the white building. I ordered what one of them ordered and hoped it would be edible. I also ordered a beer, as did the rest. They had heard about my stories and wanted to hear more, so I told them what I could. They particularly liked my piper cub flight and the burning of the hut during the offensive. I don't know why. Finally, I mentioned that prick of a lieutenant who had demanded that I call him "sir." They all had had a run-in with him. That was when I said, "Look at this!" and put my credentials on the table. They were all stunned. Who was this guy who would be crazy enough to steal his own credentials? Then they started to laugh.

"I bet that lieutenant is shitting bricks now," one of them said. I laughed. He had to be scared out of his starched shirt, we all agreed. I really didn't want to keep the credentials, though. I was asking them for ideas—and hearing very few—when the lieutenant walked into the restaurant. I always sit facing the door, so I saw him first.

"Shit, here comes the lieutenant!" I said quickly to all of them as I snatched up my credentials and but them back in my pocket. Now what do I do? The lieutenant recognized me and headed toward our

table and stood next to me. He had a briefcase that he casually put on the floor beside his foot and next to my chair.

"Mr. Burdick, I seem to have misplaced your credentials. Do you have any idea where they could be?" He looked at me, hoping I could help him and knowing that, somehow, I was responsible. I was surprised he had said "Mr." when earlier he had made a point of calling me a sergeant. I guess he was trying not to piss me off if I had those credentials. Well, he wasn't going to get them that easily!

"No, sir. The last time I had them I put them on your desk. You signed a document saying I returned them. I have it here in my pocket." I reached into my pocket for the form. Everybody knew I was sticking it to him. Now I just needed someone to make him turn his head.

"No, I've checked the form and it is signed but I don't have the credentials," he said. The worry on his face was really worth the risk I took in taking the credentials. This was going to be fun.

Finally, someone on the other side of the table asked him, "About what time did this happen, sir?"

He turned and looked at the soldier and said, "About 1145 hours. Mr. Burdick was the last agent I saw before lunch." He turned and looked at me.

What he had not seen was that I had dropped my credentials into his briefcase when he had turned his head to answer the soldier. Luckily, there was enough noise in the restaurant that he did not hear it hit the bottom of his briefcase.

"Sir, just before I left, a sergeant came in with some papers, and you turned around to answer his question. Maybe you unwittingly dropped it into your briefcase here, which, as I recall, was next to your desk." I pointed to his briefcase next to me. He looked at me like I was an idiot. So I picked it up and handed it to him. I knew he must have checked it out, but here I was handing him his briefcase. So he stuck his hand in it out of habit.

"No. It was the first place I..." He stopped talking and pulled out my credentials. He was about to say something, but then looked at me, puzzled. "Well, I guess I made a mistake. It is here. I will see you later, gentlemen, and I'm glad you're going home, Mr. Burdick," he said as he quickly left. I was surprised he didn't use my rank this time, but you could see the anger in his face and there

was nothing he could do. He knew I had somehow done this, and still there was nothing he could do. He would have to take his anger out on some other poor slob. I was going home and he had his chain pulled hard. I loved it!

After he was out the door I said, “And thank you, too!” Everyone practically doubled over in laughter. I got a few free beers for that little stunt. They all got back to the office late that day. I hoped they wouldn’t get into trouble over my little game. My jeep was waiting for me and I hopped in and went back to the gazebo for another drink or two. I told the story to those who were there and they all seemed to have crossed paths with the lieutenant. They were happy to see his chain pulled. I went to bed early that night, wondering what would happen next. I would be on a plane heading for home tomorrow. It still didn’t seem real.

I left the compound early the next morning. I was wearing my khaki uniform. For the next couple of days I would have to be a sergeant. I was not used to being in uniform. Outside of Basic Training and my special agent training, I had been in uniform less than a week over my three-year enlistment. I was sure I was going to get chewed out by somebody for not saluting or not respecting a higher rank. I was so rusty I wasn’t sure I even knew how to salute properly. I had my orders directing me to the Oakland Army Station, to be released from the Army there. I was happy about that. I was finally accepting the fact that I was going to get out of Vietnam alive. The thought made me feel peculiar inside—maybe because I wasn’t out of this poor country yet.

I was dropped off at the same repo depot that I had arrived in-country. This time the sign said “E-7 and higher,” with an arrow pointing to a separate waiting area. When I came into country it said “E-6.” Now that I was an E-6, it would, of course, say “E-7.” The Army wasn’t through screwing with me yet. I got in line with all the other returnees. My flight was today. Evidently, others were flying out on later flights and had reported early. I didn’t blame them. Again, there was a series of forms and instructions that had to be filled out and listened to. Finally, we were escorted into an area that was surrounded by concertina wire and MPs. This was where we were to change our military currency to real US dollars and cents. It was the

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first time in a year I had held American dollars and real nickels and dimes. We then went into a room where we had to empty our duffle bags. All that time spent carefully packing was wasted. They were looking for weapons, drugs, war souvenirs, and especially pictures. They confiscated all my maps and aerial pictures of Qui Nhon that I had. I was pissed because they were not classified and were mine, but arguing with an MP who was told to take anything he couldn't understand was futile. I quickly jammed everything back into my duffel bag—almost packing my orders, which I would need to get a number for boarding the plane. I went through the exit door and was given the number “15.” I would be the 15th soldier to enter the plane. I was glad I was not in the 200s. The people at the bottom could be bumped to the next flight by an officer who came late. Not fair, but not my problem now. I was going home.

We gave our duffel bags to an airline baggage handler as we got our number. He threw it on a trailer to be loaded onto the plane. I went up the steps and headed for a window seat in front of the wing. I wanted to see Vietnam disappear from sight. It was strange to watch the soldiers as they entered the plane. They looked like they didn't believe they were going home. Some were smiling, but most were just staring at their surroundings as if they didn't believe it was happening. I guessed that was how I looked, too. It was hard to understand what was going through my mind and through the minds of those around us. I came to Vietnam alone and I was leaving it alone. I felt the other soldiers held the same feelings I did. We were all tense. I kept saying to myself, “I'm going home! I'm going home!” The trouble was, I still didn't really believe it. I sat there waiting for the other shoe to drop and my journey home to come to an end. I must not have been the only one who was thinking that thought. You could cut the tension with a butter knife. I could feel it—even smell it. Looking into the eyes of the soldiers who were entering the plane told it all. They had the same eyes that I had seen on my new ID card. Most, like me, had been in the field somewhere in Vietnam less than 24 hrs ago. They had been in the jungle, on a helicopter attacking who-knew-what, or just working as a supply clerk. I was sure that none of them had a price on their head like I did. What we had done you can't just put down and walk away from. It goes with you. They had been somewhere where living and

dying was purely by chance. It was something we would all share, whether we wanted to or not. None of us trusted that we were going to get home—at least not yet.

There was not much talking as the plane filled up. Finally, the last soldier came through the door. A stewardess went and pulled the door shut. We could hear the door click shut as the lever was pulled. The air conditioning came on. That surprised me. I had not realized we had been sitting in a steamy can until then. No one really said anything. We looked out the windows as we rolled to the runway and took off. As the wheels came off the ground and loudly locked into their places, a few started clapping. Most of us, though, were looking out the window to see Vietnam disappear from sight. It did not, however.

I had deliberately sat on the left side of the plane (as you faced the cockpit). I knew that the first stop was either Japan or the Philippines, and both of those were northeast of us. So I sat where I could watch Vietnam disappear. The trouble was, we were flying up the coast of Vietnam. I was heading back to Qui Nhon whether I wanted to or not. Being in Intelligence gives you knowledge that sometimes you wish you did not have. I was aware that the NVA had been bringing antiaircraft weapons into Binh Dinh province, mainly to take out helicopters. Many of the guns were effective to 20,000 feet. I could not tell how high we were, but there was no way we were over 20,000 feet. I stared out the window with a cold feeling in my heart. So this was how it was to end. I sat and watched, looking for where I knew the weapons were. We passed Nha Trang and entered Binh Dinh Province. Soon I saw the Navy base at Qui Nhon and the beach where our offices were. One of those tiny buildings was where I had spent my time in Vietnam. It looked so small and insignificant. We continued north. I looked around and saw that everyone was now staring out the left side of the plane. They may not have known what I knew, but they all sensed that being this close to Vietnam was not good. Everyone was quiet. We were now flying over LZ English. I knew for a fact that the weapons that were in the hills we were flying over at this moment could shoot us down. My only thought was that, if I get shot down, I hope this fucking plane lands on that goddamn general's headquarters. At least we would be

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doing some good. I tried not to think about the POWs who probably were no longer down there.

I hadn't realized how tightly I was squeezing the armrests of my seat. My fingers began to hurt and I had to let go. Finally, after passing LZ English, we turned towards the sea, away from Vietnam. Suddenly, throughout the whole plane, soldiers were clapping and shouting. Now we were leaving Vietnam. It disappeared behind us. We were really going home!

We stopped in Japan for refueling—without any problems this time. It took us two hours to get back in the air. Nobody got off the plane. It was December 18th—seven days until Christmas. I knew now that I had to try to face what I was going to do with my life. At the moment, all I wanted was to find a McDonald's and get a hamburger, fries, and chocolate shake. That was the easiest decision to make. I thought I should put off any more heavy thinking for a while.

We were flying at night and the pilot had kept the air conditioning going. It was now uncomfortably cold. I had the stewardess bring me a small blanket before they ran out. I guess they were getting us ready for the temperature change we would get at Travis Air Force Base, where we were heading.

I remembered my flight to Vietnam and my worry about whether I could kill anybody. I guess I had knocked that out of the park. By the time I had left Qui Nhon to leave country, I had personally ordered operations that had killed probably thousands of people—that I knew of. It was still a hard thing to swallow. It was so easy to do when I was doing it. Strangely, even now I didn't feel that bad about it. As far as I was concerned, all of those deaths were people who were trying to kill a fellow American soldier. Some of these soldiers on the plane could be going home because of what I had done. That thought did not feel bad. All I could think was that I had done what I did to save lives, and to get even for lives lost. Yet, I knew that nobody who had not been with me would understand why I did what I did. There would be no use even trying to explain it to them. What was gnawing at me, though, was how much I had changed. I was not the person who, one year ago, flew to Vietnam. I was now used to making decisions that killed people. I was used

to putting myself at risk and not caring, and I had embraced anger, hatred, and revenge. I had learned to trust no one. I liked what I did, even if I hated to say so. This was not the same guy who came to Vietnam. The worst thing that happened during my tour was that I had learned to trust no one. Because of that, I had few friends and I felt that I was not likely to look for any now. I liked the guys I worked with, but I was not close to them. I had become a loner and I liked it. Yes, I could drink and party with anyone, but I never would let them into my heart again. It was too painful. At times I must have been difficult to be around. Most of the time I would drink and joke around with the guys, but the next day I could go out and order an attack and still drink and party that night. I was cold-hearted and kept thoughts to myself. Most of the time I appeared to be a hard drinking goof-off. That was why they were so surprised when I pulled something off. Those who worked with me were always surprised how vicious I could get in what seemed a nanosecond—and probably why they stayed away from me. Now that world was over for me. I wanted to try to become what I was before I went to Vietnam. But I didn't know how to do that, and I spent much of the trip back wondering if this new side of me—that I had brought to life—could be put to rest. I would find out soon with my wife who—because of my distrustful attitude—I had pushed away. After her “thing” with her cousin, I could not bring myself to trust her again. All I had learned in Vietnam told me that if someone broke a trust, never offer it again and always be wary of them. In my head I knew there was nothing to this “thing,” but I felt betrayed, so I shut her out. Now, I still could not get myself to try to trust her again. I could not let go of my anger even as we came nearer to the US.

I was very confused about what to do about her. I was still angry for all the ill feelings we had sent to each other. I was sure we could never have what we had before. I was not even sure I wanted to go back to that. What surprised me was that Major Theran had guessed that my marriage was toast. He even tried to talk me into a suicide operation because of it. Luckily, I wasn't that crazy. Still, I could not think of one reason to go back to Lena. I did remember Major Theran's comment about not making decisions in Vietnam about a marriage. Well, I wasn't in Vietnam any more—but I wasn't home either. When we landed in California I would have to know what I

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was going to do. Lena had written me before I left Qui Nhon that she was finding a place for us when I got back. I took it as a half-hearted attempt to see if I was coming back. She didn't describe anything, and seemed less than happy about the whole thing. It was sort of like a duty for her. Well, I didn't have to do any duty.

There was one more huge problem that I had to deal with and that was my predicament with hospitals. I had gone to the Evac hospital one time too many and was now suffering because of it. I still saw the bright blue eyes with a small tear running down the impossibly white face of that boy-soldier dying. I choked up and almost shed tears every time I saw that picture in my mind. Worse, every time I was near a hospital and could smell the antiseptic and other things, I would grow faint. It was scaring me. I did not know what to do. I knew if I stayed away I would be all right, so I decided to stay far away from hospitals until the feeling left me. I hoped, over time, it would go away. There was no hospital on the plane so I was all right for now.

The pilot came over the intercom saying that we would be arriving at San Francisco International Airport because Travis was fogged in and we could not land there. He told us we would be there in an hour. It was dark outside. I liked the idea of landing in San Francisco. I knew that town. It was 75 miles to my mom and dad's place from there. I knew now I had to make a decision about Lena. So I went back to basics.

I had generally dropped any pretense about being religious. I was Catholic, but no longer believed what they were trying to lead me to. Yet, as a Catholic, I had made a promise for better or worse when I got married. I guess I was getting the worse part sooner than I expected. On that thin premise, I decided to go back to Lena. Maybe I would change and things could get better again. In any case, I was going back to Texas for now. I chuckled to myself. I had always said that the closer you get to a problem before you make a decision, the better. I was landing at San Francisco when I had finally made my decision. I couldn't get much closer than that. I still had no idea about how I was going to make a living, but at that moment I didn't really care.



You couldn't see much as we approached San Francisco. It was foggy here, too, but I guess they could land here for some reason. As the wheels touched down, we all clapped and yelled. We had made it home alive. Everyone had a big smile on his face. We didn't know each other but we knew we had lived through something we would never forget. Now we were in the States and soon we would be going home for Christmas. We couldn't have been any happier. We had to wait for the plane to taxi to the gate. While we were taxiing, the pilot came on to let us know that we would have to go through customs before we could get on the busses to the Oakland Army Terminal. They had handed out custom forms before landing and we had all filled them out. I had nothing to declare. Because of Christmas, it was taking them a little more time to get the agents to the temporary area we would be going through, and to get the area set up—or so we were told. We had to wait on the plane for a half-hour before the door actually opened. None of us cared much. We were home and it felt good. Finally, they let us leave through the opened door so we could get out. I was with one of the first groups to get out. It was freezing outside—at least it felt like that to me. We were all wearing our summer dress khakis from Vietnam. It didn't seem to bother any of us too much, though.

As we entered the terminal we could hear music. It was Bing Crosby, singing "White Christmas." It was a great greeting for all of us to hear. We were truly home! We entered a large open area where our duffel bags were being stacked by baggage handlers. I said "Merry Christmas" to one of them. He just looked at me angrily and walked off. I thought that was strange. As I looked around, I realized that no one was talking to any of us. I looked around some more, and you could see other passengers walk into our terminal. They took one look at us, then usually frowned, turned their backs on us and walked away. Something was wrong, but we were happy to be home, so most of us ignored them. I did not. What was going on? I finally found my bag and got in line for the customs officer to check my luggage. I watched as he just checked the form and then pointed to the door where our busses were. I smiled at him and said "Merry Christmas! It's great to be back!" He said nothing. He just stared and scowled at me. I thought it was just him. I looked around and every customs officer was doing the same thing. No one

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was talking to us. People were coming in and frowning, whispering to each other, pointing, turning around, and going back where they came from. It was like they didn't want to be near us. Why? Did we carry some contagious disease?

Gene Autry was now singing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." The whole thing was surreal. Here were all these soldiers who had served their country—and were just happy to be home and safe. All they wanted was to go home for Christmas. Nobody expected a parade or even a Thank-You. But being shunned was something no one was prepared for. Shunning is very personal. I could see soldiers looking around, confused by what was happening. They were still smiling, but there was confusion on their faces. Why was everybody ignoring and avoiding them? I took my bag and put it on a bus. I looked at the customs agents as they walked away. They were not even talking to each other. As they left, some turned their heads to stare at us. I felt like a black person must have felt when he or she sat in the wrong section of a bus. I could not understand why they seemed to hate us. I knew that there was considerable opposition to the war in the States, but that had nothing to do with me or the rest of those with me. I didn't volunteer to go to Vietnam. I knew that everything that could be done wrong, was being done wrong in Vietnam. I could not change that. What I did know was that I had tried to save American lives while I was there. The decision to be there was made by politicians in Washington. Blame them! Why blame the soldiers who had no choice and only did what they could to stay alive and help each other. Besides, part of me was proud of the work I did. In a difficult situation, we had worked together to save American lives and eliminate those who attacked us. It was our job. All of us, I'm sure, had seen the demonstrations against the war in the US. It seemed to me that many were taking their frustrations out on the soldiers who were sent there. Maybe we were just an easy target. Anyway, it hurt.

After the last bus was filled, we drove off to the Oakland Army Terminal. Looking at the city and its lights, and driving through San Francisco and over the Oakland Bay Bridge was special for me. Seeing all the sites that I had been to when I was younger made me realize even more that I was home! There were no explosions, smells

of death or trucks full of soldiers going to who-knew-where. In fact, I even saw a McDonald's and it was open. Too bad we couldn't stop for my hamburger, fries, and chocolate shake. When we arrived at the Oakland Army Terminal, I was separated from the rest of the soldiers. Apparently, almost all the soldiers were remaining in the Army or were going to another place to end their service. The rule was that, if you had less than 90 days of service, you could get out of the Army at the Oakland Army Terminal. In our group, there were only five that met that category. I was one of them. We went through form after form. They had us change into our Class A uniforms and put our khakis away. That, of course, meant that we had to dig through our duffle bags to get everything. It felt strange to wear the Class A uniform again. While we were doing that, they were generating all our remaining pay, processing urine samples and making sure we had been checked by all the proper personnel. We went to one briefing after another. We even had a physical. Well, they looked at us anyway. Eventually, we had jumped all their hurdles. I had over \$600 in my pocket from my back pay. We were ready to leave. It was about 4:30 in the morning. We had been doing this all night.

They had one more thing they wanted us to do, and that was watching some Veteran's Administration movie that lasted 45 minutes. After the movie we could sign our papers and we would be out of the Army. Nobody wanted to watch the movie so I suggested a solution to our group of five. Each soldier should give me \$20 and with my \$20 we would have \$100. I would find the corporal who was going to show us the movie and persuade him that the projector was broken. They quickly agreed. I found the soldier and offered him \$80, which he gladly took. I couldn't help myself. It was just so simple to try another scam. I knew I would have to stop doing this. I enjoyed this particular scam, though. Soon, some wimpy lieutenant came in and apologized that the projector was broken, so we would miss the movie. We, of course, did not complain and it didn't cost me a thing. I signed my papers and grabbed my duffel bag and joined the other soldiers who had already gone out the door. I was a civilian again—but still in a uniform. I was the last one out the door and it clanged shut after me. I heard a bolt slide and lock the door.

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They had locked us out! When you're out of the Army, I guess you are really out.

We looked around. The huge parking lot was empty. It took us a moment to realize that we had no idea where we were. I thought there would be a bus stop or something out the door—but there was nothing. One of the guys saw a telephone booth far away at the end of the parking lot. It looked to be about 500 yards away. We walked hurriedly to it. Here we were in Oakland—not the safest place in the world. All of us had our pockets full of money and probably good pickings for somebody—except that we had just spent a year at war. I pitied any fool who would try to mess with us. We got to the telephone booth and, of course, the telephone book was gone. How do you find a taxicab if you don't have a number? A corporal noticed the word "TAXI" scrawled on the side of the booth with a number scratched in the metal after it. Someone had left us some help. We called the number and, indeed, it was a taxi company. We didn't really know where we were but we were able to describe where we had just come from. They sent two cabs for us. Three of us wanted to go back to San Francisco International Airport and the other two wanted to go to the Greyhound station. The taxi for the Greyhound station arrived first. Before they left, the two ex-soldiers thanked me for getting them out of the movie. I felt a little guilty about not paying into the pool, but they were happy, so I said nothing. About 10 minutes later another taxi arrived and drove us to the airport. The cabbie was not talkative. It was almost 7:00 AM when we arrived at the departure area. I couldn't believe we had used up that much time getting here. The clock at the Army Terminal must have been wrong.

We all decided to go get our tickets to wherever we were going and then meet in a bar that was open in the terminal. I knew the bar was there because I had flown out of this airport before. I went to the Continental Air desk and asked about a flight to San Antonio, Texas at a military rate. I bought my ticket. At least they were polite when I bought my ticket. I was to leave at 10:15 AM. Since it was a direct flight, it would probably take me only three to four hours to get to Texas. The woman at the counter was helpful, so I asked where the phones were and she pointed to a place down at the end of the terminal.

There was one thing I knew I had to do and it was harder to do than I thought. It is one thing to sit and plan what you were going to do, and quite another to do it. I should have realized that—considering all the operations I had planned. Yet, this was somehow different. This was very personal. I needed to call Lena to let her know when I was going to arrive. It was a very difficult thing to do. I didn't know what to say. I pulled out my wallet and looked at the picture that she had sent me of her holding the Valentine flowers—what seemed to be a lifetime ago. It helped me pull myself together and made me feel like it would be a good thing to talk to her. I would try. Before I called though, I took the mushroomed bullet out of my pocket. I had rubbed it every time I had screwed up in Vietnam. I didn't want to screw up now. I put it back in my pocket, hoping that I would not make another mistake. Time would tell.

Before I called her, though, I decided to call my mom and dad to let them know I was back. I would tell them I was on my way to Texas. I had to call collect. I put my dime in and gave the operator the number. I didn't make it person-to-person since I was just going to leave a message that I was back. My mom answered and I let her know I was back and heading to Texas. She, of course, was ecstatic that I was back and wanted me to stop and see her but she understood my need to get to my wife. She never knew how close I was to going to my old home again, permanently. We talked briefly and I said I would call her after I got settled in San Antonio. She was really happy to hear from me. After saying goodbye, I knew I now had to call Lena. I was still very uncomfortable calling her. I wanted to and didn't want to at the same time. I looked at her picture one more time and thought to myself: What the hell! Give it a try!

So I put my dime in the phone and dialed the operator. This time I gave the phone number and Lena's name and asked that it be a collect person-to-person call. The number was her mother's number because that was all I had. I heard the phone ring a couple of times and heard the operator say, "This is long distance. Will you accept a call from John Burdick?" At the other end I heard "My God! Yes! John is that you? Where are you?" Surprisingly, her soft southern accent sounded good to me, but hearing it again after so long was a shock to my system.

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I struggled to speak and finally said, “Yes. It’s me! I’m in the San Francisco Airport. I just bought my ticket to San Antonio.” That was probably not the first thing I should have said to my wife after being away for a year, but I didn’t know what else to say. I think I was afraid to ask her if she wanted me to come back there. I gave her my flight number and the time it would get there. “Can you pick me up?” Which was a stupid question.

“I didn’t know you would be here today. You didn’t tell me! Of course I’ll pick you up, but everything is not ready,” she said. I had already guessed that if I showed up she would not be ready. I did not know when I would be getting into the States and could not give her anything but general times that I might show up. Luckily, as a teacher, she was on Christmas recess, so she was free to pick me up whenever I showed up. I guess I would have to wait until I got there to find out what she meant by “not ready.” Anyway, I didn’t feel that old connection we used to have. Both of us had our guards up.

I couldn’t solve our awkwardness over the phone, so I abruptly said, “Look, we’ll see each other in a little while. Let’s save some money on the long distance charges. I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Love you!” She agreed and said she was waiting and loved me, but something was not right in her voice. I wondered what it was. We hung up and I wasn’t sure how I felt any more. I worried that I had not made the right decision—or worse—that the decision was not mine to make. Maybe Lena had decided that she had enough of me. I headed for the bar to ease the tension bubbling in my head. It’s hell to be an agent and always evaluate what you hear from everybody. It’s not something that you can just turn off and I would have to learn to live with it for now.

The other two soldiers were already there. They had their tickets. I bought another round for them. Well, I tried to buy another round, but the bartender ignored me until I practically yelled at him. That was unusual. Most bartenders served their drinks quickly. It was how the bar made its money and the bartender made his tips. But he seemed not to like to serve people in uniform—or at least not us. I was really getting tired of this bullshit. What the fuck was going on! I mentioned this to the other soldiers. They agreed with me that they had the same problem. They also said that several people came

into the bar, but left when they saw that there were soldiers at the bar. At that moment, as if to prove their point, I watched as three businessmen entered the bar, saw us, and turned around to leave. The corporal at the bar with us swore to himself and jumped up and cornered one of the men. I thought there would be trouble. Well, at least my duffel bag would get to San Antonio if a fight broke out. I had already checked my bag through to San Antonio when I bought my ticket. No fight broke out, though. The corporal had grabbed the man's arm and said something to the man, who suddenly stopped and said something back to him, and they went outside the bar. The other soldier at the bar and I looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders and started to get up off our bar stools. We guessed the fight was going to happen outside the bar, but as we got off the stools, the corporal returned. He was not happy.

"You're not going to fucking believe this. He tells me everyone here hates the war and blames us for prolonging it. They avoid all of us because they think of us as baby killers, rapists and murderers of innocent civilians. Can you believe that shit! We did our duty and we are the fucking bad guys, not the VC who killed whole villages and tortured and killed our POWs as a matter of policy. Fuck them!" After hearing what he said, we were all very upset—to say the least.

I asked him how he got the guy to talk. He pointed to his Masonic ring. "We have to help each other if I give the ritual request. I did that and that's what he said. I wish I hadn't asked."

We all were silent for a while. What he had said about the POWs had really hit home with me. It's hard to explain how we felt—but we were angry. We didn't really know each other, but we were all being lumped into the same box. We were the evil ones. I would never have joined the Army if it wasn't for the draft and a goddamned optician's assistant who was pissed because I broke his projector. I had no choice. It was join or be drafted. By joining, at least I had some ability to choose what I would do. If I hadn't joined, I would never have been in Army Intelligence. I was the victim of the goddamned system. It wasn't my fucking fault I was in Vietnam. It was some nameless clerk who accidentally sent a request for agents twice to some bureaucrat sitting in some air-conditioned office in Washington, supported and urged on by our elected officials to fill the request. Then when I got to Vietnam, some clerk screwed up

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and sent me to Nha Trang rather than the R&R center where I was supposed to be stationed. Despite all of that, I did my job because my country had ordered me to do it. I was proud of what I did and I didn't need any "pats on the back" for doing my duty. But I didn't need to be labeled a criminal, either. If people were upset, then they should take it out on the damn politicians, not the soldiers. All we could do was our job, no matter how ugly it seemed to these smug civilians who had no idea what we had to go through or what we had seen. Evidently, the heroes were the ones who ran to Canada rather than serve their country. What we did meant nothing to these people. We finished our drinks in silence. We then shook each other's hands and went to our various airlines to wait for our flights. I just wanted to get to San Antonio so I could get my uniform off and be the civilian I always wanted to be. No matter what anyone said, I knew that what I had done in Vietnam had some worth to my friends there, even if it had none to those here who never faced death. I did not expect or want any praise for what I did, but I didn't deserve their disrespect either.

Finally, my flight was called and I went to get on. "Excuse me sergeant! Did you just get back from Vietnam?" The cute little blonde stewardess was talking to me.

Cautiously, I said, "Yes. Do I look that weird?" After what had happened to me so far in San Francisco, I was wary about what she was going to say.

"No, you look fine. I just wanted to thank you for your service. Is there anything I can get for you?" she asked.

I was stunned. For a minute I didn't know what to say. Tears came to my eyes. She wanted to help me! I must have looked like I really needed some perking up. "Well, I'm going to San Antonio to see my wife for the first time since I left. I haven't shaved for almost two days. Can you get me a razor?" I asked.

"I'll see what I can do." She looked at my ticket and saw that I was sitting in seat 11C. I went to my seat, guessing that I would not see her again. How would she find a razor? Still, what she had said had made me feel better. I would never forget her for that.

We took off, and when the seatbelt sign was turned off, she surprised me by coming over to my seat. "Well, I looked everywhere



but the only razor I was able to find was the one that Rachel had, over there.” She pointed to the front of the plane where a beautiful brunette looked at me, smiled, and waved. It’s a little small. Think you can use it?” She was holding a tiny pink plastic razor that was less than an inch wide. I had no idea how Rachel used it and I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask. It must be for her legs.

“Thanks! I think it will work. Let me give it a try.” I took the tiny razor and headed for the bathroom. I used the soap from the dispenser to lubricate my face and began to shave with the tiny razor. It wasn’t the sharpest razor I had used, but it worked. I finished the job without cutting the hell out of my face and cleaned up. At least my face would be clean when I got there.

When I came out of the bathroom I went to Rachel and gave the little razor back to her. “Thanks for the help. You will never know how much that meant to me!” I smiled and handed her back the razor. She took it and put it in her pocket.

“I wish I could have done more. My brother was in Vietnam. The people in San Francisco were terrible to him, too. I wish you and your wife all the happiness you can get!” she said, smiling, as she turned away.

Sometimes you are lucky to meet just one friendly person—today I had met two when I needed them most. I wondered if the people who treated us so badly knew what it did to us, to be treated like that. I doubted if they cared. I went back to my seat.

My mind was full of countless disconnected thoughts as I got closer to San Antonio. I wondered what I would do when I was back in San Antonio. How would I find a job? Maybe I should go on unemployment insurance pay for a while until things straighten out? What would happen with Lena? I kept trying to put the last year out of my mind. I had tried so hard to do my best, but everything I did had meant nothing. I failed so miserably on my last action with the POWs. I knew I would never get over that. Now that I was in the States, everyone seemed to despise what I had tried to do. I knew that I could not talk about what I had done to anyone who had not been there. I would just have to forget about it. In what was to prove a horrible choice I decided to never talk about what really happened to me. If forced to say something I would do what I always did and joke about it. I now knew that, even if you do a good job, you

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should have no expectation of being rewarded for it. You do as best as you can because it is the right thing. Expect nothing for it. The personal attacks were hard, though. I had no idea about what would happen with the war in Vietnam. At the moment, I didn't really care. I knew that anyone who served in Vietnam would have a special place in my heart—even those who screwed up.

But my service had changed me too much. My body was uninjured, but my mind would take some time to recover, I guessed. I had seen too much and I couldn't get it out of my head. I was not the same person who, one year ago, had left San Antonio. I had lost something and couldn't put my finger on what it was. As a result, I left the Army, left Intelligence, and would try to wipe from my mind the Agent I had been. I wondered what I would become as I left the ashes of my previous life. While I thought about this, the plane began to land at San Antonio International Airport.

## Chapter 24

**It was hard to describe how** I felt as the plane slowly came to a stop in front of the terminal. I rose up to leave the plane as soon as the door was opened. As I went out the door Rachel wished me good luck. I would probably need it. I put my hand in my pocket and rubbed that mushroom-shaped bullet I had stupidly fired at the wall in our offices the first night of my arrival at Qui Nhon. I did not want to do something stupid here. Of course, I wasn't even sure she would be here. I went down the steps of the plane and into the terminal, wondering what was going to happen. As soon as I went through the door I saw her. She looked even better than her picture. She saw me and came running towards me smiling and crying at the same time. For a moment there was no one else as we hugged and kissed. I was home! As we went to get my bag she talked on and on about school. Though I was out of the Army now, I was still an agent in my head and something was wrong. The whole thing was kind of awkward and I realized it would take some time to straighten out what was bothering her and me. After I got my bag I began to find out. She took me to a rental car. Where was my car? It turned out that my poor baby-blue VW Beetle was in the shop. She had not changed or added oil since I left, even though I had reminded her several times. She told me that I needed to go see the mechanic because he had some concerns. So did I! She told me that she did rent a house for us but neglected to turn on the electricity or gas. The only furniture was a bed. She had not moved her stuff in yet. San Antonio in December is cold—usually between 30 to 40 degrees. We stayed in the house for 4 days before the electricity and gas were turned on. To say things were awkward those first few weeks would be an understatement. Eventually I asked

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about the money I had sent home. I was right about my money. It was gone. There was no real explanation except something about her mother needed help but the “help” was never explained.

It was very evident to me that somehow I had to turn off the agent mode I was in. At times I knew I must have sounded like an interrogator. I tried to stop, but it was not easy. For 12 months I had lived totally involved in my role. I could not turn it off overnight. So for the time being I was relatively quiet and tried not to act like an agent. But the urge was so strong within me that I had to resort to not talking at all or talking very little. I said nothing about what I did in Vietnam. I wanted that to go away—but it wouldn’t. In my head I kept reminding myself that I had signed documents not to reveal to any person any of what I did without a proper security clearance and a “need to know.” Even if I wanted to talk, I was still under orders not to say anything. I was out of the Army but still in the inactive reserves, which meant that I could get called back if they wanted. As far as I was concerned they would have to draft all the pregnant women and quadriplegics before they would get me to return to service. I was not about to give the Army—which for the last three years had screwed me every time it could—another chance to do it again. For the time being I would be silent.

The house she had rented was only a few blocks from her school. She was on Christmas break when I came home and so were her students. One afternoon she had gone to the store and I had fallen asleep on the couch watching football on TV. Her students, being young and full of mischief, came to her house and lit off a string of firecrackers in our front yard and ran away. The explosions immediately put me back in Vietnam, thinking I was under fire. I quickly rolled off the couch and started crawling around, looking for my pistol or rifle. I was sure the VC was attacking me again. If I had a gun in the house there is no telling what would have happened. Slowly I realized I was in San Antonio and I didn’t have to kill any VC. I began to shake. I was ready to kill again. I went to the kitchen and cracked open a beer. I did not like losing control like that. I knew I was on the edge. My solution—as always—was to tuck away the problems and they would go away on their own. I told Lena what her students had done and laughed about it. It was not funny, though. The next day I went down and applied for my

unemployment benefits. They were going to give me \$50 a week until I found a job. When I found out they would pay me weekly, I wondered how long they would keep paying me for not working. In any case, I needed some time to decompress so I would take as long as they would let me.

About 3 months after I returned I received a call from an officer from Fort Sam Houston. He invited me to an award ceremony the next week. I was told that it was not necessary for me to wear my uniform. I was a little surprised and had no idea what he was talking about. I wasn't supposed to get any medal and I was sure the Army was screwing with me again. I turned him down and asked him to mail any award I was supposed to receive. I did not ask what the award was. As far as I knew and felt, I didn't deserve anything anyway. I then forgot about it. My parents were coming to visit us in a couple of weeks and I was getting things ready. On the day they arrived, as we were unloading their bags from my car and taking them in, the postman came up and handed me the mail. In it was a small package in brown paper wrapping with a return address of Fort Sam Houston and addressed to me. I was curious so I opened it up immediately. Who knows? They could be calling me back to duty. Inside was a small box that I opened. I was stunned when I opened it and saw a Bronze Star laying there. I had never seen one up close. There was also some other things in it and some orders listing the awards I was to receive. One said that I was awarded a Good Conduct medal. I laughed to myself over that. I doubted anyone would describe my conduct as good. There were also some campaign ribbons in the box. My mom heard me laugh and saw my surprised look and came over. She then called my dad over and, naturally, he had to take several pictures of me holding my new medal. All I could think of was: That damned Dave turned me in for a medal even though I asked him not too. I knew I really didn't deserve anything. The men who went out and risked their lives based on my information were the ones who deserved this. It stayed in its original box in a drawer for the next 32 years. I never even looked at it. I didn't want or deserve any medals.

Over time, things became more bearable between Lena and me and I went out and found us a new house to rent. We never really connected like we had when we were first married, though. I still

could not talk to her about Vietnam and how it was affecting me. The truth was that I never talked to anyone about what I had done. Eventually I stopped telling anyone that I had been in Vietnam. One day I was stopped at a red light and another car drove up next to me. He seemed to recognize me and began waving and beeping his horn. I couldn't figure who he was but I lowered my window to hear what he said.

"Hey, John, I belong to the same club you do. I haven't seen you lately. Where have you been? I owe you a drink." In Texas at that time you had to belong to a private club to get a mixed drink. As an agent, I had belonged to several clubs. The more I looked at him the more he seemed to be someone I knew.

As the light was turning green I yelled to him, "How're you doing? I've been out of town for a while. I'll stop by and get that drink soon." We waved at each other and went on our separate ways. I had no intention of going back to that bar. I chuckled to myself about saying I was out of town. He would never believe how far out of town I had been.

After a few months of trying to put myself back together I took a job with Dunn & Bradstreet as a credit investigator. It was better than selling shoes or insurance and with my background they snapped me up immediately. At least it was an interesting job. When my first Thanksgiving after returning from Vietnam came up, I took some time off so we could have Thanksgiving with Lena's brother Chuck in DeRidder, Louisiana. Chuck had worked in Vietnam as a civilian and I was looking forward to talking with him. It was only a five hour drive from San Antonio to DeRidder. I could easily do that on Wednesday and return on Sunday. We were going to stay at Chuck's home. I had not been back to Louisiana since my training at Fort Polk, which was just a few miles from his home. I had no real desire to go back to visit Fort Polk, though. The drive was easier than I thought and we arrived early on Wednesday afternoon. Their home was a double-wide trailer sitting by itself on a couple of acres of land. It was not in the best of shape. I felt like I was out camping in the wilderness. The good part was that I liked Chuck and his wife Irene. She was from New Jersey and still had the "Yankee" accent. I guessed that her accent must have given her some difficulty. I knew from my experience at Fort Polk that the local people did

not like “Yankees” or “hippies” from California. When I asked her about it she just rolled her eyes and looked at Chuck. He just said it had been difficult for her, especially when he was in Vietnam. He had to go, though, because he needed the money. That night I was introduced to “Southern Comfort,” a sweetened bourbon-type of liquor. I consumed copious quantities of it. The drinks loosened our tongues a bit and Chuck and I began to talk about Vietnam. It was late when we went to bed. The next day for Thanksgiving, Bob–Lena’s youngest brother–showed up and we had a great meal and more Southern Comfort. I guess the night before I had talked to Chuck about my shooting skill with a .45. He asked me to go squirrel hunting with him early the next morning. He even had an extra shotgun for me to use. I hadn’t ever fired a shotgun nor had I ever gone hunting, but I was easily talked into it and agreed to go. He told everyone we would be back by noon for lunch.

The next morning we got up early and drove off to a pine forest near his house. There was nobody moving around that I saw. He knew exactly where he wanted to go, though. We drove down another dirt road for quite a while. The trees were getting thicker and taller but they weren’t California pines. These trees were tall and thin and there were little brush around them. He finally pulled over near a small trail and stopped the car. We got out the shotguns and he explained to me what we were going to do. The trail split about a hundred yards ahead. We would split off there. I would go to the left and he would go to the right. We would meet in about half a mile and then walk back together. That sounded good to me. As we walked the short distance to where we split he gave me hints on how to find squirrels. He pointed to the nests high in the trees. Some looked like balls of twigs surrounding the tree near their tops. We went over safety issues to make sure we didn’t shoot each other. The main thing was to keep the safety on until you were ready to shoot, then snap it off and fire. He could not know that I always did that. I learned that from Karl in Vietnam. So we split up and went our separate ways. I walked what I thought was about half the way and didn’t even see a bird fly. I walked a little farther and heard Chuck fire. All I could think was: Damn, he got the first one! Maybe I could get a bigger one. I kept walking slowly, gun at the ready, but still didn’t see anything. I also didn’t hear anything. There were no

birds chirping, no bugs buzzing. I heard nothing at all. I thought that I must be making too much noise so I tried to be quieter. Still, there was nothing to shoot. Eventually I came to the spot where the other path met with the one I was on and where I was to meet Chuck. There was no Chuck. I waited a few minutes and then decided to go back the way I came. Maybe I had missed an earlier path. Probably Chuck had gotten his squirrel and gone back to the car. So, still hunting, I went back to the car. There was no one there. I had never been hunting before and thought that maybe Chuck was trying to get a bigger squirrel and was spending time trying to get a better shot. I waited some more but he didn't come. Well, while he was screwing around, I would at least fire my shotgun. I slowly went up the path to where I had seen a nest, took careful aim, and blew it to hell. There was nothing in it. I then went back to the car and decided to wait for Chuck until he wandered back. I leaned against the front bumper, lit a cigarette and waited. I had put the shotgun in the car. About 10 minutes later I saw two men with fishing poles walking some distance behind the car heading toward a small river in the direction Chuck had gone. I waved to them and they waved back. They disappeared into the woods. I looked at my watch. Chuck had better get his butt back here soon or we are going to be late for lunch. A few minutes later the two men came sprinting back towards me. They were not carrying their fishing poles. I went and got the shotgun out of the car. You never know what people will do.

"Hey, were y'all hunting with somebody?" the older one shouted at me as they came close.

I shook my head "Yes." "I'm waiting for him now," I said.

"Hey, we just ran into a dead man over there." He pointed back in the direction I was waiting for Chuck to return from. I almost fell over. What had he said? I couldn't believe my ears and I didn't trust these guys.

"Are you sure? What did he look like?" I asked. They were close to me now and saw I had a shotgun and stopped. They didn't know me either.

"He's dead all right. At least he's not moving. He had a shotgun in his hand. We didn't touch him. I'm going to send Buddy here for the Sheriff. I'll take you back to where we found him and see if you



recognize him.” He motioned and Buddy ran off down the path they had come up.

All I could think of was that this can’t be happening. This was a fucking nightmare. I hoped these guys were just trying to steal the car or my shotgun. The old man looked at me and sort of yelled, “Y’all comin’!” I shook my head affirmatively and began to follow him down the trail. My feet felt like they were encased in lead. I couldn’t believe this was true. I was sure these guys were going to try to steal the car and my gun. They probably already had Chuck’s gun. I deliberately stayed behind him. He kept looking back to see where I was. It made me feel that I was right and this guy was up to no good. I bided my time. I held my shotgun closer to me. The path turned suddenly to the right and as I followed him I froze in my tracks. There in front of me was a body lying face down near a tree. The man stood near the body, looking at me. “Y’all right, boy?” he said as he came nearer to me. If he hadn’t grabbed my elbow I would have fallen to my knees. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Another dead body! I staggered closer to him where I could see his face. It was Chuck and he was very dead. There was not much blood around. I forced myself into agent mode now.

“Don’t touch anything! Let me see if there’s a heartbeat,” I told the old man.

He held me back. “You don’t have to check. I already did. There’s no heartbeat. Looks like he was hunting a squirrel and took off the safety as he was moving around the tree. Caught his foot on the root over there and fell forward. Used the shotgun to stop his fall and it went off. He took the whole blast in the chest. He had to be dead by the time he hit the ground.” I looked over the scene as the old man described what he saw. I had to agree what he said made sense.

“I need to go back to the car,” I said to no one in particular. The old man turned me around and walked me back to the car. I don’t remember a step. I do remember being on the seat of the car and hearing sirens off in the distance. They seemed to be coming closer. I looked around and slowly realized where I was and what had happened. If I had just never said anything about my shooting skills this would never have happened. He was such a nice guy and

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now he was dead. I had hoped I was through with killing. Evidently not!

The Sheriff and his posse arrived in a cloud of dust with two other cars and an ambulance. The old man along with his fishing buddy was talking to the Sheriff. I saw him shake their hands and they left. He came over to me. "Son, how you doin'?" He gently took the shotgun from me. I hadn't realized I was still holding it. He handed it to a deputy who emptied it and put it in the trunk of the car. "Son, can you tell me who you are?" he asked. I needed to pull myself together. Now I needed to act like an agent. Somewhere within me I found myself again. I began to answer the questions as best I could. Just as I finished, two of the deputies brought the body out on a stretcher. It was covered with what looked like a white sheet. You could see a red splotch soaked into the sheet on the part that covered his chest.

"Mr. Burdick, could you come over and get in my car. We have to go and notify his wife now. One of my deputies will drive the car to his home, following us." I went and got in the back seat of his car. The sheriff went and talked to his deputies. One got into Chuck's car and the others got in the other Sheriff's cars. The Sheriff got into the car I was in as a driver. Another deputy got in front of me. At least I wasn't handcuffed. I looked at my watch it was almost 2 PM. We had promised to be back by 11 AM. Everybody would be worried. I wanted to be anywhere but here. I would have to be the one to tell Irene and Lena what happened. I didn't know if I could do that. We all took off in a cloud of dust with sirens screaming. I guess the Sheriff wanted them to know we were coming and it wasn't good news. I felt that every person we passed was looking at me and wondering what horrible crime I had committed. Eventually I could see Irene's trailer ahead. People were coming out and looking at us as we screamed closer to them. You could see the worry on their faces as we came to a stop.

The Sheriff leaned over the seat to me. "Listen, son. I'll tell her what happened. She'll want to talk to you after that. Maybe not right away. Just follow me to them."

He got out of the car and the Deputy helped me get out. By the time I was out of the back seat the Sheriff was at the steps telling Irene what happened. She started screaming and then fainted. Lena

ran over to me, grabbed me and looked me right in the eye and asked what happened. All I could get out was, "He tripped." The tears were coming down my cheeks. They had taken Irene into the trailer and put her on her bed until she could control herself. The way she was wailing it would take a while.

The Sheriff was back near his car and came over to me. "Mr. Burdick, we are going to have a Coroner's inquest about this death tomorrow at 10 AM. You need to be there." He waited for my reply. I agreed and he gave me instructions where the inquest would be held. I again told him I would be there. They left and Lena helped me into the trailer. Irene was sitting on the couch with tears streaming down her face. When she saw me she motioned me to come over to her. I really didn't want to, but there was no way of avoiding it. We had to talk sooner or later. I guessed sooner was better and went and set down next to her. She quickly grabbed my hand. "John, the Sheriff wasn't too specific about what happened. He only said it was an accident. Can you please tell me what you know?"

I sat there a moment looking at the tears still pouring from her eyes and began to tell her everything I knew—which really wasn't much. When I finished she hugged me. "Thanks for telling me the truth. It really was just a terrible accident!" She then began to sob uncontrollably while I held her in my arms, crying along with her. Finally she paused and saw my tears. "John it was not your fault. He was going to go hunting with or without you. Don't blame yourself!"

By this time more people had shown up and they all wanted to cry with her. So I went to the kitchen for a beer. It's amazing how things get taken care of during a tragedy. By the end of the day everybody had been called and the Funeral was set for Monday afternoon. I volunteered to go back to San Antonio and pick up Lena's mom and bring her for the funeral. Lena was going to go with me. We were to leave in the morning after the inquest. This Thanksgiving weekend was going to be a difficult one.

The next morning I drove into town and found the courthouse where they were going to have the inquest. I was directed into a conference room where about 6 men sat at one end of the table with the Sheriff and I was sat at a small table facing them. It was a very informal meeting. The guy at the end yelled out, "Hey Bill!—Bill

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evidently was the Sheriff--You better swear him in." The Sheriff then stood up and motioned for me to stand up. He then asked me if I was going to tell the truth and I agreed. Nobody stopped talking while this was going on. I sat down and decided to give them a report much like I did for that Lieutenant who used a shotgun to blow the back of his head off, except this time, when I described the body, tears ran down my cheeks and I had to stop several times. At the end, they ruled the death an accident and thanked me for my testimony. I went back to the trailer and picked up Lena and drove to San Antonio to pick up her mother.

We returned the next day with Lena's mother. It was apparent that Lena's mother did not like Irene and she complained the whole time about Irene getting Chuck's stuff. She somehow felt it was hers. We didn't talk much.

Before the funeral, Billy--the oldest brother--and Bob--the youngest brother--sat down to talk with me. For some reason they were sure Chuck had killed himself and they wanted to know if there was anything that showed that to be true. It became clear that they did not like Irene either. I continued to tell them what had happened and that it clearly was an accident. They decided that we had to go to Fort Polk to the office where Chuck worked and clear out his desk. They were sure they would find something that showed he had another girlfriend on the side and they wanted to destroy that evidence so that Irene would not be hurt by finding out about it. I didn't believe for a minute that they were concerned about Irene. I thought they were looking for anything of value they could take or maybe another will that might leave them something. They were just like their mom and I was having none of it. I did decide to go with them just to keep them honest. There was nothing at his work place so we took the stuff we did find back to Irene. I had done my basic training at Fort Polk and despised the place. It looked the same as when I was being trained. There were even trainees hiking, marching, and running everywhere. I was happy to be out of the Army and that the military part of my life was over.

I drank a lot of Southern Comfort until the funeral. The funeral was sad and filled with tears, but I saw a lot of people staring at me and in my mind I knew they were wondering if the whole thing was my fault. I wanted to leave this town quickly. There was a country

reception at the trailer after the funeral. Lots of food and lots of beer. During the reception Irene caught up with me and asked me to come with her. She took me to her bedroom and closed the door.

“John, sit down on the bed, please. I want to talk to you for minute. I know you want to leave this afternoon and getting Lena’s mom out of here is a good thing!” I was surprised it was the first time I had ever heard her say anything about Lena’s family. I guessed I was about to hear more.

“You are really a nice guy and I’m so sorry you had to be there when this accident occurred. It really wasn’t your fault.” I thought that if I had kept my original intention of never talking about Vietnam, then I wouldn’t have told him about my shooting prowess and we wouldn’t have gone hunting. I still don’t know why I went hunting. I have never hunted anything. I didn’t even fish. But that day I agreed to go. In some way I still felt guilty.

“Just so you know, as soon as I can I am going to sell everything I have here and go back to New Jersey. I’ve had enough of this town and its sick people. Before I go, though, I have to warn you. Get away from Lena’s family. They will try to destroy you. They are evil people. When Chuck was in Vietnam they wrote terrible lies to him about me. He came back once and found out they were all lies. He and Billy had a terrible fight. His brothers currently are trying to take back some of the property that Chuck bought from them. They are sick, evil people and if your marriage is going to work you have to get away from them. Take Lena and go back to California and have a good life. Chuck liked you. He really did. So please go back before it’s too late. I have to get back to the wake now. I’m sure somebody is going to say something under their breath about us being in the bedroom. Think about what I said and see me before you leave.”

I thanked her for her thoughts. In my heart I knew she was right. Later that afternoon I put all our stuff and her mother’s stuff in our car. We went and said goodbye to everyone and I pulled Irene off to the side and told her I would do what I could to follow her advice. I gave her a hug and went to the car and drove back to San Antonio. As soon as I was in the car I could tell that Lena’s mom had said something to Lena about my visit to Irene’s bedroom. They

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obviously had some words because of the silence that filled the car as I got in. There was no talking all the way home.

The silence in the car as we returned to San Antonio gave me some time to think about what had just happened. Chuck's accidental death by shotgun blast, with the smell of blood and gunpowder, again took me back to a Vietnam I was trying to forget. Now the feelings were all stirred up again. It was such a senseless death—like all the other senseless deaths I had seen. Something had snapped inside me. Somehow this was my fault like all those other deaths that were my fault. I knew that I would never touch another gun or brag about my shooting skills again. In fact, I decided never to talk about Vietnam again unless it was a joke. Making fun about my actions in Vietnam seemed like a great idea. My feelings about Vietnam would be my secret. The hours of silence and quiet thought ended after we dropped off Lena's mother and went home. I thought that this trip to Louisiana for Thanksgiving was going to be fun when we left days before. It was far from fun and changed my life in ways I never suspected. I never drank Southern Comfort again.

## Chapter 25

**One of the secrets of life** is that it goes on even after death. Chuck's death slowly slipped from our minds as time went by. In my case, his death had triggered a dream that would not stop. It was a dream that I originally fought and tried not to have. But it always came back. The dream was about me being recalled to the Army. I was sent to Fort Polk for retraining to get me in shape. The dream was very detailed and came with color and smells. Each night I would begin where I left off the night before. In the beginning, I fought not to have the dream. Nothing I tried worked. I finally gave in and just let the dream take me over. Eventually, I actually began to look forward to it. Amazingly, the dream took almost a year to complete and then restarted all over again.

During the dream years I quit working for Dunn & Bradstreet and took a one-year job teaching for the San Antonio School District. I found I enjoyed working with the kids. At the end of the school year we left San Antonio and moved to California where I took a job with my dad in his TV and appliance stores. During my first year there my dad had a stroke and I had to take over running the stores. My dreams were still running in my head every night, even though I knew what was going to happen. These dreams, though delusional, had become my reality. By the time I was almost through the dream for the third time I almost believed I had been in Vietnam for three tours. One night I took a group of salesmen out for drinks and one of them said he had heard that I was in Vietnam. He asked me how many tours I had been on. I almost said three. I was in my third tour in my dream. But I stopped when I realized there was no way I could have done three tours. I knew when I got back and there was

not time to do three tours. I was amazed that I could think I really had done 3 tours. I replied, "One." This all happened in a flash. I didn't know it, but at that moment the dream died. I never had it again. At times, though, I missed it.

During my dad's illness he was in the hospital for a while. I had not been near a hospital since Vietnam. I remembered that feeling I had after I saw that poor soldier with half a body. I knew I would be unable to go into a hospital without fainting. I tried to visit him but I could not. As soon as I parked at the hospital I would get light headed and start to faint. It was a horrible feeling. He was only there a couple of days and I begged off going to visit because of work. When Lena became pregnant with our first son I knew that somehow I would have to overcome my fear. I doubted anybody realized how I felt. I sure wasn't telling anybody about it, even Lena. When Lena's time came I took her to the hospital emergency room and that was not hard. The smells were not bad there. From there we were taken to the emergency ward where Lena went through hours of hard labor. The activity alone kept the demons from my mind but during the quiet times they crawled back into my head. Eventually she had Carl by a c-section. They showed him to me through a window and told me to come back the next morning. I did not have to be told twice. The next morning I sat in the car trying to get enough courage to try entering the hospital from the front door. After about 20 minutes of arguing with myself I went in. It was nearly impossible for me to walk through the front of the hospital to get to Lena's room and to visit Carl in the room where all the babies were kept, but somehow I did it. I also managed to visit Lena and thank her for our son. I left quickly, though. My excuse was that I had to get to work. Luckily for me, I was not allowed to visit Lena when she was feeding the baby. It was one of those old rules the Dominicans who ran the hospital had. So I would show up during that time and then walk around the outside of the hospital to take a picture of Lena and Carl through the window. Eventually she came home and I didn't have to face the problem for the time being. When our second son, Kirt, was born, they no longer had those rules and my problem had eased some. To this day, every now and then when I enter a hospital and get hit with the smells from it, I still get a twinge of that old feeling but it is nowhere near as strong as it was



back then. I have never forgotten that poor wounded soldier who brought this on. I can still see his face to this day.

I worked for my dad for about five years when we decided to part company. My style and his style did not match and that was all right. After I left I began doing some consulting work. Working with Dunn & Bradstreet and running a large retail business had given me some experience. My work with some of my clients moved me towards computers. This was 1975 and there were not any “home” computers yet. It was obvious to me that computers could make quite an impact in any business. After shopping around to try and find one that I could work with, I stumbled upon a small outfit from Cupertino called “Apple” and bought one of their computers. With the help of my brother, Joe, I learned how to program it and make it do things. I had it doing payroll, inventory, billing, and even wrote a simple spreadsheet program. I began to sell Apples with my software to local businesses. Apple seemed to be impressed and helped me grow my business. They were privately owned at the time and were planning to go public. At one of their meetings I was offered a chance to buy 10,000 shares of the company for \$1 each. They were making the offer to all who had worked with them. They wanted to share the wealth with us. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the money to buy the shares. Not one of my better decisions. My work with computers did have another advantage, though. I was offered a job as a vocational instructor for the Santa Cruz County Regional Occupational Program (ROP). I remembered my brief work as a teacher in San Antonio and accepted the job. That was one of my better decisions. ROP placed me in Watsonville High School, Watsonville, California. It was a large high school in a farming community.

During the next 10 years I spent my time trying to learn how to teach and learning about techniques that would excite overactive teen-agers to want to learn. Since I was teaching computers, it was not too difficult. During this time I remained quiet about my time in Vietnam. All the internal struggles I fought alone. By the mid ‘80’s people started to talk about Vietnam again. In the educational community, people who fought in the Vietnam War were still considered pariahs. To them it was an illegal war. But the public mood was changing. My students began asking me about the war.

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At first I just changed the subject, but they would not give up. It was 1985 and I had not talked about what it was like to anyone. It was very difficult to do. All those pent up feelings of two decades of silence were hard to control. I began to talk about how the soldiers who returned were treated when they came back. No matter what you thought of the war, they did not deserve that. The students agreed. Several said they had lost a cousin or an uncle in the war. I asked what the community did for them when they returned. One student told us that they didn't even publish his cousin's death in the paper. The other students wanted to know why he wasn't recognized. The discussion went on over several days. The end result was that we decided to find out how many students who went to Watsonville High School died in Vietnam. We began the search and it became evident that there was a large group from the community that wanted to help. The whole concept was tearing me up inside, but the students wanted to do this and I would help. The only rule I laid down was that whatever we did was to be about the soldiers and not about rightness or wrongness of the war.

Slowly we began to put together the information and, while doing it, decided that we had to recognize these soldiers forever with a plaque on campus. By January of 1987 we had identified all the students who went to Watsonville High School and died in Vietnam. There were 16 of them. When we announced that we were going to place a plaque on the school for these students, we were overwhelmed with requests to attend and to help. We had to move the ceremony to our football stadium.

Part of our research was to find out as much as we could about the students who died in Vietnam and how they died. The Army actually helped us get some of that information. At times we found out things that we knew we could not tell the public. One of the soldiers—we found out—was captured and tortured to death. His body was eventually found. The report of his injuries was in the report that was made when his body was found. There was no need to make his family suffer through this. Another soldier had received a letter from his wife saying that she was taking away the daughter he had never seen and moving in with another man. She would be sending him the divorce papers. He was very distraught and distracted. While on a mission that afternoon he stepped on a mine

and blew both his legs off. He died that afternoon. We could not use that story either. Many times the parents brought in information that we could use. By this time we had found all the parents but one and that parent had died a couple of years earlier. We had selected 16 speakers who would read a short account of the soldier's life and death. Each speaker met with the family of their soldier. I was present at these meetings. These were poignant meetings and left me drained after each one. Sometimes our fellow teachers would help. During one lunch period I had a fellow teacher come in and listen to the students as they read their story. The teacher was a World War II veteran and a pilot whose sole claim to fame was flying under the Golden Gate Bridge during the war. He sat there and listened and suddenly got up and left, tears flowing down his cheeks. I knew then that we were on the right track. For one day these soldiers would get the respect they deserved.

There was one extremely difficult day when a mother of one of the soldiers brought in some documents on her son that she had received from the Army after his death. I took them and promised to get them back to her. She said she was not sure that she wanted them back. She never had the strength to look at them. She wanted me to look at them and, if there was anything that she should have, I could give it back to her after the ceremony. As she was talking, I saw that the manila envelope was from the morgue in Vietnam. I told her I would do what she asked. After she left I sat there holding the envelope and wondering if even I had the strength to open it. The point was to have the truth told, so we would have to open it. I had the speaker for this soldier and our student MC meet with me after school. We sat alone in my office as I explained what the mother had given me. We opened the envelope together and I poured the documents on my desk. We all froze at the same time. A small white envelope tumbled out. All it said on it was "bullet." I opened it and out slid a bullet with the dark stains of blood still on it. It was the bullet that killed him. I didn't want to touch it so I used a pencil to shove it back into the envelope. The students were still frozen. There was also a small wire-bound notebook that also had slipped out of the envelope. I opened it and found it was a diary that the soldier was writing. He was talking about how he felt as he was going into the battle that killed him, and what his dreams were. The notebook

*John G. Burdick*

had dark stains on it too. The students read it and decided to use some of it in the speech they were going to give on him. All of us were moved by what we had seen. The students left knowing they could tell no one about the bullet. What mother wants the bullet that killed her son? We would give the notebook back to her, though. The bullet we would give to our local historical society along with all the other records we had uncovered. As I went home that night, I couldn't help think about the bullet that I carried around for a year to mark my mistakes. The bullet in the envelope held a much darker moment than mine. My own feelings were a mess. It was always difficult to hold my emotions in check. Somehow I did.

In April of 1987 we had our ceremony. There were over 5,000 people there. Our football stadium was full. We had bands, flags, color guards, and politicians. Every mother and father of each soldier was there except for one. Many had many Uncles, Aunts, brothers, and sisters there too. When the students read their short biographies tears fell from almost every eye. At the end, we fired cannons that could be heard for miles around and then a lone Marine sounded taps and I think every girl from the high school cried and there were tears in the eyes if the rest of us. The ceremony made it on TV news across the state and on every major newspaper. After the crowds had left there was one more thing we had to do— and we did it as a class. The heavy granite rock on which were engraved the names of the 16 students was placed on its base in the school quad. Only the students and the local American Legion Honor Guard were there to see this. When it was in place the Honor Guard actually fired a volley out of respect for the soldiers and again sounded taps. The event was over but none of us wanted to leave. I was very proud of my students. They had done a noble thing. For the first time since I left Vietnam, I felt that I had done a good thing and honored some great soldiers. Today I was finally satisfied. It had taken twenty years for me to finally do something that honored all of us who fought in Vietnam.

# Epilogue

**My personal life had not gotten** any better. Within three years after the Vietnam Memorial ceremony I had left my wife. There was no repairing what we had been through and lost. My oldest son went on to college and my younger son, who was then a junior in high school, moved in with me. It was a difficult time but we survived. I continued to teach and work with students. We did many more activities but none as emotional and moving as our Vietnam Memorial Ceremony. It brought me back to life. The problem I had with hospitals is gone and the dreams have never returned. Like many veterans who fought in any war, the sorrow I feel for those who died sometimes overcomes me and brings tears to my eyes. It is a pain that only those who get it can understand. I have seen soldiers from World War II talk about their time in Europe or the Pacific suddenly choke up and find tears starting to flow for what seems no reason and become unable to speak. I know that feeling. It does pass. We truly know the pain of war and the cost that few—who have not been there—can ever know.

These are the students from Watsonville High that died for their country and whose memory we honored that finally helped me begin to heal the pain that was in my heart.

**Federico Alaniz Jr.**

SP4, US Army, Rifleman

Earned: Bronze Star and Good Conduct Medal

He was 21 years old when he died for his country

**Gary Ralph Carpenter**

PFC, US Marine Corps, Rifleman

He was 19 years old when he died for his country

**Raymond Rodriguez Delgado**

LCPL, US Marines, Rifleman

He was 19 years old when he died for his country

**Lawrence Rubin Dodd**

SP4, US Army, Rifleman

Drafted on his honeymoon

He was 21 years old when he died for his country

**Eddie Dean Gant**

LCPL, US Marines, Rifleman

He was 19 years old when he died for his country

**William Herbert Haakinson**

SGT, US Army

He was 25 years old when he died for his country

**Stephen Wayne Herring**

PFC, US Army, Door Gunner

Earned: Air Medal with 24 clusters

He was 20 years old when he died for his country

**Rocky Yukio Hirakawa**

SGT, US Army

Earned: Army commendation Medal and two Bronze Star Medals

He was 20 years old when he died for his country

**John Deogracias Delgado**

SSG, US Army

Earned: Bronze Star, Silver Star

He was 22 years old when he died for his country

**Louis Charles Miller**

PVT, US Army, Airborne

He was 18 years old when he died for his country

**Hildefonso M. Ramirez**

CPL, US Army

Earned: Bronze Star, Bronze Star for Heroism, Silver Star

He was 26 years old when he died for his country

**Bernard Kealoha Ramos**

PVT, US Army, Rifleman

He was 20 years old when he died for his country

**Benito “Bobo” Rodriguez**

SGT, US Army

Earned: Bronze Star, Good Conduct Medal

He was 20 years old when he died for his country

**Frank James Rose Jr.**

SP4, US Army, Combat Engineer

Earned: Army Commendation Medal

He was 26 years old when he died for his country

**Leonard Eugene Sommers**

PFC, US Army

Earned: Good Conduct Medal, Bronze Star

He was 20 years old when he died for his country

**Leonard Ray White**

CPL, US Army, Airborne

Earned: Bronze Star

He was 21 years old when he died for his country

These men—many of whom died trying to save their buddies—hold a special place in my heart because they helped me finally end my tour of duty 20 years after I left Vietnam. When I was there I tried to save the lives of men like these. When the bodies of these men came home there were no parades, and no public support for the families who lost a son or brother. Some of these men did not even have their obituary run in the local paper. The community did not want to know about them and wanted to forget. My students were able to remind everyone that these were good men, some of them true heroes, and that they should not be forgotten. Watsonville is a special community that knew what had happened to these soldiers

and wanted to right a wrong. They did a marvelous job. My healing began at the end of that ceremony. It still goes on and will probably never end. Every soldier who fights in a war carries it with him forever and we should never forget that.

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