

LAWLESS IN VIETNAM

***A PERSONAL ACCOUNTING OF
MY WAR***

by Tony Lawless

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To contact author, email: lawlessinvietnam@yahoo.com
or: lawlessinvietnam@hotmail.com

Or write to: PO Box 372 Circleville, Ohio 43113-1651

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Because I knew she would listen,

I wrote these letters.

Because she saved these letters,

this book was possible, and

Because she too served,

this is for Elaine

INTRODUCTION

I have come to realize that it is impossible to be totally objective about a personal history. But I've tried anyway, up to a point. My effort in this book is to do justice to the truth, but facts always come with feelings, so I include how I felt about events back then and, on occasion, how 30 years' perspective has affected those feelings. Everyone has an opinion about Vietnam, and I'm no different. How could anyone live through this and not be affected by it? So this is a mosaic, reflections from a fractured mirror, memories recovered after years of being locked away, arranged according to how they occurred, or how they occurred to me. It is a record of who I was, what I saw, when, where and why I did what I did, and to whom it was done.

This should not be the first book one reads about Vietnam, and I hope it will not be the last. Americans saw the war through many different eyes, each with their own point of view, and each pair of eyes was affected both before and after with different goals, attitudes, and expectations, making the truth even more elusive and contradictory. Because it was such a long war that encompassed so much technological, sociological and political change, each Veteran's experience varied greatly, depending on the era in which they served, where they served in-country, and with which Branch of the Armed Services they rendered service. From my perspective in the gunwell of a Huey helicopter, flying far and wide from Pleiku to the DMZ, I can attest to the fact that even the country itself varied greatly according to where you looked.

So my story can be neither definitive nor comprehensive. It can only ever be one story among many that comprise the full history of America in Vietnam. It may not be too typical, but it cannot be that unique either, for there are few solitary experiences or unshared emotions in a war.

While we were all individuals, few of our experiences were ours alone.

All entries in this book were either experiences of my own or were told to me by the people who had the experiences. I relied almost exclusively on four sources for its construction: my own recollections, letters I wrote while I was in-country, my photos, and a few official Army documents. I tried to see all four elements objectively, as the Army didn't always get it right, the right photos are hardly ever taken, my letters home were suspect because of self-censorship, and emotional content, and my memory isn't always reliable since, as documented here, I was seldom completely sober - even on those days when I got high only on flying.

I wasn't sure whether or not to contact people and conduct even the most superficial of interviews, to see if my memories were in accord with those I served with or knew me at the time. This would have been possible, but I put off making the decision until after I had written a first draft, which I knew would have to be a raw, indiscriminate, and scattershot upheaval of painful and disjointed recollections. And there was no guarantee I would even be able to finish.

Almost as important is how very easy it would have been to blend-in, corrupt or distort my specific memories with those of others. I decided that in spite of my diminished capacity of recall, this must be about one person as much as I can make it. I can put myself through this, but I forbade myself from asking someone else to do the same thing, even something as seemingly harmless as chatting about the good times we shared, because it can be hard for all of us to deal with these memories. I learned in the process of setting my own story down on paper that the pain caused by Vietnam is a corrosion inside of us, that many of us have had to either harden ourselves to or succumb control of our lives to, in one way or another. I couldn't promise them any payoff that would be worth their years of filing, processing, and then keeping these memories where they were safely contained all this time. Once taken away, a person's anonymity, reputation, hiding place, their innocence, (even that of grown people) cannot be returned to them in the same shape it was before. I believe that no one should be forced into the spotlight,

everyone deserves to stay in whatever sanctuary they've managed to construct for themselves.

I extended this same 'clemency' to most close friends and in many cases, family as well. For this reason, I edited these letters to Elaine, excising personal information that I felt made no real contribution; this is a memoir, not an exposé or tell-all. The word personal by definition means that it belongs to the person - not the public. I am responsible only for my story, and feel they should be allowed (and encouraged) to offer up their own stories in their own way, in their own time. They did not sign up for all this, I reminded myself, I did.

Nothing here is meant to refute, impugn, contradict, defame, dismiss or discredit anyone else's story. Those I served side by side with saw things differently. Men who served in my same platoon even six months before my arrival in the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company may not recognize some of what I describe, just as those who came along six months after I left also had different experiences. That is how quickly things changed over there.

I seek no absolution. I wish only for my insight to incite, my words to prod or engage, and maybe light a pathway which others might follow in telling their own stories, so that our history is written by those of us who lived it. Otherwise, it will be reduced to cultural cliché and political simplicities by people who come along after the fact and write about it as they wish it had occurred, according to how they felt about it. Even someone who calls me a liar is better than someone who doesn't call at all.

Oh, how I wish I had written this when I was younger, when the fire burned hotter, and the vision and memory were clearer. But the memories that stayed with me all these years did so for a reason, and the ones that stay hidden are best left to their resting place. One thing that held me back from starting was a feeling that my experiences didn't seem exciting, unique or universal enough. I always assumed that someone with better memories and powers of reporting would write the definitive account of the Doorgunner experi-

ence in Vietnam. But I eventually realized that certain of my experiences may have value, as all who saw have something to add to any history.

If the prose seems a bit ripe, it is because it has been hanging on the vine for so long, and because what's being discussed is sometimes so rotten that there's no other way to relate it. Whatever compels me to do this also compels me to do it this way. There is profanity here because no accounting can be accurate without it; war itself is profanity, a curse mankind swears upon his fellow man, the ultimate expression of misanthropy. So no apology for language, as it is the only weapon in my arsenal. There is also frank talk about drugs here, as no honest record of my time in Vietnam would be complete without it.

The insults against the Vietnamese people (and other groups) had to be included, even though I feel no animosity, hostility or superiority to them. My use of insulting language and attitudes is a reflection of how I felt I was 'permitted' to feel towards the Vietnamese people at that time. I do not consider myself a bigot, but cannot have my own failings ignored or excused. It is yet another aspect of my character, that must be taken into account.

There are some very personal reasons for writing this memoir. I have said little about Vietnam since my return and have always wanted to inform my friends and family about the facts so that they might gain some understanding about me and my involvement. Those who've loved me have respected my silence, and it is important to me that their respect be returned. Thus, to describe accurately, define lucidly, recall with as much vividness as possible, and to honor those who deserve it, both in and out of the service, is a debt I owe, and I try within these pages to express at least some measure of my enormous gratitude to them.

The time for silence, bragging, embellishment, self-aggrandizement and posturing is over, and only the truth, as close as I can come to it, belongs here.

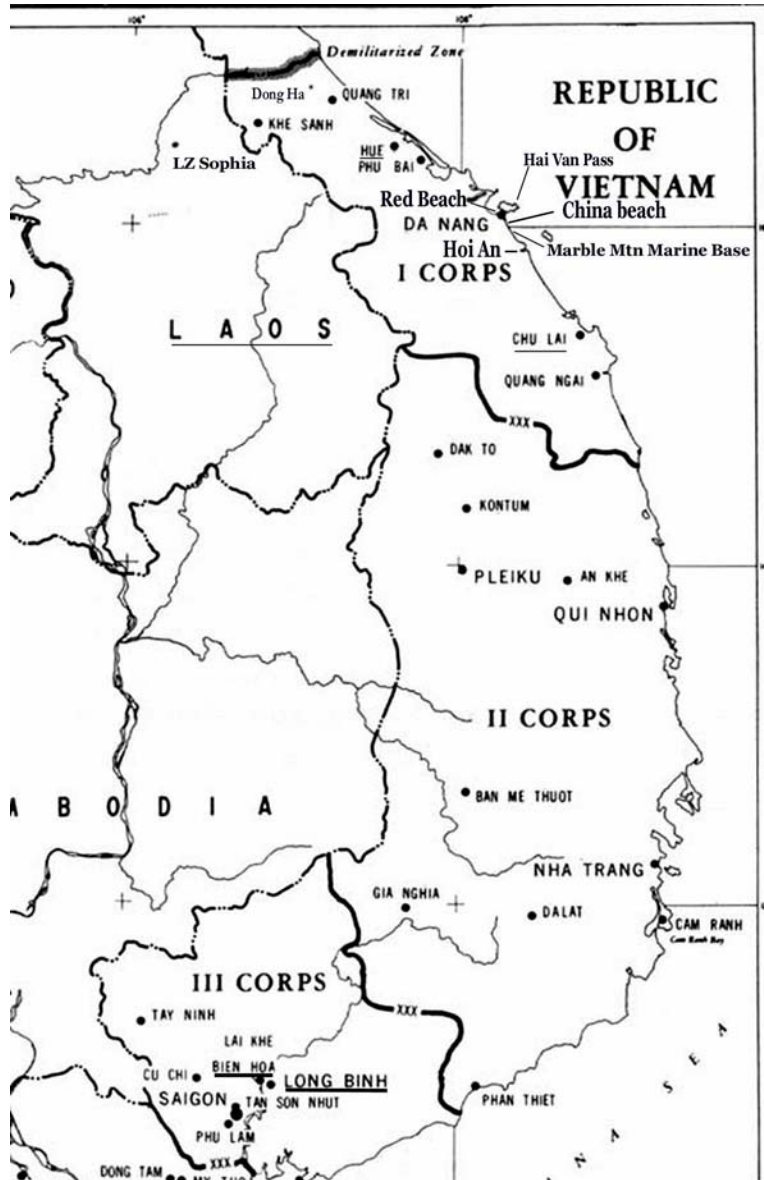
It is also for those who cannot speak for themselves, both living and dead, that I offer this report.

There is no moral to this story, it is simply a recollection of America's unhealed wound by an unwounded heel. I have no recommendations for future generations to follow to avoid their fate. I cannot warn people away from trouble, nor save them from their own misfortune. All that I learned in Vietnam, and in my life since, can be summed up in the following verse:

CANARIES DIE FIRST

THE BRAVE GO IN WAVES

CLEVER LASTS FOREVER



CHAPTER 1 - THE BUZZ ON RED BEACH

“SERVING IN VIETNAM WAS LIKE TAKING A SHIT, THE JOB AIN'T OVER TILL THE PAPER WORK IS DONE”

If I decide to answer the question, I usually just say I was a Doorgunner. But I was really a Crew Chief.

During flight, I sat in the left gun well, or ‘back seat’ of the Army’s UH1-H *Huey* helicopter, manning the M-60 machine gun, alerting the Pilots to anything out of their range of sight, and controlling the payload, whether it was ammunition for re-supplies, VIPs, POWs, reconnaissance spotters, mail, or infantrymen. But, unlike a Doorgunner, who sat on the right side of the ship, I was trained to maintain the helicopter - raise the hood, check the oil, clean the windshield, and assure the Pilots, who would be assigned different helicopters on any given day, that mine was not ‘Red-Xed’ and was ready to go flying. And I always wanted to go flying, so I took that part of my job very seriously. That’s why I was sitting in the left seat, and had such a great view, the day we put the ‘buzz’ on Red Beach.

If our mission took us north from our home at Marble Mountain Marine Base, there were a couple of ways to fly around Da Nang, all of them boring. The area had Air Force, Navy, Army and Marine air traffic and was strictly regulated. We had to fly at regulation altitude, away from other airfields and population areas, and keep the radio tuned to air traffic control (instead of to the music from *Armed Forces VietNam* radio, which is what most of us wanted to listen to while flying).

It was a striking contrast, taking off from our ugly military base spread out on the sand at the edge of the South China Sea - on our right we could see far off into the ocean, beyond which was Hawaii, and beyond that the mainland of America, a place we called The World. But from the left side, we could see to the west and the beautiful, cloud-shrouded mountains that led to the rest of the exotic Orient,

another world entirely. And in between was Da Nang, Vietnam's second largest city. It was off-limits to us Army enlisted men, meaning that we were not allowed to go there, day or night, for any reason, so it remained a mystery to us. On one edge of the city was a beach that we called Red Beach. And if we were flying north, at a certain time of the morning, what we saw the Vietnamese doing on that beach shocked and disgusted us. They were using the beach as a toilet. Walk out to the water line, drop, squat, do their business, pull up their pants and go - no wiping it seemed, and no shame whatsoever.

It might have bothered me less than some because I had grown up in a small town and had clear memories of my childhood home having an 'outhouse' and no indoor plumbing. Behind the times, even for rural Central Ohio in the mid 1950's. I have vivid memories of the wooden 'two-holer' and how much you appreciated the seat which kept your butt from freezing or getting splinters; of the stinging smell, a child's fascination with 'what's down there', and the fear that I might fall in; messy, chipped porcelain-on-steel-chamber pots inside the house that someone had to carry outside to be dumped - a job they probably didn't let me do, since a little kid couldn't be trusted not to spill the thing and what a mess that would be.

So a small part of me that got left back in Commercial Point, Ohio, understood. But that didn't stop me from enjoying what came next on that morning in Da Nang. On this particular day, a decision was made, among the four of us in that helicopter, to express our outrage to these 'gooks', who didn't even have enough sanitation sense to bury or burn their shit like we did.

(A nasty job, burning shit, which involved pulling the drum containing the crap back and away from the latrine, adding jet fuel (JP4) and standing guard, up-wind, while it burned, turning it from liquid/solid to steam and ash. Then reverse and repeat the process. 'Field sanitation' the Army called it. The 'shit detail' to the rest of us.)

Back to those 'squatters' on Red Beach. This is who

we're fighting for and they won't even bother to adopt one of America's greatest and most basic gifts to the world - the American Standard toilet and all the goodies that go with it. It's one thing to start from behind, we thought, but these people just seemed to refuse to 'get with the program'. How can they ever become Americans, or even our friends, if we can't get them to build and use a simple thing like a bathroom?

So, after flying over this scene on this morning, the Pilot descends from regulation altitude to low-level, flies parallel to the shore, and aims the chopper right at the people on the beach. There came a point where the Pilot could pull up and resume regulation altitude, just the threat was fun enough, usually. Not on this morning. Perhaps responding to a dare, trying to win a bet, out to prove something to someone or showing off to the rest of the crew - or perhaps it was a snapping point, the wrong thing for the wrong guy to see on the wrong day, whatever. On this morning, the chopper does not pull up but goes faster and goes lower. So low that our propwash kicks up a spray off the water and it seems like the chopper's skids will scrape the sand. And so fast that the people on the beach are caught off-guard and get knocked backwards into their own mess. What fun to watch, as dozens of men, women and children flatten themselves in their own crap, scared to death that this crazy helicopter is going to plow into them.

I had never been much of a prankster or delinquent, so I never realized such a mean malicious thing could be so fun. I laughed insanely, partly at the Pilot's damn-the-regulations-let's-have-some-fun attitude and partly because, at the moment it happened, I was on the left side and saw the whole thing as one of the funniest bits of real-life slapstick I'd ever seen. It lasted only a few seconds, as the Pilot pulled up and away quickly, so we wouldn't get caught and written up for violating regulations. No matter what happened to the people on the ground, we would be able to explain it away with a story about a sudden loss of engine power or some other malfunction that required flying that low and fast to

regain safe airspeed. No one on board said much about it once we stopped laughing, and I don't think I ever bragged about it, lest our guilt become public knowledge. I remember looking back down at the scene as we flew away, and it seemed that the majority of the people we had just buzzed were not as angry as they were resigned, numb even. "We weren't the first ones to do this", I thought to myself. Years later, I realized that one of the recurring nightmares I always had of Vietnam was of an old man, shaking his fist in wordless anger at our disappearing helicopter, and that it was our fun prank that caused him to haunt me all this time. Took the fun right out of the memory.

And like so many memories do, it bothered me more and more as time passed, and begged a question to which I never found a good answer: how did they turn a 'good' boy like me - a boy who gave patriotic speeches in Junior High, and who hardly ever got into fights or caused trouble for anyone - into a malicious delinquent, and willing killer, who eventually lost faith not only in himself but in his most cherished beliefs as well?

Why I went to Vietnam isn't hard to say, it is a collection of reasons, excuses, hopes, rationalizations and justifications. But the question of how I was transformed remained elusive. This book began as a search for answers, some of which stubbornly elude me. I know for sure how it all started - with the roar of race cars and the screaming of jets, and a little red wagon they called a Radio Flyer...

CHAPTER 2 - RAISED RIGHT AND TRUE BY THE RED, WHITE AND BLUE

Including baby pictures in a war memoir can be risky; they either make you look silly, or they make no point at all. It wasn't until after my Mother died that I saw these pictures of my first birthday, and not until I was assembling this book did I realize it was a



series of pictures that told a story. So that's why I include them here, to remind me that things started well for me and, as the last picture shows, at that time at least, I was free to be filled with glee.

My Grandma Blanche worked a farm back in a 'hol-ler' near Gallipolis, Ohio, struggling to feed and clothe thirteen children, while her husband was away most of the time, working the riverboats along the Ohio River. By the time I knew her, she was old, living alone with a big dog in a house perched on a hill overlooking the river. Her house smelled from meals cooked from 'scratch', she used lye soap she made herself, canned fruit preserves kept in her pantry, and made me a patch-work quilt from scraps, with the name 'Tony' hand-stitched in one corner. She once took me to the little church up the road, where her voice joined in on old hymns like "The Old Rugged Cross", and I got my first taste of the surge that a melody sung in harmony created inside of your body.

My Mother made fun of her Mother's old fashioned ways, trying to put distance between the country girl she was and the city girl she so desperately wanted to be. Tobacco was their flash point, as Grandma forbade its use. Grandma once remarked sadly that her children's houses all contained more ash trays than Bibles. But it was a freedom thing for my Mother; all those years being told what to do made her

more determined to smoke, just because she could. And I made it worse, nagging her all the time about the smell and the expense. Family legend has it that during the Depression, when they could barely make ends meet, Grandma Blanche refused to raise tobacco on her farm, even though it was an easy crop to grow and cash in on.

It was a moral thing to her. No political or scientific reasons, just her own interpretation of the Bible. And, I think (or wish, maybe) that my Mother told me the story out of



pride that someone in our family once took a stand out of belief or faith or whatever it was. Of course it didn't help me resist and I also used cigarettes as an instrument of rebellion; two packs a day for twenty-five years. My Mother died of lung cancer before she reached the age of sixty - I quit smoking soon after. Grandma Blanche took her first jet plane ride when she was in her eighties, flying out to Seattle to see a daughter. She traveled, visiting her children, lucid and active, well into her nineties.

My other Grandmother, Polly, listened every morning to a radio program out of Columbus, the theme song I still associate with her - Tommy Dorsey's *Song of India*. She loved that music, and only years later did I come to appreciate those Big Bands that were the sound track of her swinging years. During the time between my parents' separation and divorce, I lived with Grandma Polly, and it was the happiest period of my life.

She was the only person I remember who was ever concerned that we were not being taught things in school that she thought we needed to know. Even the way they taught us handwriting didn't seem right. She never scolded me for being a boy, she just let me know with kind words, and big hugs, that I was loved and that it was ok to love in return. And she must have had nerves of steel and the patience of a saint to put up with that loud-mouthed bully of a husband that was my Grandpa O.H. They say she once went upside

his drunken head with a frying pan. Now there's courage for you. Bet that sobered him up quick.

She would remind us kids that she too used to like to have a good time with them, and drank her share of beer. But after she got diabetes, it all changed for her. There were always two pitchers of iced tea in her refrigerator, one marked with sugar and one without. She never demanded our sympathy, she demanded only that we know the warning signs of diabetes. It probably saved my brother Mark's life, knowing what she had taught us in her gentle but knowing way. She always shared her wisdom as if it was our right to know. She kept the family history and made me feel like I was the most important part of it. She amazed me when she quit smoking cigarettes late in life. When I asked her how she did such a difficult thing, she admitted it wasn't easy, but she didn't boast or scold me for my habit. She claimed no special strength or power. In fact, she never laid claim to anything - except my heart.



I wish I could stop right here and say that this is why I went to Vietnam. I wish I could say I went away to defend this, that this was what I was willing to die for. But it just wouldn't be true. It's not really the good things about your life that send you away to train as a killer, or fight for a vague principal in a far off land. This was the good part of life that shaped the good part of me. The bad part all came later. When I consumed the work of Ray Bradbury and Ray would wax nostalgic about a place called Ohio where the rocket men had come from, it wasn't a place on the map I thought of, nor the machinery that lifted us up and took us away. It was those two Ohio kitchens and the angels who lived in them, and who hummed their songs of life in their own sweet way - Polly and Blanche - the two saints in my religion. If I have a heart, if I've been good in my life, it was they who allowed me to be that way.

It may be mothers who send us off to war, but it's Grandmothers we go a-fighting for.

CHAPTER 3 - INTO THE VALLEY WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

Flying around Vietnam took us to far-flung places over inscrutable jungles of broccoli-topped trees where one could imagine all sorts of dangers hiding from our suspicious eyes. One place in particular had a nostalgic familiarity, but I wasn't quite sure why at the time. Why we were there, I don't recall, but I remember that house - I could never forget



it. Somewhere east of Da Nang, perched on the side of a mountain in a lush forest, lit by golden only-in-the-morning sunlight, was a well-tended, thatched-roof house, constructed in an ancient style using age-old techniques, that must have been home to mountain folk of some means. A thin trail of lazy smoke rose from a cooking stove inside. No signs of life, as maybe they recoiled from the sound of our helicopter blades smacking the crisp air, or maybe they were fishing for the day's meal in the little stream that ran through the valley below.

I carried this image for years, never really knowing why - I just thought it was a pleasant picture from a time and place that had few positive images worth storing. Then, after writing this about my two Grandma's, the image of that place returned - it was probably the home of someone's grandma. Someone dreamed about this place and about the food you could smell cooking, the calm that would wash over you as you approached it, and the smile you knew was waiting there to greet you at the door. And the sound, which is the same in any language, of someone saying "Welcome Home", and meaning it. Maybe this was what they were fighting for; maybe this was someone's dream of what Vietnam once was and could still be - a home, built by hand from

materials grown on the land. Land that someone called home. A place worth fighting for, a place worth dying for. I didn't understand then. But I'm beginning to understand.

CHAPTER 4 - GO FAST, THEN GO FASTER

These pictures tell a story of a boy and his toys. I went from the Radio Flyer to a tricycle, then this tractor. Later there would be electric trains, bicycles and, later still, a go-kart, the best Christmas present a nine-year-old boy could ever get.



My Grandfather O. H. built the garage behind our house and a platform in front of the house (that's where I'm riding my tractor). The platform was like the town square of olden days. When the carnival came to town, all the rides and games would be crowded around that platform. They'd pull a farm wagon to one end of it, cover it and that would be a stage where a fiddle band would play while everyone who could would square dance. They say that's where my Mother and Father fell in love; he could really 'cut a rug'. Our front yard was the meeting point for family and friends, us kids always begging every adult around for money to ride the ferris wheel, play games and buy cotton candy or candy apples.

A small town where front porches were important escapes from houses hot from summer swelter, and were stages on which family dramas got played out, as well as a fair bit of comedy, too, if a wayward wasp entered the airspace and everyone tried to give it its due, bobbing and weaving while trying not to swat it. A kid's first taste of juicy gossip, as the adults remarked on the goings-on of the neighbors and the not-so-neighborly.

Milk delivered in glass bottles with cardboard stoppers; Penny candy at Jimmy Sprouse's store. And in winter-time, there would be a big shiny Christmas tree in the center of town, and some guy dressed as Santa Claus who'd pass out presents to all the kids. An American dream that I can still smell when I pass a garage, enter an attic, or catch the aroma of lilacs or burning maple leaves. I never carried a key

or had to knock on any door. Ran, played, rode my bike, built tree houses and backyard forts. But small town charms and Grandmas' gentle words are no match for the excitement a little boy feels when he hears those screaming engines..

Because in the beginning, it was the scream of race car engines that thrilled me the most, my first taste of excitement. Didn't have to go far to find heroes. My own American Dreams were formed by my Grandfather O H, my Uncle Dick and my Father, Harold, or Slim, as he was called by his friends. Grandpa O.H. began his career by raising a sow and selling her six pigs, using the profits to go to Mechanics School. Six pigs to start an empire. Clever man.

During the week, they'd work on farm machinery in the garage. Huge complex beasts that dug into the earth, planted beans, baled hay and harvested corn, which they would lay open like gutted dragons, greasy parts mixing with weeds from the field, like undigested bits from the monster's last meal. They'd wrench and pound, torch and grind. And curse the busted knuckle. And when Grandpa finally got one under control, he'd whistle. Not a specific tune, just that thing a man will do when he's got the hard thinking done, the mystery solved and there's nothing left to do but put the parts back together. That's when us kids knew (and adults too) that it was safe to go around him. "Sweep the floor for a soda pop, Grandpa?" Little bottles of cold Coca-Cola our big reward. Mom hated me coming home all dirty, but I was in heaven.

Grew up hearing stories about how, when they were on the road, my Dad would sometimes sleep in the race car to guard it against rivals who couldn't beat it on the track and would try to sabotage it while it sat on the trailer. The goal was always the same: Go Fast. Then Go Faster.

To me, that old race car was the most beautiful thing around - and what a sound! The source of all my early childhood pride. I don't recall seeing it race that much, but I sure remember the trophies - Grandpa had a case for them in his garage - and I never passed without a look, and a promise to myself, that someday...

I wasn't really taught the trade, though, they wanted me to be a somebody, since I was so smart. But I just wanted to go racing. I begged to the point of distraction to go with the men. The only crowds I remember being a part of, that weren't right in front of our house, were at a racetrack. The first music I ever heard was the race car engines they built in Grandpa's garage. As soon as I talked, I was cheering for our car, our driver. The driver of that car was the first guy I ever wanted to be; he seemed so big and so cool (long before anyone used that word to describe that look). He drove hard and fast, always pushing toward the front, and if he couldn't pass 'em on the inside, he'd work on the outside and pass 'em that-a-way. He'd bring home a trophy or a wreck. And one day, it came home all smashed up and that was the end. Until uncle Dick started building his own racecars in the sixties, re-igniting the fire inside of me.

But biology dictates an end to childhood, and progress demands changes from small, close-knit family towns in post-war empires. My childhood ended in a divorce and I lost 'custody' of my place and my people. A for-sale sign went up in front of our house, and the next thing I knew, my Mother had moved my brothers and I into a small cramped apartment in a low-income housing development on the west side of Columbus. I was still in the family but not with it, and to that idyllic little place called home, otherwise known as Commercial Point, I would forever forward be just a visitor. I had to learn to fear strangers, and although the many new places we moved to would widen my world and set me on the course that led to this writing, I found out early that the damage done to children, regardless of how it's inflicted or by whom, is permanent and mostly irreversible. Nurturing can redirect a bad nature, but a good nature can take years to recover from nurturing that lacks attention, or longs too much for something it feels it has been denied.

CHAPTER 5 - DESTINY DETOURS, OR DOES IT?

However deep and wide this emotional fault line was in my development, it undeniably led to two influences that may have been as important as any in my life; two more very important women - both school teachers.

First, when a divorced parent remarries, a kid becomes part of yet another family, and I was lucky that the mother of my stepfather liked me. I never figured out why, maybe she liked my inquisitiveness, or took pity on me, figuring I deserved more, of what I don't know.

I do know that Annie (that's all I ever called her) challenged me to learn more; she tried to improve my French



(an impossible job), corrected my English (which, despite being annoying sometimes, helped me learn), gave me my first exposure to amateur photography, and instituted a reward program, giving me a nickel for each new word I learned and could define from the dictionary. I have command of my language today because of that, and am also not the least bit hesitant to use a dictionary, or the words in them, as weapons or instruments of defense.

While Grandmas Polly and Blanche were heart and soul, Granny Annie was a kick start to my brain. While Polly and Blanche got misty eyed and swelled with pride when I recited my Optimist Club speech in Junior High, ('Optimism - Formula for Freedom'), it was Annie who guided me through the writing process, constantly sending me back to rewrite, condense, clarify; "Is this what you're trying to say?" she asked repeatedly.

Her dictionary reward program gave me a vocabulary, and her guidance taught me to articulate, edit and polish. Before leaving for Vietnam, Annie suggested I keep a diary of my days - advice I ignored, not understanding the need to someday recall the details and specifics of something

I never expected to survive or have any need to retell. Something I could really use right now as I struggle to peel away layers of forgetfulness and hazy recollections. As I now commit these words to paper, it is she who is at my shoulder, even though she's been gone from this life for years, and it is she alone who I turn to and say, "Is this alright?" And she still never fails to say honestly if it's right or if it needs more work. Never wrong, just needing more work. Wish I had said it: Grandparents get along with Grandchildren so well, because they have an enemy in common.

The other woman was a music teacher I had in fifth and sixth grade at James Lane Allen Elementary school, Lexington, Kentucky. Mrs. Yates was young and had soft red hair and no resemblance to any other kind of school teacher I'd ever had. With nothing more than a record player, an upright piano and an Autoharp, (still one of the oddest instruments I've ever seen used as accompaniment) Mrs. Yates transformed a bunch of ordinary kids into the most extraordinary choir ever created. She devised a Christmas music program that still ranks today as the most amazing artistic accomplishment I've ever witnessed first hand. She had us singing songs from around the world, in different languages, Latin and Spanish, and not just Silent Night and the usual hits. How she did this I don't recall exactly. I do remember that it wasn't easy and us kids didn't take to it without resistance. Music had never been so difficult, but never so rewarding either, once we caught up with her. That performance was one of those things in life that turn out so special, that the feeling lasts forever. What I would give for a recording (or film! How valuable video recording is cannot be fully calculated!) of that concert.

But if that was all that Mrs. Yates did, she would not warrant mention here. It was what she did in that classroom, on any ordinary day, that stays with me. She put the music in me. That music that I hear everyday of my life, which makes hearing my favorite of the five senses; that music that's been my hobby, my pastime, my passion, and more than once, my savior. I'd heard it before, but never in such an immediate,

accessible way. Music appreciation classes in those days were dull affairs with the teachers trying to force you to value the music for its own sake, rather than letting you feel it in your gut. She taught us every song from every Broadway show that was out at the time, *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *Showboat*, and my favorite of all time, that classic of Americana, *The Music Man*. I knew the songs long before I saw the shows or movies.

Mrs. Yates didn't actually teach us music, so much as she shared it with us, in that way that unlocks something that was already inside of us. Whether it was her design or just the only method that occurred to her, I don't know; I never got to talk to her as an adult. But I've never stopped thanking her. Her music led me to other music - Broadway to rock, classical, folk, jazz, blues, bluegrass, and music led to the other arts, painting, sculpture, architecture and an appreciation for elegance in the design of everything. And ultimately to a love of the most beautiful thing in nature - nature itself, its animals, vegetables, minerals, and yes, its people as well. All started by delicate fingers boldly banging on black and white keys or strumming lightly on the taut strings of an autoharp, respecting always those spaces in between the notes, and the time it takes for each one to say what it came to say before the next one chimes in to continue the melody.

Teachers seldom get to know where or when or if their lessons bear fruit, so here's an apple, Mrs. Yates, long overdue. Thank you, wherever you are. And thanks to every other Mrs. Yates, too, for planting that seed that nourishes our souls.

CHAPTER 6 - COLOR-BLIND INDUCTION

I was not destined to join the Army. In fact there were a few warnings early on that I should have heeded but didn't. One was having a stepfather who had served in Germany in the early fifties, and who would sometimes wake my brothers and I up by blowing reveille on an old bugle. John loved filling our heads with Army stuff, and the attendant joys of discipline and physical fitness. Drove me crazy, but at least he wasn't an asshole, just a pain in one.

The other early warning came on a field trip to Ft. Knox, Kentucky in the sixth grade. We were shown around the Army Base that guards America's gold supply by a Sergeant who picked on me, the class clown, all day. Using me as his self-defense 'volunteer', he threw me over his shoulder onto the ground in a not-so-painful but oh so humiliating Judo demonstration, which delighted the man and the class - very much to my expense. Over the next few days, I used up some of my best material getting back my title of King of Fun, after playing jester to that guy. There's a vow I should have kept - swearing that day to stay clear of the Army, it's still a sore spot that my older self dismissed what the child inside tried to warn me about.



The kid knows, but the adult 'reasons'. That wasn't reason, that was treason against the self. Rationalization should be strictly rationed. I figured at the time that I was 18 and grown up, and therefore able to handle something now, that had scared and intimidated my poor inner child just five years earlier. Joke was on me.

Sometime in the late summer of 1969, I stormed out of the house after an argument with my Stepmother, yelling

back at her from my car door, “I can’t wait till I leave”. To which she replied, “I can’t either”. Don’t know what the fight was about, but I know neither of us meant it. To her credit, Jean had done what she could to let me know that I didn’t really have to go to Vietnam.

Before graduating high school back in June, I had gone to the local recruiting office at Ft. Hayes, to meet an old friend of hers Captain John, who helped me through the process of physical and mental testing, with the hope of joining the Air Force. But my near-sighted vision kept me from piloting anything. Disappointed again - was this going to be my life’s story? Since I saw my first Sabre Jet roar across the Ohio sky, I thought piloting a jet was right up there with being a race car driver. Already I’d given up the dream of being a lawyer, even though I’d been a good debater and loved history and politics. But my grades from seventh grade on weren’t going to get me into college. I’d taken no college prep courses in high school and had instead taken the blue-collar-in-your-future course called Distributive Education, which let you out of school half a day to go to work. Which at the time was great, I got the high school diploma my Dad thought was all you needed in life, and earned myself just enough money to make payments and insurance on a car. Of course I now see that a car is a flashy-on-the-outside, ugly-on-the-inside instrument of slavery, marketed as a thing of freedom and beauty.

Back to that recruiting office in June. Turns out, I was also color-blind, which disqualified me from becoming an Air Force mechanic. Captain John, being Army, suggested that if I wanted to be a Crew Chief on a Huey helicopter, I might be able to qualify. And Crew Chiefs fly with their ship, he said. Well that did it for me - a mechanic who gets to go flying, and as a bonus, you get a gun - machine gun - no less, to defend the ship. Well choppers weren’t jets, (Turbo Props) but I’d seen the evening news, they were like flying hot rods and that’s all I needed to know. Where do I sign, Captain? Now understand, he said, while the Army will guarantee that you’ll get to Crew Chief’s school and while

you'll be able to use the delayed entry system, so that you won't have to go 'till September (Oh boy, one last summer! Yes!!) while all that is true, it is also true that there is a ninety to ninety-five percent chance that you will go to Vietnam, where your life expectancy is about forty-five minutes in combat, if that's what you end up doing. Like I said Captain, where do I sign? But he wouldn't let me sign right then and there. I owe it to your Step mom, he said, to send you home to think about it. Which he did. His career was judged on the number of bodies he could deliver to the Army, but he gave mine one last chance. "There's no hurry," he said, "you haven't gotten a draft notice yet."

By the time I got home, he'd already talked to Jean, and said in so many words that I didn't have to do it this way, or take such a dangerous job. There were ways to get certain jobs and certain duty that didn't get close to Vietnam. I don't recall any real discussion, other than that, and it didn't last long. My mind was already made up. I was more scared of the draft, because at that time, you could be drafted into either the Army or the Marines, and the thought of being a ground-pounder as we called the infantrymen, was a real fear. A buddy was already a Marine, and I knew they were crazy S.O.B.s, so enlisting was a way to avoid two fates worse than death - quite literally. Out loud, my 'thinking' was all about 'learning a new trade', that of helicopter maintenance; the Army guaranteed that I'd at least get the training I was promised (a promise the Army did make every effort to fulfill, even in those days of its most desperate need).

I reckoned also that by the time I got out of Basic Training and helicopter school, the war would be over. This was June 1969, Nixon had beaten Humphrey back in 1968, by promising to end the war by Christmas of 1969, which meant that I would not even get called to go. And after all, what am I going to do now that I was out of high school? The house was getting crowded with my brother and sisters growing up and needing more space. What am I going to do, sit around and wait for the draft? I ain't stupid, after all. The words patriotism, duty or obligation never entered into the

discussion.

“Remember what that guy told us at the bar - *If we don't fight 'em in Vietnam, we'll have to fight 'em somewhere else*”. The owners of my parents' favorite bar had had a son, an officer if I remember correctly, who came back from Vietnam and had given us this line, the ‘prevailing wisdom’ of the day, or ‘company line’ as I thought of it, and no more thinking had to be done. It never occurred to my Father or Stepmother to ask a follow-up question - such as just how would they invade us and why; nor would my parents consider the source of that ‘wisdom’, by asking what a career Army officer would have at stake and why wouldn't he want to fight that war? A military career doesn't amount to much unless there's a war going on. None of this came up around our dinner table. Nothing much more needed to be said. The nobody had spoken and had become a somebody.

To my friends, and maybe to my brother Mark, I gave other reasons that were more tangible - I was going to get me the best stereo in the world, bring it back and blast it! And was going to smoke the best weed in the world. At that time, early summer of '69, I had just gotten up the nerve to smoke marijuana a couple of times.

So after all the discussions and ‘rap sessions’ as we called our conversations in those days, there was still the small matter of going back to the recruiting office to make sure I qualified for this great opportunity-of-a-lifetime. The physical I'd taken for the Air Force was OK, just had to hold back the part about my hay fever, even though that alone wouldn't disqualify you. Captain John said there was a problem with my eyes though, color blindness would keep you out of helicopter maintenance, since so many things are color-coded - very true. So we'll give you the test again and see if you do any better. Now, I'd be willing to bet that both of those spot charts were exactly the same, but I didn't say anything, why would I? My mind was fixed on the part where you raised your right hand - just like Elvis had done.

For the life of me though, I could not see the numbers embedded in all those dots. I might've gotten one, but the

rest of them were just a bunch of spots. 'Luckily' the man who was giving me the test just 'had' to leave the room after my first attempt. He asked if I would please not look at the answers which were printed on the last page. I assured him I wouldn't. When he returned to the room, he said why don't we try this again; and this time, my color perception was perfect and he congratulated me with a smile - "welcome to the Army, Mr. Lawless".

After that, sign the contract (wow it was a real contract!) get my copies of all the paperwork, reporting date would be sent to you in the mail and that was it. Then into that room with a bunch of other guys, guys who I felt slightly superior to because I had made my own deal with the Army, instead of being dictated to, like some victim. "Gentlemen raise your right hand - "Do you solemnly swear..."

Do you know it's not America you pledge to defend? Not its government, its flag, its people or its way of life? Not the land, the sea, or the amber waves of grain? You, like the President, the Congress and all other Servicemen and women pledge to defend the Constitution of the United States of America. Words written on parchment kept under glass in Washington. Words defining a concept called freedom and a system called democracy. That's what we swore to preserve, protect and defend, against all enemies, within and without. I still consider myself bound by that oath.

I wish I could say that that was the sum total of why I went into the Army and on to Vietnam. I wish I could say that I was filled with patriotism and a sense of duty. I wish it was because of family tradition, Uncle Dick had served with the Army in Korea. Sure there were elements of wanting to do my part, and wanting to feel that surge of pride within that comes from raising your right hand. I certainly believed in our system, in our country. I'd worked hard writing those speeches for the Optimist Club contest in Junior High, and practiced them until I knew them by heart. I saw the look of pride in Grandma Blanche's eyes when she said 'Say your piece, Tony,' meaning I was to recite it in front of whoever was there at the time. I'd be embarrassed, but I'd do it be-

cause Grandma Blanche asked so little of us.

But, of all the righteous reasons listed, I still have to admit that it was none of the above. It was not for motherhood, brotherhood or the neighborhood. It wasn't because I should, it was because I could. Just for me. I was at a point in my life where I felt a lot of pressure to decide a future for myself that just didn't give me many chances, or afford me many choices. A college deferment was a joke. I'd been allowed to fail in school, beginning in Junior High School, and didn't have the grades or, really, the motivation. Growing up, there'd been vague promises or vows made that, when the time came, "we'd figure something out". But nothing concrete had been done. There had been no 'college fund' set up when I was born, to which monies could have been contributed to and on which interest would've been compounded. Having more children must have been more important than endowing the ones you already had with the resources they would need in their later years. It's how I believe the poor remain poor for generation after generation - they know neither the price of raising children, nor the value of the individual.

I was sick of Gahanna, Ohio, a town that had never felt like home. I was tired of being 'Slim's oldest boy', or that kid behind the counter at Earl Auto Parts,-where I worked after school, on weekends and during summer vacation - that skinny blue-jean-ed beer boy bent over the blue fender of the used up old car. Tired of being given things I didn't want and wanting something I couldn't even talk about out loud. Bombarded with religious dogma spouted as gospel, with never a clue as to how to reach the inner spirit. Sentiment that only came out with the booze. Always given responsibility without any corresponding privilege. Always being home when someone called. Tired of my race car being used as a taxi for Grandmas, kids and groceries. Called names, wimp, second best, 'candy ass'.

Got love maybe, but respect, never. Even self-respect, or maybe that was the cause of it all, I never pushed back. Baby sitting, fighting over the last potatoes. Tired of

being a weak geek who always turned the other cheek. Tired of 'suckin' hind tit', "Don't get smart!" Wise-ass words that had no claim to wisdom; "Do as I say, not as I do". (then why do you want me to be like you?) "Straighten up and fly right, or I'll jerk a knot in your tail"; "There's no atheists in foxholes;" "The Army will make a man out of you." (yea, if ya live long enough) Blah, Blah, Blah. I needed for my life to mean something or my death to. Be a part of history instead of a historian.

I saw no other way at the time. By spring of '69, we'd been told so many things about Vietnam, that discussion was impossible without turning quickly into argument, which, in our house always ended with someone pointing their finger at me and exclaiming, "You don't know what the hell you're talking about". The natural rebellion of a teenager got amplified by the revolt of a generation against those who were claiming to have its best interests in mind. So I had to find out for myself. They'll have to believe me once I've been there - and if I don't come back, who cares what they think, they'll all have a good cry and build shrines to me, spend the insurance money on a new car and furniture for the family room.

There was also that *other* contract you made with Uncle Sam - the G.I. Bill. If you somehow managed to get back and if you were somehow able to accept what was yours, they would help you heal, help you get educated and help you buy a home of your own. Three benefits, that I had no other way of obtaining. At least that's what I'd been brought up to believe - that the Army was the best deal for a boy like me, with nothing else on the horizon. I was not naïve enough to believe I would miraculously change just because I went to the Army.

I knew there wasn't much I was actually going to like about the Army, I'd had those peeks into Army life from my stepfather and that trip to Fort Knox in Junior High. And there was a movie from the fifties, *The D.I.*, with Jack Webb, and all those other films and TV shows. Plenty of warning. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but in June of 1969, I

needed to do something to avoid the draft and get out of Ohio. So joining up was killing two birds with one stone.

To understand the world and all it had to offer would have required more education than was available to me either at home or at school. I had no appreciation of the world, because all we learned was American History and Government, with no context or perspective on how ours fit into the larger scope of world history. Our movies and TV filled my head with tales of our superiority and power. Who could argue -



we had won World War II and magnanimously rebuilt Europe and Japan, cured Polio, created an unprecedented standard of living for our average citizen, built roads from coast to coast and were about to go to the moon as Kennedy had challenged us. We'd win in Vietnam and I needed the glory and power that would come from being

a part of at least one of America's great victories. I needed to bring home more than a paycheck or a checkered flag.

A melancholy hit song in 1968 featured the lines... "Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end, we'd sing and dance forever and a day.. We lived the life we choose, we'd fight and never lose.." Odd that such nostalgia was so popular with young people who were supposedly at the cusp of such a new and brighter future.

If only I'd had the guts and imagination to hit the road and see the world. You could still hitch hike in this country and most others. Get a passport and learn about the world, it was big wide and wonderful. As I've since learned. But there always seemed to be only one solution to our problems, one way of getting from A to B. My mind was a captive of limiting assumptions. Intellectually I wasn't aware of the wealth of options open to me at the time. And even if I had known, I wasn't psychologically ready to consider anything else as something that I would actually do. I used what was available to me to change my circumstances and location, but my mind wasn't free to choose how it looked at the

world, nor was it able to relate to the possibility of actually following any other path. Just being aware of options doesn't make one capable of exercising them. Role models didn't exist for me; I knew others my age were following other paths, but I couldn't see myself being that bold or innovative. I knew even then that to dodge the draft, leave the country or resist the war in any way took a lot more courage and inner strength than I gave myself credit for having.

Going off to war was an acceptable path in our society, and I wanted desperately to be accepted. Self-image can be extremely limiting to a person's growth, and I was always dissatisfied with what I saw in the mirror. All easy to see now, but back then there was nothing but a muddle of mixed-up desire, raging hormones, wanderlust, and war fever. And one pill to cure it all.

Now for that last summer of '69. Sometime in 1968, my father and I had gone to a local Chevrolet dealer to check out a beautiful 1964 Chevy Impala I had spotted earlier, but it was gone by the time we got there. But there on the lot was something else that caught my eye - a blue '65 Impala with a white convertible top. But it was the SS 396 emblem on the front fender that lured me for a closer look. Hmm, a 'big block'. A look inside and - Oh Boy! A four speed on-the-floor, factory-installed Muncie transmission. Pop the hood to find a big Holley four barrel carburetor and factory dual exhaust with 'Glass Packs' that made it rumble so sweet. Written on the air cleaner '325hp', meaning more horse power than I'd ever known. Hot Rod guts in a family car shell - and a convertible to boot. I wanted it. Because it was a big block. Big Power. For the same reason, Dad did not want me to get it. It's an Impala, Pop, how fast could it go anyway? He just looked at me with that warning eye that said, "I know what you wanna do, and you better not get caught doin' it".

There were two versions of a song at the time, one by Credence Clearwater, and one fabulous rip-snortin' one by

Ike and Tina Turner, but somewhere I'd heard a third version or a story or something that said that Proud Mary was a slave-carrying ship that plied the Mississippi River before the Civil War. Yea, I was a slave to that 'ship' and it would from then on be referred to by me and my friends by that name.

I was a 'round track' fan, according to family tradition; but after my first trip to the drags at National Trail Raceway outside of Columbus, I was hooked on that sound, especially after seeing the nitro-burning 'Funny Cars'.

I discovered that after the professional program, they'd have what was called Pure Stock, where anyone could enter their car, get it classified and race it right there on the same strip as the big boys. So I brought Proud Mary out and lined her up. Won my first trophy against a Mustang 351W on a strip slightly slick from a mist that had not yet cancelled the racing for the day. I learned right away it was all about control. Don't get anxious, wait for the 'Christmas Tree' to count down to Green, then ease out gradually, let the other guy spin his tires while I shift into second, then punch the throttle, letting that vacuum-operated Holley secondary take its sweet time delivering the full force to the rear wheels, by which time there's speed enough to grip the strip. By the time the tachometer hit the top of the power curve at 5200 RPM, I power-shifted into third gear and was across the line, seeing that loser Mustang in my rear view mirror. Always a joy in those days to beat a Ford. Then I picked up the ticket that gave you your time and speed, and they'd checked the box marked 'winner'.

I tweaked that engine as much as I could before each race (remove the power steering belt, the air filter, the spare tire, advance the timing, ice down the intake manifold [don't ask]) within the rules and within the limits of safety (after all, it had to get me home after the race, it would've wrecked my budget and my reputation if I broke it and had to have it towed back to Gahanna - something my Dad always swore was going to happen if I kept racing it.) There were few cars that showed up in my class, so I'd go to other tracks on Fri-

day and Saturday nights, and then back to National Trails on Sunday; picked up a lot of trophies, had a lot of fun.

And one Sunday, Dad's warning almost came true. On the way home, Proud Mary developed a "tick, tick, tick" so loud that I thought something was going to let loose. So I pulled off to the side of the road and figured out that a self-locking rocker arm nut had broken. But I didn't have the right deep socket with me to get it re-tightened; so I had to use a crescent wrench (otherwise known to wise guys everywhere as a hillbilly socket set) to laboriously tighten the thing down enough to limp home. There I was, alone by the side of the road, bent over the fender, with the wrong tool in my hand, as all the racers from the track drove by, witnessing my humiliation. It was a big job being small-time.

CHAPTER 7 - BASICS OF BASIC TRAINING

POKED, PRODDED AND PROBED

September, 1969. There was a big party to send me off. I got gifts, a lot of pats on the back, and promises from everyone to write often and keep me up on what was happening. Fun party, the start of many that my comings and goings would cause in the years to come. It was an easy parting; I was only going to Basic Training, I'd be home for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. I was looking forward to helicopter school - not to mention my first trip by airplane. Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon that summer, but this was going to be my first time on a jetliner. And it was free, courtesy of the U.S. Army.

First stop, Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. It was called a Processing Center, aptly named because that's where the process of turning a 'recruit' into a 'trainee' began. *Poked* with needles to ward off diseases you never heard of; *prod-ded* rudely from one place to another, for clothes that didn't fit and equipment you didn't need; and *probed* in every orifice ("Turn your head and cough". "Hey! Is that glove clean? Where you putting that finger? Whoa! That feels weird, dude". Join the Army and see what?! Sure were some shitty jobs to be had in the Army). Shaved like sheep, (best way to stop head lice from spreading, not to mention how much easier it is for the barber) deprived of sleep (some guys really did cry for Mama that first night), and the only relief was when we eat. And even that was unpleasant, since many of us had never eaten anything but Mom's home cooking, and found powdered eggs and Army 'coffee' not at all appetizing. And they made you eat in a hurry, which wasn't that bad for me, I came from a big family, where you 'came and got it before the hogs got it'. Some guys actually liked the food, which proves that there are some mothers out there who really should be ashamed of themselves.

The real pain of this phase, though, was anticipation -

the worry of where you'd go from here. Some Basic Training Posts were worse than others, the two worst being Ft. Gordon, Georgia and Ft. Polk, Louisiana. I figured since I was Regular Army, (meaning I had enlisted), and was destined for helicopter training, I'd get some place less infantry-oriented. But no, my next stop was Ft. Gordon. Then another sad discovery - the Army sure located itself in some pretty sorry and uninteresting locations. Many were in the rural South as a result of Reconstruction after the Civil War. As a way, I guess, to get Yankee money to rebuild that which it's Army had destroyed.

In Basic Training you learn a lot of really important stuff, like how to make your bed, shine your boots, arrange things neatly in your locker, 'field strip' a cigarette, salute everything that moves (and if it doesn't move, paint it), take a shit in front of fifteen other guys, throw a 'blanket party', how to fire a gun, and brush your tongue. I dreaded Basic Training, thanks to scare stories, both new and old, from sources both real and from the movies. I had always hated gym class, played no sports really, and had had my fill already of living in close quarters with other people, thanks to coming from a big family that lived in small houses.

And just because everyone had to go through it didn't make it any easier. People had always said that the Army toughened you up, made a man out of you, and that was fine by me, I was tired of being beaten up, pushed around and called names. So there was a part of me that tried. But there was also this part that resisted, testing the authority to see if they were really as smart as they claimed. Parents, teachers and the church had all let me down in one way or the other and I wanted the Army to prove that it could make me want to follow rather than just bully me around. But as someone had said once, "the Army does things just to piss you off". And that I found to be true. The Army kept you rattled, in a state of psychological uncertainty, and got you mad at the world, figuring you'd take it out on the enemy when the time came. And they were right, as I was to find out later in Vietnam. But what if you were never able to take it out on the

enemy? What then? Trained to kill, but kill who? Take it out on whoever's close? And weak?

The yelling started the minute we got off the bus from Ft. Jackson (no more airplane rides for you son) and kept up the whole time. We were hurried, harried, halted and harassed - suddenly coming to rest and then made to wait - for everything. 'Hurry up and wait' wasn't just a cliché, it was *Standard Operating Procedure*, a method built into the system to keep you on their schedule and remind you constantly of just who's in charge here. Civilian clothes were banished, rules laid down and equipment stashed according to strict placement, right down to how to fold socks and line them up neatly in your footlocker.

Weak links were exposed almost immediately, part of the Army's strategy to create discipline within the ranks by using the trainees themselves. Set them against each other. Couldn't help feeling sorry for the small guys, who looked comically ridiculous in their over-sized equipment - and if you were small and had a weird name, like Tinderhoff, it was going to be rough. If school kids were tough on names, the Army brought it to a whole new level of meanness: if you looked Indian, expect to be called Chief, if your name was Hymen, you were 'Buster'; Artie became 'Choke' and if your name was Bates, you were Master from then on. And on and on. Instinct made one want to help, but the Army would turn such sentimentality to its own use, by giving you even more hell for not letting the man bring his own self up to the others' level. Makes a tiny bit of sense now, but made none whatsoever at the time. The beginning of my war with the Army.

In my first letter to Elaine from Ft. Gordon, the 'belly-aching' begins. On top of everything else, I had a cold and probably a touch of everything else I'd been vaccinated against.



5 Oct. 69
Sunday

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
Army GPO Form 7-64

Dear Elaine,
How is everything? I'm in
Ft. Gordon, Georgia now. Basics
start tomorrow. I was at Ft.
Jackson last week, reception is
what they called it. We got our
clothes, most of our equipment,
and a lot of hell. I've had a
cold ever since I took the
shots at Jackson. Here at Gordon
our platoon has the best (best)
D.I. of the company. He's about
40, talks with a lisp and has a
Pot Belly. Today was our first
Barracks inspection, we only had 2
days to prepare for it, because half
of us just got in Friday. I went to
the P.X. yesterday and spent
\$15.00 on necessities, we're not
allowed luxuries for 4 weeks
(out of a total of 8). Then we get
weekend passes. On the second or third
week we have post privileges,
which includes beer (I almost forgot
what it's like) bowling, etc. Right
now we're restricted as hell.
Speaking of inspection I only had
1 thing wrong, which is pretty good.
This here Army sucks!

Big high to everyone
Judy

The inspections never seemed to end, and always came about from some 'outside' cause: "So-and-so is coming to inspect, blah, blah, hurry up blah!" Those 'necessities' were Army-mandated stuff - 'conveniently' available from the P.X. (Post Exchange) and were the Army's way of keeping our lockers looking uniform (and some supply contractor in business). I'm sure I had to buy a razor and blades, since up to that point, I'd only needed to borrow Dad's Remington every once in a great while to whisk off the peach fuzz.

The *D.I.* that I speak about is the Drill Instructor, the man with the wide-brimmed hat that the movies had turned into such a cliché. The part about him being the ‘easiest’ of the Drill Instructors in the company was probably true, but I don’t know how we determined that, since we had nothing to compare to. And that didn’t mean that he couldn’t reduce a man to near tears with a spittin’-in-your-face hollering-at-the-top-of-his-lungs kind of intimidation and/or humiliation. Then turn around and march us down the street ‘calling cadence’ that would make us smile in spite of ourselves. Always some bit of mean poetry about how the guy back home (always referred to as *Jody*, for unknown reasons) was getting it on with your girl. Humor was used as a weapon, like his opinion of civilians - “I hate civilians; I hate my wife because she’s a civilian”. When we didn’t seem to understand some instruction, he’d ask, “Clear as mud, right trainee?” - that kind of humor.

He’s the first person who teaches you that there is a right way, a wrong way and the Army way to do everything. Like military time. If it’s fourteen hundred hours, does that mean it’s too late for lunch? Like, in the beginning, it is every recruit’s first instinct to react to every question asked of him by answering, “Yes Sir!” or “No Sir!” To which the Drill Instructor would glare back at you with that killer look and say, “Don’t call me Sir! I work for a living!” See, only Officers were addressed as Sir, the non-Commissioned Officers, (or *N.C.O.s.*, for short), were called Sergeant, First Sergeant or, in his case, Drill Sergeant. This could be especially tough for boys from the South, who had been addressing every man older than himself as “Sir” since early childhood. This was also our first encounter with the Army caste system which kept the classes of officers, non-coms and enlisted men separated. An ancient system that I felt didn’t belong in such a modern world, but they seemed to thrive on it.

It was the Drill Instructor’s job to get us in line, keep us in line and ignore our every whine. And we whined plenty. But somehow the message got through to us that he knew that anything important that didn’t get learned here,

could mean death to those who were going off to war. Understanding this made learning Army bullshit even harder, because they seemed to give the same importance to all things, picayune or not. Just teach me what I need to know to get through Vietnam, I thought, I'm not staying in the Army as a career. I don't need this crap. But we had to drill and march - "Left face. No, your *other* left, Lawless". Drill Instructors had to have enormous restraint, since they couldn't use violence ever, or much profanity, even, to get us 'squared away', one of their favorite expressions.

Another common saying was to accuse us of having, "flakey shit", whatever that meant. But you didn't want it, that's for sure. If you missed a spot shaving that morning or your boots weren't shined just right, and if you offered any kind of excuse, his pat answer was almost always, "Sounds like a personal problem to me, Trainee!" And personal problems weren't his to worry about - you took personal problems to the Chaplain, as the joke went. Meaning you could pray, but it wasn't going to help you out of the situation your flakey shit got you into.

In that first letter to Elaine, I mentioned (proudly?) that I only had one thing wrong on my first inspection. They got harder as we progressed, and some guys kept doing things that brought the rest of us trouble. The Army's solution for that was to punish everyone - pushups, usually - ("Drop and give me 20"), taking away privilege (that we probably didn't have to begin with), and by somehow letting us know that in extreme cases, if the same man kept causing trouble for the platoon, he could be treated to the ultimate punishment, called a blanket party. Not an officially sanctioned act, just one of those 'rumors' that would get spread about how a guy would be sleeping and a bunch of guys would suddenly wrap him up in a blanket and pound him with their fists, so that he couldn't see his attackers, but get the message.

Didn't happen in our barracks - didn't have to. As was probably part of the plan, again, we all got the message. Fighting did break out and angry words could set us against

each other, making for a tense and anxious atmosphere. And some of these guys were tough hombres. I was a skinny kid who'd only been in a few fights and had been beaten up regularly back at Linmoor Junior High and wanted no more of it. But some of these guys were street thugs and/or town bullies from the wrong side of the tracks and were just not to be messed with. And the Army was furthering their fighting skills with instruction on how to dispatch an enemy with bare hands, bayonets, and anything else at hand.

In those days, a local Judge could give out a sentence of either go to jail or join the Service - a discretion that allowed him to kill several birds with one stone, as it got rid of a 'bad element' and it filled the local Draft Board's quota, perhaps allowing some favored rich kid to avoid getting drafted. And the local municipality could also avoid the expense of jailing. And chances were, the Judge himself was on the Draft Board and was happy not to have to draft a son from one of the town's 'prominent' families. Worked out well all around. Except for those of us who got stuck with them. But the draft netted quality as well. One of the first guys I befriended was a young man from Puerto Rico who already had his private pilot's license and a pretty good education, thanks to his family's wealth and his own brains and curiosity. I could sometimes not understand him, his English had been learned at school instead of at the dinner table like mine. I also could not understand, as I asked him often, "Why are you here?" I couldn't find Puerto Rico on the map but I knew it wasn't a State and didn't get a vote in the Senate, so how could they get drafted? It didn't bother him; he seemed to identify with the U.S. and was looking forward to going to Crew Chief School just like me. But it bothered me. It was one thing for the Army to take a 'nothing' like me or one of those 'others' and make them into a 'something', but here was a smart, talented 'something' that they were going to grind into a 'nothing' like sausage from steak. More stuff that didn't make sense.

Other guys who didn't belong were the older guys in their late twenties (who weren't supposed to be draft eligi-

ble) and the ones who had children. Local Draft Boards, out of corrupt intent, I guess, would send them in spite of their age or parental status - even if they were obviously too small, weak or slow in the head - just to fill a quota. And everyone knew, by 1969, that rich kids or those with connections, just got off. That's why they had to create the draft lottery, to attempt to address some of this unfairness. More of those inequities of life I was learning. Then there were the Army Reservists and the National Guard, who only had to take Basic Training and A.I.T. (*Advanced Individual Training*), and then got to go home, only to report for a month each summer for a few years, for which they got full benefits and little chance of being sent to Vietnam. Some were clever or lucky, but most were privileged characters, whose families had the right 'pull' to get them admitted, and who then would always be able to claim that they served. Just another entry on their resumes that civilians didn't really question, but afforded them leadership positions in businesses or government or both. We knew this in Basic, and treated them with as much scorn as possible, but were frustrated in our efforts, because you knew these guys were connected, and making friends might just get you a lift up later in your duty - or maybe even later in life. Making enemies of them could do the opposite. Frustrating enough to make a killer out of anyone.

Ft. Gordon itself was a well-tended antique, relic or dump, depending on how you looked at it. Two-story wooden barracks that must have been state-of-the-art for guys going off to fight Hitler or the 'Japs'.

Heated by smoky, coal-fired furnaces that turned the cool Georgia mist into a black phlegm that got coughed up every morning and made you wonder if you were going to keep breathing another day. I remember as a kid playing in a neighbor's coal bin and how dirty and hard to wash off the stuff was. Over the years, I learned that coal is a dirty business from beginning to end.

The old wooden buildings were such fire traps that they kept 'Fire Guards' on duty during the night. One guy to

stay awake in case a fire started. Which meant that on top of not getting enough sleep to begin with, you could be awakened in the middle of the night just to get dressed and stay awake for two hours. It was also another way for the Army to trip you up if they caught you sleeping when you were supposed to be watching for fire. They never explained that it was a way of getting us familiar with the concept of Guard Duty, that job armies since the beginning of armies have needed done...having someone stay awake all night.

It meant too that the sleeping environment never stayed quiet for very long, which was hell on light sleepers, as every couple of hours there was some guy trying to wake up the next guy who was to be his relief. Some guys were very hard to wake up, and some tried to get whoever was waking them up to stay awake another hour so they could sleep more. Some of those guys could be pretty intimidating too; so if the meek shall indeed inherit the earth, it's payback for having to wake up some of those mean S.O.B.s for Fire Guard Duty.

When I first heard that we were to 'police' an area, I thought it was something necessary like crowd or traffic control. But it was another of the Army's 'fun with language' deceptions. Policing an area meant walking through it, bending over and picking up the cigarette butts or any other debris that was not 'G.I' or *Government Issued*. If it wasn't painted and if it didn't move, you had to pick it up.

If the Drill Sergeant heard groans about this chore (or shit detail, as it was referred to by those of us who had to do it), he would bark, "I don't wanna see nothin' but assholes and elbows," which meant you bent over, whether there was something there or not. Whenever a chore (or detail, as small jobs are referred to by the Army) was too minor or picayune, we'd mumble the old Mousketeer jingle, something the Brass hated, because anything that was 'mickey mouse' was too trivial - to the point of being insulting to us and the lowest waste of our time.

The Army tolerated cigarette smoking, and at every break, the call for nicotine relief would be, "Smoke 'em if

you got 'em!'. Tobacco companies even sold small five packs for when money was running low, and would even include them in survival kits and Red Cross packages. Butts would get hurled the instant the 'ten-hut' was called to stand to attention or return to formation. That's why we were taught to always 'field strip' our cigarettes, squeezing the tobacco out and wadding up the remaining paper so that what you threw on the ground was so small it couldn't be seen and didn't need to be picked up - but filter cigarettes were almost impossible to field strip, since the filter didn't come apart easily and messed up your fingers with its tar if you tried to unravel it.

There were some guys in my barracks from Brooklyn who still make me laugh just thinking about their antics. They had come in on the 'buddy' program, which was another gimmick to get guys to join up, by promising that they would stay together during their training. There were three or four of them, urban hipsters, who spoke in their own thickly accented 'Brooklynese'. They weren't just close, they seemed to know something the rest of us didn't - inside information, as if someone who had just been through this process was feeding back info to them on what to expect next, and just what they could get away with - or the limits of what the Army would tolerate. My first lesson in the real value of information, and first brush with what I could only call 'cool' people - long before the term got abused and overused as it is today in the selling of breakfast cereal to little kids.

They and some other guys from the West Coast would talk on and on about the drugs they had already taken and the protest marches they'd joined, and here I had only just that summer smoked my first few joints. I was still too timid to even admit such a thing, and actually kept them at arm's length when they started talking about smoking toothpaste. I never saw them do it, but they claimed it would get you high, I guess by smearing it on a cigarette. It had been urban legend in those days that hippies smoked banana peels, so the story had just enough credibility to make me wonder.

But I remember the headache I got from my first joint, so I declined to pursue the matter further. They were a bit smug about it all, and I couldn't help but envy them a bit.

But the biggest shock was when I discovered that they had smuggled in a record player and had it stashed in pieces in one of their lockers. What balls, I thought, and how crazy. And risky. I knew then that these guys didn't care about getting busted, or at least were true to their feelings of protest - or were just plain nuts. And the record I remember them playing? Something I'd never heard before, except the one radio hit culled from the album. It had a funny picture on the cover of an old blimp crashing and the group was called Led Zeppelin. Such a heavy drum sound it distorted the tiny speakers and the combination of singer and guitar made a weird sound that was too exotic for me at the time. Something truly new that made me feel very square and behind the times. Again...

That summer, my Dad had interrupted whatever car job I was working on in the driveway to show me the headline about Woodstock and complain about those damn hippies; the article barely mentioning that there was music or anything other than a big traffic jam, a lot of mud, misery and marijuana. I clearly remember saying little back to him, but feeling kicked in my stomach, an old familiar feeling. I was missing out on something, again the fun was passing me by and I was never going to catch it. I was a 'greaser' (someone whose work got grease under their fingernails) and a 'homebody', still listening to Top Forty Radio, and even remember buying (and listening to) one of those Super Hits compilation albums they had started to sell on TV. My father and I always fought over the radio station in the car, truck or garage, where ever we were. Country vs. Rock. His Merle Haggard vs. my Top Forty, which at that time (1964-1969) had a good deal of Motown (which I loved) and soul music like Sam & Dave and Booker T & The MGs. Referred to by my father and his truck driver friends as 'nigger' music. A major battle ground, like the length of my hair, which was a constant, bitter struggle between my father and me. Both of

us dealing in our own way with our own peer pressure. Mine was the youth culture of the sixties, personified by my long-haired friends 'out in the country', who, at that time, my parents had not yet accepted. My Father's peers were the men he drove cross-country trucks with, and who hated long hair, hippies, rock-'n-roll and sons who dared to 'sass back'. This angered me more than anything, knowing he cared more about what they thought, and that he couldn't allow that I needed desperately to belong and be accepted by my peers. He'd fought his own war with his father, and I guess, looking back, I can see how he must have thought this was how you raised a son. But I couldn't see it then.

So here I was in Basic Training, quivering with fear, lest I not make it in the Army, and these hippies, or 'heads' as they were called, were way out there, some even had been to Woodstock. I was still into the Beach Boys (the only concert I'd been to up till the time) and they had actually seen Jimi Hendrix. But I couldn't join their clique, I was too far behind - and afraid that they were going to bring trouble down on all of us, so I kept myself apart, in spite of my attraction to their 'hipness'. I could've reached it, and even wanted it on some level, but couldn't grasp it for myself. Figured there'd be some better pay off down the road by being a good boy. Hoped so, anyway.

But I wasn't afraid to chase a beer, as one of my next letters to Elaine shows:

SUN. 26 OCT 69

Well its Sunday now, and if it weren't for weekends, I couldn't make it through this damned Army. We just lay around and sleep, or play cards on the weekends. I sure wish you'd send me a big batch of home made cookies or soft brownies (or both) or anything for that matter. We eat three squares a day but it just ain't enough! Besides we ~~aren't~~ aren't allowed to buy stuff like that, but if its sent through the mail we can have all we want. Well, I've been in ~~the~~ Post camp 3 weeks now and I've been A.W.O.L. twice already, yesterday and last Saturday, a bunch of us went up to the P.K. and had a few beers, the reason we're A.W.O.L. is because we're restricted to the Company area, and the P.K.

By the way I'm not going to send that picture back, it's a constant reminder of how things were back when I had it made!

We've been on the rifle range all week, it's a pain in the ass because they're 1 1/2 + 2 miles out and we have to run with full packs and gear all the way out there. ~~Thursday~~ Tuesday, the good Gen. Westmoreland paid us a visit out at the range. He was decorated like a Christmas tree with medals. Friday, a guy in our platoon was shot on the range, he accidentally dipped his M-16 and it went off through his leg. He was really fucked up; he has a hole in his ankle as big as an apple. I sure felt sorry for him. If we fire good on the range next week (Marksmen, Sharpshooter, or EXPERT)

Well I just stuffed my gut over at the mess hall. I waited till last and they called for seconds and I loaded up.

Three weeks, and I'd already gone AWOL (Absent

With *Out Leave*) twice to get beer, which only involved a walk of a few blocks, but a treacherous one, as we could have been spotted by anyone on Base as Basic Trainees, and busted easily. I'm sure I got talked into it, but don't remember by whom, obviously I felt brave being in a group. I had not been allowed to drink much growing up, but must have developed quite a taste for 3.2 (percent alcohol) beer since my eighteenth birthday back in April. Plus, at that point, getting high was a major relief. The beer must have worked, as I have no memory of the guy shooting himself on the rifle range, and I'm sure I didn't see it happen.

And when I read this letter I was shocked that we'd gotten a visit by the generalissimo himself, General Westmoreland. (Somebody check his diary for that week, I'm curious to know why he was there and what, if anything, he took note of.) But I must have seen him to know he was decorated "...like an Xmas tree", with all those medals - which is how he'd appear wherever he went in those days.

At first it seemed ridiculous that the Army had to teach personal hygiene to a bunch of men who they had determined were competent enough to handle dangerous weapons. "Gentlemen, this is a toothbrush, use it like this..." But, in fact, the Army taught us one thing that seemed nutty at the time, which was to follow-up the brushing by scraping the tongue with the toothbrush just before rinsing. Eliminates bacteria and reduces bad breath. Quite true, and a technique I still use today. I consider it one of only a few useful things the Army taught me.

It was good that they'd teach about shampooing, changing socks regularly and other cleaning habits, too, since some of these guys were from places that considered a bath to be something you did only on Saturday night, and changed clothes only for Sunday-go-to-meetin' time. And nothing less than the United States Army would've had the power to force them to do otherwise.

(In the early years of the Vietnam War, this worked against us, and we were cautioned about it, but not given any real alternative solution: Everything America washed itself

with contained perfume; soaps, deodorants, foot powders, even laundry detergent. Colognes, marketed on TV for years, had become associated with manliness, making it tough for some guys to give them up. And there were those 'close quarters' that made some of us smell worse, just by our physical nature. All of which that Vietnamese enemy could smell a mile away, and would use to pin point our location out in the field. Also a dead giveaway were those perfumed letters the girlfriends would send that we carried in our pockets. But even in Vietnam, guys would refuse to give up their favorite stuff, and some quite likely paid the ultimate price for their stubbornness.)

The Army did not care one bit for your modesty or need for privacy. Even in a big family, you could always close the door of the bathroom and have a few moments of peace in which to do your business. But here in Basic, the commodes were all lined up in a row with no dividers to hide behind. And as human beings will, most of us needed to sit down right after breakfast. It got crowded, smelly and hurried, and a lifetime habit became another area of sheer torture, since Army food disagreed with people in different ways. And, as with anything, if you did any little thing just the slightest bit different, it became everybody's business and the subject of jokes. Yea, Army life, where nothing seems to come out right. Another advantage of being from a big family was that I could sometimes 'hold it,' and that's what I'd do; but that strategy was used by others, too, and the crowd after supper could be just as bad.

SUN. 9 NOV. 1964

Claims.

Well here it is Sunday and I have a chance to relax and catch my breath. This week has been hell with work and test and night firing. I don't think I've gotten over four hours sleep a night all week. Before last I got about 3 hrs. sleep and got up at 3:00 and missed K.P. all day which is a bitch. That's why I haven't written all week. Last weekend I got my first 2-day pass for firing sharpshooters, which is second highest. We went into the "swingin'" town of Augusta. We ate, slept, drank, and saw skin-flicks. A very relaxing weekend! Next week is ~~divorce~~ divorce, which means playing soldier and sleeping in a pup tent; round like fun, huh? Well you must be busy too, with home, you probably have your hands full. Tell the old salty ~~me~~, I said his lucky his ~~the~~ the Army sucks! The highest promotion the Army has to offer is the rank of civilian! Well have to run now write soon. Tony
PEACE

My first taste of KP, or Kitchen Police - up at three am to peel potatoes and take orders from a growling bunch of cooks. Lifting heavy pots that reminded me of the drums axle grease came in that we used in the auto repair business, and filling them with ingredients that did not appear to be food at all. Giant cans of vegetables stirred with huge paddles, an industrial assembly area that seemed like hell's kitchen, as imagined by someone from the other side of Alice's Looking Glass. And the food delivery truck that came several times a day, accompanied by sharp shouts of, "KPs, outside!", meaning all of us were to drop whatever we were doing and go unload that truck. If it was cold, no sympathy

or coats were offered - just barks of, “Work faster, K.P., you’ll stay warmer that way”. And the worst job of all was cleaning out the grease trap. Army food created a lot of grease and it got collected in this big tub that had to be cleaned every day. It was usually the cook’s chief way of getting work out of everybody, by threatening them with the job. But, ‘someone has to do it,’ and I got stuck more than once. Or some other poor bastard would, who, like me, presented little or no threat of retaliation.

KP was the longest day of all, and even if the weather outside was really bad, it was only a slight consolation. Because at three am when you were roused out of bed, all you wished for was a broken leg or an early death. K.P. also made it hard to eat certain things from the Mess Hall from then on. Gray sauces, ‘mystery meat’ and anything you couldn’t readily identify would be left on the plate. All the more reason to beg for food from home. Three squares a day just wasn’t enough. Growing up, I’d been accused of having a tapeworm or a ‘hollow leg’, since I was so skinny but could put away massive amounts of food. Grandmas, Aunts and any other women who cooked, loved to feed me because I was always so appreciative and full of praise for what I genuinely believed was great cooking. Army food wasn’t good, but there was often plenty of it.

The problem in Basic was that you were hurried and harassed into eating quickly, something new to me, even though being from a big family taught me not to wait or hesitate. I’d learned quickly to play the game in Basic by waiting till last, when they’d sometimes call for seconds, preferring to let us eat it instead of giving it to the hogs (which they actually did - local pig farmers would pick up scraps from the mess halls and feed them to their pigs.) This strategy could backfire easily, as sometimes what was left wasn’t enough or was cold or congealed or both. That’s why this book is for Elaine, she came through - early and often and sometimes, just in the nick of time.

The Army operated on rumor so much that it was sometimes hard to know the truth, simply because it was

hard to get someone to officially deny what was being rumored. These rumors could spread back through the ranks like smoky fire, making us all choke on the dreaded 'news'. The rumors heard most at that time were about Vietnam, the war itself, what happened to guys while they were there, or whether Nixon was going to pull us out by Christmas, as he'd promised. Or whether everybody in training at the time was being shipped over there, regardless of their *MOS* (*Military Occupational Specialty*).

There was also what could only be called the 'dumb ass' rumor. It may have had some basis in reality, as all lies do, but it took a dumb ass to really believe them. And the Army could make all of us feel like dumb asses, just because of the way we were isolated from the outside world, kept in the dark about what was going to happen to us, and how, why and when such and such was going to happen. One such rumor was that they put saltpeter in the food to keep us from getting erections.

On the surface it seemed to make sense. A hard-on at the wrong time could be embarrassing, even dangerous, as the other guys could get the wrong idea. Hey, a guy could even get the wrong idea about himself - especially if it's true what they say about how often the average man (and we were still teenagers) thinks about sex. That thing could pop up at any second for no reason at all, especially in a situation where the pressure built up because your 'relief time' was so out of whack. Even the word itself, saltpeter, added some credence to the rumor - it seemed like a good idea to salt that thing down for a while. I didn't know for sure just what saltpeter was, it has something to do with making gun powder - which would be kinda funny - one application makes explosives and one prevents them. But I pulled K.P. a lot in the Army and never saw it in any of the kitchens or heard it mentioned by any of the cooks. Just one of those rumors that made Army life so confusing and hard on a guy.

Drill Instructors would sometimes refer to trainees as a bunch of 'swinging dicks' and some guys really did live up to the name. The close quarters reminded you daily of your

‘shortcomings’ in that area as well. Proof that there were some endowments we are born with that shall not be overcome. Race, body size or type, or national origin mattered not a bit in this contest. It was one thing in Junior High Gym class to see that some guys were ‘further along’ in their development, but this was the final exam. No hiding the truth here. Another Test Track on the road to manhood, and some of us were driving compacts, while some of us had hot rods. More of those inequities of life.

I was granted my first weekend pass for my skill (Sharpshooter, second only to Expert) at shooting the M-16 at paper targets. The weekend in Augusta I forgot, proving that the beer did its job. But the M-16, I’ll always remember thinking of as a toy gun. Every gun I’d ever seen had been made of polished wood and machined metal, most were



hunting rifles or shot guns. I may have only shot one once, if at all, but I remember what they looked like and how they felt in your hand. Not to mention the delicious taste of the pheasants that were brought back one year. (Tastes like chicken) But this M-16 was plastic and felt like it.

There had been some news reports that the M-16 jammed when fired too much or when they got dirty. I recall part of our training sounding almost like a sales job (or sometimes an apology) for the M-16 and it’s design, which was very light weight, part of why it felt so toy-like. And we spent a lot of time learning how to clean it, even being blind-folded so we could do it in the dark.

It was that old rumor about the gun barrel exploding in my face if it got too dirty that made me pay closer attention to the cleaning of my weapon than almost anything else in Basic Training. The fun part, of course, was a switch on the side that turned it from single shot rifle to a machine gun. Use up a clip full of bullets (rounds) in a few seconds; so you better have another clip handy and be quick about getting the old clip out and the new one in if someone’s shootin’ at you.

And there were two ways it could go in wrong - upside down and backwards, so if you did use it as a machine gun, make sure whoever you were shooting at got dead and stayed dead while you switched clips.

The Drill Instructors would get 'bent out of shape' if you dared call it a gun. Why, I never figured out, the Army was nuts over nomenclature.

He'd use a verse to help you remember. With one hand he'd point to the M-16 and say...

"This is my weapon..." Then point to his groin...

"This is my gun." - point back to the M-16 and say,

"This one's for killing.." then back to the groin...

"...and this one's for fun."

The short-barreled M-16 did not respond well to what was called 'Kentucky Windage', putting anyone with rifle experience at an immediate disadvantage. (again, pity the poor country boys, who'd grown up shootin' at food) The Army knew this, and took a lot of time training us to adjust the sights on the M-16, so that rather than adjusting your shot according to where your first round landed, (Kentucky Windage style), this way, your weapon was (supposedly) more accurate on the very first shot. Good idea, except, as I figured at the time and proved later on, the M-16 you were issued in Vietnam never got adjusted to your eyes, because there wasn't the time or the rifle ranges on which to fire at targets just for the purpose of fixing your sights. Besides, as I learned later in helicopters, at the end of the day, the Door Gunner would take all your guns back to the gun room for cleaning, leaving a Crew Chief unsure if the gun he had yesterday was the same one he's firing today.

And the Army must have had some training accidents, because the thing I remember most about the firing range was the call before we started shooting, "Is there anyone down range?" Shouted several times before we started. Then us having to shout, after turning in our M-16, "No brass, no ammo, Sir!" to the Officer in charge, and repeating the same answer when we returned to the barracks. The Army was obsessed with not allowing any bullets off the fir-

ing range. Guess you can't blame them for wanting to keep dangerous stuff out of the hands of angry people whose lives they were making miserable.

The most demanding thing for me, though, was the 'low crawl', prone on knees and elbows, slithering under barbed wire with (or without) live ammunition going off over your head; I just couldn't get my skinny long arms and legs to coordinate.

So many trials, so many tests. Here I was, desperate to become a man, thinking that if I just get through this, then I'll be tough, then I'll take no shit from anyone, and all along, this creeping fear hounds me, that my 'stuff' just wasn't 'up to snuff'. In Junior High Physical Education, Archery was my sport, and I was pretty good, but the skill had little value to this Army. Born too late, I reckon.

In High School, I'd been able to avoid gym class, so when Basic Training called for us to run long distances or negotiate obstacle courses, I failed miserably. I was tall gangly and uncoordinated, but dreaded repeating Basic just because I couldn't pass the physical stuff - that would be the ultimate torture, iced with humiliation.

Marching in Army boots in sand with a full pack on my back did not agree with my un-athletic body, and both my ankles swelled up so large I was unable to even tie up my boots; so the last two weeks of Basic, I rode in a truck to the rifle ranges and infiltration course. My own way of turning my deficiency into 'getting over', as we called any method at hand we could use to get out of work or duty. The ankle pain was worse than the duty, though.

I'm sure it was only because the Army didn't make the final test as difficult as the training that I made it through Basic at all. That I got out of Basic after spending the last two or three weeks 'on profile' as they called it, with swollen ankles, probably attests to how badly they needed me in Helicopter School. My letter of November 17th complains of cold weather in Georgia that got us pulled off of bivouac a day early:

Monday 17 Nov 69



Always, Always, Always

Claine,

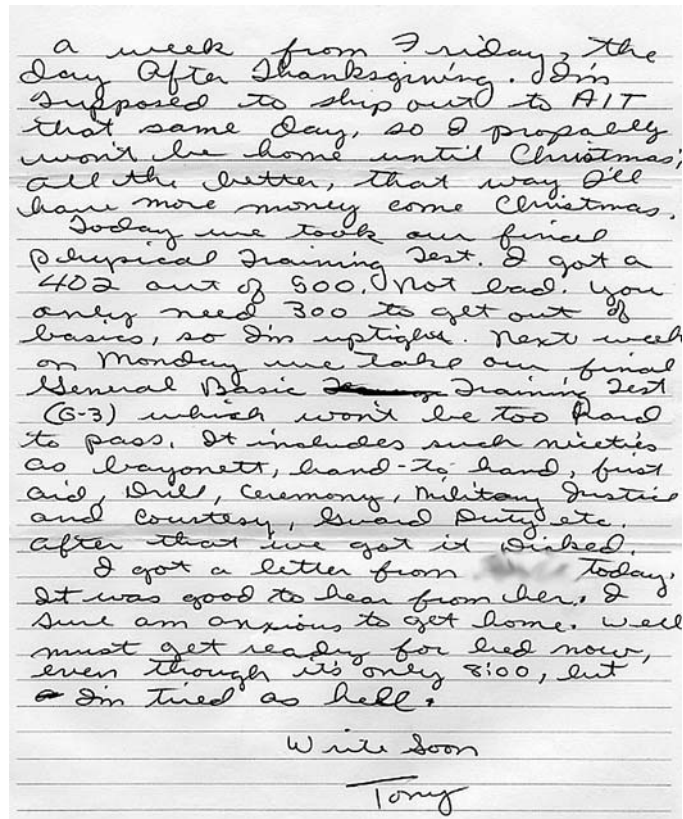
you spoke in your letter of that "warm southern sun"; shit, it's colder than a bitch down here; in fact we were pulled off bivouac a day early because of it. It's a damn good thing too, it's hell getting out of a warm sleeping bag into 20° weather. I thought I told you before, I fired Sharpshooter on the range, that's how I got my pass into Augusta.

I got your cookies Saturday. They sure were good and so were the brownies; I still have a few left, the guys in the barracks liked them too. You put the wrong address on the box, you didn't put "C" company ~~and~~ on it and it was misrouted to B-4-2, so when I got them they were pretty crunched up, but they were well worth the short wait. When you get some spare time, send me a few more to hold me over till graduation, I appreciate it immensely. Speaking of that golden day, it's only

There was one day of 'getting over' and escaping the misery. I hated Bivouac; It may be bracing and invigorating to some, but getting out of a nice warm sleeping bag for me was icy torture. There are guys who like this stuff, I thought, let them do it. More incentive not to get stuck being a 'ground pounding' infantryman.

I had been uninterested in the 'great outdoors' growing up, preferring to build tree houses or forts out of refrigerator boxes in the backyard than going on hikes or campouts. I had been kicked out of the Cub Scouts in the Fourth Grade, probably for bad behavior, but remember clearly not

being sorry about it because I regarded all that rope-tying and fire-starting to be old fashioned for someone like me, who was going to be a Lawyer, Actor, Singer, Race Car Driver, Senator, etc. Besides, wasn't Vietnam a hot jungle? How does this relate?

A handwritten letter on lined paper, written in cursive. The text is as follows:

a week from Friday, the Day After Thanksgiving. I'm supposed to ship out to AIT that same day, so I probably won't be home until Christmas; all the better, that way I'll have more money come Christmas.

Today we took our final Physical Training Test. I got a 402 out of 500. Not bad. You only need 300 to get out of basic, so I'm uptight. Next week on Monday we take our final General Basic ~~Training~~ Training Test (G-3) which won't be too hard to pass. It includes such niceties as bayonets, hand-to-hand, first aid, drill, ceremony, military justice and courtesy, guard duty, etc. After that we get it dicked.

I got a letter from [redacted] today. It was good to hear from her. I sure am anxious to get home. Well must get ready for bed now, even though it's only 8:00, but I'm tired as hell.

Write soon

Tony

Just days later, I'm "walking on air", an odd choice of words, since I was hardly walking at all the last two weeks of Basic because of my swollen ankles...

24ms. Nr. 20 1969

Elaine,

Well here it is 7:00 P.M. Thursday and I'm on my second letter, the first was to none other than your loved sister. Well graduation ain't but a week from tomorrow and I'm walking on air. It'll only be 4 weeks till I'm home! Thank God, I about to go crazy in this damn Army. Last night we went through the infiltration course, which is crawling over logs under barbed wire, all the while, there's live machine gun fire over your head and bombs exploding around you. I know one thing, I don't want to be a ground-pounding infantryman, dodging bullets just ain't my thing, and Lincous is something else I could not endure all the time. My arms are still sore from the shots we got yesterday we've had a total of seven since we've been in Basics, I told you Basics was a bitch. Well how's everything? Not much from this

end. The cookies were great, but they didn't last long. Send a few more (oatmeal-soft) before Thanksgiving so I'll have something decent to eat! It's all appreciated highly! Say hello to the ole pirate.

write soon

Tony

Didn't make things any easier though, I still had to suffer through the gas mask test - something I left out of the letters. You were put into an air tight room that would be

filled with tear gas and not allowed to put on your mask until you heard the command. The lesson was to make you quick to get it on in case of a gas attack. Good training - for World War I - but there was no evidence that the Vietnamese were using gas against us. Sure made you think twice about joining a protest march though - the U.S. Government wouldn't hesitate to use tear gas against their own people if they dared to exercise their freedom of assembly.

Speaking of protests, an unforgettable moment in Basic was one I probably saved to tell Elaine and my friends when I got home. We watched a movie, at a theater on Base, called *ALICE'S RESTAURANT*, starring Arlo Guthrie. Which was strange, considering the subject matter. I've never figured out if the Army had a sense of humor about showing it to us or was ignorant of its contents (hard to believe, really) or was actually trying to be democratic about things and therefore not afraid to let a liberal, rabble-rousing, Roosevelt point of view to be shown to us. After all, it was well known that Arlo Guthrie's father, Woody Guthrie, had been the father of protest music going back to the Depression, when he went around singing songs about labor camps and railroad tramps, and Arlo was carrying on the family tradition. I knew who Arlo was, probably from the Smothers Brother's Show or his appearances on folk music shows of the early Sixties like 'Hootenanny'.

ALICE'S RESTAURANT was based on a hit song of the same title and was, among other things, about Arlo getting busted for illegally dumping his trash. But the part that made it a protest movie is when Arlo gets his draft notice and reports to the local induction center for his physical. It wasn't too funny to me that Arlo's character noticed that the guys who showed up at the induction center seemed to be the same types ("mother - stabbers and father - rapers") that he'd been surrounded by in the jail when he got busted for dumping trash - too close to what I was experiencing here in Basic. But when he gives the 'finger' to the Army Sergeant in charge of things, the entire audience erupted with whoops and hollers. Shouts of "Right on!" The biggest laugh I'd had

or heard in a long time. Yeah, somebody somewhere understood us and what we needed. Still can't believe the Army showed it on Base. I figure it must have been a draftee who was in charge of Special Services, (the Army unit in charge of entertaining us) and who giggled as he slipped this one by the 'Brass'. I'd still like to know how it happened. But however much we felt powerful in that moment, we left the theater and went right back to our duties. I didn't kid myself, I knew the Army held all the power cards. That was one night in Basic Training, though, that I went to bed with a smile on my face. Thanks Arlo.

We were constantly reminded to write home while in Basic, and the Army had to sometimes even force guys to write letters back to their families. They didn't care what you wrote - bitch as much as you like, tell truth or lies - but the U.S. Army did not like getting asked, or investigated by Congressmen, about what was happening to an individual soldier who, for whatever reason, wasn't calling or writing back home. It was understandable to me - the things we were going through were hard to describe in letters. There were a lot of movies about War, but actually very few about the reality of Army life in Basic Training. I didn't like writing letters, it took time out from sleeping, (we were always sleep-deprived) reading, relaxing, goofing off, talking to the group or drinking beer. And some guys played a lot of pool. Whenever there was recreation there were pool tables, and even if you weren't good at it, pool provided a place to hang out and something to watch that took your mind off of Army stuff. Television wasn't very interesting in those days; daytime TV amounted to game shows or soap operas and no self-respecting young man of that era would've been caught dead watching either.

But the last thing you'd want to do is sit down and write a letter. Couldn't talk much about what made us laugh, it would come out profane, mean or obscene. Didn't want to recall the 'Army' stuff, because it always came out sounding very dangerous (like my telling Elaine about the boy who shot himself on the rifle range - I doubt if I wrote home to

Mom & Dad about that), or it would sound like complaining.

And even though we needed a sounding board, I personally did not want to sound like I wasn't man enough to take it. Others probably had similar feelings, and for those reasons, kept their letters as brief and general as mine. I was lucky that Elaine was there and willing to put up with my 'belly aching', as we called it, and never refused a request for more food. I suspect there were a lot of guys who didn't have anyone like Elaine in their lives, no one with whom they'd spent many hours discussing anything that came to mind. All those hours while our parents were out drinking, Elaine and I were listening to the Beatles, playing cards and sharing what we were learning about the world.

I also had the advantage of an education that centered heavily, early-on anyway, on the Liberal Arts. I had been in Mrs. Yates' choir, and exposed to music at a depth most kids didn't get to. I had written speeches, been on debate teams, encouraged by some teachers to appreciate poetry and by Grandma Annie to appreciate my own brain and how to use it. But still, I considered writing home a chore for the most part, and have to confess that after reading the letters to Elaine, there always seemed to be that ulterior motive of 'send more food'.

But more importantly perhaps, it was also because she wrote back - you lose interest in writing, communicating, when you don't get a response.

It was always possible, even in those days, to call home, and some guys did, but I found myself with little to talk about that would seem to justify the (hefty) expense. If they said anything happened, so and so got married, died, had a baby or got a new job, my only response was, "Great! Wish I was there to see it" - what else was I going to say? Which led them to feeling guilty for having told you. Then you had to reassure them that it was OK, that's what you wanted to hear, the good and the bad. Any news from home was better than what we had to say. Army stories were either dark humor or had to do with preparing for war - neither of which made for the kind of thing you wanted your family or

friends to be left with after the conversation. And over the phone, tears came too easy. Tears that could be seen by other guys, phones weren't always in booths; tears that might be used against you, as they were evidence of your weakness. And some guys did not want to hear the tears from the other end either. If you thought that all you were going to do was make your mom, wife or girlfriend cry, you didn't want to call at all. And unless your Dad and your buddies were very, very knowledgeable about what you were going through, all they could talk about was the job or the farm or the car or the bar. So why spend the money?

And besides, the worst part was the dead air. When all both parties want to hear is the sound of the other's voice, no one knows what to say or when to say it. Suddenly there's conversation gridlock, and we each keep saying dumb little things like, "It's good to hear your voice, Mom". "It's good to hear yours too, son." "Are you getting enough to eat?" "Yes, Mom. They feed us plenty, but I sure miss your homemade pies." "Well, I'll send some more cookies." "We sure miss you son." "Miss you too, Pop." More than we ever realized before. Just what was it we talked about over the dinner table all those years? Recapping our day, making plans for tomorrow. All this pain could be avoided if you just wrote a few lines on a piece of Army stationery (which was always available) and Special Services even provided help to those who lacked the skill to say what needed to be said.

But some guys really just never learned how to write. Some could only read the simplest things, signs, instructions, etc. They'd been forced into higher grades because there were so many of us Baby Boomers and there was always someone waiting for that desk. "He'll learn, somehow, have faith in the individual," they always said. But what about the individuals who lacked faith in themselves? And then there were always those stories of High School drop-outs that became millionaires or Presidents, so there was plenty of allowance made for ignorance of 'book learning'. But the Army wasn't concerned about any of that, they just didn't want parents, the Red Cross, or Congressmen calling, won-

dering if their boy was OK.


With the perspective of age and time I can now see what the larger problem is. It's the blank page. It's the metaphor of all metaphors of life. We're all born with one and must fill it in as we go, without knowing where it's going or why it's going there. Life is easy, all you ever have to do is be a good follower – be it worker, citizen, child, parent, soldier, teacher, politician or preacher. Just follow the example that someone else set and keep to the path. Clap when they clap, say Amen when they say Amen. Do this and you'll be loved, work harder and you'll make more money. Make more money, you'll be able to work less and have more and more. Vote for me, I'll set you free; if you want more freedom, fight more war. But then suddenly you are faced with the aloneness of putting yourself down on paper.

There is an old saying that three things a person has to do alone are be born, die, and testify. And writing letters is a way of testifying about what is in your heart. Twenty-six letters of the alphabet and thousands of words in our language and still we struggle to express our most basic emotions. It's easier to touch, kiss, caress, to get on your knees, carve your initials in a tree or to dedicate a song. With only eight notes, Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do, every single musician from Mozart to Louie Armstrong to Hank Williams has done it better than all the words in all the languages known to man. "Please dedicate the next song to my girlfriend." "Listen, honey, they're playing our song." "Remember how we used to love that song when we were young?" "I still mean it old girl, you're the one for me."

It is said that it's the notes that make the tune, but the spaces between the notes are what make it a song. So too are the spaces between lines that are really what's being said in every letter we write to someone we love. But the struggle remains for us to come up with those words in the first place that express what's in our hearts.

By the first week of December 1969 it was all over and I was relieved to be at Ft. Rucker, because it meant I really was going to Helicopter School. Just not right away; there was a delay before classes started. The shit details were moronic, but as I said in this letter of Dec 1st, at least it was more like real life, where you do it for them during the day and for yourself on nights and weekends.

mon. Dec 1 1969


UNITED STATES ARMY

High!

Well, here I am at Ft. Rucker, Alabama. It's just a pissy-ass little base where they teach Aviation, in the midst of a "dry" county; clear the hell out in the midst of nowhere (other wise none as Alabama). I'm not in school yet, I'm held over in this company until the school starts which may not start until after Christmas. Until then, we pull details, such as clean-up K.P., guard duty etc such rotten shit. One thing about this, we can wear civilian clothes, and let our hair grow on top and at 4:00 we're off to do as we please. I got through basic ~~ok~~, it wasn't hard to pass those test. The last week was easy as hell, we stayed drunk most of the time. And about firing the M-16 rifle, I told you I fired sharpshooter (with live bullets all the time, even for practice) well now, I while I'm here, I have to qualify ~~for~~ with the old M-14, why, I don't know, but it at least ~~gets~~ gets me off detail. Christmas leave starts the 19th. I should be home the afternoon of the 20th traveling by bus, which is the only I can get home. Imagine, 24 hours on a bus, oh the pain! Well, anyway, I'll be home, and I don't have to be

Crew Chief School would happen after Christmas leave, so for the moment I felt just plain relieved that I'd

made it through Basic Training.

UNITED STATES ARMY

back here till the 4th so I'll be home for New Years. Break out the booze! Tell [redacted] not to get mad at me for not answering her letter right away, but I'll get it out as soon as possible. This is the first letter I've got out for days. I called Dad tonight for the first time in a long time. They still have not sold Proud Mary yet, but they cancelled the insurance.

my new address is
A. [redacted]
T. E. S.
Ft. Rucker Alabama 36360

Don't forget it, please!

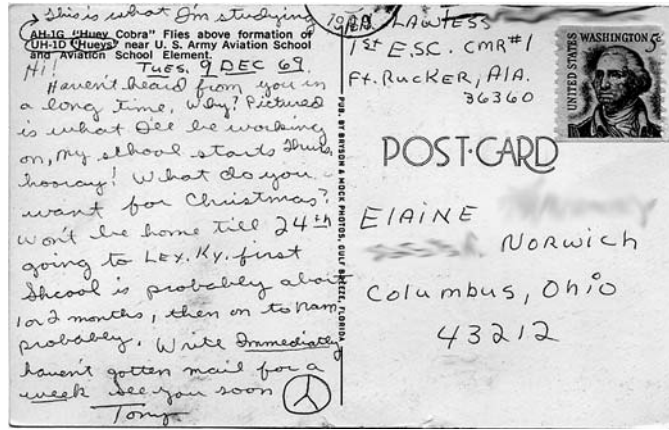
Well, time for bed, write soon

← Tony

P.S. enclosed is a picture of you truly in my old company, taken during one of my periods of exhilaration (on a drunk).

I'd learned to lock and load, parry and thrust, low crawl, answer a password challenge on Guard Duty, learned about military justice (there was none), military courtesy (to the ranks above yours, only) how to bob and weave your way under blind authority (same as being around drunks, pretty much) and that the Red Cross helped in emergencies but they made you pay the money back.

Met some interesting people who were outrageous and who convinced me to someday head to California; and suffered through some other people who I've spent the remainder of my life trying to ignore, despite having to watch in horror as they succeeded in politics, business and the media.



But there was one more “learning experience” waiting for me that had nothing to do with Army life. This was a lesson of life that shocked and saddened me and has never left me.

On that bus ride home from Ft. Rucker near Dothan (a small town in the southern end of Alabama) to my Mother’s house in Lexington, Kentucky, I saw poverty of a type and scale that I had never seen, was not prepared for, and which disgusted and shamed me. I had seen poverty in the low income housing project in Columbus, Ohio when my Mother took us out of our small town home after the divorce. I had gone to school at Marshall Elementary, in Cynthiana, Kentucky, with the children of coal miners and itinerant farmers and sharecroppers; I had seen black bums on the streets of Lexington and heard my mother make fun of them and the way they were always asking people stopped at traffic lights for cigarettes. I had seen the poor section of Columbus, Ohio and even once saw the grimy ghettos that the steel business had produced in Pittsburgh. But this was Old South tarpaper shack poverty, the kind the Kennedy Brothers had found in Appalachia in the late Fifties and used to create the food stamp program, and which Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society created the War on Poverty to combat. But here it was 1969, almost a decade later and the place looked to me

like it couldn't possibly have changed much since Civil War Reconstruction. Central Kentucky puts a genteel face on the South, with its beautiful rolling green hills and the long white fences with beautiful horses grazing lazily behind them. The business of tobacco even seems gentlemanly, the drying barns and warehouses providing quaint scenery and jobs for all.

But the lower Alabama that I saw out the window of that Trailways Bus (couldn't afford Greyhound) was field after field of used up farm land, inhabited by joyless-looking black people who lived in tiny shacks that didn't look as well built as the chicken coops back home. There were mules pulling plows across bleak fields, with black men and boys in tattered clothes and sweat-soaked straw hats following morosely behind. I'd only ever seen modern farming, my Grandfather's garage full of tractors, combines and disking machines.

It wasn't just a region, it was almost the entire length of Alabama, since these buses served mostly the small town routes. This was misery on such a scale that I couldn't believe it was the U.S. in the year 1969. This was some other country, some other time. We had so much and these people had so little and I found no answer for the question of why. Filthy, underdressed little children played in the dirt where scrawny chickens pecked the hard ground. Windowless little shacks that looked like they were abandoned decades ago were still being called home. Our barracks back at Ft. Gordon would have been palaces to these people. We were fighting a war thousands of miles away, while here in our own backyard we were losing a war on poverty that we'd been fighting for just about as long as we'd been fighting in Vietnam. Just that summer, an American had landed on the moon, declaring, "A giant leap for mankind". How was it helping these people?

I distinctly remember looking at the other passengers on the bus and wondering if they saw what I saw, felt like I felt. But there wasn't much conversation, the obnoxious drunk or the squalling restless children kept everyone an-

noyed and forced to stay within themselves as the bus bounced over neglected roads and prevented sleep. Nothing to do but stare out the window.

They knew I was off to war; my uniform bespoke my fate - yet another war on another front that I saw outside the window bespoke theirs. I was the one whose eyes were being opened. I wanted to get off that bus and do something, who wouldn't have? But once off, I could never have gotten back on. And if I'd stayed there to this day, I wonder, what really could I have changed? Early lessons about the true inequities of life. Someone always has it worse.

But the bus keeps moving northward and soon Alabama gives way to Tennessee and then the familiar sights of Kentucky. Army and Alabama are quickly overshadowed by parties with family and friends and fine meals in warm modern houses. All my favorite food and people. Everywhere I went there were proud looks, backslaps, hugs and handshakes for the favorite son who had survived our society's gauntlet. They didn't need to know that I'd barely gotten through the physical training, or that my ankles swelled up so much that I limped through the final tests; sordid details are best left out. What good is wearing a uniform unless it smoothes over a few of your wrinkles?

Wrapped in this 'cloaking of manhood', I slept like a baby in the bed of my boyhood, feeling that surely this means something, at least that I'd never again have to fear being that scared little kid. He was deep inside and hidden by my accomplishment. At least for that brief moment he was.

I have little memory of that Christmas of 1969, but I know everyone had a great time. There was good reason to believe that I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam, the papers reassured us it was nearly over. The family lived well and in harmony, conflicts were set aside for the moment as we exchanged gifts and drank in the good cheer that came with the closing of an old year. So much to celebrate. What a long eventful year it had been. I had learned so much, done so much, passed so many tests. Graduated, made decisions, joined up, and faced the consequences. During that vacation,

I doubt if I looked back on the year as anything that special.

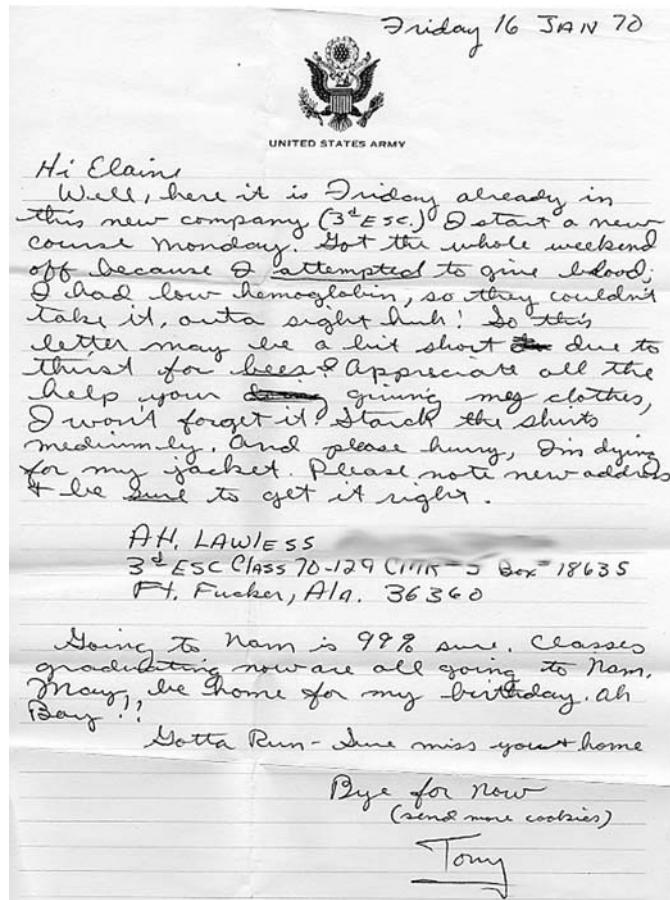
It's only now, more than 30 years later, that the events seem larger. Only now can I say that for me, it was the last Christmas that I really enjoyed, when we were all family, everyone still alive, well, prosperous and able to believe that things would always be this way. All we had to do was come together and everything would be OK. I was welcomed home and home was welcome.

Christmas turned into New Years and for the first time in my life, I had something real and concrete lying ahead of me, instead of just dreams and fantasies - I was going back to Alabama to Helicopter School. Inside, I was apprehensive, as I had no one telling me what would happen when I got there. On the outside however, I was the Man, on a roll and in control. For the first time in my life, something about me felt complete, all there, and headed somewhere.

Youthful ignorance is indeed blissful because there is blessedly no way of knowing that you would never feel just this way again. If I could have seen what was ahead for me I would have called in sick that next morning, played dead, or run away and hid. Make them fight that war without me. But all that good feeling I'd just experienced and all those good wishes I'd received from family and friends would have vanished if I hadn't kept true to the path I'd mapped out for myself. It was actually easy to stay on the path at that time, since, even though I had to report back to the Army, I was now officially a Private, (E-2 pay grade) reporting for duty as a Crew Chief Trainee, and there was no reason to quit now. I was just going back to Alabama, then I'd be home again and we could have yet another party. Easy stuff. All in all, a good year, my 1969 - like none ever before, and like none ever since.

CHAPTER 8 - A.I.T: GUNS SPIT FIRE, BOYS SPIT JUICE

The Army rumor mill gets worse when you're in transit, as there is nothing else to talk about and lots of new people from different duty stations whose blabber must be tolerated, even solicited. All of which keeps me totally off guard, as the chances of going to Vietnam, which were lessening in January because they were sending guys back, suddenly become ninety-nine percent sure, as, according to this letter of January 16, all graduating classes were going...



And even though I'd just stuffed myself with everyone's home cookin', my hemoglobin was too low for them to take my blood, but I got the weekend pass anyway - taking advantage of another of my weaknesses. And my other weakness, for cookies, saw me writing Elaine every few days, talking about care packages.

Wed. 4 FEB. 70

Elaine,

Well, I'm sorry I took so long to write back, but I haven't felt like doing a damn thing all week! I finished the maintenance course Monday and now I'm in the Door gunner course. This is just where we learn about the guns mounted on the helicopter and how to shoot them. (A vital part of staying alive in Viet Nam) I'll be done with this Monday, graduate from ~~E~~ the whole affair Wednesday, then Preliminary Overseas Training & I go overseas. (Which I have about an 85% chance of going to Nam, but it's nothing, don't repeat that to anyone) But I still don't know when I'll get home, because orders may not come from Wash. D.C. right away and I'll have to wait a couple of weeks before I get them. So I'm going to surprise everyone! ha ha! Really though I'll be at least 3 weeks before I get "Back on the Block".

The M-60 machine gun had been used by the Army since WW II, and had been adapted for use on helicopters in a couple of different ways. But at the time, we were only being taught the 'Slick' mount, which bolted the gun to a pod, and added a pair of handles to replace the pistol grip trigger.

In an earlier letter, I mentioned having to shoot the M-14 rifle and I recall how much more like a real gun it felt and how down right fun it was to fire. It was another relic from WWII, used in Vietnam (by that time) only by snipers and a handful of infantrymen. With no real time to adjust the sights, it was still accurate enough (and responsive to that 'Kentucky Windage') for me to earn an 'Expert' ribbon. Being longer and heavier made it impractical for use on helicopters, so that was my first and only experience with it, but it made me even more aware of the M-16's faults.

The Maintenance Course covered the things that a Crew Chief was responsible for, like cleaning the Particle Separator (Army lingo for air cleaner), the oil filter, and how to inspect the 'hell-hole' - literally a hole on the underside of the aircraft large enough for a man to crawl up into, where it was always dirty, dark and leaking something - and a good target to shoot at, from the enemies' perspective.

We were not permitted to smoke in the old wooden buildings where classes were held, so some wise guy (student) asked if it would be OK to 'chaw', or chew the stuff during class. Probably without thinking it through, the instructor gave permission, and pretty soon, two or three guys were bringing in tin cans to spit the juice in, which sounded almost as bad as it looked and smelled. Next thing we know, more guys joined in, some of whom didn't even smoke cigarettes, they just got a kick out of it for the feeling of delinquency or defiance it gave them. Soon, they and their old coffee cans occupied the front row of the room. And everyday the rest of the class kept getting farther and farther back, until finally our backs were literally against the wall.

The other job a Crew Chief was responsible for was a tedious, time-consuming grease job on the 'short shaft', a two-piece splined and grooved metal tube which connected the turbine engine with the transmission. A small template was used to measure the thickness of the new grease, which was applied after a laborious cleaning. All made worse because it required an inspection upon cleaning and another upon final greasing - which meant it was not only hard, but

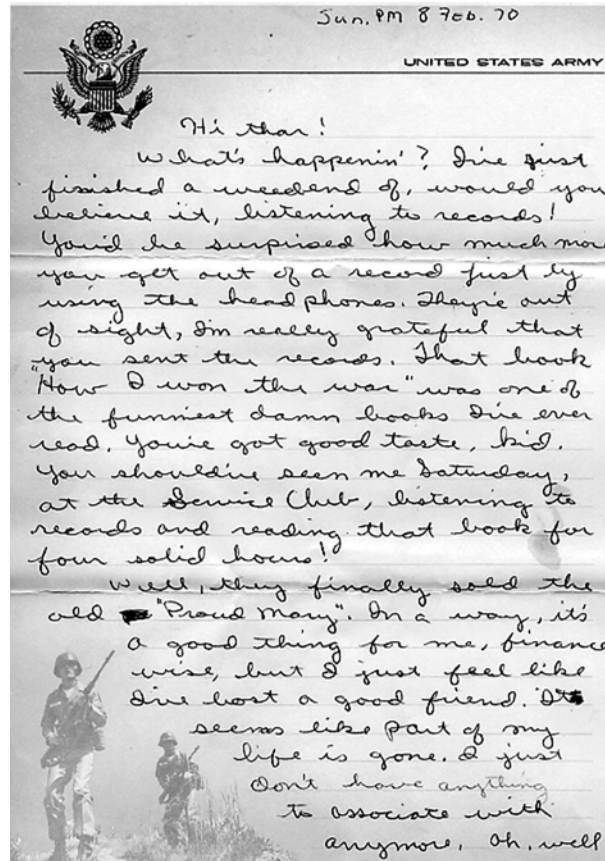
the inspector could be hard to find when you needed him; giving them one more chance to jerk you around.

Sophisticated as the Huey helicopter was, we were told of a very low tech method of cleaning that kept the blades of the turbine engine fans free from built up carbon. It was a lot of work to tear the engine apart just to clean off soot, and you couldn't get a toothbrush in there, so some genius at Lycoming, after much trial (and a lot of error, I imagine) figured out that the best thing you could pour into the front end of the engine that would clean out the back end without damaging any parts was - walnut husks. Yep, ladies and germs, ground up walnut husks were just soft enough for the intake fans to handle but 'spongy' enough to effectively scour the soot off those combustion blades.

Of course, sometimes, just like everything else in the Army, you had to wait for a shipment of walnut husks. But unlike every other supply part you had to wait for, walnut husks were the one thing about which the Army could not say "Hey, that stuff don't grow on trees, ya know."

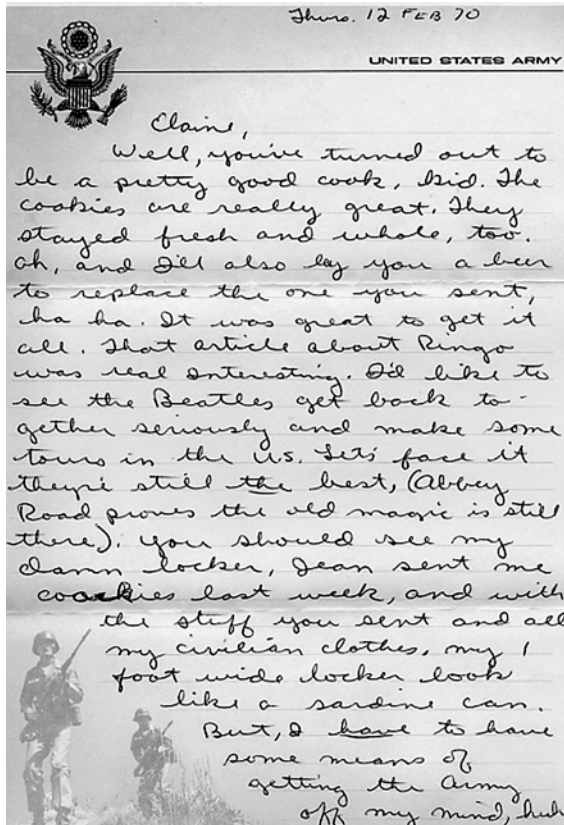
I was becoming disappointed that there were so few things about the turbine engine that we were allowed to touch - most work was done by specialists in the hangar ('hangar rats'). The fuel control box was such a precision instrument that its mechanism was only worked on in a bath of cleaning solution, the oil from your fingerprints could ruin it. I gained a lot of respect for the engineering and technology, but found that all I was being trained to do, really, was gas 'er up and check under the hood. If something didn't look right, your orders were to get someone who knew something, and let them decide what it needed.

I was getting what I'd asked for all right, but it was turning out to be a lot less than what I expected or wanted. And it didn't offer much hope for a future career. I'm still a *grease monkey*, only the vehicle is different.



Funny how a person spends their free time when money's low. I was still paying debts I owed on my 'race' car, so hanging around Base, listening to records and reading, were a major way of escaping, as was writing letters praising the goodies sent - and begging for more.

That Service Club had amazing state of the art components for listening to records, which, for me, were the Beatle records such as *RUBBER SOUL* and *ABBEY ROAD*. Still hoping, as many of us did for years, that the Beatles would get back together.

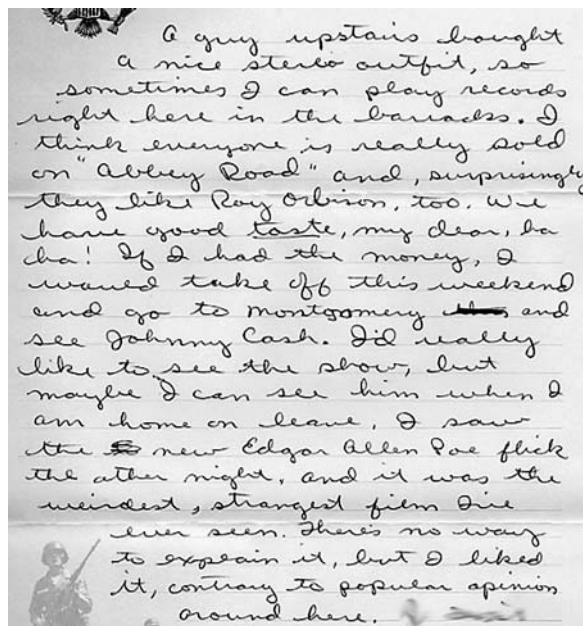


Then, half way through A.I.T., I learned something that changed everything. One thing that made everything not just hard but bitter as well.

By 1969, it had become impossible to notice that the Draft wasn't fair; too many poor guys, too many guys from rural areas, ghettos and too many who just should not have been called, were being drafted. Too many of America's privileged were getting college deferments, even if they were on their sixth year of undergraduate work. Too many had connections in the local draft board and too few sons of the very people who committed American troops to the Vietnam War were suffering the loss or paying the price. So the Selective Service came up with a lottery to make it more fair. 365 numbers, representing each individual's birthday, were

drawn out of a hat in a big ceremony, and the numbers were printed in the papers. They figured only the first hundred or so would ever get called.

My number was 268. I would have never been called. I was going through all this hell - for nothing. Humiliating enough to have enlisted, but now, one of the main reasons I'd enlisted - to avoid being a 'draftee' and getting the worst duty - didn't exist for me. Well-laid plans crashed down around me and there was no getting out of it or lashing out at anyone. I could only blame myself. Two and a half more years I had to face the Army. Hell, I better go to Vietnam, by God, cause I gotta kill somebody, even if it is fool me for being such a fool. I don't know if I ever told anyone about this. There was just no way you could laugh this one off. Even for someone who was used to being laughed at.



I was surprised by this reference to Johnny Cash, who was as country as you could get at that time, but I believe he was one of those performers who we liked because of his guitar sound and his defiant, rebellious (and we be-

lieved) drug-taking image.

That new 'Edgar Allen Poe flick', was a compilation of short stories by different directors called Spirits of the Dead. One segment starred Jane Fonda, and was directed by her then-husband, Roger Vadim. I don't recall how the audience reacted, but it is my guess that this was before her heavy antiwar period, when she became known as 'Hanoi Jane', and the favorite target of supporters of the Vietnam War. Never saw or heard of it anymore, and now wonder if maybe Jane didn't buy up all the prints to keep it off the market, it was that weird.

MON. 9 MAR 70

Howdy,
Got your letter today. Not much
~~happening~~ happening around. We fired
machine guns out of a helicopter today.
It was a gas! I really love to fly,
and shooting a machine gun just
adds to the fun! Of course, it may
not be so much fun when some
son of a bitch shoots back!! It may
get a little scary!

Then up another affair

Earlier, we'd gotten our first ride in a helicopter, my first ever. It didn't last long, as they were probably just trying to find out if we got sick, got vertigo, or just plain chickened out. Luckily, I did none of the above, but I know for sure that by the time we took this ride, I was about to die from anticipation anxiety. Here I'd staked everything on being a Crew Chief - which I was finding out was just a gas-pumping, oil-checking, guide-them-into-their parking spot Door Gunner - and I didn't know if I was going to like it or even be able to take it. What if I puked all over the place (which some did) or got dizzy from air sickness (which some did) or just plain didn't like it (which some did not)? Then, I'd just be a mechanic, still stuck in a garage, turning

wrenches, with no way to pull off any of my well-laid plans of going to war and drawing blood - theirs or mine. I'd have to work for the next two and a half years as I'd worked all my life, fixing others people's machines. Rich kid squeals the tires, poor kid fixes the flat. This was one of those times when I was determined. Maybe it was mind over matter, but I was gonna prove I could do this.

Little did I realize that just surviving the training was the real test - no one was really looking down from above assessing your worth. You were just a warm body to the Army and they had slots to fill; part of a quantity, my quality mattered little. Wish I'd have known that then, I would've made more fun out of it. But as this letter attests I did have some fun with a gun and was enjoying what little bit of flying we were getting.

Pointless inspections, and getting up at all hours like I was still in Basic Training, plus they're pulling out my wisdom teeth, 'just in case'. I can still hear their logic, that three hurts no worse then having one pulled - and the dire implied (or stated) warning about getting it out of the way now - "Don't wanna get it done over there". As if taking a few days off from the war would be a bad thing. But way underneath that, even, was the thought that any dentist crazy or stupid enough to end up in Vietnam would be bigger trouble than the loss of a few teeth you "really didn't need anyhow"...

Sun. AM MARCH 15/70

Mornin' half,

I say morning because it's 9:30 Sunday morning and I've been awake since 6:30. I know it's crazy, but we had an inspection yesterday ~~morning~~ and I had to get up at 3:30. So, by 5:00 yesterday afternoon I was brushed and fell asleep on my bunk and I just didn't feel like sleeping this morning. I got the goodies yesterday and the cake is really delicious. I really appreciate getting the care packages, they really renew my faith in the outside world and I feel that someone really cares for me. I'm glad you didn't send the Beatles album, because, like an idiot I went out and bought it, when I knew I couldn't afford it. And now - 2 weeks from my next payday, I'm broke! Besides, I went over to the Service Club yesterday to check out a stereo and they said that they weren't going to check them out anymore because some moron got into a bunch of them and stole some expensive components, so they're not letting anyone use them for a while! Boy was I pissed! I'd like to get my hands on that sonofabitch!

Well this has been a pretty busy week. Tuesday I had 3 molar teeth pulled. Needless to say it hurt like hell. It bled so bad the dentist put stitches in the gums! It's been sore ever since. I go back Monday to have the stitches taken out. Then ~~the~~ Wed. we

All this, and I'd spent my last dough on a Beatle record I couldn't listen to. I'd still like to get my hands on the S.O.B who stole the stereo stuff, but The Army's Criminal Investigation Division is still searching for a suspect.

Started jungle training, which is a requirement now (just in case). We had to fire the M16 rifle the first day. I'd already done it in Basic, but I had to do it again. Then Friday we went on ambush training. The temperature was about 40° and very windy. One here we were out there playing 'G. I. Joe' like fools! I really got bad when we had to wade through the ~~swamps~~ swamps. Cold, dirty, and tired was the only things I felt that night, and on top of that I had a big inspection to prepare for the next day! What a bummer! Oh, well it's all over now. I got a promotion last week to PFC, now (Private First Class) I wish I was a real PFC (Proud fucking civilian) ha ha! Pardon the language. I'll make a little more money now anyway.

Well kid, I'm coming home! It probably will be the last week of this month I'm not sure, we don't have our orders yet. But I will be home finally! Thank God

Well got lots of letters to write so write soon & thanks for the goodies

Homeward Bound,
Hisself

'Ambushed' from all sides: losing my teeth, taking jungle training, slogging through cold swamps, playing 'G. I. Joe' in the wind and rain, and no tunes to help me sail away.

The promotion to Private First Class (pay grade E-3) was practically automatic at that stage, the pay raise was minuscule and even the knowledge that I was going home seemed like small relief. No wonder I was so grateful for the Care Package - I had the blues bad and now had to go home, just to say goodbye.

This being the last letter before my last leave means that within days I got orders to report - meaning I was definitely going to Vietnam.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES ARMY AVIATION CENTER AND FORT RUCKER
Fort Rucker, Alabama 36360

SPECIAL ORDERS
NUMBER 65
EXTRACT

11 March 1970

72. TC 211. Following named individuals are relieved from assignment to organizations shown after their names and REASSIGNED as specified. Data applies to all individuals except as otherwise indicated.

REASSIGNED TO: United States Army Oversea Replacement Station (WODG 08G)
Fort Dix, New Jersey 08640

ADMINISTRATIVE ACCOUNTING DATA

Auth: As Indic
Alloc: USARPAC
Ultimate asg: VN Tran Det (WOER) APO SF 96384 (P5)(OBRC)

FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Reporting date: 10 April 1970
Leave data: 15 days delay en route chargeable as leave
Travel data: Not applicable
Availability date: Not applicable
Port call data: Report to Fort Dix, New Jersey 08640
not earlier than 1000 hours not later than 1200 hours on
10 April 1970. Port Call Control Number: W00437
Special Instructions: (a) Will Proceed Date: 24 March 1970
(b) Comply with the following numbered item(s) of
DA Supplemental Instructions (Appendix B, AR 310-10):
11, 26, 27, 34, 36, 39, 40, 41, 43, 48, 58, 59, 62, 65

NAME, SSAN, GRADE, MOS, PCS MDC, RELIEVED FROM, OPO CONTROL NUMBER, LINE NUMBER

Auth: VOCHOPO (Sp5 E [redacted] & [redacted]) 13 Feb 70
ROHLINGER, JOSEPH E [redacted] PFC 67A1F ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11B) Fort
Rucker, Alabama 36360 VSU E270
Auth: DA ROSIER EPADR 3-13 dtd 13 Feb 70
[redacted] PV2 67N20 ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11
Fort Rucker, Alabama 36360 EXK 0799
[redacted] PV2 67N20 ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11B) Fort
Rucker, Alabama 36360 VTD J157
[redacted] PV2 67N20 ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11B) Fort
Rucker, Alabama 36360 VTD J149
[redacted] PV2 67N20 ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11B) Fort Rucker,
Alabama 36360 VTD J169
LAWLESS, ANTHONY H [redacted] PV2 67N20 ZWEO 3rd Enl Stu Co (WIDZ 11B) Fort
Rucker, Alabama 36360 VTD J161

This is what those orders looked like: Just one line (here underlined by the bold line), so few words...Ultimate Asg: [assignment] VN that spelled out such a fateful sentence. As if not spelling out the word Vietnam made it easier to take.

CHAPTER 9 - MIXED-EMOTION COCKTAILS, ONE AIRPORT AWAY

The question I was asked most often on that last leave was, “So, where do you go first, Tony?” Everyone knew where I was going to end up - Vietnam - so the only polite thing was to ask about the steps between home and the final destination. “Well, I leave out of Port Columbus and fly to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey on Sunday, (April 12, 1970) and from there I don’t know, won’t know till final travel orders come...”

A more somber celebration could not be dreamed up in fiction than the real one that takes place just before a kid goes off to war. Books don’t dwell on it, the reader is anxious for the coming action of battle, and Hollywood always places the scene on a train, where a whistle and steam blowing add poignant punctuation, as all the characters gather to kiss and wave, while the soldier’s face sticks out the window and slowly fades away.

But it doesn’t happen that way. Saying goodbye becomes a chore and a bore, revisiting all those houses of your youth, all those memories and all those you love and know you’re going to miss, trying your best to play some brave role, wearing that stupid ass uniform that everyone thinks is so patriotic. They were all doing it just once, but I had to say goodbye over and over - and one goodbye ain’t enough, while a thousand won’t cover the tears of someone you love. So sorry to cause all their pain, wish I had more time (but wish I could leave right now and save everybody having to think of something to say).

My money wasn’t any good in any bar, there were more drinks bought than I could possibly consume. Handshakes were firmer, old times couldn’t be re-hashed enough - anything to avoid the present - and conflicts were suspended, since there was little left to argue about anymore. Vietnam seemed a world away from ours; by that time it had been on the news and in the papers for so long that it was just another

story. What we did talk about was the protest against the war, and how all the ‘trouble makers’, long hairs and agitators, were keeping us from ‘winning’ this-here war. No talk of battles won or territory taken back from the enemy or what we would do with Vietnam once we ‘won it’, only what effect it was having on us. And by that time, I was listening more than I talked; I just wanted to get on with it.

That last leave is too short to enjoy and lasts too long to endure. Every visit became a scene. They suggest you write a Will at that time, but I’m just eighteen with nothing to leave and no family of my own to leave it to. Debts get paid or forgiven, promises get made, “We’ll write everyday”, they say. “I’ll write as soon as I get to my final assignment”, I say. No one expects heroics, just “take care and bring your scrawny-ass self back home in one piece, you hear me you son-of-a-bitch!?”

I had always hated Sundays, especially the evenings. It was the end of the weekend and Mondays just never held much promise for me - it was either back to school or work, neither of which I ever looked forward to in my life.

And the most important Sunday night of my generation, I missed. The night the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan, I was in... church. My brother had to tell me about it, emphasizing the spelling of their name. “It’s *B-E-A-T-L-E-S*, Tony, and they were great”. That next day in school, a half a dozen guys got sent home because they had combed what little hair they had down over their foreheads. This was Lexington, Kentucky, February 1964, you must remember. I was not so bold. But I have never forgiven the church for making me miss that show.

So, on this Sunday afternoon in April 1970, after I’d said the last good-byes to my neighbors and friends, and the duffel bag which had been packed yesterday was loaded into the family’s Chevrolet, there was no one left but family. We piled in and drove to the airport, and as we made our way

across Gahanna, I remember looking at the places where I'd lived out the last few years of my youth, emotionless and numb, as if I was already apart from it, despite it's being just outside the car window.

We stopped at the Airport restaurant to have a last bite together and wait for my plane to be called. (Roy and Elaine showed up at the airport at the last minute - Elaine remembers that I wasn't happy to see her and Roy, probably a case of not wanting anymore people there than necessary, just in case I wasn't able to keep that little boy inside me from busting out in tears) That last beer tasted pretty good, and the hustle and bustle of the airport helped divert attention from the last goodbye. Some tiny part of me felt like crying, but I didn't. Couldn't. I hadn't cried since I was thirteen years old, even though I felt like it many, many times. Big boys don't cry. That was law and no one, not even myself in my most private, painful moments, could give me permission to break that law.

Besides, I was getting exactly what I wanted and was just taking the medicine I had prescribed for myself. Once, years later, my Stepmother said putting me on that plane that day was the saddest thing a person could ever do. I don't remember his exact words, but my Dad did not try to be brave or tell me to make him proud. He just said, "Come home", which almost made me break down, but I was able to assure him that I would and hugged him one last time. There are some moments when you hug someone and really feel them. You don't think, you just feel. Commit this touch, this smell, this feel to memory, and carry it always. Forget everything else, only the love passing between you counts at moments like these.

Why does it take a war to make peace between us?

Last call for the flight, I headed through the gate, turned around and gave one last wave, then walked on down the plane ramp. Took my hat off and thrust out my hand to the stewardess so she could see the seat number on the ticket I'd been grasping for the last half hour. Took off my jacket, sat down and found something in the seat pocket to focus on

so that my eyes could dry a bit. Can't be betrayed by a tear escaping. Not now. Not ever. From my window seat, I could see their faces and their waving hands and wished the plane would move. Finally, we were up and flying and I was getting an aerial view of my hometown at twilight, with porch lights coming on, the glow of the day giving way to evening shadows.

That was it, I thought, a part of me breathed a sigh of relief. But the next intake of air brought with it realization that the 'I' that I was referring to, was no more, and now belonged to some unknown future. One that I would only be able to blame on myself. I was getting what I wanted, what I'd signed up for, adventure, a way out, a future apart from family and home.

Not until many years later did I think of what it must have been like for them to take that drive back home. (And didn't get a chance to ask the Parents before they died) I'm sure they had a good stiff drink, maybe watched some TV and put the kids to bed, like always. But what must it have felt like to them, and to the millions of others like them, who didn't know day to day where their boy was or what dangers he faced? Did they read the papers more closely - or less? I was off doing, while they could only wait - for a letter that said too much or too little. Or for the two men in the plain sedan, who they sent to your home to inform you that your boy was dead. On that day I thought only of my own feelings, but there were others, too, who felt pain. And no amount of pride can overcome the pain of that last day.

CHAPTER 10 – “...NEXT STOP IS VIETNAM”

Leaving home in Port Columbus, I had been part of the broad mix of civilians, but landing at McGuire Air Force Base I was suddenly part of the broad mix of military, many in uniforms I couldn't match with any of our Armed Services and a few in unauthorized mixtures of civilian and military clothes. Technically they were out of uniform, and again I was in awe of how boldly some guys defied all things military. But one little guy just didn't seem to care, and created a bizarre, unforgettable scene. Dressed in bell-bottom pants and a wild shirt, he walked through that airport with a portable 8-track cassette player, smiling and singing along to the Country Joe and the Fish song *Feel Like I'm Fixin To Die Rag*. And practically everyone within earshot joined in on the chorus, which by now, we'd memorized from the Woodstock album. I kept thinking that some officer was going to come along and take that box away and arrest him, but I didn't see it happen. It was, after all, just an Air Force Base, and arresting the guy could have started a riot.

There was a hit song at that time called, *I'm Leaving On A Jet Plane*, that was so sad and overplayed that it had gotten down right annoying. Country Joe's ditty was much more in line with the mood of the times and the people who lived them. An appropriately insane, fittingly profane antidote to square Top 40 schmaltz. In this topsy-turvy turnstile for transients, it set just the right tone of craziness for what was to come.

It cold-splashed me out of my blue funk and made me aware of the amazing journey I was taking. It was the longest trip I'd ever taken, but it passed very quickly - partly because of the speed we were traveling and partly because I was in no hurry to get to where I was going. And part of it was I really wanted to see the places that I was traveling through, even New Jersey.

I wrote to Elaine about the trip; but started off attempting to say something I wasn't able to say on that last leave or even on that last Sunday before I left home:

23 APRIL 70 1

Dear Elaine,

Sorry I haven't written before but this is the first chance I've had for a while. To recap what's happened I'll start out with ~~the~~ Sunday, I just off I'll admit I hated like hell leaving. It was terrible thinking that ^{the} last time I'd see my favorite things for a whole year, I never thought leaving ~~was~~ would hit me as bad as it did. I'm just glad my favorite people were there to see me off. Do you realize that you and Roy are my best friends. Of course I'd probably never say that to Roy, but he knows it. And you and I have always ~~had~~ seen things ~~for~~ in the same light and it helps me a lot just to think about you

2

and Roy, Dad and Jean, and ^{and} this weird; only 9 days from home and already I'm wanting to come home.

Sometimes what needs to be said just won't come out. It's too painful to tell someone just how much they mean to you and how much you'll miss them. We're each trying to bolster the other's courage by not letting the obvi-

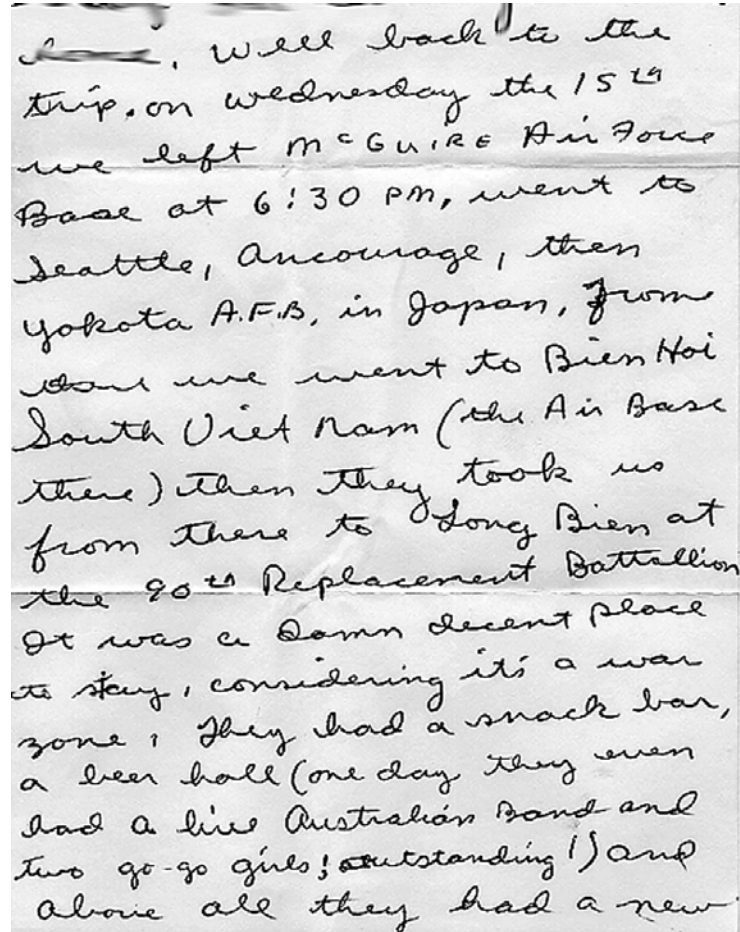
ous into the conversation; we all know it could be the last time we see each other, so why belabor the point by getting too emotional? Do your crying into your pillow, or you'll cause everyone else to cry. Even though that's what we all needed - a good cry. Sure deserved it.

One of the things that has improved over the years is the realization that it's not just OK or therapeutic to cry, but a necessary part of good mental health. We needed a good cry then, a whole bunch of us did; had damn good reason, too. Part of what took me so long to recover was just breaking through this one barrier. Thirty years. They used to scold us when we cried, when a lot of times we desperately needed a shoulder; life is scary enough without the added fear that crying makes you vulnerable; our handiest relief valve is forbidden to us. It's not really a weakness at all, just proof that you're human, and for that reason susceptible to pain, emotional as well as physical.

So I was trying to tell Elaine how much I felt and hurt. Maybe it was due to the sudden and inescapable realization that all the training and all the traveling was over and I really was in a war zone and could die at any moment. Or maybe I'd stored all this up and planned to say it in a letter at the first chance I got, since to say it in person would have created one of those moments that become 'his last words'; and if you don't acknowledge the possibility of death, you don't have to face the possibility. So I put a few words on paper, then get on with the story. Give them something to talk about, other than just emotions which would further deepen the sadness.

CHAPTER 11 - FIRST DAY IN-COUNTRY - I'M AN NCO!

Further on in that first letter from in-country I recap the journey.



Will look to the trip, on Wednesday the 15th we left McGUIRE Air Force Base at 6:30 PM, went to Seattle, Anchorage, then Yokota A.F.B. in Japan, from there we went to Bien Hoi South Viet Nam (the Air Base there) then they took us from there to Long Bien at the 90th Replacement Battalion. It was a damn decent place to stay, considering it's a war zone; they had a snack bar, a beer hall (one day they even had a live Australian band and two go-go girls; outstanding!) and above all they had a new

It was night when we refueled in Alaska so we saw nothing but a small airport. But it was an unforgettable thrill, upon approaching Osaka, to see Mt. Fuji sticking up through the clouds all covered in snow; an eye-popping amazement

at seeing something for real that I'd only ever seen before in photographs.

Boy, for a split second there I was thanking myself, this damn near makes Army bullshit worth the trouble. I could have never had this experience as a civilian. Maybe we'll get a lay over and see some of Japan, like I'd always wanted to - but no, it's a tease. We were only there to refuel again, and left right away. Can't help ya, son. This plane has to get to South Vietnam. Your doom awaits.

Never thought about this until just now, but there were some guys waiting for this plane to take them home from the war. Wish someone had pointed that out at the time.

³
~~made~~ modern swimming pool.
I was there for 3 days & I
was in that pool every
day; not without sustaining
a bad sunburn, of course. But
that one's pretty well healed
now and she got a new
one. Bah! Bah! What a way
to fight a war, huh? Well,
I didn't get by completely,
I had to work during
the day and it wasn't
easy in that heat, believe
me. They do have Radio and
T.V. over here. ~~Well~~ Well Sunday
the 19th (my "Daddy" birthday)
I learned that I was leav-
ing there but I didn't
know where or when. Then,
at 1:00 AM that Monday morn-
ing they got ~~me~~ me out of
bed, and said "you gain' to
Da Rang, son." So I said well

Unexplained in this letter was how I managed to pull off that little three day 'vacation' when I first arrived in Long Bien, the processing station where they stashed you while deciding where to send you in-country.

There was no insignia (the stripes of rank) on our 'green' uniforms, which were issued on the first day of arrival. In the first formation that day (morning formation is like homeroom, only you have to stand up through the whole thing), we just gathered around who ever was in charge and he ordered us into two groups, NCOs (non-Commissioned Officers) on this side and EM (Enlisted Men) on this side.

Well, in one of those split-second decisions you make in life, I went left instead of right. I figured if I got caught, if they actually checked our papers, I could just say I'd made a mistake, got confused because I was right in the middle and was still getting left-face mixed up with right-face as I did in Basic Training. But for once in my life, I crossed the delinquent line and got away with it. 'Got over', as the saying went. Got to swim and supervise the other guys, victims of their stupid honesty, as they pulled KP and walked Guard Duty.

I have a clear recollection of floating on my back in that pool, and thinking about how this blue sky and cool water could be any where in the world, and what a shame that it was in a war zone. It also occurred to me that, hey, some people don't have it half bad in this war zone, maybe for once, I'll get lucky. Dream on...

Whoever woke me with the news was less than the usual gruff in manner at delivering it. As if there could be no sadder news, no worse place of Duty in the whole country. The assignment sounded like a death sentence: DaNang. The ultimate place of execution, the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company. Real war in a real war outfit. Feel like I'm fixin' to die.

Warning of bad things to come, the plane ride from Bien Hoa up to Da Nang was a jolt to the jugular. Stark contrast to civilian planes and jarring proof I was getting closer to that no-bullshit zone where all things are focused on winning that war and nothing but - or so I imagined. This was no soft, quiet ride on a jet liner, this was an ugly, old-fashioned propeller-driven C-119 military transport plane - a freighter, not a cruise ship. No interior walls, its guts were exposed and huge bundles of wires and hydraulic lines surrounded you - and any one of those lines could blow at any moment and spray hot fluid all over the place. Engines screamed, everything rattled, and no sweet stewardess or polite greeting from the Captain, you just strapped yourself into the cushion-less nylon-strap seats and shut-up. Trapped inside the belly of a beast that surely was going to crash and kill me before I ever even get to the war! As it flapped its pre-historic wings over

a pre-historic countryside the damn thing even spoiled the view, as things outside could only be seen through its tiny opaque windows. I never hated flying in anything as much as that rickety C-119.

CHAPTER 12- PHANTOMS, AND OTHER TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Years before I arrived in Vietnam, I had read a book about U.S. fighter jets engaging in ‘dog fights’ over the *DMZ* (the *De-Militarized Zone*, that strip of no-man’s-land between North and South Vietnam) against Russian-made MIGs. It was a pretty exciting blow-by-blow account of our pilots going ‘toe to toe’ with the enemy. I recall having mixed feelings about it, even as I was reading it.

I wanted to be a pilot as much as I wanted to be a race car driver, and fighter pilots got to shoot guns and drop bombs - what more could you ask for? So when I landed at DaNang Air Force Base that day in April, 1970, my eye was riveted immediately to those Phantom F-4s, known as Fox Fours, taking off on combat missions.

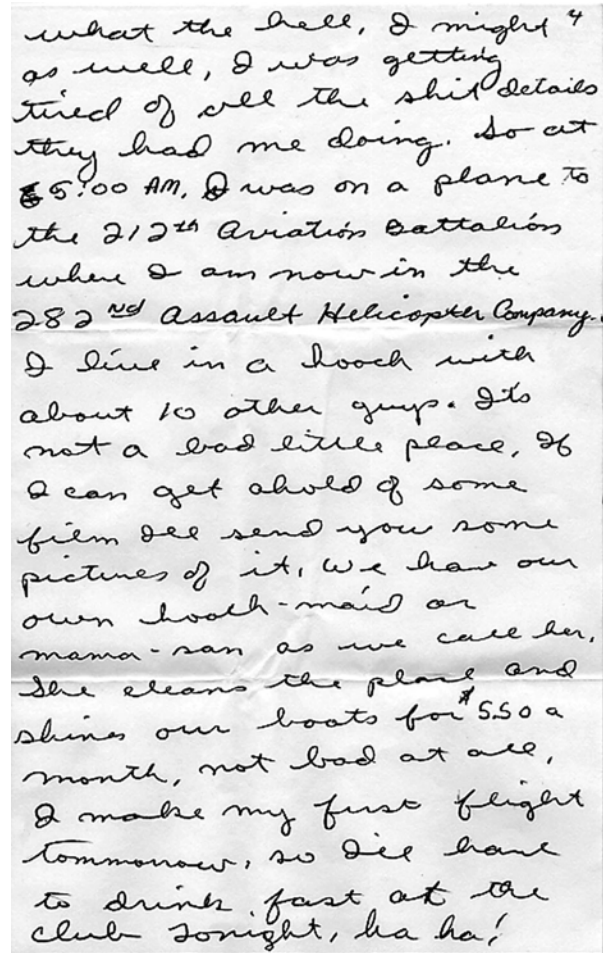
Here I’d just landed in the ugliest, clunkiest, clumsiest dodo-bird of a cargo plane, to find a nest of the most beautiful fighter jets ever made. No other jet designed since has had such elegant grace, such fine fusion of form and function, the kind that we sometimes call sex appeal, but which is really just a visual rhyme of the perfection we see in nature - like the awesome blood-lusting beauty of predatory birds or the blistering swift speed of the cheetah at full throttle. Some cars look like they’re already speeding, some lips look like they’re already kissing, and some planes look like they’re already flying, even when just standing still. Afterburners shoot flames out the back, accompanied by an ungodly roar. What raw fun. Mixed feelings come from the fact that I still love those airplanes, but just can’t enjoy their beauty as much as I used to, because I can no longer divorce their form from their function nor ignore the fact that they have no other purpose than to kill people on a mass scale. And none of them, even when loaded with the most powerful weapons in our arsenal, are effective against a human idea whose time has come.

While waiting for transportation over to my new assignment at Marble Mountain, I had lunch in the Air Force Commissary, which proved for me how much better Air Force 'chow' was, and how much I was going to miss by not having made it into the Air Force. Even low-ranking Air Force Enlisted Men ate the good food, wore neater uniforms, and seemed to be a lot less miserable than the average Army enlisted man. Air Force duty immediately struck me as more of a job than the extended shit detail the Army engaged in.

By the time the truck pulled up to take me to the other side of Da Nang, the other side of the world, really, I was overwhelmed with the urge to beg, "Please, let me stay with these guys, please, the Army will never miss me..." But no, destiny (and my new Platoon Sergeant) awaits.

CHAPTER 13 – "THE THRILL IS GONE"

There is a difference in the way you're treated when you finally reach the company to which you've been assigned; they're relieved to see warm bodies. But, by the time you arrive in DaNang, tired and jet-lagged (there was no such term at the time), in your looks-new-from-a-mile-away (olive) green uniform, you don't look as if you can be of help to anyone, much less do the job of the experienced guys you are replacing. But, hey, that's not my fault.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and describes the author's arrival at a new company, their living conditions, and their plans for the evening.

what the hell, I might ⁴
as well, I was getting
tired of all the shit details
they had me doing. So at
5:00 AM, I was on a plane to
the 212th Aviation Battalion
where I am now in the
282nd Assault Helicopter Company.
I live in a hooch with
about 10 other guys. It's
not a bad little place, &
I can get hold of some
film I'll send you some
pictures of it. We have our
own hooch-maid or
mama-san as we call her.
She cleans the place and
shines our boots for \$5.50 a
month, not bad at all.
I make my first flight
tomorrow, so I'll have
to drink fast at the
club tonight, ha ha!

There's some Officer present, the Executive Officer, maybe the C.O. (Company Commander), and most likely the Platoon Sergeant in charge, all giving you a welcome that gets less warm as the rank of the person giving it descends, until finally, some smug/weary Company Clerk is showing you to your barracks. Called hootches for some reason, I never found out why. Real buildings, at least I didn't have to sleep in a tent, and there were sandbag bunkers in between, and over there are the showers. Well good, at least I can wash off this travel grit and sandy sweat that makes this stiff new uniform even more uncomfortable; man is it always this hot? "No, in summer it's hotter".

Well, at least we're not out in the fields in the middle of nowhere with bombs going off, as your wildest dreams have imagined and feared. Some relief there. Don't feel so bad now, for having joined up instead of waiting for the draft; this could have been a lot worse, I guess.

But it's no picnic area - it's sweltering and eerie, as helicopters and planes take off and land right over there - isn't that too close? How can I sleep in all this racket? *HA!* Just wait, *Newby* (or *New Guy*). They call you *F.N.G.s* or *Fucking New Guys*; they call you that cause you have to be de-trained, then retrained. You'll find out.

Meanwhile, here's your hootch, get your gear squared away, and don't forget to lock up your stuff in the locker, thieves will rob you, unfortunately. (Hey, wait a minute, I'm thinking, aren't we all in this war together? Silly boy). That first stroll into the hootch is just too much like the first day I showed up in class at a new school, with every face turned on me. Luckily I wasn't the only one entering the hootch at that moment; I just felt like it.

First impressions - there's some nice guys here, OK, but boy, that guy I don't wanna mess with, and some of them are outright snarling at me. Turns out that, just like in school, some of the guys who at first seem nice and helpful, well, they turn out to be boring, and the ones who seem angry, are just hungover and end up to be best drinkin' pals.

Why were so many just sitting around? Lunchtime; fighters resting in their corners between rounds. All those eyes staring at me, and me wondering who will I have to fight? Who will save my life, and which one (what a morbid thought) has a funeral in his near future? It wouldn't take long to get some of the answers.

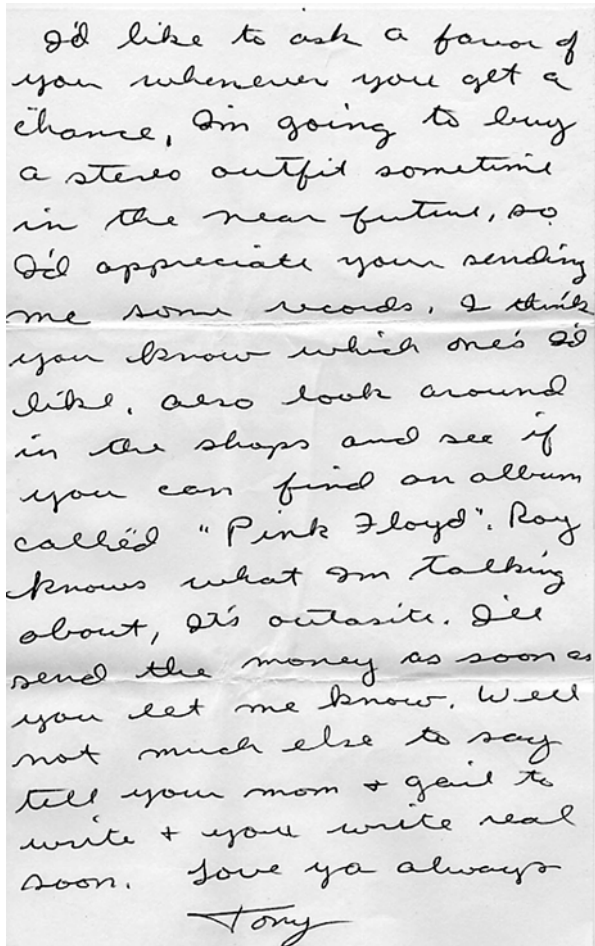
Further on in that same letter, I mention a hootch maid who would clean the place, shine boots and change bedding. I'd heard about this but didn't believe it, nor did I understand it when I saw it. Couldn't any of these women also be working for the enemy? Few spoke but the smallest amount of English, seemingly, so how could you conduct an accurate, revealing interview? Didn't they steal stuff? (No, not usually, as long as you locked up your things.) Couldn't they secretly understand English and overhear our military secrets? (No, the Army didn't keep secrets.) And who needs them anyway? What if I don't want to pay? Well, it's a closed shop, Lawless, just like the union. You can't do the work even if you wanted to, so shut up and play along. And if this is such an urgent situation, why do we need our beds made, shoes polished and everything straightened up everyday, anyhow? Just how long do we plan to be here anyway!? Probably the best question I could ask about that situation. But the evidence I gathered didn't add up to much of a case, as few people, I was to find, in Vietnam or after, were all that concerned with what I found or saw, or felt.

I later learned that, after being out flying all day, it's good to come back to a hootch that's not all covered with sand, which they would be if not swept out everyday, and clean sheets felt good after wearing a sand-sweaty rough Nomex uniform flight suit all day. Because sometimes the sheets themselves would be filled with sand and make sleeping very uncomfortable for a dead-tired Crew Chief who'd had enough suffering that day.

Early in the Vietnam War, there was supposed to have been a thing about Mama-Sans getting 'passed around' among the guys in the hootch. (*Oh Boy!* I secretly thought, *built-in sex!*) But by the time I got there in 1970, the Army

must have gotten wise to the trouble that this caused among the ranks of sex-starved men, and only hired older or married hootch maids, who would be more likely to get passed up than passed around. (Mama-Sans had other functions that I was, at this point, unaware of and would become most grateful for later.)

But what must they have thought of us and our perfumed everything, shoe polish, raked sand and obsession with stripping away the top layer of everything we rested our precious white butts on?



I'd like to ask a favor of you whenever you get a chance, I'm going to buy a stereo outfit sometime in the near future, so I'd appreciate your sending me some records, I think you know which ones I'd like, also look around in the shops and see if you can find an album called "Pink Floyd". Roy knows what I'm talking about, it's outasite. I'll send the money as soon as you let me know. Well not much else to say tell you mom + gail to write + you write real soon. Love ya always
Tony

It was *UMMAGUMMA* and it was supposed to get you high just by listening to it. Through headphones it was weirder than anything I heard up to that time. I was to become a big fan of Pink Floyd later but this request remains curious; eager to prove I was cool or something...

But of all the memories of that arrival, it was the music playing that I remember best. Only when I read the letter to Elaine did I remember about the number of guys or the Pink Floyd album request. What I had always remembered was the music that was playing either from someone's stereo or it was the radio playing AFVN (Armed Forces Vietnam) but when I finally sat down on my bunk and all that had been was suddenly over, and all that was to come was surrounding me, I heard guitar strains of one of the most amazing records ever made, and the title line could not have described better how I felt. The song's about a man feeling free at the end of a troubled affair, but the sound you hear is a piercing guitar, playing against the mournful sound of a big upright bass. Performed by the man who'd taught them all how good an electric guitar could sound, BB King..

"The thrill is gone, it's gone away for good..."

God what a sound. I can't hear that record to this day without being transported right back to that moment when I'd arrived at my bunk, in that hootch, to begin my war in Vietnam. I've been a fan of the blues ever since, and always will be. Bless you, Mr. King, and Lucille, too.

"..and now that it's all over, all I can do is wish you well..."

AND NOW FOR A BRAND NEW THRILL

It takes almost a week, but I finally get my first flight as a Door Gunner. There isn't much that I'm responsible for. Just pick up the M-60s from the Gun Room, which I'd already cleaned, affix them to their pods, and load the ammo belts into the ammo cans, making sure the rounds are dry, grease-free and there aren't any twists or dents. Check the

'action' of both guns. Hurry, the pilots are coming...

The Pilots say hello, get quick introductions all around, then a few words with the Crew Chief, before AC (Aircraft Commander, senior pilot on board) and Peter Pilot (they were all called Peter Pilot, I don't know why) complete their pre-flight inspection of the chopper. Pay attention, don't get distracted by everything. Put on the helmet, plug in the radio cord, adjust the little boom mike to my mouth; "Test, test. Can you hear me?" "Yes, for Christ sakes, not so loud!" "Sorry". Brand new prickly Nomex flight suit itches already, and it's hot, lets hurry up. Strap on the 'bullet-proof' ('*chicken*') vest, tighten all the Velcro and it gets even hotter.

Pilot yells, "Comin' hot!" Crew Chief repeats the call, so that anyone standing around the ship will get clear of the tail rotor turning and get out of the way of the turbine, which could spit fire if it suddenly got too much fuel on first ignition - called a hot start. The whine of the starter, the click, click click of the 'igniters' and then the whoosh of the turbine catching, transmission whirs, and the big blades begin to turn. A few seconds and the turbine scream begins, then the blades become a blur and the whole ship shakes and makes you wonder how everything holds together, much less gets off the ground. Kicking up sand and debris that hits you like a sand blaster. Wind swirling around feels like it could knock me down. What am I supposed to be doing right now? Crew Chief motions me to get in and fasten my 'chicken' strap. So I do.

Huey helicopters have no rear view mirrors, so the Crew Chief has to get out, stand up front and guide the pilot back out of the revetment (a parking space that is fortified with sand-filled drums piled on top of each other open only at one end. A test of a pilot's hovering skill at the beginning and end of each day). People could (and did) get killed from walking into those spinning tail rotors. But suddenly the ship is rising! Whoa! And none too steadily, it actually rocks a bit, like being picked up in a bucket by a drunk giant, hoping he doesn't swing you too fast or too far to one side and crash you into those barrels, which now seem really close. Then,

the giant starts to ease you backward until you're out of the revetment and the wind buffeting changes again, as does the noise - all of it nerve-wracking and exciting at the same time. Pilot swings the tail, the Crew Chief runs ahead and clears the way as we move forward toward the runway. Stop, set down, Chief climbs back aboard, hooks up his radio mic and says, "Clear left", which is my cue but, being a rookie, I'm a tad slow to find the button, and we have to wait just that millisecond before I can spit out the words, "Clear right". A look from the AC, not a dirty one, just checking on the new guy, that's all. Whew, that's a relief. Whoa! Wait, there's an airplane coming right at us! Push the button, "...uh.Fixed Wing taxiing here at three o'clock" (the 'o'clock' was old-time method for telling which side of the aircraft and about which direction to look at for potential obstacles).

"Got it", responds the AC; then the Pilot waits for a moment before clueing me in on how close they have to be in this taxi area before I interrupt the radio traffic. Which I can't always distinguish as our radio traffic, since I can't hear everything the pilots are hearing. Another rookie lesson: watch the Pilots in case they're talking on the radio and can't be heard through my intercom.

Don't sweat it, I'll learn. Just like any first day, nervous and eager to please. I can't see the Crew Chief from where I'm sitting; good thing - I can't see him roll his eyes at my rookie 'greenness'. Sometimes a Crew Chief would leave his seat and come over to say something out of earshot of the pilots. It could be a tip or a joke (if you were lucky) or a scold (which could ruin your day or flat piss you off). And after all, a bad report or even if you didn't 'seem to fit', these guys could refuse to fly with you - then nobody would. Can't think about that now. Just keep eyes wide open as we taxi down the runway.

The helicopter vibrates less as it picks up ground speed and heads down the runway. We're empty, and traffic is light, so take off is pretty quick. Transitional lift shakes the chopper just a bit, then we're flying! Wow! First time flying in Vietnam with the doors open! What a great sensation, but

there is overload, too, as the Pilot ascends much more abruptly than they ever did back at Ft. Rucker. The wind in the well where I'm sitting calms somewhat, the air cools quickly, drying the sweat, but that sun is bright even through the helmet's built-in tinted visor. AC, Pilot, and Chief chat back and forth.. Now I can relax a bit and take in the sights.

Spread out before me below, the South China Sea, Marble Mountain, and on the other side, DaNang City. This is it. I'm in the war and on a mission. My eyes look down (vertigo!) at the strip of sand we just took off from; what a desolate looking place. And just before turning above China Beach, I think I see what appears to be someone on a surfboard riding a wave. That's got to be a mirage or something. Can't be surfing here, it's a war zone. And everybody knows Charlie don't surf.

AC asks me where I'm from, always the first question asked of a new guy; I learn that my answer, Ohio, excites almost no one, "It's near Iowa, isn't it?" Glad to be acknowledged, but talk turns to other things and I'm left holding the millions of questions I'd like to ask these guys about what to expect. Information is priceless and experience is sometimes the only currency you can use to purchase it.

29 APRIL 70

Hi Elaine,
I missed the show tonight, so I thought I'd write a few letters. And I thought I'd tell you about my first flight. I told you in my last letter that I was supposed to fly that next day, but I got bumped off. Well last night I got to thinking, and I figured I only had 2 more days in April to ~~make~~ my flight pay, so I just told the dispatcher that I needed to fly this month, so he ~~to~~ put me on! We didn't have an earth-shaking mission. Just taxing V.I.P.s + V.C. prisoners, but I did get 7 1/2 hours in (I only need 4 hrs. per month to get flight pay). I did get to see some Air Force jets make some bombing runs. That was real nifty the way they maneuver.

In this letter, April 29th 1970, I'm not sure what show I missed, but it was probably due to hanging around with the Crew Chief and Gunners that night, trying to soak up some of that experience.

My first time out and I'm in luck, seeing those great Phantom F-4s on 'bombing runs'. I'm very impressed with how 'nifty' they maneuver. They have a wicked grace, as they swoop down in a looping arc onto the target area, after which we see the puff of smoke from whatever ordnance (napalm, high explosives, white phosphorous) they drop.

On this same mission I get my first look at a Viet

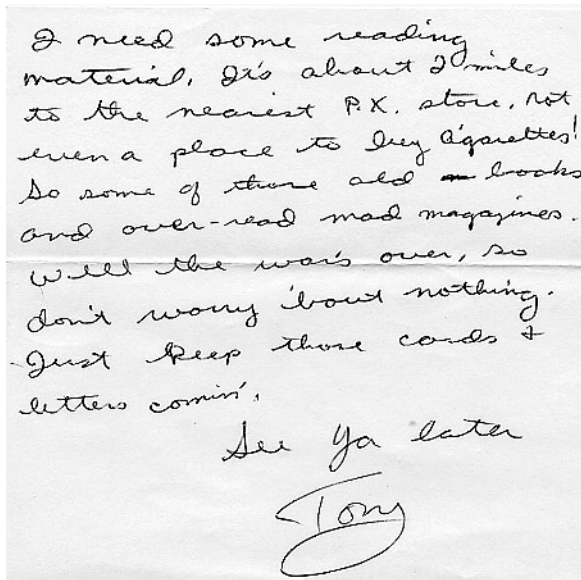
Cong prisoner. The *enemy*, sitting just inches away. How eerie. Up till now, he was just a phantom, too, seldom seen, always feared. I'm waiting for some Hollywood movie scene of a prisoner being held out the window by his ankles till he talks, but that doesn't happen. Hmm. Bummer. I'm captivated, undoubtedly the most nervous one on the ship, but the Army guy in charge doesn't even hold his weapon on the guy...

Two things I notice about him: First, what a tiny person he is; skinny, mostly hairless, no uniform, no jewelry, no tattoos or anything signifying his identity. The Mama-San who cleans our hootch could whip this guy, I think to myself. How could these guys beat anyone? The other thing I can't help noticing are his eyes, which I catch sight of only for a second - dead eyes. Black pupils that betray no human emotion - not fear, apprehension, humor, nothing. Chilling. I've heard tales of the terror that the Viet Cong could strike into the hearts of their own people and their American G.I. enemies - torture tactics, booby traps, hit and run attacks. In a movie he would have smiled wickedly at me and said, "Boo". But this guy is all the way inside himself, as if nothing that was happening to him was real or of any consequence whatsoever. Whew, and I thought I knew cool.

An interesting first day; and if we flew 7 hours, a pretty long one as well.

We didn't shoot at once, I was really disappointed, I thought I could ~~kill~~, but as it was I didn't even get to fire my ~~own~~ gun, oh, well, maybe next time. I'm beginning to sound like a real war monger, huh? ha ha!
Oh, by the way, if you haven't already sent the records, forget it, if you have, no sweat, I just decided that when I order my stereo, I'll have it sent right home, there's too much chance of it getting stolen. If you've already sent them I'll send them back with a few souvenirs + the postal charges, ~~oh, by the way~~ when ever you get around to sending another care package

Only an idiot would be disappointed at not being shot at, but there was that M-60 machine gun sitting there in front of me all day, ready to shoot, and I didn't even get to aim it. We were seldom even allowed to go 'guns out', which meant pointing the M-60 outward. It was considered an offensive approach. We were in 'Friendly' territory which meant that even if we got shot at, we'd have to ask permission to shoot back. And that permission started with the Pilot calling someone higher up on the radio, which might have to involve quite a few levels of authority, by which time we could be dead, and/or clear of the area. 'Rules of engagement', all wars have them, but in Vietnam they were confusing, and confounding, as there were seldom any clear 'front lines'.



I need some reading material, it's about 20 miles to the nearest P.X. store, not even a place to buy cigarettes! Do some of those old ~~on~~ books and over-read mad magazines. Will the war's over, so don't worry 'bout nothing. Just keep those cards & letters comin'.

See ya later

Tony

That PX two miles down the road I speak of is China Beach (hospital, PX, and R&R Center). Reading material was precious. MAD magazine was an old favorite of mine and, at that time, I was reading a lot of science fiction.

My assessment that the war was 'over' was based on the fact that our company was involved in no real combat missions at the time; our area was in a kind of calm - and I was put out about this, wanting badly to see some action. But I took the opportunity to make the folks back home feel that I was in little danger. What I didn't know at the moment I wrote this letter was that the war had just changed locations, as it often did. They were at that moment invading and securing the Ruination of the Cambodian Nation.

I closed this letter with an old line Dean Martin used to get a laugh with at the end of his TV show: "Keep those cards and letters coming.." But I was serious. Cards and letters were life. Period.

CHAPTER 14 - ZULU GUARD - PICKED, PLUCKED, SHUCKED AND...

Whatever I did to get the dispatcher to let me fly that day, it's a good thing I did it, because it would be my last chance for a month. The following day, I got the worst news about the worst assignment ever in my entire Army career. Just when my flying career was 'getting off the ground', my world crashed; because for the next month, I was to get a taste of what it was I'd signed up to avoid - being a grunt Marine!!

Zulu Guard. Just writing the two words makes me cringe. Zulu Guard had nothing to do with those proud namesake African warriors, or anything proud at all. The military uses certain words to denote the letters of the alphabet, for the sake of radio clarity and uniformity, so A was Alpha, B was Bravo, R was Romeo (who said the military didn't have a romantic side?) and Z was Zulu, the last designation; and to me, the last assignment anyone could possibly want. A thirty day sentence in Hell, just as I'd discovered heaven in a Huey.

The Marines, whose Base it was, (hence the name, *Marble Mountain Marine Base*) demanded personnel from our Army unit to help guard the base. I guess it was their right to ask, and I guess it was my unit's responsibility to give. And I couldn't argue with the company's policy of sending only FNGs to this duty, everyone else was too valuable and hard to replace. But just because all the reasons were right didn't cool my head one bit. This wasn't about 'paying my dues' as a Door Gunner in order to become a Crew Chief. This was military bullshit time. Scream and cry and bang your fists on the wall, but there was no getting out of it.

Platoon Sergeant says "Do this and you'll be done with it for the length of your tour" (a lie, as I found out later). Guaranteed the training, sure, but the job, well that was always at Army discretion. This is exactly what I'd

signed up to avoid - the Marines and their job as grunts, pulling guard duty. One of those times in life when you're just stuck, with no way out and an immediate future that held nothing but pure torture. Some guys went with me, but some did not, and the 'why' of that tortured my mind even more. I'm no threat to anyone on any level, a skinny guy with not much to intimidate with, no bellowing voice or family connections, so I had no chance of getting out of it.

Then too, I was Regular Army, meaning I'd signed on, and that I would probably obey, since a draftee had much less at stake and less to lose if he refused. The very thing I'd done to protect myself from this situation, enlisting, was one of the very things now forcing me into it. No one to cry to 'cause the Army don't care if it's fair. Just got broken in, and now I was done in. No one to blame but that idiot in the mirror. I'd been graduated, matriculated, manipulated, integrated, inoculated, indoctrinated, segregated and fumigated - I was ready to go to war! But I got picked and plucked instead.

In-country at the time there was a saying, "When I die, I know I'm going to Heaven, 'cause I've done my time in hell"; and in Basic Training, there was a line about, "hating your mama for bringing you into this world". Neither really describes how I felt about working for the Marines, who we called 'jar heads', after their severe haircuts.

I pull Guard Duty every single day, either in a tower or on roving patrol, all the while looking at that runway, where those choppers with that sticks-out-like-a-sore-thumb, Black Cat-on-a-yellow-spot logo on the nose of my Company's helicopters can be seen taking off for missions that were, in my mind anyway, exciting and adventure-filled. While I'm stuck here filling sand bags with a bunch of jerks who love nothing better in the world than harassing Army guys and making them suffer

It took forever, almost a month, to get that first letter from home, adding to my sour mood. As I wrote to Elaine on May 11th, I considered them 'animalistic', (apologies to animals - and Marines - everywhere), and considered working

for them slave labor, from which I would get no reward...

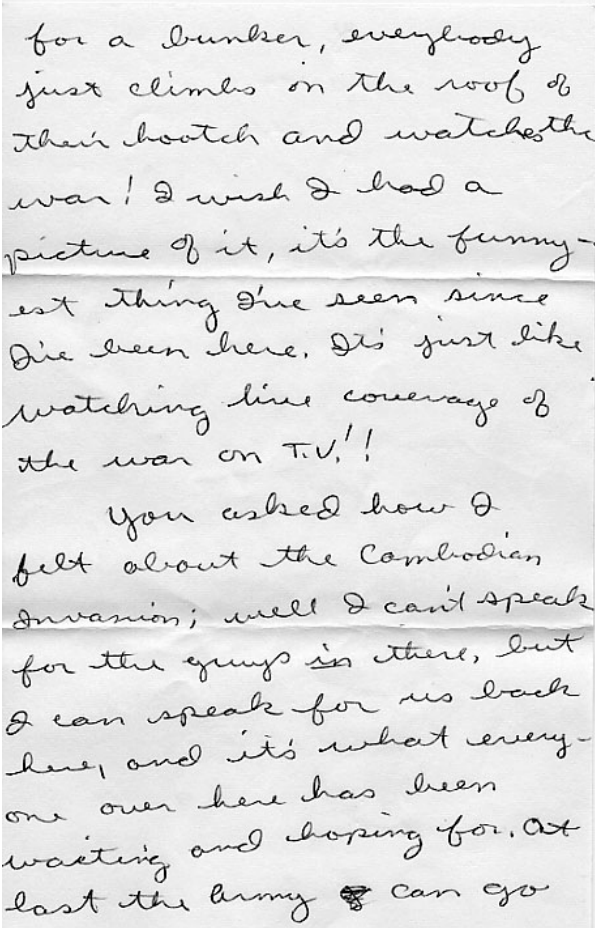
From what I've
seen of these Marines on
Zulu guard hell been even
wilder when he gets home.
I thought us Army Dudes
were animalistic, but these
Marines are in a breed all
their own! Give 'em close
to punching it out with a
few of them; they think that
us few Army Dudes on Zulu
guard should work for them
on top of pulling Zulu guard.
I told them to 'biss my
ass, and a few of them did
not like that at all! I
don't have to work for them,
so I don't! Damn Marines any
way.

I'd show up for work, but every day I would devise ways to thwart their attempts to get me sweaty. My undeclared war with the Army boiled over into open hostilities with these Marines, - always with some low-ranking true believer who took my attitude toward 'the Corps' personally. Theirs seemed a cowering, spanked-boy obedience, and many would even betray a friend ('drop a dime' - as in a telephone call) for rules violations; as only a fanatic would do to prove his true faith. Some of them had been in the field

fighting and were glad to be in the 'rear', out of the rain, heat and war in general. They just couldn't understand why I hated this duty so much; this was the only war they were going to get and I was becoming afraid that it would be the only one I'd get too.

about 3 nights ago we were in a high threat condition and it turned out to be a real one. The rockets and mortars came from all over. They didn't hit our run-way or any of our area but they sure blasted hell out of the special forces camp + a POW camp about a 1/2 mile down the beach, that was too close for comfort. It went on all night but I slept through most of it and all of the alarms. Early in the evening I had "Roving Patrol" which is where I just walk around with another guy and make sure everything is up tight in the ~~living~~ living quarters. Well, about 8:00 clock, the bombing started down the beach and around here instead of heading

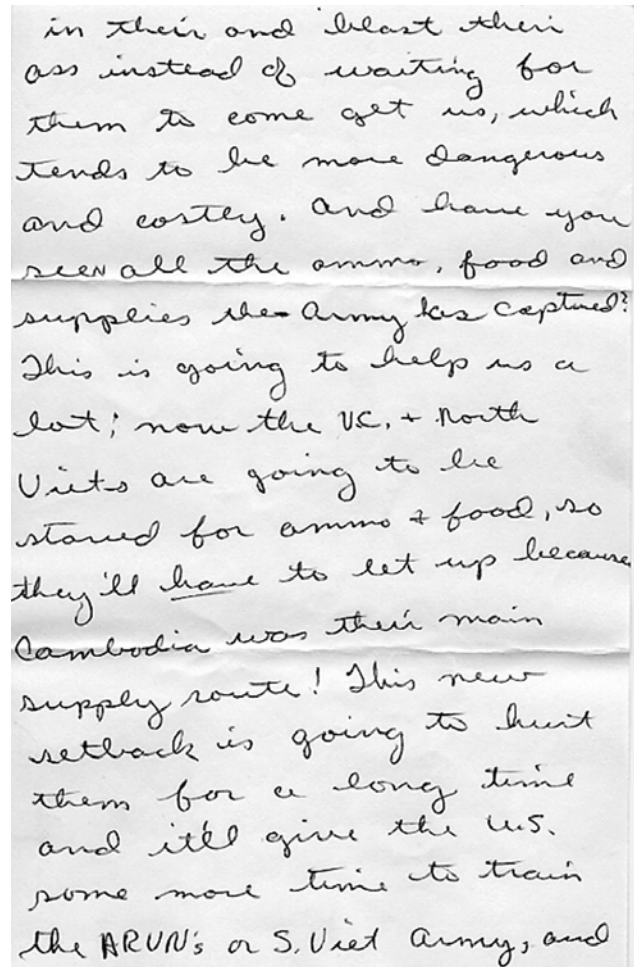
One serious threat to the base was 'Sappers', lone Viet Cong who would cut through our barbed wire perimeter defenses to wreak havoc on our aircraft or fuel/ammo dumps. But it was a rare occurrence here, isolated as it was on a sand bar, bordered by the beach on one side and a no-mans-land on the other. Much more likely were rocket, RPG, and mortar attacks, which were often so poorly aimed that no running to a bunker or other evasive action would protect you. That's why guys climbed on rooftops to watch, as letter of May 10 & 11 describes...

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and describes the experience of watching the war from a bunker. The note is divided into two paragraphs by a horizontal line.

for a bunker, everybody just climbs on the roof of their booth and watches the war! I wish I had a picture of it, it's the funniest thing I've seen since I've been here. It's just like watching live coverage of the war on T.V.!!

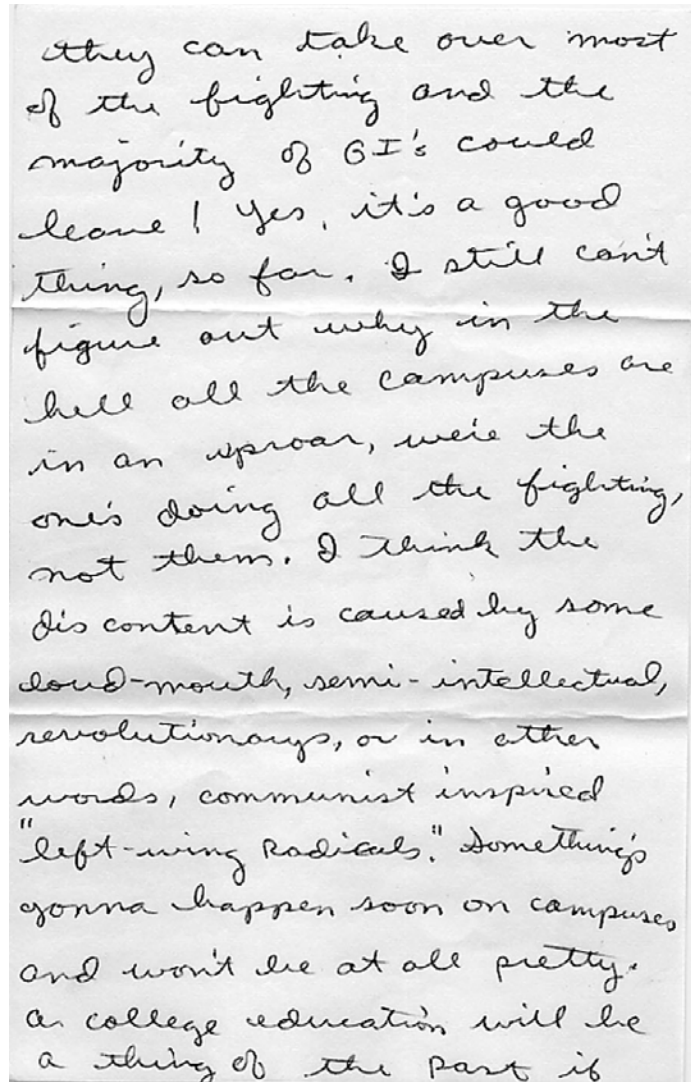
You asked how I felt about the Cambodian invasion; well I can't speak for the guys in there, but I can speak for us back here, and it's what everyone over here has been waiting and hoping for. At last the army can go

So since I could not defend, or be defended really, against 'incoming', and because I didn't believe we were under that much threat of Sapper attack, I decided I was not going to die *for* these Marines, *with* them, or *because* of them. Maybe in my helicopter with guns blazing defending my crew and my ship, as I had so naively planned, but not here. My performance on Zulu Guard would have no bearing on my future as a Crew Chief, so I became a 'hard case', and, for the first time in my life, I 'pushed back'.



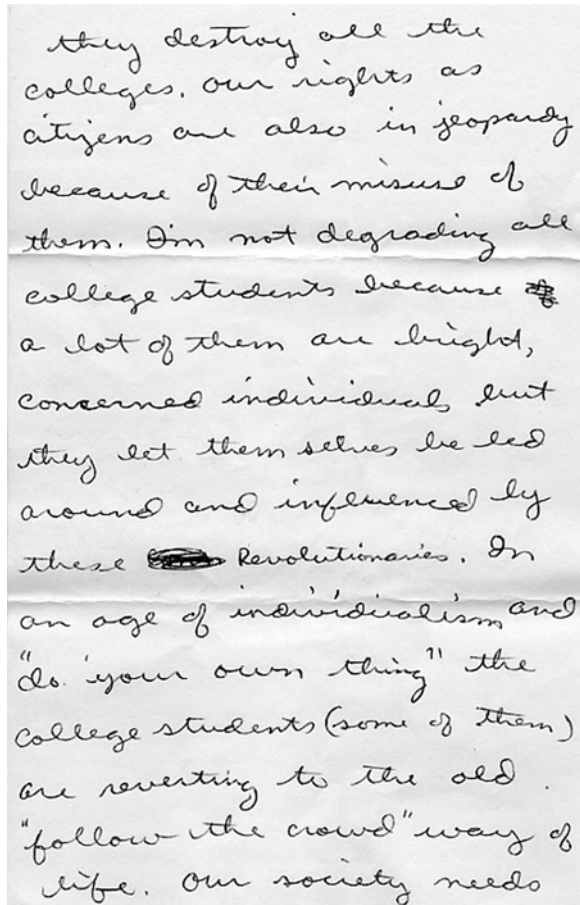
in their and I least their
ass instead of waiting for
them to come get us, which
tends to be more dangerous
and costly. And have you
seen all the ammo, food and
supplies the Army has captured?
This is going to help us a
lot; now the VC, + North
Viets are going to be
starved for ammo + food, so
they'll have to let up because
Cambodia was their main
supply route! This new
setback is going to hurt
them for a long time
and it'll give the U.S.
some more time to train
the ARVN's or S. Viet Army, and

My first instinct was to excise the part of this letter about the Cambodian invasion - which was just then making big news. But it's a record of how I felt at the time, regardless of how I've changed since. I believed in the system, and trusted its leaders' intentions, something that would change, the more I saw of Vietnam.



they can take over most of the fighting and the majority of GI's could leave! Yes, it's a good thing, so far. I still can't figure out why in the hell all the campuses are in an uproar, we're the ones doing all the fighting, not them. I think the GI's content is caused by some loud-mouth, semi-intellectual, revolutionaries, or in other words, communist inspired "left-wing radicals." Something's gonna happen soon on campuses and won't be at all pretty. A college education will be a thing of the past if

My tirade could have been written at the Pentagon, and was probably word for word what was being reported in the Stars and Stripes, the New York Times and the Columbus Dispatch. But too much of the newspapers' focus was on the campus violence, much of which was being caused by people whose real goal was to discredit the Anti-War movement.

A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten text in cursive. The text is written in dark ink and is somewhat faded. The paper has horizontal lines. The handwriting is somewhat slanted and has some corrections, such as a crossed-out word in the middle. The text discusses the impact of campus violence on college students and society.

they destroy all the colleges, our rights as citizens are also in jeopardy because of their misuse of them. I'm not degrading all college students because ~~of~~ a lot of them are bright, concerned individuals, but they let themselves be led around and influenced by these ~~people~~ revolutionaries. In an age of individualism and "do your own thing" the college students (some of them) are reverting to the old "follow the crowd" way of life. Our society needs

changing, that's obvious,
There is a right way and
a wrong way to do it; and
street-fighting and other acts
of violence is the wrong way.
Peaceful protest, letters to
Congress men and ~~the~~ honest
"rap sessions" with society's
leaders is the only way
our society will ever get
it's much-needed face-
lifting!
Excuse me for a minute
while I ~~am~~ climb down off
my soap-box!

We now have proof that certain groups in and out of our government were infiltrating the Anti-War movement (as they had the Civil Rights movement) to turn it violent and provide grist for the media-mill and provocation for the government to discredit any Anti-War sentiment around the country.

One thing in the letter I still agree with, though, is that violent protest gets us nowhere. Today I believe that violence is just as wrong, but even more so because we are just simply outgunned and lack the will to kill, neither of which the other side lacks at all.

My only comfort comes from knowing that, like most everyone else, both then and now, the real truth about what we did in, and to Cambodia, was kept from us. Small comfort. And standing on a soapbox, I was learning, can alienate your friends and get your head blown off, so don't stick your head up or your neck out.

As if the duty itself wasn't bad enough, a more immediate and even scarier problem arose. Beneath the Guard Towers, the Sea Bees had built bunkers out of wood and sand bags which we were supposed to sleep in between shifts up in the tower at night. These bunkers provided some protection from fragmentary grenades and small explosions, but most would not take a direct hit without allowing some damage to the soft tissue sleeping inside.

And as these bunkers aged, they became the full-time home and fertile breeding grounds of the largest rats I had ever seen. Guys would take snacks in and the rats would eat them while we slept. And if there was no food, the rats would munch on your toe, or any other flesh laying around. We couldn't carry pistols, weren't allowed to fire our M-16s at them (that wasn't safe anyway), but some guys did just the same and got prosecuted for it. The Marines offered no real solution, which left us with no real choice but to stay awake all night or sleep on top of the bunker where you were liable to get rained on or eaten by mosquitoes. So stay awake.

And if that wasn't always possible, because the Marines would make us work a full day instead of letting us sleep, there was Obesitol. Obesitol was a liquid 'diet' medicine, that came in a glass bottle and had a picture on the label of a fat man with a big belly. It tasted something like bad vanilla mixed with rank alcohol and had a thin smooth cough syrup consistency. My first dose was a spoonful and it kept me awake all night. It would make you 'speedy', pupils dilated and a bit hyper-alert, but didn't give you much of a 'rush' or make you too jumpy, once you got used to it. It also killed your appetite, which helped reduce the amount of snacks you'd need for a night's duty.

It wasn't easy to obtain, someone had to get it from a Vietnamese pharmacy, and since all interaction with the civilian population of the Da Nang area was off limits to all enlisted men, the stuff was hard to come by. But I remember once being on detail outside base, or on a PX run to China Beach, and whoever was driving stopped at a pharmacy and bought a half dozen bottles. By the time I left Vietnam, I

could drink a whole bottle of the stuff and hardly feel it.

Zulu Guard does provide a bit of crazy fun from time to time...

MAY 28, 1970

Howdy
Well I finally got around to writing you a letter. I haven't felt like doing anything the last couple of days, just one of those weeks I guess. Luckily tomorrow is payday so I get the day off! Monday I get off Zulu Guard. What a relief that'll be!! I hate it with a passion; these Marines are all liars!! (~~Some~~ gung-ho career men) Oh, speaking of Marines, I haven't seen Carmen yet; it's hard to get to Freedom Hill even though I can see it from here. I'm going to keep trying, though. We got hit last week with rockets. It was about 10:30 P.M. and I was on guard in the tower when a rocket hit right on the runway! It was cool as shit! That's the first time I'd seen a rocket hit! No one was hurt they were just trying to tear up the runway. Yesterday we got hit with a real bad rainstorm. I've never seen such big clouds and tremendous lightning flashes in my life! First the wind came (cold, at that) and it blew sand all over hell then the rains came. And it ain't even monsoon season. It completely flooded our boots and all the roads!! I've never seen rain like that in Ohio!! I'm going to hate to see real monsoons come in!! Other than that the weather up here is pretty decent; it's about 90°-110° during the day and it cools off at night. The sand and humidity are the things I hate!

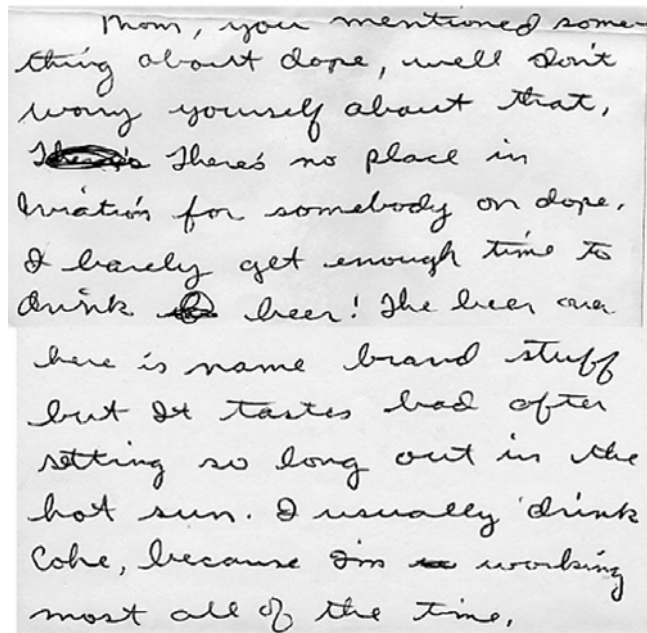
Left out of the letter is the music; I'm in the Guard Tower near the end of the runway, listening to the only hour of real rock-'n-roll that AFVN plays regularly - a Disc Jockey named Brother John, whose prerecorded show spins all the best sides of the top rock music of the day. I'm risking being caught, since it's highly illegal to take a radio on any guard duty, (you were supposed to be listening for sounds of trouble - or incoming) and didn't even use the earplug that I carry in my pocket. It's a clear, quiet night, and I can't help turning it up just a little when Brother John plays Jimi Hendrix's magnificent "All Along the Watch Tower". It's just too perfect. Here I am in a tower, watching - and singing along, "And the wind began to howl..", wishing there was someone around to point out this sweet coincidence - "ain't this a helluva song to hear at a time like this"? But I'm way up high, I'd have to shout to be heard. Suddenly, that unmistakable whistle of an incoming rocket intrudes, as if it's part of the song. A flash of light. *BOOM*. I kneel down for protection. All goes quickly quiet. Only one rocket. I turn down the radio, pop back up to get a look, and see a puff of smoke off the side of the runway - no damage to anything, but alarms are screaming.

For some reason, I don't retreat back down into the steel tower's protective box, but just stare at the runway. And at that moment, the exact spot on the runway where I'm looking suddenly explodes! Right in front of my eyes, a bright ball of light suddenly erupts, kicking up dirt, runway asphalt and smoke in all directions. I'm so fixated on it, that my eyes widen in amazement instead of blinking. It takes a second for the concussion to reach me in the tower; I flinch, but keep my gaze fixed on the spot to watch the smoke rise and the dirt settle back to the ground. The orange and white ball shrinks, day turns back into night.

Then another *BOOM*, a few yards closer; I put my fingers in my ears to keep them from popping, and I sink down a bit lower, still keeping my eyes on the runway. Another *BOOM*, this time closer, and I realize the first one was to adjust the aim, as he is now, pretty accurately, 'walking' a

series of rockets down the runway, doing some pretty good damage to the tarmac. Finally, it sinks in that these explosions are coming at me and getting way too close, so I cower down into the relative safety of the tower, but keep my eyes open to witness the bright flash inside the little three foot square cell that could be the last place on earth I see if one of those rockets hits too close. They stop short of my demise, so I pop back up to check out the damage, wishing again that I had someone to share the moment with. I yell down to the guys in the bunker, laughing my head off. "Wow. Did you see that!? I watched the whole thing, man! What a trip!" Someone yells back, "Lawless, you're a crazy son-of-a-bitch". Yeah, well, fun is where you find it. And sometimes it comes walkin' right toward ya.

May 8, 1970. In a letter to my folks in Kentucky, I write about sleeping through an attack. And in the next paragraph reassure my Mother that there "is no place in aviation for..."

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and matches the text in the previous block. There is a correction in the second line where "There's" is crossed out and replaced with "There's".

Mom, you mentioned some
thing about dope, well don't
worry yourself about that,
~~There's~~ There's no place in
aviation for somebody on dope.
I barely get enough time to
drink ~~a~~ beer! The beer over
here is name brand stuff
but it tastes bad after
sitting so long out in the
hot sun. I usually drink
Coke, because I'm ~~is~~ working
most all of the time.

I wasn't even *in* aviation at that moment, and knew little of what I was talking about, because I'd only taken that one flight. And most probably slept through that attack because I had been up all night and all day, thanks to, what else, but the wonder drug Obesitol! I wasn't asleep, I was crashed. But what I knew about drugs was nothing compared to what I was going to learn.

And here I am in a War Zone and my Mother's worried about drugs. As if war was OK, but boy watch out for drugs! The things they worry about. So my comeback is to tell them about the beer. That they can relate to. That's OK, it's *normal* to drink beer. The first victim of war and good business is the truth.

So for all that month of May, 1970, while campuses back home were erupting with protest over the invasion of Cambodia, I was in my own war with the Marine Corps. And wishing I was on the other side of the runway so that I could join the real war. Luckily, Elaine and others kept me informed and up to date on the happenings, gossip and events, giving me something to keep my mind diverted from the tedium and the torture of Zulu Guard.

My letters are all filled with advice to friends, complaints about my best buddy not writing often enough, plans for the future and, seemingly above all, how much I miss my one true love, Proud Mary. It seems shameful that a human being can love an object, in this case a car, as much or more than another human being. And this aspect of my letter did indeed shame me, until I remembered that I'd always had trouble with human beings - trouble that I never had with my car. All my life, I'd had confused emotions about family, had to say



goodbye too many times to too many friends, moved into and out of too many homes, and too many schools. I just saw too much in people that I didn't understand. But I could understand my car. What I put into it, I got back from it. Mash that throttle, hear that roar, feel that power. Always the right response. People almost never respond right. They over-love or under-think; or vice versa. A father can teach his son how to be something, but no one ever taught me how to just be - or to just be me.

Finally, blessedly, my un-merriest month of May comes to an end. And I even get a payday off to get drunk and sunburned. The worst is over now, and my wartime experience can finally begin - no more being treated like a grunt, I was about to become a full-fledged Crew Chief. Can't wait to report back to my Platoon Sergeant with the good news that I survived Zulu Guard and was now ready for some real action - my dues are paid. Gimme a chance. I'll prove myself. Just watch me. My blissful ignorance would soon crash upon the rocky shores of Army troop deployment necessities, but for a few days there..

CHAPTER 15 - SO MUCH TO LEARN

You learn the ropes by being a doorgunner for a Crew Chief, who may or may not help, as some just gave you that look all day that says, “Sorry new guy, I’m *Short*, and I just ain’t got time..” Some Chiefs had history and relationships with the pilots, and they’d joke about things I didn’t understand, or wasn’t included in either the set up or punchline. New Kid Syndrome, only here, popularity wasn’t the goal, survival was. Try to digest all this, in this new and strange landscape, and keep straight all the things you need to remember, from Hangar procedures, to the real-world tricks for keeping these Hueys flying. What we had learned in maintenance school at Ft. Rucker seemed like a joke, and a pale imitation of this reality.

You never really see a landscape till you see it from the air; and since I had nothing else to do as a gunner, during flight I noticed a few things and had too much time to think about them. There was an outdoor storage area we sometimes flew over, where pallet after pallet of canned beer was stacked, uncovered and exposed to the sun. The stack was as tall as a man, stretched the length of a football field and was almost as wide. Just sitting there. The sheer amount of the stuff was amazing; it reminded me of a fuel or ammo dump, only this potent stuff was aimed for us. Name brand stuff, too, so somebody made a lot of money on it. And if it arrived stale, who cares, soldiers were thankful just to have something to kill the daily pain - just like factory workers. After all, isn’t this what we were fighting for? The ‘freedom’ to drink beer? A cold one at the end of your killing day?

The military rationed beer and cigarettes, not just to restrict us from over-indulging in either, but rather to thwart those who would sell the stuff on the black market. It didn’t work, since ration cards could be traded and abused just like any other commodity. And the real black market was much more sophisticated and intricate and, as I was to discover as I

went along, operating on both small scale between individual soldiers, and on a large scale, between the governments of both South Vietnam and the U.S., often involving corporations as well. Books have been written about the commerce that takes place during war times that is often only quasi-illegal and often indulged or encouraged, for reasons never fully discovered by, or explained to the public.

So if you had too many holes punched in this month's ration card, you found a way around the situation, either by hitting up a friendly Officer (who wasn't subject to such restrictions) or by trading something or some service to a guy who had not used up his whole quota for the month. Warrant officers were especially helpful here, because they weren't career men, just hired and trained to be pilots, not 'leaders of men', like Regular Officers, and, as such, had less tightness in the anal area about what were considered 'chicken shit' rules. And pilots in general tended to be helpful to their crews since favors went both ways. As in 'take care of your crew and they'll take care of you'.

And there were always ways of getting what you wanted without getting your card punched at all. Sometimes, they would 'forget' to punch it, or there would always be the sob story, "the wind of my chopper sucked it out into the South China Sea", or variations thereof. On Zulu Guard, I had discovered that Marines were allowed to buy much less alcohol than we were, which created another black market as well - a good way to get back at them for the way they treated me on Zulu Guard. A bottle of Whiskey I could buy for say, ten dollars, I could sell to a Marine, just across the runway from us, for anywhere between twenty-five and forty dollars, depending on various conditions. There was a more lucrative trade in dope, but I was at this time unaware of it.

The black market that the military and the U.S. Government tried hardest to control was the one in American dollars, or greenbacks. When we got our pay, it wasn't in real money. It was in *M.P.C.*, *Military Payment Coupons*, which we could use at the *Enlisted Men's Club*, P.X., in-country R&R, and for buying money orders to send back

home. (Which I did every month.) It was important that no real money fall into the hands of the Vietnamese because, at the time, America was still on the gold standard, meaning that greenbacks could literally be exchanged for gold on the international market. Of course, Americans weren't encouraged, or even usually aware, of this, but it's for sure that other countries were. It was explained to us that if any real money fell into the hands of the enemy, they could use it on the open market to buy the State of the Art weapons to use against us. Where this market was and why our government didn't control it, I never asked.

If we were caught with greenbacks, we were severely punished. I remember seeing a few here and there during my tour, but was never fool enough to involve myself. The Vietnamese used a currency called the Piaster, which we would trade MPC for in order to buy certain goods and 'services' from the local population - sex and drugs, mostly - but again, I never speculated or participated, because I had been indoctrinated and looked forward to being 'rotated' with all due speed. I never had the stomach for crime, anyway. I was always willing to stay in the poor house rather than risk a trip to the jail house. From the time I arrived till the time I left, there were always warnings and scare stories about guys getting 'popped' for engaging in one type of illegal trade or the other. Too much time on our hands, a war that stopped and started, and too many draftees, non-believers and opportunists in the ranks must have been the cause.

That and the fact that we just didn't move as a military force. Take a territory, give it back, and have to retake it - the nonsense of it all and the fact that all that beer was being stockpiled just made it appear that we were going to be here for a long time. Get used to it and make the best of it for yourselves. That seemed to be the message.

CHAPTER 16 - MY BABY BLIVET

A Blivet is Army terminology for a giant black rubber bladder that looks like a big fat, rectangular water balloon, sitting out by itself. It gets filled up with fuel to gas up aircraft in remote locations, like a temporary filling station.

The first helicopter I was assigned to as Crew Chief had the name *BLIVET* stenciled on the nose, not unlike those whimsical names you'd see on World War II Bombers. But in this company, regulations forbade such 'defacing' - you weren't supposed to name it or write anything on it. We were lucky it even had the yellow and black logo that identified it as a Black Cat of the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company. But this wasn't the pride of the company, this rust-bucket was the oldest, and least flight-worthy. The guy who had been its Crew Chief had named it, and the company had just never forced him to remove the name - it was a relic helicopter that spent most of its time in the hangar so it was indulged like an old pet. He was proud of it and claimed it was a good ship, but all I saw was sheet metal of many different colors that indicated too many repairs, shiny rivets that meant too much paint had worn off, dented panels, leaks impossible to trace, wiring all loosened from the bundle, DZUS fasteners that rattled and wouldn't stay tight, safety wire that had come loose with age - ugly everywhere you looked.

I couldn't believe I was being treated this way. I appealed to the Platoon Sergeant for a different ship - "How am I going to keep this piece of junk flying? I don't have the experience. Why not assign it to someone who knows more than me? Don't I have enough to learn about being a Crew Chief? Isn't defending the ship and taking care of the loads enough, without trying to figure out whether or not the thing can keep flying?" I reasoned. I cajoled, I used all my debating skills - made a good case. But it only made him more resolved - wickedly so - I felt. And I began to feel singled out, picked on. First I got Zulu Guard and now this. There were other guys who had the same level of experience as me,

I considered myself a good mechanic, so why did they get the good stuff and me the junk?

For some reason this Platoon Sergeant had taken a disliking to me - or so I felt, and there was nothing I could do about it. First time in my life that I made an enemy who I couldn't compromise - I could always charm or impress people older than myself with my personality, my brains or at least my ability to get the job done. But this wasn't reasonable. He just kept growling that if I did well and kept this ship in the air, I'd be good enough to get one of the new ships when they came in. Small consolation, but I just got the sense that this guy enjoyed fucking with me. No one I could appeal to above him, and no sympathy from my 'peers' - they were just glad it wasn't them.

So when I reported that first day, the big smile on the face of the Chief I was replacing only aggravated me more. Damn, here I am again, making do with junk equipment and getting laughed at to boot. Boy, I'd really like to kill somebody. But even that doesn't happen; all we do is play taxi for American Advisors and ARVN Commanders.

Boring stuff during the day, then back to MMMB in the evening to labor away on the ship, so that I could fly again tomorrow; and the only relief was to drink beer and hope to get drunk before the other guys drank it all up. Took a lot of effort, but we defeated rationing and managed to keep a steady supply of beer. The rule for us was, stay flying, stay in the hangar working on your ship, or stay drunk. Otherwise the Platoon Sergeant would find you and put you on shit detail, meaning work that had nothing to do with being a Crew Chief. Which always seemed to involve carrying something from one place to another in the hot sun. Or raking sand around the company *H.Q.* (Head Quarters)

The Army constantly tried to keep up appearances in an area that was subject to sand and rain storms, by arranging walkways and flagpole 'yards' lined with painted rocks. Visual propaganda, tended for a feeling of permanence, because the officers and NCOs who had committed their lives to the military needed to maintain that certain style that re-

minded them of stateside military installations, which in turn reinforced their way of seeing the world only in the military terms. If the world looked like a military base, then the civilian world couldn't mock their decision or insult their vision. That's why we called them Lifers, because they wanted to stay for life and be bothered by no other life than the military one they had chosen for themselves.

There was also an ongoing battle between the generations, due to the presence of so many young draftees, who didn't like being in Vietnam and who angered the older career people (or like-minded conservative types) just by their presence. Neither side could or would understand the other's politics, lifestyle, or stand on the war itself. Not to mention the disagreements over all the things that would have caused trouble even if there hadn't been a war: Drug policy, education reform, civil rights, long hair, issues of freedom for the individual versus the individual's responsibility to society. Here we were fighting a war to give a backward society the rights that we ourselves couldn't come to grips with, despite all our high-toned rhetoric, social sophistication and technological advancement.

So if you were unlucky enough to actually get caught in the company area during the day and couldn't prove that you had to be either flying or fixing your ship, you might have to pull 'detail' work. Which also meant that you had to report to morning formation, an Army routine and tradition, where you had to stand in (semi) straight lines, in proper uniform (another pain in the ass - they actually expected you to be shaved, pressed, and boots shined, even though Mama-San did most of that work), *and* attentive. This would be where Army Directives would be read, which were usually old news that was incomplete or of no interest to anyone, medals were handed out, Article 15s announced, or other violations or warnings disseminated; and all done in the hot sun or blowing sand, before you were awake, often keeping you from getting breakfast, and yet another chance for the Army to give something for visiting Brass to inspect.

One morning when I wasn't flying, the officers get done with their part and split, leaving us standing there with the old Platoon Sergeant, who stands for a moment looking at us before taking a breath and changing his stance just a bit. His question comes out the way a teacher would begin what you knew was going to become a long lecture. "Gentlemen.." he begins, "..do you know why we're here in Vietnam?" My shoulders drop, my eyes roll and I look around at the other guys, joining in their chorus of moans and groans that are so loud and full of derision that the Platoon Sergeant snaps us to attention angrily. Makes us stand there for a few moments before calling "at ease", then continues his speech, which is laced with an undisguised anger which, in my mind, is a big part of his motivation for lecturing us in the first place. We are not obeying orders to his satisfaction; our open disrespect for Army regulation, our hostility toward Army tradition and our lack of enthusiasm for our 'job' is becoming a threat to our unity and undermining our war effort.

There are too many Anti-War posters hanging inside hootches, too many peace signs hung around too many necks, too much civilian attire adorning the uniforms seen around this company area, he complains. Too much loud music that rocks and mocks, too much insolence directed at those of higher rank. Open hostility toward the Vietnamese workers on Base. Too much marijuana smoke in the air. Too much laxness and laziness. "This is an Army unit..", he says, "..and I don't care what you think of the Army, the war, or the United States of America, we're here and we're going to do our job".

He then proceeded to lay down the law and threaten to prosecute anyone who didn't 'straighten up'. And all along, I'm thinking to myself how stupid this is. Here we are supposed to be fighting a war, which is exactly what this guy is keeping me from doing. My beat-up old helicopter is broken yet again, which is why I'm in this stupid formation to begin with, instead of out flying and fighting the very war he says we don't have enough dedication toward. Blivet's in the hangar with avionics problems that can't be fixed until this

guy lets the avionics guy get back to work. And who isn't going to give a shit about doing his job, or getting my ship back in the air anytime soon, because he's had to waste his morning tearing the posters off the wall by his bed and putting away his stuff to satisfy some higher-up's need for 'decorum'.

I have an inspection to finish and this guy is concerned about the look of a stack of sandbags outside our hootch. He doesn't care that the Mess Hall ran out of meat last night, because I got there too late, due to the lack of someone to help me wheel Blivet into the hangar, or that there was no hot water for me to wash off the toxic hydraulic fluid that had squirted all over me when the first jack I tried busted its seal just as I started pumping it. You never see this guy at night when help is needed. Running us seems more important to him than running this job.

Whenever the Crew Chiefs need parts or skilled help that isn't available, do they pitch in or take time out to find a solution? Not a chance. "Just gotta wait till parts or replacements arrive, and there's no sense crying or trying, the Army will do it when they get around to it. Meanwhile, I need you to do.. Blah, Blah, Blah". You'd think the urgency of war would eliminate the trivial squabbles between 'us and them', but here was more proof that it didn't. Just like my father worrying about my haircut instead of about my grades getting me a better position in life, the Army seemed more concerned with controlling us and our behavior than fighting and winning this war. Just let me get Blivet back in the air. I need to go kill somebody as soon as possible. Please!

Or at least I thought that was what I wanted to do. At this point I had hardly even fired the gun. Much less looked at another human being and pulled the trigger. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to when and if the time came. And that made me increasingly anxious. I came here to prove myself to myself and I still did not know if I was going to freeze up if I got shot at, and was ordered to fire back. I was getting mad enough to kill, but I still didn't know if I had the stuff inside to actually do it. And I was getting restless and angry.

June 17

Dear Elaine,

You're really on the ball, aint you? I got two letters from you in the last week. What's this shit about moving to Pittsburg? Who's ass are you picking? It'd be bad enough if Roy went to that hole, But you too? Who would I have? I'll guarantee you and Roy went dig Pittsburg at all. It's dirty, smoky, and full of nigger ghettos. Of course Roy cant turn down a good deal, but I'd sure hate to see him leave. I don't think he could really leave Columbus for very long, I've been all over the U.S. and some parts of the world, and there is no place like Big "C". Besides that we would have a hard time building a race car with him in Pitt. I'll be out of a driver.

HA HA.

Your idea about the name on my jacket sounds great. But, I think the MILLER HIGH LIPS would make it look a bit "patchy". You'll end up being another Betty Ross before I get through with you. I sure am looking forward to the care package, too. There is another thing I would like for you to send with it; a Kraft Pizza mix. That's the only thing I can't get over here. Plenty of Uncle Bud, but no pizza to go with it. Food is a real problem when we're flying, because we don't usually have time to eat; so if you have any canned stuff like tuna or anything we can eat right out of the can, just laying around that you don't want, send it along, too. I sure would appreciate it. You know what a glutton I am, Ha Ha. And don't forget the pictures of Proud Mary.

You asked if I flew the helicopters, well the answer is no, you have to be an officer. I fly as a door gunner, in other words, I'm a crew chief, but, when we're flying I protect the ship with an M-60 Machine gun. It's really a lot of fun especilly if we get to really "shoot 'em up". Ha Ha Ha. I've got my own ship now, it's nicknamed "Blivet".

I've been drunk since I got off Zulu; every night there is about 6 of us guys killing off an average of 5 cases of good old Uncle Bud.

War is hell. Our platoon sergeant

gets highly pissed off when he comes in the heetch in the morning to wake us up and trips over thousands of Bud cans. I have to stay about half drunk to stand this company and this country.

Well, must get back to work and get Blivet in the air, miss you much and hope to hear from you soon

Love

So I responded by drinking. For the first time in my young life, I drank, not to overcome my shyness enough to ask a girl to dance, but to get drunk and pass out. I drank not to have fun or to lose my inhibition enough to actually get up on the dance floor, but to wipe out the memory and aggravation of the day. I didn't get depressed, I got hung over and became, by medical description, an alcoholic. I had grown up in a drinking family and had seen a lot of what happens to people who drink. But I didn't care, it was my time, my pain, my money, my life, my buddies and my turn. No other thought necessary. I could have ended up causing a lot of damage to myself or to someone else around me if I'd kept it up for very long. Two things saved me. First, I just wasn't a very good drinker. I could drink and get drunk, but if I didn't get to bed before dizziness got me, I would throw up and be a hell of a mess. And I hated to puke. I'd still get caught off guard sometimes, but I learned quickly. And besides, it didn't do to get too drunk, you might end up too blasted to get into the bunker during an incoming attack and end up blasted for real. But my ration card for that month of June was punched with holes like Swiss cheese.

The good ole Platoon Sergeant was the other thing that saved me. As if he hadn't already made it clear that he had it in for me, his next assignment for me seemed like the ultimate kiss-off: *TDY* (Temporary Duty) in the city of *Hue*. And as it turned out, whether he meant it as a favor or not, it was the best thing that could have happened to me at the time.

CHAPTER 17 - HUE, PRONOUNCED 'WAY'

When I first got orders assigning me to Hue, I was sure the Platoon Sergeant was doing it not only to break up our drinking party, but to send me to the most dangerous place in Vietnam, and be rid of me once and for all. We were to be someone's private taxi in an area where the chance of getting ambushed or overrun was much greater than the chance of engaging in a real battle where, at least you got to fight back. Much better to get it with your guns blazing than to be a sitting duck or a 'trip wire'.

And stuck up there, a long way from mail call, away from your buddies, just seems like a living end. First Zulu Guard, then Blivet, now this. But my complaints are soon hushed by a pal who points out some important aspects of the duty: You're a long way from Army bullshit, no Platoon Sergeant, no Company Area, no formation, no officers, other than the pilots, no one to answer to except the people you're flying for, and they tend to treat chopper crews with respect. And good food, they said. "Now wait a minute..", I say, "..how can you get decent food all the way up there?" "You'll see. Just remember to take a bunch of stuff with you to keep your ship flying, so that you don't have to send back down for stupid stuff".

OK. So I loaded my on-board footlocker (not really permitted, but most Crew Chiefs replaced their jump seat with a foot locker that they strap-rigged to keep it securely attached, and this we'd fill with all sort of tools, parts, supplies, and anything that might be needed or hard to find or keep, that could make our life easier.)

We head north with Blivet loaded up with our clothing bags, tools, spare M-60 barrels, extra clips of M-16 rounds, film for the cameras, smoke grenades and what ever snacks we could squirrel away from care packages and C-rations. Since we were going all the way to Hue, we proba-

bly flew at high altitude and only saw Red Beach from afar - but still looked for the dinks taking their morning shit.

We fly over the Hai Van Pass, which separates the Da Nang area from points North; a twisting and forbidding road leading up to its flattened-off peak will figure in my as-yet-unforeseeable future. It's a nice clear morning and once we're up to altitude and clear of DaNang Air Space, the pilot tunes the FM frequency to pick up whatever AFVN was playing, a pleasant way to start the duty and the day.

My first time up this far north and I'm glad that the Crew Chief sits in the left side well, it affords a great view of the area that spreads out before me from the shoreline all the way to the mountains. It's a bit greener here, not as sun-scorched as down south, and less populated. Looking down, there are the usual rice paddies and tiny villages, and only one road running north connecting it all. But from up where we're flying, what takes the eye's attention is the breathtaking perspective of those mountains looming in the west. I've never seen such dramatic peaks, which seem to get larger the farther in you look. Giant clouds of every different size and shape seem to hover and enwrap the whole scene as if they too were at war, and the mountains were standing in the way of their march out to sea - or back to the interior from where they seem to have come. Ohio was flat and Kentucky hilly, but here was real contrast - the endless ocean on one side, opposite the mountains that seem to be trying to head out for a swim. And in between, this long treeless area of land, held captive between the two, guileless and delicate looking, as if the mountains and the sea had declared this a neutral zone in their perpetual struggle for dominance of the earth. And man came along and carved intricate patterns that glistened in the sun and formed little areas with irregular outlines, the long levies where people move astride reflecting-pool rice paddies.

In the near foothills, are little enclaves surrounded by trees that seem out of place, not Asian-built, but French-colonial style mansions that had survived from the old days of rubber plantations before World War II. Beautiful little

islands in a verdant tableau. What an amazing sight - not just beauty, but a stunning, overpowering connection between mountains, land and sea. And such a view afforded by being up this high, in this helicopter! A panorama no camera could capture - no one who was imprisoned by life on the ground ever saw this; no airliner, no one on a ship, no one back home would ever see this, nor would I ever be able to describe it to anyone. Maybe the birds can see it. But even they would not be able to appreciate it. They probably take nature's beauty for granted, just like the rest of us.

But, as always, sticking right up in the middle of this beautiful scene, like someone giving it 'the finger', is that M-60 machine gun, breaking the spell. I can look over it and around it, but not through it. It's constantly quivering from the wind swirling around it, reminding me that whatever beauty is 'out there', everything 'here' is rigged for a purpose. A purpose I can't forget, don't dare forget, because although the scene may last forever, my ability to appreciate it won't, should I forget my purpose and the part that ugly piece of metal plays in that purpose. Someday, I promise myself, I will see the beauty and nothing but the beauty. For now, though, I reach out and touch the gun to make sure it's secure in its mounting, reach into the ammo can and make sure the ammo belt is clean and free of snags.



That tin can on the side of the gun is a C-ration can. It fit perfectly into the slots where the standard feeder chute was supposed to go, and actually did a much better job of feeding the rounds into that old M-60 machine gun -, and was easier to replace than the regulation part. When something works, you stick with it.

The guys were right so far. For once, having a Platoon Sergeant who wanted you reassigned was working to my advantage. Strange that I get duty that other guys with more time in-country probably want - and deserve. I'm still a FNG but I'm right where I want to be - nice for a change. I

might someday feel a sadness about a misspent youth, but today, I'm a Crew Chief, with something to prove and my own ship to protect and a mission to fulfill, enjoying this sense of airborne purpose and feeling of flight.

Unusual too, the Doorgunner assigned to go with me is Black. While there are a lot of black men in Vietnam, there are very few who fly. I recall none in our Crew Chief School, and there was a 'prevailing wisdom' that black guys were afraid to fly and preferred duty in as safe an area as they could get. As if the reason for the war and our conduct of the war isn't disturbing me enough, here's yet another sad aspect of the whole picture: our conduct in the war toward each other.

This guy is quiet and always does his job, a bit of a loner like me and we get along great. Sharing a room and living quarters causes no problems and there's never a question about his 'bravery' or willingness to face danger, which we do routinely that month. But it's my guess that he's with me because he's black and because the Platoon Sergeant was either himself a racist or heading off a situation caused by having racists in his charge, who might not want to fly with a black man or even share a hootch with one. I never found out. And don't care. Civil Rights were out the window, replaced by a new, more subtle racism.

I knew I wasn't a bigot. I considered myself open-minded and could tolerate people of other races, but my letter to Elaine of June 17, 1970 reminds me that racial bigotry is an ongoing war, fought within and without. I wanted to tear this letter up or edit out that word 'nigger'. Here I am trying to talk my two best friends out of moving away, and using that word to scare them into changing their minds. I hadn't seen that much of the U.S., but I had seen Pittsburgh a few years earlier and was indeed disgusted by all the filth and ugliness caused by the steel business. But here I was using that word to indict a group of people whose only 'crime' was to have invested honest labor in return for menial pay, in

search of their own piece of the American Dream. I offer this not as an excuse - that 'acceptable level of hypocrisy' - applies to me, too. But maybe candor and honesty can help break the cycle. I wish..

But the unfairness of Vietnam got visited on African-American guys more than any other group, as they were obviously being drafted at a much higher rate than was their percentage of the American population. Way higher. Especially in the crucial years between 1966 and 1970. And many of them found it impossible to avoid that fact, once they got there and saw how many of their own kind were there. It forced many to band together and often alienate themselves from white guys who would otherwise be their friends. The longer I stayed there, the more segregated things became.

Evidence of their brotherhood could be seen in the handshake they used among themselves, called *The Dapp*. At first, it was just a series of handshakes and 'slapping five', but as their militancy and separateness increased, so did the length of time it took and the amount of body parts that became involved in the greeting. It was intimidating at first, and the Army made some efforts to stop it, (calling it an un-military salute) which only made it more of a requirement for each guy - and which also put an end to their practice of passing it on to certain white guys considered sympathetic to the cause. It became a black-only thing and more intricate as time progressed, sometimes causing raucous laughter if a bunch of guys started doing it with guys who weren't familiar with their style - say they were just passing through or had just been assigned to the area, and were not used to going from the back-of-the-hand slap to the fist-on-top-of-fist, to the chest tap, and on and on.

It was a beautiful thing to watch, rhythmic hand poetry, visceral, tribal, and yet unique to this generation of Americans. I was excluded, not just because I was white, but I was a doofus as well; too uncoordinated to get the moves in the right order. (There were also black doofuses who couldn't really do it, so I didn't feel that bad.) But I envied their display of togetherness, partly because it was a culture

that was young and rebellious, and partly because it scared the Army while making those involved feel a powerful togetherness against the Army. And that was cool as far as I was concerned. I may have joined up with the Army, but I wasn't joining their oppressive ways. After a while it got serious, as the more militant guys brought their anger at the 'honky white establishment' from the streets and jails back home, where things were heating up over the summer of 1970.

So here we are, two loners, one black and one white, both relatively happy to be flying and away from Marble Mountain and all that Army bullshit. My flight record shows that we flew almost everyday that month. A lot of work, with not much time for goofing off, since by the time we're released for the day and I get my maintenance and cleaning done, it's drink a beer, read some, and hit the hay.

Hue is good for other reasons beyond just being away from the Army routine and the Company Area. For one thing, we get respect from the Pilots, who we have a chance to get to know a bit, and who open up more in conversations and brief us better about our missions. We all depend on each other and feel more like a unit because of it. The people we fly for show us more respect and require less formality, saluting or spit & polish. They're more serious than some of the self-important ego-maniacs back in DaNang. In part because we're so far from the major military installations and so much closer to the DMZ - some days we fly within sight of North Vietnam, and some days we're the only American military in the area - and I think it alters everyone's attitude.

1 July 1970

Anyway,
well I finally got around to
writing you back, I'm way behind
in my letter writing. I got the
package and contrary to your
disappointment, I thought it was
great! The berlogue chips were
outtaite, that's the first thing
I love for!! The whole ~~thing~~
package was great, as usual
I shoulda million for it; I'm
indebted to you for the rest of
my life!

Don't let the incident with
upset you; the old "herb" has
a way like that with people.
Just chalk it up to experience.
I'm really looking forward to
seeing some pictures of Prand
Mary, I miss her so much;
and everybody else, of course, she
been in Hue now for about
a week. I like it up here,
but we don't have much
spare time, to write letters,
we do sneak in a few lines
now and then, though.

Part of that seriousness means that we're allowed to practice-fire our weapons, which is almost impossible back in the DaNang area - no open areas and too many knots of dense population. And in Da Nang, Pilots didn't care about crew needs - they might fly with you today and someone else tomorrow. And any practice came out of their time back at the Base, where life for them was pretty decent, Officers Clubs were always well stocked.

But in Hue, it is *this* ship, *this* crew and *this* gun that's keeping you alive. So if we have time and we're flying around the coast, we fire our guns, using any movement as a

target. M-60, M-16, the pilots even stick their G.I.- issued .45 or .38 out the window just to join in the fun. Pity the poor fishes swimming around minding their own business that day, as we swoop down like a clumsy, clattering bird, our blades making a whop-whop, and two M-60 machine guns suddenly fire hundreds of rounds into the water, like a giant bird spitting hot melon seeds, every fifth one a 'tracer' round that hits the water glowing hot and trailing steam. Bad day to be a Manta Ray in the South China Sea. Rat a tat tat

It always feels good to fire off a few belts of ammunition, even though it takes the Gunner most of the evening to clean all those guns. But that's what he's here for and I never heard a Gunner complain about it, ever. Good to feel a gun fire, and a machine gun feels especially good because it will keep on firing, making you feel that no matter what's in front of you, no matter how much comes at you, and no matter how bad your shooting, you can spit enough rounds to eventually overwhelm the whole state of China.

Of course, once you've heard a mini-gun fire three thousand rounds per minute, the M-60 sounds clunky, like an old tractor next to a Ferrari. But you get to hold onto the M-60, pull its trigger and feel it kick and rattle. Nobody felt a mini-gun, it was fired and aimed by remote control and mounted way outside, where only the pilot firing it got any 'kick' from it. And the M-60 is right in front of you. The smell of gun powder is intoxicating, even to a peace-loving guy like me. The smell of burning gunpowder to a pacifist is like the smell of frying bacon to a vegetarian - seductive, until your brain reminds you of the slaughter involved. In that place, at that time, the truth is, even a pacifist sleeps better after practice-firing his weapon.

Another fine part of duty in Hue is the chow. An insult to call it chow, it was darn near 'cuisine'. The best of my entire military career - better even than Air Force or Navy. Anyone flying north of the Hai Van Pass tried to maneuver themselves to this certain Officers Club by lunch time just to partake of this great food. The story goes that the chef was a Vietnamese who had been trained by the French and contin-

ued cooking for the Americans. To this day, I can still smell and taste his baked dinner rolls, which were just slightly sweet and fluffy as a cloud. Everything that comes out of his kitchen is delicious - and I've always considered myself a good judge of cooking skill.

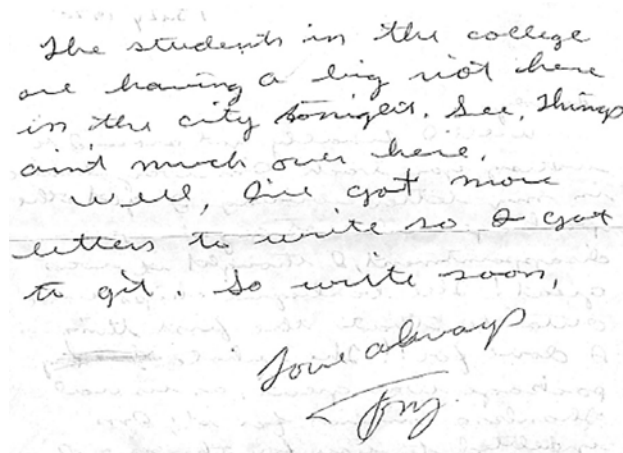
It's a tribute to our Aircraft Commander that he takes both myself and the Gunner into this place, which is off-limits to enlisted personnel. We get stares from the officers there, first because pilots always stick out, that Nomex uniform looks unkempt to begin with, and after flying for a few hours gets wrinkled and sweat stained. Secondly, they come dragging in their crew, a black kid who was most likely the only black in the room, and me, a pimply-faced worker bee who could look out of place in his own living room. But the AC makes like it's perfectly natural and beyond discussion - no 'eatin' in the kitchen' for my crew, his attitude seems to convey. Could also have something to do with the fact that the other officers might have to call on us to pull their cookies out of the fire someday, I don't know.

What ever, we sure enjoy the food and the special feeling. Boy, officers sure get treated well, I notice. I knew that before, but never witnessed it first hand. But they also conduct themselves differently, as well. They're 'elite', 'have class', and speak in low voices about things that seem above the concerns of the average Joe. Yea, the inequities of life. The decision-makers, intruded upon by a couple of kids who will spend their lives carrying out those decisions, or being carried out by them. Sure is good food though.

Even though it had been bombed to rubble by the Americans back in Tet of 1968, I can see that the city of Hue is a special place. It was the ancient capital of Vietnam, now only a provincial capital, but much of the French and classical Vietnamese architecture remained, as witness to its former stature and importance. It had seen some of the most vicious fighting of this war, due to its symbolic importance to the Vietnamese of both the South and the North, and due to its closeness to the DMZ. Fighting from Hue had been seen on TV for years back home, more than DaNang, and

almost as much as Saigon. It was hard to defend and easily over-run, located as it was on a plain between the sea and the mountains, and was also accessible by a river. It was a sacred place to them, and a spooky one to me. Spooky because I expected a barricaded garrison of some kind, with people living in bomb shelters. That's why I considered it a death sentence to be sent up here.

What we found instead, since there hadn't been any fighting there for a while, was a quaint and mostly pretty little city with tree-lined boulevards, walled compounds, white fences in front of well tended homes, and businesses housed in fine-looking store fronts, all inhabited by a higher-looking class of people - almost in defiance of the notion that there was a war on. We're truly intruders here, and this place commands respect, like no other place I've been to in this country. I want to roam around and play tourist, but it's a practical impossibility for us; the Army warns us constantly about Viet Cong hiding amid the population, and here's a place I believe them - if I was Viet Cong, I'd hang out here too. Lots of good food and mellow young people.



The students in the college
are having a big riot here
in the city tonight. See, things
ain't much over here.
Well, we got more
letters to write so I got
to go. So write soon,
Love always
- Jny.

Closing out the letter of July 1, 1970, I mention a riot at the college tonight, noting that... "things aren't much (different) over here". To us it means that we end our day early

and lay low for the evening. A college town in turmoil over the war - just like the rest of the 1970 world - the Baby Boomers were going 'boom' everywhere.

If DaNang is a bustling port city 'on the make', with hustlers, beggars and servants, Hue is like a gentle haven for artists and intellectuals and others who could still think thoughts beyond what was, and into what could become. I see a remarkable thing going on in Hue that makes me question a lot of my assumptions about us Americans and our reasons for being in Vietnam. Even though the ancient walled city had been blown to bits and the remaining structure was mostly a crumbling memory, they were rebuilding it - by hand - repairing broken walls and patching over numerous bullet holes. Wheel barrows, hand trowels and old fashioned mortar mixing was their method, and the old men doing it moved so slowly, it seemed as if they had been doing it forever and would be doing it for the rest of their lives.

This wasn't a grand looking place to begin with, nor was it very big. It was off limits to us, of course, but one day, a Pilot and I got close enough and curious enough to sneak in a ways for a peek. It had once been beautiful, but not that ornate or gilded, nor as majestic as Indian or Middle East temples. But the rubble was picked up and reassembled piece by piece, and in some places we could see that this had once been an elegant place - just not a gaudy one.

This is the first I see of the long-distant past of the country's history; I'd only seen its recent past, the Japanese, French and Chinese influences. And before now assumed that the only culture Vietnam had was the trappings of the Buddhist religion - the small shrines along the roads and temples where they make offerings and burn incense. But this was evidence that there had once been a Vietnam 'Empire' - a nation, a people, who had their own distinct language and culture and who identified themselves in terms other than just religion. And if these old guys had anything to do with it, it would last long after the current war.

My machine-slave mentality laughed at these old peasants who look to be rebuilding a sand castle in a rain-

storm. They're never going to get it done, and even if they do, what'll it be good for? Nobody will care, it's so small and plain it won't even make a decent tourist attraction. But the work continues, and I notice that it has none of the trappings of a big municipal project - no propaganda banners telling how it will bring a better life to the community - almost as if they're doing it in secret. The war could return at any moment (which, of course, it did, many times) but this place, this project, must be so sacred or so symbolic that it will continue, even if it takes forever. Nations, like people, cling to symbols.

It affects me in a way I can't explain. I know one thing, it does make me aware, for the rest of the time I'm in-country, that there's a real 'something' here that we can't see; something, in fact, that they are reluctant to show off. And I keep my eyes open for it from then on. But it's only in Hue that I see it quite like this. I have a camera with me, but I am reminded that the Vietnamese don't like having their pictures taken, nor do they care for us taking pictures of the shrines or other things they consider sacred. I like to think that I lack pictures of what I considered the most beautiful part of Vietnam because I respected those sacred places and the people they belonged to enough to respect their prohibition against photographing it. But I could have just been between cameras. If memory doesn't prove otherwise, I try sometimes to give my younger self the benefit of the doubt. Call it survivor's privilege. Hue is the only place I would care to revisit someday, but..

I'm too busy to give it much thought; I got my own symbols to occupy my mind; A Care package from Elaine, with BBQ potato chips, umm boy, my favorite - reminds me of home. Mail call is a real thrill when it only happens every few weeks. And finally I get the picture of my car...



Proud Mary, and
yours truly. That's
the camper behind
"us".

Can you tell to
look at it that we
just spent an hour
spinning in the mud.
I got ~~oil~~ splattered
but it didn't show.
Maybe it would have
helped me look better!!

Front and back of the picture of Elaine with Proud Mary.

*Good, I thought, they're still having fun and living normal;
maybe things will still be the same when I get home and I
can just pick up where I left off...*

15 July 70

Clain

well, the package was just great and the pictures were outstanding. I'm sending the other pictures back that you wanted. As long as I have the ones of Proud Mary, I'm satisfied. I really appreciate it.

I'm sorry I've been so long in writing to you, but I've been up here in Hue for about a month and it takes about 2 weeks to get your letters after they reach DaNang, so, by the time I get them, they're about three weeks old. Besides that, I've been real busy up here; I haven't had a day off in about 2 months, and I'm really draggin' ass. Hue keeps me busy, but the time sure goes by fast. Last week we were on a resupply into a place called LZ BRICK. We went in 3 times without incident, and there was another

The time goes by fast because the routine is so irregular, and we get little time off, because we're the only ship in the area and have many masters to serve. Tired from not enough sleep, we're up at dawn most days and in the air right after breakfast. Most of the time the missions are boring, tedious or both. I try to get some of my maintenance work done while we wait. Gunner grabs the blades with the wire hook after they stop turning, ties it securely to the tail, and finds a spot somewhere in the shade to catch forty winks. If nothing comfortable is handy, he'll curl up in a nylon net hammock that gets stretched out inside the cargo area of the ship; semi-comfortable enough if you you're tired

enough to sleep with one arm dangling and your legs scrunched up a bit.

I bug the pilots at each stop, trying to determine how long we expect to be parked, so I know just how much to tear into things. Light is always a problem - flashlights were tough to get and batteries got stolen - so I take advantage of the daylight to inspect the innards and clean the hard-to-reach areas. Always sand mixed with hydraulic fluid in crevices, and no way to wash it out - wipe it carefully with any rag handy. And don't risk cleaning behind wire bundles or disturbing the safety wire connections. In just a few minutes I have so much cowling removed that it looks like a major job is taking place. When the Pilots come scrambling towards us with word that we have to leave, I always have to be able to stop what I'm doing, fasten 'er back up and gather my stuff while the Pilot fires the engine. Never lay anything important on the ground, and don't be afraid to jump up and fasten the cowling around the engine with the blades spinning. Button down the particle separator - gently, don't bend the sheet metal, it tears so easily, and DZUS fasteners can lose their spring if you're not careful. This is when the footlocker comes in handy - just throw tools, rags and parts in, close it up, grab the pole, and with one foot on the skid, I clear the AC for take-off, once the ranking officer gives us the signal; then finish my straightening up, keeping that one eye on outside clearance. Remind the passengers to get buckled in. One of the few times I actually get to tell a guy with ten times my rank what to do. And he has to do it.

Most times we're just a limo service, taking high ranking Brass from one place to another; staying for a short while, then going somewhere else. We often get stuck waiting for someone and have only time to grab a bite at the mess hall of whatever outfit we're assigned to, and sometimes we go from one mission to the next with no time for anything but C-rations or whatever we're carrying from our care packages. Flying uses up a lot of fuel, which tethers us to the fuel depot, and it happens a lot that, while the Brass is eating, we're out refueling, in order to be ready to fly again; which

uses up just the amount of time for our lunch. They don't mean it, it's just the way the cookie crumbles for us. "You wanted to fly..."

Hard to believe I could ever get tired of flying, but if the day is boring and the mission uneventful, it does get tedious sitting back there in that well. The pilots get tired, but just like driving long distances, at least they have something to keep their hands busy and their brains occupied. And each minute in the air means corresponding hours of maintenance on the ground for me.

Not much to look at out the window either, just rice paddies dotted with thatched roofs as far as you could see, and sometimes the gray sky and our 2000ft altitude makes it all just a colorless 'pea soup'. Nothing to listen to, radio traffic keeps the pilots' ears tuned, and always the Gunner and I have to be alert for other aircraft entering our airspace and the occasional tracer round that some pissed off farmer fires off that ricochets skyward, making us think it's directed at us. I'd nod off, but always keep a part of my brain on alert.

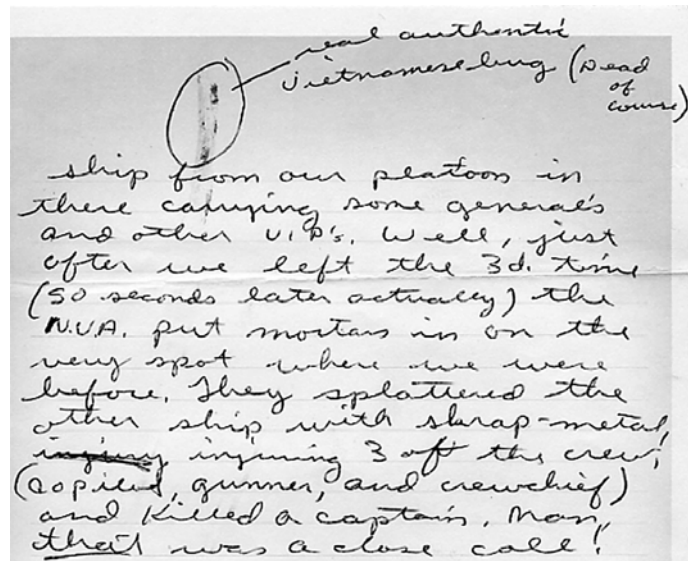
LZ BRICK AND OTHER THINGS I DON'T REMEMBER

There are lots of ways to attribute one's survival. I'm not a true believer, never thought I was lucky, and if my life is following some destiny, it has not yet revealed itself to me. But on July 7th, 1970, our boring routine was torn up on a resupply mission to a place called LZ Brick.

I have only fuzzy memories of the event, all resupply missions were pretty much the same from my perspective back in the well. Most LZs (Landing Zones) looked the same and we usually dropped off the same cargo each time - some kind of ammo in metal or wooden boxes. So this one would have been lost in all the other black holes of my memory, but for the fact that I wrote to Elaine about it, and the fact that I saw it mentioned in the Black Cat newsletter as part of the unit history of the 282nd A.H.C.

In that same letter of July 15th, on top of thanking Elaine for the picture of my car (which I carry in my pocket)

and complaining about not having had a day off for 2 months, I describe the disaster that I narrowly miss at LZ Brick.



Right now, I wonder to myself why I related this story to her. What was I trying to do? Scare her? Brag? Prove that I really was in a war zone so she'd keep sending care packages? It looks like such thoughtlessness now. But I'm sure part of it was because I knew she would listen, and because she really wanted to know and because she never complained about anything - I probably didn't relate 'war stories' to anyone else, except Roy maybe, out of concern that they'd worry too much and not want to hear about it because there was nothing they could do about it *but* worry.

I didn't save hers or anyone else's letters; it wasn't safe over there, someone could use them against you if a grudge got too deep or carried away, and the enemy (we imagined) could use them to track down our families after we were dead or some other disaster could befall whoever's return address fell into the wrong hands. They were private messages above all, and it was just felt that the only way to

keep them private was to destroy them. That's why we have no record of Elaine's, or anyone else's, reaction to my letters - I had to destroy them. But the fact that I kept writing and the fact that I never had to apologize or explain my poor choice of subjects for my letters to her is proof that Elaine kept up her end of the conversation, never becoming judgmental or scolding, but always there with the latest news, like we were still back at her apartment, playing cards and listening to records.

So I must have felt some need or obligation to tell her some of the truth. Most times, the daily routine was so unremarkable that it didn't lend itself to good story telling. So a day like this, full of such action-packed events, I wrote about, since it proved how 'lucky' I was. And I did write so little about what I was doing - this story about LZ Brick is only about a half a page in a five and a half page letter. The rest is just chat and gossip about boyfriends and girlfriends. We'd even stopped talking about the Beatles, their breakup had begun to sink in, and hopes of them getting back together were being dashed by the acrimony between John and Paul. We were growing up, things mattered now.

I can only speculate about how the events unfolded that led to the tragedy. Most vexing is, why was the General's ship sitting on the LZ anyway? If my ship had gone in two times without incident, as I wrote, did that mean they thought the LZ was secure enough for the General to land? (LZs were seldom big enough for very many ships at once), Had the General's ship been circling the area while we were making our sorties (trips) into the LZ? Not likely, since our ship would have had to go somewhere else to pick up supplies, which meant our two sorties would have taken at least thirty minutes to an hour to complete, depending on how far we had to go - way too much time to circle an LZ for anybody, especially a busy General.

It was probably decided that since our ship had been in there twice, it was safe so the General ordered his chopper in just after our second take off. Perhaps we came back in for our third sortie, where someone came over with our mail bag

or other goods, before we took off. We then took off and, according to my letter, in less than sixty seconds a mortar exploded in the exact spot where our ship took off from, catching the General's ship parked just yards away spraying them with shrapnel.

Can't understand why the mortar didn't hit when we went in the first two times - it could have been that we were testing the area with our sorties, but were in and out so fast (a point of pride here? Was it because my crew did the job so quickly?) that the mortar crew was too far away to gauge accurately. And maybe, as would happen in remote areas like this, it was a small mortar 'cell' of three or less NVA or Viet Cong, and they only had one or two mortar shells to fire and got lucky when they saw two of our helicopters on the LZ at the same time. My guess is both choppers kept their blades turning and were only on the ground a short period of time and still the mortar crew couldn't get their shells into the LZ before my ship took off. But it seems a fairly likely scenario.

I also do not recall what happened immediately after our take-off. We probably circled the area, either climbing up out of harm's way or maybe we used our M-60 guns to strafe the area while the other ship got airborne. There were so many instances of this kind during my flying period that I can't distinguish this particular one. Since we sometimes did fly above to save ourselves and sometimes did provide low-level gun cover, either one could have happened that day. It's for sure that once we knew there were injuries, we weren't going to leave the area, in case the ship had to set down and the injured ferried to the hospital, which may also have happened. It's possible that we flew with the ship to the hospital and helped inspect the air worthiness of the General's ship. One hundred hits and it still flew - and may have flown all the way back to Marble Mountain - unbelievable; no wonder we fell in love with our helicopters.

My short account of it says that Gunner and Crew Chief were injured, so I guess only they know for sure, but regardless, to have all that blood and to have to bring a casu-

alty back must have been horrible. That ship must have been a mess, and the Crew Chief had a lot of work to do when he returned to DaNang.

I wonder how I felt that night. This was my first brush with death, my first 'hot' resupply job and, like so many, it had appeared as routine as all the rest - until the mortar shell exploded in a grim reminder of how close we were to death, always. I couldn't help thinking about the guys out there on the edge in those fire bases and remote outposts. I'd been on Zulu Guard, I knew what it was like to sleep in a windowless bunker in a place where only some barbed wire and some scattered claymore mines were all that kept the enemy at bay. I thought about those guys and that poor Captain who was busy doing his job when suddenly he felt a hot poker enter his head and, much too slowly, felt his consciousness begin to fade away as the two Generals laid him inside the chopper and applied dressing to his wound.

This is why I didn't just quit. For years I wondered why we all just didn't drop our guns and tell our Company Commanders to go ahead and 'lock me up' - I can't, I won't do this any more. I'd rather sit it out in jail. I can't take the terror of not knowing when I'm going to get it. But the reasons you keep going are very basic and so much a part of you that you don't even really think them out loud: it's because I want to kill that guy who killed our guy, that's why. It all gets reduced to that - if we don't go kill them now, they will kill us. Thus, killing becomes perpetual.

Politics, protests, the past, the future, nations and families are forgotten, and there's nothing you can see anymore but the fight. And if I don't fight, that'll just mean that they draft some other poor slob to take my place. And if I don't do my job today, if my ship is grounded because I slacked off, who will fly these missions? Who will bring these guys the ammo they need to defend themselves? Huh? Who's going to do it? That's what it all gets reduced to out here. If not me, who? If not now, when? If not here, where? The same argument they'd used to get us into Vietnam was now locking itself into my immature brain and keeping me

going like a robot. Because the thing you learn, as if you hadn't already spent your young life learning the same god-damned lesson over and over, as if your whole life and all the failure and frustration had only one message to deliver, as if you needed to have it pounded into your head and couldn't escape it is: *there's always someone who's got it worse!* Always. Someone.

How could I complain when I flew safely back to my bed that night while that other crew operated as a hearse, and worried all the way back to DaNang? How could I complain, as I ate my goodies from Elaine and read about my friends in her letter, that those guys 'out on the wire' guarding a tiny base camp, could be overrun and have to face the enemy with maybe their bare hands at any time tonight? I didn't complain, and I did. But what I know I did was repeat a phrase that was said over and over by me and a lot of other guys at the time. It was our only defense, our only effective response to what was abject insanity and increasing frustration at being so helpless to change anything about it. "Forget about it...", we'd say "...it don't mean nothing". Over and over. It don't mean nothing. Forget about it! And like any good psalm, or any good drug, it eventually blacks out the memory. Helps deaden the psychic pain. And that could be why I have so little memory of that day at LZ Brick.

Of course, others remember this incident better than me; and if I didn't have the letter I wrote, and if it didn't contain facts in accord with theirs, I couldn't have sworn that I was there. All resupply missions run together in my mind. I still don't remember this one much. And I still wonder why that chopper was sitting like a duck on that LZ, which had been hot only hours before. But it didn't mean nothin', so I forgot about it.

CHAPTER 18 - CENSORSHIP BENEFITS ALL - YOU'D THINK

It was eleven days until I wrote Elaine again, which probably meant that it took that long to get mail to where we were in Hue.

26 July 70

Howdy Babe,

How's things going? Good I hope. Things are looking up over here. The V.C. are about to launch 1 more major attack in I Corps (northern section of S.V.N) and when they do, the "war" will just about be over, cause they'll get the shit knocked out of them. The VC's strongest force ~~is~~ comes from Laos, where they all ran from Cambodia, so they're probably going to try one more time than it'll be all over. I'll say that the American fighting force will be home in Dec. 71, with nothing left over here but advisors. After that the South Vietnamese Army can handle it. They are a good army and they're really doing most of the fighting over here. I could come home right now and they'd never miss me!! ha!

Did you get your pictures back? I hope so. I kept the ones

I notice a trend in this letter of July 26th that I had no way of seeing then, but which seems obvious now. The letters contain too much information and not enough explanation. My younger self often writes like a war correspondent, sending reports back home, imagining that they are read and disseminated among friends and family, who read them with eagerness and interest for what information they contain. But

then they always get personal, with an on-going exchange that Elaine and I keep up about various personal things, which is not meant for others to hear. This again, I suppose, is because we, Elaine and I, as well as 'us', our friends and members of our generation, considered ourselves seekers of truth, and wanted, whenever possible, to get the news first-hand. Many of us had been eyewitnesses to events that were covered in the newspapers and on TV and had found the coverage to be slanted, biased against our views, inaccurate at times and had become, by 1970, more like propaganda than news. The 'media' we often found, took the word of the cop, the politician, the General, or the 'holy' man, and gave no time to any opposing view of events.

In Vietnam, there developed a cynicism among reporters which came from being in the field and witnessing things that the government or military would claim happened completely differently than the way reporters saw it with their own eyes. This is why the daily briefings given by the U.S. military in Saigon became known as the 'Five O'clock Follies.' In the 1980's, their deceptive technique became known as 'spin', but in the 1960's, and early 1970's, people of our generation demanded the truth; and this would often lead to heated confrontations, even at one's own dinner table. When we now see film about the period, we see confrontations between police and demonstrators and are not told that it is the seeking of truth, and not just the need for violence, that caused much of the fighting on streets and campuses.

The average soldier in Vietnam got much less news and information, even about the very war we were fighting, than the folks back home. There were some publications that made their way to us from hand to hand, such as *Ramparts* and *Rolling Stone*, but the one publication we saw most was *Stars and Stripes*, a newspaper which was published and distributed by the Army. It contained news from home, reports from other major newspapers on various lighter stories, and war stories from around Vietnam. I remember reading *Stars and Stripes* because I liked reading, was always running out of reading material, and wanted to keep up with how truth

was faring as the wars, both foreign and domestic, progressed. *Stars and Stripes* was written in a simple, straight forward style, with few multi-syllable words or complex sentences. I don't remember it containing much depth per subject, and if there were conflicting views presented or follow-up questions, they were, as I remember, only included to add credibility or emphasis to the report being given.

What stood out about any war report in the *Stars and Stripes* was the way everything was going our way and how each encounter with the enemy was contributing to our overall winning of the war. Even when we suffered casualties, it was the enemy who got the worst of it, according to the *Stars and Stripes*; and no matter how confusing or confounding the war may have looked to outside observers or independent reporters, the Stars and Stripes always saw things pretty much the same way - we were doing everything right, even if things were going wrong. It was a hurray-for-our-side, flag-waving enthusiasm that I could understand for the most part - once you commit, you must not quit.

I remember getting the feeling from reading the *Stars and Stripes* that it was the same news, written in the same style, that guys fighting W W II read during that war, and on back through all our wars - WW I, The Spanish American, Civil War, Indian wars, and even the War of Independence itself. This one we were fighting now, they seemed to be saying, was just a continuing battle for those same goals of freedom and democracy and only the battlefield, weapons and tactics had changed. That's why, to a nineteen-year-old such as myself, who had already committed my all to it, the war had reason of its own, a promise that must be fulfilled, if only to those who had fought, sacrificed and died in order for us to be in this position of world power in the first place. And, in the second place, to bring that peace, freedom and right to self-determination to those who asked us to help them achieve it.

A line oft-repeated then to justify our commitment to Vietnam was, that if we don't fight Communism in Vietnam, it'll spread and we'll have to fight it somewhere else, maybe

even on our own shores or those of some precious ally - like Japan or in South America. Part of me was swayed by their 'domino' theory, but part of me was skeptical that there were more things involved in this war than we were being told, and that there were more issues at stake.

For one thing, it had become difficult to discuss which of our systems, the capitalist economic system or the democratic political system, we were actually trying to spread. It became impossible to avoid noticing along the way, that most people made little or no distinction between the two, even though there were crucial differences between them. Which made our generation (and even some older people) wonder just whose money was being spent to further whose ideals, and whose lives were being sacrificed for whose profits. But these were dead-end discussions in most forums, from the newspaper editorials of the day all the way down to the dinner tables of America.

In that letter of July 26, I'm not explaining how I know all this; it has the ring of information derived from 'official sources' which must have included the *Stars and Stripes*, mixed with personal observations (the ARVN is a 'good' Army - well they looked good, anyway, all dressed up in our gear) and random discussions with whomever I talked to at the time; which could have included some high ranking officers who would occasionally chat with us in the course of flying our missions.

Sometimes, the top Brass would go into a meeting, and their aides (or aides-de-camp as they were sometimes called) would answer our questions or just fill us in, feeling comfortable with us because they saw our crew so often and considered us more a 'part of the team' than usual. And of course sometimes, they were just trying to sell the war, and felt compelled to get us to buy into their viewpoint - so many of 'them' knew that there were so many of 'us', - skeptics in the lower ranks - who always questioned everything, and needed 'pep' talks.

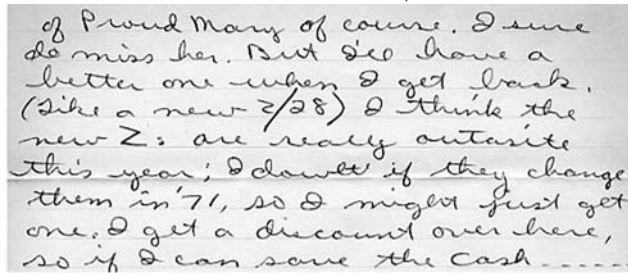
But on a personal level, I look now at this and other letters and think how cruel and unintentionally thoughtless it seems to tell my best friend about a close call with death, then to go on about how there would soon be a big offensive by the enemy, after which, the war would be 'over'. I'm reminded that, when writing back home, we were aware of censorship by the government, so we didn't include too many details, and were also afraid that if we said too much, it could give the enemy info that they could use against us personally or as a fighting force. A lot of naivete, obviously, but it did enter my thoughts, and might have been one reason that facts seem so sketchy in my letters.

It must also be taken into account that, as of this letter of July 26th, I'd only been in the country for about ninety days, thirty of which I spent cooped-up on Zulu guard, and thirty on temporary duty in Hue. So I'm still an *FNG*, very much at the mercy of what I'm told and have not, as yet, had a chance to really talk to a lot of other soldiers or see much of the country with my own eyes. When I first saw these letters in the 1990's, I was shocked that my younger self seemed innocent and gullible, and so 'gung ho', (to use an old Army expression we'd used since Basic, to describe love of military, and/or an eagerness for war for its own sake). It is a deeper perception which now allows my older self to 'cut some slack' to my younger self, because now I appreciate the forces involved in creating this mentality within me that accepted the official view of things.

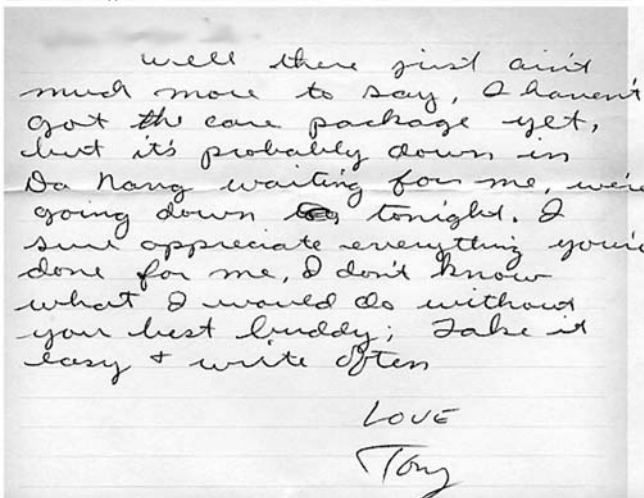
The line about the war being over by December of 1971 is sadly poignant now, considering how long it actually took us to extricate ourselves from Vietnam. But it must be remembered that all I could see in July of 1970, was the incredible amount of force we had brought with us, and how much of it we had given to the ARVN - so much firepower, it just seemed like all we needed was the 'go' from Washington, and we could have wiped them out.

I couldn't see at the time all those other factors hidden from us, like the on-going difficulty of fighting a jungle war with no front lines; the true physical strength of the NVA and VC; and the psychological strength of the North Vietnamese, a people who'd already survived having more bombs dropped on them than were dropped on Japan in all of W W II.

What we also couldn't see was that it was already just a test of wills all the way around: The American will to increase the killing, the North's will to fight on for their cause in spite of overwhelming odds, and the as-yet-unknown lack of will on the part of the South Vietnamese people and their Armed Forces to shoulder the war burden by themselves. Reading the *Pentagon Papers* many years later, I learned that people inside our government knew about all this, but the average American wasn't being told. And neither was the soldier in the field, of course.



of Proud Mary of course. I sure do miss her. But I'll have a better one when I get back. (Like a new Z/28) I think the new Z's are really outsize this year; I doubt if they change them in '71, so I might just get one. I get a discount over here, so if I can save the cash -----



well there just ain't much more to say, I haven't got the care package yet, but it's probably down in Da Nang waiting for me, we're going down ~~to~~ tonight. I sure appreciate everything you've done for me, I don't know what I would do without you best buddy; Take it easy + write often

LOVE
Tony

This last paragraph, which looks like the usual sign-off, has a finality to it that I wonder if I was aware of when I wrote it, especially the line “...*we’re going down (to Da Nang) tonight.*” Close calls, coming battles, and now a night flight to Da Nang, this could have been my last letter. (was I thinking that way when I wrote it? I doubt it) And what would it have all meant had an enemy round brought us down or mechanical failure left us killed or captured?

Would anything I had written to Elaine help my friends or family understand why I died? I can’t know. Neither can those people know, whose sons, husbands, brothers or friends died under the exact same set of circumstances which I managed to survive. So little real information, and even less explanation, left to piece together the last days of a young man’s life. Maybe that’s ‘why me’. Maybe it’s for those who were left wondering, that I try now to fill in the blanks of letters that tried to say so much, but which left more questions than answers. Letters full of facts left in - and feelings left out.

CHAPTER 19 - THE SWAGGER OF A BLACK CAT

It was just dumb luck that I ended up a Black Cat. Good luck, I think. When you're in Long Bien lounging in that pool, you think to yourself, well this could be OK, I could hang out here or in Saigon or Bien Hoa and it might not be so bad. Things you think about while waiting for your assignment. Hang out with the big shots and maybe you don't get shot - and still pick up that combat pay, flight pay and the medals that prove you were actually in a war. Then the orders come through, and it's all a blur except for that one thing - the place they were sending you - Da Nang. And worse, the company assignment: 282nd A.H.C., which stood for Assault *Helicopter Company*.

The Army will tell you that assignments are based on the needs of the units, but it's destiny for those who are assigned. In previous American wars, units stayed together from training to battle, and in fact, the Viet Cong operated a variation of it called 'cells' - where a few soldiers would train and fight together, sometimes all the way through their tour of duty. Some of the guys I went to helicopter school with were also Black Cats, but that was luck of the draw, not any plan or design by the U.S. Army. We were a random bunch, assigned by company needs, hard to consider ourselves a real unit. But we had that big yellow spot with a black, arched-back cat on it, which made us recognizable, good or bad, to all who saw our ships coming.

Most film of Vietnam shows anonymous aircraft, except for the 1st Cavalry, 101st Airborne and certain other 'old Army' units, Brigades and Divisions, huge entities who got a lot of press because of where they operated (mostly in the south and central highlands of Vietnam) and who they carried (the Press, and bigwigs of course).

But the Black Cats were just a company, one of the only assault helicopter companies in the 212th Aviation Battalion, which had Cobras, A-10s and various other aircraft as its primary responsibility. Maybe it helped that we were a

lone Army unit in Marine territory; they controlled not only the Freedom Hill area west of DaNang, but the very strip of shore land where us Black Cats were based was called Marble Mountain Marine Base. Our company consisted of around three hundred individuals, three platoons of fliers - gunners, crew chiefs, engine and airframe specialists - plus pilots and clerks, cooks, officers-in-command, etc. All of us separated by rank, job title, race, social and economic background, drug of choice, religion, (or lack of) and that thing which remains such an enigma to us Americans - culture.

Sewed on some of our uniforms was a yellow cloth patch identifying us as Black Cats, while 'calling cards' were cooked up by some of the guys in Third Platoon (Alley Cat Gunships) and passed around - 'Death on Call' they offered. Part whimsical fun, but serious bragging as well - it transformed us nobodies into somebodies. It gave us a 'swagger' that helped us feel united, powerful and made it easier to deal with the fear and frustration. We had been recruited, trained, sent over and brought back as individuals. But we of the 282nd had that one unifying identity, which may have served us just as well after our service as it did when we were in-country - something positive to look back on and hold onto, like a high school ball team, neighborhood gang, or the college fraternity that our luckier peers back home belonged to at that moment.

It's too bad other guys didn't have a unit identification like us Black Cats. It's a reminder to me of having once been a part of something, a positive emotional connection, from a time when too many of my emotions were of the negative kind.

CHAPTER 20 - MY FIRST COMBAT ASSAULT

“Airmobile, loaded with gun, look out Charlie, here we come”

Several times over the years I tried to write about my Vietnam experiences - to no avail. In the early 1980's, I took notes while watching Stanley Karnow's series on PBS, and was also inspired by re-reading the *Pentagon Papers* around the same time. But I didn't have Elaine's letter then, (didn't know they existed until 1991), and there were always other priorities. That period in the early eighties was the closest I came, in part because I felt that enough time had elapsed and that I was emotionally ready, and also figured that people were ready to listen, since Vietnam was becoming the subject of movies and TV shows.

But all along there was that part of me that knew that if I probed too deeply, I could erupt with emotions I had no way of dealing with. And a very real fear existed within me that what I'd successfully blacked out or forgotten would come back to me, and push me into serious mental illness like what had happened to so many other guys who'd been through the war. I was afraid that the unknown that I had been dealing with in my nightmares would invade my waking hours, cripple all the progress I had made toward becoming a normal human being, and I'd end up in a psycho ward at the Veterans Administration. Another fate worse than death, I thought.

I was able to watch documentaries and movies about Vietnam because documentaries always focused on the larger picture of war, politics. And movies, other than *Apocalypse Now*, were mostly gung-ho fantasies that had so little to do with the war I saw that I could easily dismiss them (and most were just plain bad movies as well). But nightmares have a way of coming at me that hardly has anything to do with daily life; sometimes they come when things are bad and sometimes they happen just as things are looking up.

And all along I knew one thing that had not happened kept building inside, a pressure that I was unable to relieve and one I knew could someday erupt uncontrollably and leave me with no option but sedation and lock-up: I did not know how to cry. I hadn't cried since I was thirteen and the longer I went without, the more afraid I became of it, believing that if I got too mad, too stressed out, too alone or in too big a crowd, I might suddenly burst out and once started, be unable to stop. I had kept going on the strength of my ability to laugh and to make others laugh. Just like when I was a kid - armor forged with humor. Kills two birds - allays my fear and makes friends at the same time. That makes me human, doesn't it? That was my thinking.

But about that attempt I made in the early 1980's.. I remember using a technique from English composition, or Journalism, (I'm not sure which, since I never took a class in either one) that suggests when trying to write something, write first that part which stands out in your memory most vividly and therefore what you know best.

And there were a couple of things about my first Combat Assault that did stick in the memory, augmented by a series of pictures I took around that period - and now I have the added benefit of the letter I wrote to Elaine about it, and the general history of the period being excerpted in the Black Cat Newsletter which records that the months of August, September and October 1970 saw the Black Cats participate in numerous combat assaults. This is a memory hard to doubt, there's so much evidence of it and my flight record even confirms that I flew 7 hours that day.

2 August 70

Hi Kid.

Well I went on my first CA today. (COMBAT ASSAULT). It was really outsite! A CA. is where we have 5 "slinks" (that's a plain Huey with 2 machine guns) and 4 gun ships (Rockets, grenades, mini-guns etc). The slinks take troops and supplies, while the guns shoot up the area. I was in No 2 ship. They go in / at a time dropping their load and taking off like a boat out of hell! I ~~was~~ wish I had my camera because this is the first time in about a year that the "Black Cats" have done things like this together and ~~so~~ it really looked good, and really pretty well coordinated. We broke one guys leg because he didn't want to jump off (2 ft. off the ground) ~~so~~ naturally we push them off. ha! God damn chickens. (They were Vietnamese Infantry). It was really great. I hope we get more missions like this.

I don't mention to Elaine how anxious I am going into my first Combat Assault (or CA as we abbreviated it). The early morning is clear and cool, being towards the start of monsoon season. I'm still tired from the long flight down from Hue, and from not having had a day off in months; and now the extra work of preparing the ship for a C A.

Preparations involve removing the small doors behind the pilots' seats, stripping the ship of all extra weight, including my footlocker, adding extra ammo in the boxes and gathering as many side arms as we can get away with.

I'm as anxious about making a mistake as I am about getting shot by the enemy. So many things can go wrong, like forgetting something, or freezing up - and so many people are watching me, counting on me, even. We're not by ourselves up in Hue anymore, the whole company is out in force; nobody wants to miss out on this. The Black Cats haven't done an all-out C.A. for nearly a year, and everyone wants a piece of the action. What if we're given the order to shoot and I freeze? If my gun jams, can I fix it quick enough (I don't *really* know as much as I should about that M-60), and if I do pull the trigger, will I freeze on it and burn the barrel off till it blows up in my face?



And what if I shoot holes in my own ship's tail? Guys do it all the time - fixate on a target as the ship flies away, then suddenly, when the pilot kicks the tail to one side to change direction or as an evasive action, you can't stop firing quick enough, riddling your own tail with your own rounds - and back at the sheet metal shop, they *know* they're your rounds, you can't hide the fact from them. Gunners are forgiven, Chiefs are not - they have to stay with the ship while it's repaired in the hanger and that could be torture if the rest of the boys were 'out playing'. I will not, can not, accept failure in myself. Not here, not today.

Once in the air, we're an awesome sight, flying in formation, the Alley Cat gun ships ahead and on each side, like fighters protecting a bomber group, our Black Cat emblems on the nose of each ship a proud display. I'm as thrilled and nervous as I ever was in my life. I'm afraid of the unknown, of course, but I'm most immediately worried about my old ship - will she take the stress, and did I do my maintenance properly last night? It was dark, did I miss any leaks, was there safety wire coming loose? Did I do a thorough pre-flight this morning, or was the excitement of my first C.A. blinding me to a problem?

We land soon at a rendezvous point, LZ Nancy, and I'm relieved that the Pilots make no comment about the way she's flying. Once we shut down and tie the blade, I go around wiping, checking fluid levels and testing the play of control arms everywhere. Not knowing how long we have to wait for the 'go' order, I don't tear off any cowling.

I notice that, while the pilots gather on one side of the runway for a briefing, some Crew Chiefs and Gunners seem to be having a meeting on the other side, so I head that way, in case I might be missing something important. Some of them are smoking, so I pull out a Winston and light up as I walk over; as any new kid would, I'm trying hard to hide my need for acceptance from them. But instead of learning anything, rather than picking up pointers about what to expect next, these guys are talking about everything but this morning's mission! It's the usual round of complaints, gossip, jokes and put downs that we always engage in, and worse (and this is the second thing I don't tell Elaine about) some of them are passing around a joint! Not everyone's toking on it, and I pass as coolly as I can, but I can't believe it! Imagine my shock at seeing guys about to go into combat, guys who I was depending on to save my life with a gun, were blown away before a single shot is fired.

I dismiss myself and head back to Blivet, not saying a word about it to anyone. I maintain my cool, but like most people who are ignorant of marijuana smokers, I fear that they might 'freak out' and accidentally shoot me or not shoot at the enemy. And along with that fear is that silly 'logic' that makes one think that just because they're doing one illegal drug, that they're probably also high on others. These guys are crazy, I think to myself. I would have thought that you need to be straight and sober for this kind of big operation - am I taking things too seriously or are they not taking it seriously enough? Whew! Glad when we get the order to go, so these guys don't have time to get even more stoned.

Our part of a Combat Assault means going somewhere, picking up some poor ground pounding infantrymen, (usually ARVN) and then delivering them to some god-

awful spot in the jungle. A spot that could be nothing more than a pockmark created by a bomb or artillery barrage, which leaves the tiny landing zone littered with debris and tree stumps. Our goal is to get in, drop these poor saps as fast as possible, and get the hell out even faster. Since we have more to live for at that precise moment in our lives - (well, compared to what their night was going to be like in the jungle) namely hot showers, warm food and a decent place to sleep - we could be forgiven perhaps for thinking our odds afforded us the right to get them off the ship and us back into the air, fast as possible, at whatever cost.

The part about kicking the ARVN infantrymen out is true, unfortunately. The problem was, the landing zone we were dropping them off in had not been cleared of tree stumps, preventing the Pilots from getting very close to the ground; so naturally, these Vietnamese troops, who were short-statured and extra-burdened with field packs, hesitated, waiting for the ship to go lower, even after the order to jump off had been given. We in the crew were concerned only with getting in and getting out of the LZ as quickly as possible, so Gunners and Crew Chiefs were either ordered to (or took it upon themselves) to 'escort' them out.

So, I grab the pole with my right hand, reach around with my left to the first guy, pull on his shirt and throw him out like a sack of potatoes. The second guy behind him gets the message and jumps out at my commanding thumb motion - but talk about hate-filled looks! It's a long way down for them, and I doubt seriously if we would treat American troops so callously, but every millisecond that passes makes us (and them, too) more vulnerable to a mortar or gunfire. On top of which, the Pilots were yelling and their anxiousness makes us work faster to empty the ship and get the hell out of there. I clearly recall hearing a Commanding Officer barking over the radio not to push these guys off before getting close to the ground - we had indeed broken one guy's leg.

They weren't chicken, as I called them in the letter, they just weren't prepared to parachute, that's all.

Oh. by the way, we weren't shot at but the "guns" killed a bunch of V.C. outside of the landing zone.

Well I was going up to Freedom Hill today and see Carmen but we had the CA and I couldn't. I haven't had a day off in 2 months. Carmen should be home next ~~week~~ week or so. Maybe he'll stop down here on his way to the airport. I hope so.

Well, ~~and~~ I flew 7 straight hours today without a break, and I'm dead tired, so write soon + keep the faith

Love

Tony

Luckily, it was a smooth operation and no one got hurt, except the poor ARVN who broke his leg. And I must have been so 'up' from it that I still had energy enough to write a letter telling Elaine about my first big day in combat. But I couldn't tell her everything. Hell, who would've believed it?

CHAPTER 21 - QUANG-TRI

So I made it through my first combat assault, and my reward was to spend the next week in the hangar fixing Blivet. At least I was no longer a new guy; as evidence, my Nomex flight suit was getting broken in. (Hootch maids always washed them in hot soapy water to get the grease out - which ruined the very fire-retardant properties we wore them for in the first place) There were new faces around the company area looking at me after a month in Hue as if I knew something. I hadn't had my 'cherry' broken yet, meaning I hadn't gotten into a firefight, but I'd had enough close calls with rockets on runways and mortars in LZs to feel a little confident.

Still had a hard time getting help from the hangar, though; they hated Blivet, it always needed something, and I wasn't the kind of slap-on-the-back kind of guy who could charm them or coerce them into hurrying. Used bribery if it got me something, but usually I could only wait for them to finish whatever job they were doing, so I would just head for the Enlisted Men's Club, to catch up on my drinking with buddies or go back to the hootch to put together model cars. I had loved putting model cars together as a kid, and was shocked when I found some on sale at the P.X. - again not understanding that in Vietnam, just like the Army in general, you're either being worked to death or you've got time and nothing to do with it but sit around and read or write letters. I even had time to build little shelves to display them on.

I missed Hue and hated being back in the company area, it was like returning to school after working a regular job on the weekend and being treated like a kid again. Let me go back, *Top* (Platoon Sergeants were often called Top Sergeants or 'Top' for short - but only if he was 'ok'). Morning formations, saluting, inspections, paperwork, showers that turned cold suddenly, food that was barely edible, pep talks from visiting 'shit-heads', a mosquito fogger truck that blew a cloud of who-knows-what kind of insecticide

throughout the company area without warning, a constant bustle of people and aircraft noises, sirens at all hours, and those damn Malaria pills.

Malaria pills were slightly smaller than a dime in diameter and about as thick as 2 or 3 dimes piled together, and they made me sick, sometimes feverish, often tired and always they screwed up my bowel movements. So I quit taking them around this time. I'm going to die in a blaze of gunfire, by god, who cares if my corpse has malaria?

I had tossed my 'dogtags' into the South China Sea after hearing stories about how they'd get hot in a fire and burn your chest. Not sure if this was true, (so much of what the 'old guys' warned us about was intended to 'pull our leg'), but I'd never liked wearing them, or anything else around my neck and still don't; they were uncomfortable in the heat, and my real fear was that they would jerk my neck into spinning machinery if I forgot to take them off before starting to work. Besides, there had also been stories about the Viet Cong using them for some nefarious pseudo-kidnap blackmail scheme, so out the door they went.

The Army made life in the company area hard enough, but I was further alienated by the sectioning off that took place among us soldiers. There were three basic 'groups' that everyone belonged to in Vietnam - heads, juicers and squares - or freaks, drunks and straights. 'Heads' smoked pot, 'juicers' drank and 'straights' were either religious or just plain tee-totalers. Pilots could be drinkers, straight, religious or all three, but only a very few risked their flight status by smoking pot or hanging with the 'heads', and they were firmly discouraged from hanging out, 'fraternizing', with the enlisted men anyway, so there was no chance of finding pals among their ranks; of course I could have joined one of their prayer groups but I wasn't into organized religion.

I once heard that artillery was almost exclusively 'juicers' - makes sense - after a day shooting off those big booming guns, you'd need a drink, too. The Infantry split

about evenly, (depending on the era - leaning in the later years toward 'heads', as drug 'offenders' were drafted to fill out the ranks, and after all, it was easier to carry a few joints - or a Bible - than bad tasting cans of beer).

The one road that some heads and some juicers could find each other on was the one called 'downers' - 'reds', 'beans', Seconals, barbiturates, and sleeping pills. Just one of these old fashioned sleeping pills and a few beers could make you feel like you'd drunk a whole case of beer. And it would black you out for the whole night and leave you drowsy and floating the next day, instead of hung over like you'd be if you had actually drunk that whole case of beer.

I had been raised in a family that drank, got drunk and suffered consequences - the repercussions of which we never stopped to calculate. "Shut up and have another beer" was the family rallying cry - and answer to all thorny questions. So even though I wasn't a very good drinker, I kept it up, since I had already found religion and rejected it, and found sobriety not worth the money saved - nor happiness to be its automatic result.

But here at Marble Mountain, I was running out of drinking buddies; some were going home, and worse, fights were breaking out in the E.M. Club too often for me to hang around there. I did not like fighting; I had a soft nose, which couldn't take a punch, and I got all the pain I ever wanted in the dentist's chair. So I began to hang around the hootch a lot. I was identified with the juicers and, even though I'd smoked pot before, I wasn't invited into the 'Head' parties. I had never been 'cool', by any definition of the word. Somewhere back in elementary school, fourth through sixth grades, I was in cliques with the 'smart' kids, but not since had I ever really fit in with any 'happening' crowd. Just too awkward, insecure, unsure of my place; undereducated, culturally deprived, too slow on the uptake, too poor. And now, add scared, as during this period the Army was cracking down on the heads in our company, busting people who they caught smoking up on the roofs at night.

That's why I sound like a stern old lady, reading a government anti-drug tirade in this letter of August 18 1970.

OK, you say you and Ray
smoked some weed together, huh?
Well that's fine, but that's as
far as it goes with you.
Do not under any circumstances
drop, shoot ~~or~~ or smoke any
thing other than grass. Grass isn't
as bad for you as alcohol, but
that other heavier shit is really
dangerous, listen to the voice of
experience, I've had it all and
it fucks up your mind! I've
seen guys get hooked on it over
here (it's about as easy to get as
a pepsi) and it has completely
ruined their lives. I know how
it is; the first time it feels
great, and so on the next time
and so on. Then you begin to need
it in times of the least amount
of stress then you keep doing
and finally you mentally,

not physically "hooked". You
get so you can't hardly face
reality without it. That's when
your mind starts deteriorating.
Grass never hurt anyone, when
taken sensibly; but that other
shit, acid, downers, B.T.s, STP, speed,
etc. ain't for no one! Please,
for me, steer clear of that shit.
Grass is good, so is likker, stick
with it. I know what it's like
I've been down that road before.
PLEASE!!

Such a shameful liar I was, but my heart was in the right place, because at this time, I hadn't done anything other

than Obesitol and marijuana, and had very, very much to learn about drugs and the people who use them. I had not “been down that road before”, but was about to head down that way in the months to come.

So when the Platoon Sergeant, brings me orders for another month of TDY, I start to celebrate my return to Hue. Then I get a look at the orders and my whoop of joy gets caught in my throat - it's not Hue - it's Quang Tri. Whoa, I said, Quang-Tri's too close to Dong Ha, which was just a spit and a holler from the D.M.Z. The De-Militarized Zone was the only 'line in the sand' agreed upon by both sides - and it was a no-man's land. Had been since way back in the Fifties when the U.N. created it to separate Ho Chi Minh's north from the south.

Now I know for sure that this Platoon Sergeant wants me killed. I want out of the company area, but not *this* far out. But I had no time to argue or protest, you have to get up there quick, he said, the monsoons are coming. At least this time I am better prepared, knowing what tools, spares and fluids to keep in my footlocker. And lots of reading material, now including comic books, which I'd never gotten into before. Also a Pacex mail order catalog to start shopping for a stereo and other goods with all the money I was making from flight pay. So here was a new lesson - be careful of what you wish for, you just might get it. And just like getting my wish to go to Crew Chief's school, this one was walking that line between dream and potential nightmare.

On the trip north, we encounter a severe thunderstorm so huge it looks like another planet has descended on the earth and was trying to find a space big enough to park itself. We can't go around it, even though the Pilots try to speed around its eastern edge, that takes us too far off course and out towards the sea (not a place you'd want to try and 'land' a helicopter, they do not float!). So they do what seems to be perfectly natural - fly over it. Of course, it's impossible, as the clouds just keep going up and up, even as we ultimately reach an altitude of 11,000 feet, an altitude that the Huey was supposedly not designed to operate in.

Being from the flatlands of Ohio, I had never experienced high altitude conditions before, (jets don't count, they're enclosed and pressurized) and none of us on board give thought to how high an airliner sometimes has to go before getting above the clouds. "Give it a shot", I said, since, I didn't like flying in the rain - besides being cold, what really bothered me was flying with the doors shut, which gave me a terrible sense of being helplessly closed in and claustrophobic; and I remember having (what I now know as) panic attacks, when we were forced to close the doors, and air pockets would toss the ship around and the neutral 'G' forces made it feel like we'd lost power and lost our 'tether'. For this climb, we kept the doors open for as long as we could, then closed them when the air started to thin out and the gusts - cold, cold, cold - blasted us around like a toy.

It's an eerie, suspended-animation feeling as we rise above the eight-thousand foot limit; oxygen thins, increasing our breathing rate, forward airspeed slows, and the usual noise of our big blades smacking the air quiets, allowing us to hear all the other sounds the machine makes which are usually drowned out by the drum beat of the blades hitting oxygen-rich sea-level air. For the first time ever, I can hear the gears in the transmission *scream*, and I wonder, worried, if that's the sound they always made or is the transmission over-revving as a result of the blades finding less resistance in the thin air? And will that lack of resistance overheat the transmission fluid?

I keep looking up at the gauges for signs of trouble. I've painted yellow lines on the faces of some of the gauges to mark where 'normal' is for that given reading in that particular ship. Over time, a Crew Chief determines that the range of pressure or temperature of a given reading is safe, as different from other ships. Variations could be due to the age of the component, like the transmission, or it could just be the way a sending unit and the gauge itself interact to produce a reading that was less or more than 'normal', but which would prove, after much experience with the ship that

only a Crew Chief could provide, to be well within normal flying range.

As we climb higher, I notice no real pressure or temperature problems, but the sound, coupled with our slow movement through the air, which buffets us unexpectedly, gets downright worrisome. I don't have enough experience to know what all can go wrong, but I know just enough about the turbine engine to be very concerned about overheating the 'hot end' - that the thin air would cause it to run 'rich' like a car at high altitude belching black smoke and backfiring from all the excess fuel that keeps burning as it leaves the combustion chamber. But I figure from the lack of high temperature readings that that exotic fuel control unit is doing its job, by allowing only so much fuel in, and maintaining a balance that prevents the turbine from spinning too fast or too slow.

But none of this mechanical stuff takes long to figure out; what bothers me is the fact that we're becoming enveloped by the storm, which now contains lightning as well as rain, either of which could disable our power at any time and leave us without enough forward airspeed to prevent our falling like a rock. There's no glory in this, fellas, let's get down. Which we do, after reaching the nose-bleed height of eleven-thousand feet. Wow, what a weird, gravity-free feeling of 'hanging up there without the air'; semi-wonderful (once we started breathing again).

Once we get down below the storm, we follow the road north, and manage to make our way safely under the low visibility, by flying just above the telephone poles that parallel Highway One - just under the cloud bank, but still high enough to keep from catching the skids on wires. Adventure is fine, once it's over and you're telling the story over a cold beer, but during the adventure, you really can't help asking yourself - "Do I really want to die like this?"

At the beginning of the August 18th letter, I wrote that Quang Tri is 'nice'; Gunner and I have our own room, which is more like a motel room than a hootch or barracks, and we even have our own Mama-san.

18 Aug 70

Howdy Babe,
God damn your two big
letters ahead of me and I'm just
now answering them. I'm sorry, but
I had to think a while before I
wrote back to you. Well yesterday
the monsoons began. I'm in Quang-
Tri right now for a while, it's really
nice. We didn't fly the last two
days (our pilot is running close to
having too many flying hours).
And today we flew for about a
half hour then they released us.
It's raining bad all over because
of the monsoons, so they don't fly
us unless it's an emergency. I hate
to fly in the rain; because we
fly with the doors open on the
copter. It's a cold bitch.

And like Hue, it felt more like doing a job, rather than suffering through high school again - as in the company area, with all the games people and the Army play - none of which I was able to tolerate, even when I was *in* high school.

With monsoon rains keeping us inside a lot, I do a lot of reading and catching up on my sleep, since on those days when we do fly, we're kept very busy ferrying people, supplies, mail and ammo to the firebases and other outposts in the area. I didn't write many letters because I didn't get many, they all came at once.

Days start early in the morning, as we always have to be ready to fly, even though we sometimes sit around for hours dressed and ready to go, boots all, waiting for the rain to let up. Or for some brave soul to order us into the air re-

ardless of the weather. I had seen some pretty good storms back in Ohio, but tropical monsoons that sweep in from the South China Sea and bounce off of those mountains create a wind-driven rain that feels for all the world as if the top layer of the earth's crust will get blown away. We had tornadoes, but they came through doing their crazy-leg patterns of damage in a relatively short amount of time. A monsoon can pelt the earth with huge raindrops like a Vaseline machine gun for days on end. It can get to you, since the buildings we lived in were of thin, open construction with tin metal roofs, and escape from the lightning, thunder and pounding noise is impossible, making sleep difficult for someone whose ears are already on constant alert for sounds of 'incoming' explosions. More than once, we jump out of bed and have our pants on before it dawns on us that it's only thunder and not a rocket or mortar attack.

No wonder I'm always grumpy and quick to nap if things go quiet during the day. Then, the sun comes out and blisters me with its close-to-the-equator unfiltered rays, as I hustle to get maintenance done, covers removed, water scooped out of the wells and supplies loaded and secured. Cold and wet, or hot and sweaty - ever have a sunburn? You should feel Nomex next to sunburned skin that's wet and cold, like frostbite rubbed with sandpaper. And always the mosquitoes and creepy crawlers invading, as if there isn't already enough hassle to this life.

WHOREHOUSE OF THE AUGUST MOON

Still, Quang Tri is 'nice', because I never lose sight of the fact that it's much worse 'back there' (in DaNang) or 'out there' in the places we fly to during the day - where guys live in sandbag bunkers, enduring deprivation, booming artillery barrages and incoming of all kinds. Another thing that makes Quang Tri 'nice' is my first visit to a 'house of ill repute'. There are some things, though, that you can only tell a brother - for obvious reasons this 'report' wasn't in any letters to Elaine or the folks...

28 Aug. 70 2

Molecular Brother,
10.0 What's happening? Been getting
any lately? So have I. You ever
done it in a wet sponge? Well
that's what this one "dink" felt
like that I had last. Wow was
she bad! She just layed there!
I can't wait to get back to the
world to all that good Boom-Boom. Ha!
Well not a hell of a lot
going on around here. Monsoons
are about to set in. That'll
be ok. in a way, because we
can't fly as much, and that means
less work. yea! I can dig on
a little less work. That
damn helicopter takes too
much of my time, that's for
damn sure. This whole place
is really bugging my mind!
I think I'll go to Bangkok
before long just to get
away from all this hassle.

Actually, some guys on the compound just converted one of the empty billets into a whorehouse, dubbed the 'boom boom room' (Vietnamese slang for sex). I was unsure if I wanted to do this when it was offered. There had been rumors and warnings of all manner of dire consequences from encounters with Vietnamese women-of-the-night, from disease to sudden mutilation. But I was reassured by whoever was organizing it that these were good local girls and that the guys had all done this many times before. The price seemed reasonable, so the rank capitalism of the whole thing persuaded me, and I took the plunge. Hey, isn't it what

every boy secretly dreamed would happen while he was in the Army? I'd sure never had opportunity for this kind of experience before, and the conditions sure felt right. After all, these *are* Army guys and we *are* a long way from the company area, and we *are* in a war zone after all...

So I paid the guy in charge (that Z-28 will just have to wait) and took my place in line outside. I was ushered in and pointed to a bunk. The room had five or six double-decked bunks set up and shadows moved around as guys were finishing or starting. Strange smells reached my nose, that made me understand for all time what keeps the perfume industry in business. Various sounds, beds squeaking, low moans, grunts and the unmistakable sound of female Vietnamese patter cut through the silence, as the girls kept up a muted but running conversation with each other, perhaps comparing notes, trading recipes or just trying to keep a check on each other as the customers 'came' and went.

The drill was to strip down and stash your clothes on the bottom bunk, then crawl into the upper. Mosquito nets were all there was for privacy, but some wise guy shaded some lamps with tee shirts to give the place a muted light which helped set the 'mood'. Quietly, and with quickness practiced in all those situations the Army demands you undress fast, I get down to underwear, socks and tee-shirt and crawl up into the bunk, where in this low light you can just barely see a figure in recline.

It's a real romantic scene in that bunk; not pretty or ugly, old or young, she was just female, which is all it took for me to 'rise' to the occasion. Then I notice she's eating an apple; I politely hesitate, waiting for her to finish the apple, but she just gestures with it toward her lower half, as if I should go ahead and start, she'll catch up later. So, I 'de-brief', insert the round peg into the slotted hole and press in gently. Nothing. A couple of moves up and down and side to side don't seem to register on her scale. I repeat as necessary, and that's all it takes - I come a gusher, shake and shutter as the well goes dry. Then she looks at me and says "You fini?" "You fini, yet?" Just because I'd paid my money, I thrust my

lessening self at her a couple more times, but her question takes any latent cheer out of the coupling and I unscrew myself. I was just like that apple - fini. It used to take me longer to get Proud Mary down the quarter-mile drag strip than this, and for that I got a trophy.

As I exit her 'bed chamber' she grabs my neck, the first time she's actually touched me, and says,

"You Numba One G.I. You give me tip?"

'Numba one' was good, 'number ten' was bad in Vietnamese *slanguage*. I'm shocked; she hadn't even offered me a bite of the apple. But I slip her a few M.P.C - cause I sure don't want to end my first visit with someone calling out at me like they did to one of the guys just before me - the worst insult the Vietnamese girls could hurl at an American serviceman - "You numba ten G.I.!"

Next morning, "How we doin' today, Chief?" "Fine, sir, ready to preflight." Is he smiling extra wide this morning? Could he know about my big night of wet-sock sex last night? Does word get around in the B.O.Q. (Billet Officers Quarter) about our romantic evening? Probably not, he probably just jerked his johnson to a picture of his fancy before hitting the hay and dreaming of Nancy.

"How we doin' today, Chief?" Peter Pilot asks the same damn loaded question; one that begs for an answer of reassurance and confidence I'm supposed to provide, regardless of the awesome responsibility it entails, and the low level of training and pay I receive compared to them. "Hell, I don't know, sir", I want to respond, "this old piece of shit machine might fly and it might not, I don't know. Ask the guys at Bell Helicopter in Texas just how much stress this thing can take, ask the guys at Lycoming how much sand can be sucked into the intake before the engine just clogs up or seizes from it. Ask those guys back in the hangar if the fuel regulator was fixed right, ask some subcontractor just how scarred up these big blades can be before the skin starts peeling off of them in flight".

How we doin'? Damned if I know; it was dark when I put the thing away last night - the ship, I mean. I don't

know what's inside that or underneath this, or whether or not these couplings are leaking or just wet from overspray from something else that's leaking. I'm bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, cause I kept getting up to take a leak and to wash my own 'coupling device', cause they say that's how you prevent venereal disease - which causes a leak you can't just tighten up with a spanner wrench. Luckily, we soon take off and I'm feeling relieved to be back in the embrace of someone who truly loves me, my baby Blivet.

'BROKE DICK'

Even though there's a million things that can go wrong with this UH-1H, G.I.- issued troop-carrying union-made helicopter, in Quang Tri I'm gaining some measure of confidence in mine and in my ability to maintain it, diagnose its needs, ignore its false warnings and keep the dreaded *Red X* off its sheet. A Red X was the one thing a Crew Chief had some say about, a modest bit of power entrusted into the hands of us low-ranking high flyers; but if a Crew Chief was overruled by a specialist, it made him look either like an idiot or a coward. And there were few 'Chicken Littles', since, if you're a Chief, you want to stay flight-ready.

If you're unsure about anything, I learn, point it out to the Pilots, offer your opinion, but letting them shoulder some of the burden always takes weight off you. One morning in Quang Tri, I believe this attitude, this sharing of responsibility, saved the life of our crew and the helicopter. It was one of only a few times that I feel good about my knowledge of the ship and my advice being correct concerning what action should be taken in an emergency situation. Or maybe I was just lucky, who knows.

Everything had been normal the night before and there was nothing unusual in the pre-flight inspection. (The pre-flight inspection was done by the Pilots just before we took off, it was their right and responsibility, and the Crew Chief, who was supposed to have already done his more thorough inspection, usually stayed close by in case the Pi-

lots had any questions or comments to make regarding the condition of the ship or any of its components). Start up, warm up and take off are all as usual that morning, as is transitional lift (transitional lift was the brief period just after take off when an aircraft is flying, but still being buffeted around by its own wind bouncing back at it from the ground; in a Huey it was usually just a shuddering feeling that lasted four or five seconds, unless we were loaded, which could take two-three times longer to get into clear flying air.)

On this one particular morning, just as we get a few dozen feet off the ground, the ship suddenly starts to vibrate, clang and shake. Rank fear sucked my innards empty. I'd never before felt so helpless and vulnerable at the hands of a machine. Thoughts raced through my mind, as we kept flying, but the noise, like gears trying to interlock while ball bearings were clogging their teeth, kept up and the Pilot reported that his pedals, which operated the pitch of the tail rotor, felt *inop* (inoperable) and the tail tried to 'come around' on him. Should we increase airspeed and try to fly without tail control? Or should we set it down right here and now? No, I offer, cyclic around and take us right back to the pad, we can make it that far. How I know, I'm not sure, but I feel that, whatever's broken was as bad as it was going to be, and that whatever was left will get us back.

Our timing is lucky, as the break occurs close to home - anyplace out of the compound in that area, or any area of Vietnam, could be potential enemy territory, and as such, not a safe place to set down. With gears screeching like fingernails on a blackboard and the whole ship vibrating, we manage to get back to the pad without too hard a landing, which, in itself, would have been a big problem, because a hard landing required a rigid kind of inspection that would have meant a trip back to Marble Mountain, and time spent in the hangar.

As soon as we're on solid ground, I jump out and get clear of the blades, as does the Gunner, since we can't be sure that the gears doing the grinding aren't in the transmission and possibly about to be shot out like shrapnel right

through the panel in the well that we both lean back against. I can see the tail rotor blade isn't turning, indicating for sure a failure in the tail rotor drive system, so once the blades are securely locked and tied by the Gunner, I go over and start flipping back the long cowling, until the 45° tail rotor gear box and the entire shaft is exposed. All I have to do is grab the long portion of drive shaft with one hand and the portion aft of the gear box that goes up the tail with the other and the problem is obvious - the 45° gearbox is broken; teeth have sheared off the gears and this ship is now Red X-ed.

Pilots ask if I can fix it, and I say even if I had a spare gearbox, which I don't, I'm not authorized to touch it. Call the 'Cat Doctor', I'm going to take a nap until he gets here. Can't you do anything till then? They ask. Yeah, if he's coming right up, I'll go ahead and take the old one off for him, which is what I do. But don't hang around a ship sitting on a pad, Charlie could too easily lob a mortar, or even a grenade in here and ruin our day even worse. We contact the Cat Doctor back in DaNang and they say they'll bring a new gearbox and some extra lengths of drive shaft just in case, and do we need anything else? Yea, bring me my mail. OK, we're on our way.

The 'Cat Doctor' was the name of any ship in the company used for rescues, but was mostly for this purpose of bringing parts and skilled technicians to revive broken helicopters. Unless, that is, they're so badly damaged as to need a 'sling-load', where a giant *Chinook* or a *Flying Crane* would lift them with a sling, and fly them back to the company area. I was glad ours did not appear to need that, it could take days or weeks to arrange. By later that afternoon, they arrive with new parts, get them installed and we're back in the air, if only for a little while, since we came home right around dark, not feeling safe to do anymore night flying than we have to up this far north.

I recall thinking how scared of crashing I was, how quickly that flush feeling shot through me, that we were going down to certain death, and I remember I still didn't pray or beseech God. Which means that that old saying we heard

so much growing up, that there were 'no atheists in fox-holes', just wasn't true. I didn't get off that chopper and onto my knees and call on God, Jesus, Billy Graham or Buddha; what I did do was call the Cat Doctor. That call was answered.

Once during this period, we were flying deep into the mountains to a remote outpost that was nothing more than a spot sawed off the top of a hill. So high up and so windy that the Pilots had trouble setting down due to unpredictable gusts that kept blowing Blivet back and forth. After trying a couple of times to no avail, I suggest we go back down and try again later. But the Big Shot we're carrying intimidates the Pilots and appeals to their 'pride'. Now it's a matter not just of skill, but a bravery thing as well. We'll show him some airmobile Black Cat balls.

So the AC takes over, gets familiar enough with the wind currents to inch closer to the ground and just plops us down hard instead of easing us down like he's supposed to. Great, I think, you get to be a hero to some jerk we don't even know, and I get to worry about what cracked in the skids from your sudden impact with the ground. But I don't say anything, and have to admit, it was good flying - and the old saying in aviation is true, any landing you walk away from is a good landing.

I jump out and inspect the skids for damage and make sure none of the rivets have popped out of the skid pads. I peer as far as I can up the cross legs for evidence that we broke something, as the Pilot shuts down the engine, and we all finish breathing our collective sigh of relief. That wind is strong, I think, as I check around the tail for signs that our almost hard landing ripped any ribbing. Wish I knew more about just how much stress all this damn aluminum can really take before sheering; why didn't they train us better, tell us more, I'd sure worry a lot less and sleep a lot better. I know just a little but not nearly enough.

Then we all notice, at about the same time, that the blades have not stopped turning. The wind is so strong and so steady and our angle just pitched up enough that the

blades are acting like a windmill. Not turning fast, but just enough to rock the ship unsteadily. The wind is that strong and with no way to anchor the ship to the ground, our fear is that it could tip right over and tumble down this mountain.

Well, here's something that doesn't happen everyday - nothing in the manual about this. Stumped for a solution, the AC orders the gunner to go up on top and grab the blade and make it stop turning. The Gunner gives me a look, as if to say, "What?", but starts slowly, not wanting to disobey or appear cowardly; and it is the Gunner's job to tie down the blade, after all.

My mind races - is this the right thing to do? Calculate options, a million 'what ifs' present themselves in a



rush. I suggest we let the blades keep turning and that we stay inside to weigh the ship down till we're ready to go. Quickly, I make my case to the Pilots: One - There's nothing he can safely

grab onto up there; if he pulls a blade down, it could dip down and pull the ship sideways, tipping the balance just enough to knock the ship on its side. Bad for Gunner and ship. Two - If he tries to grab onto anything but the blade, like a stabilizer strut, it could stress and break a connection that is only strong in the up and down direction. Three - If he does get a grip on something, only harm can come of it - he gets cut from a sharp edge or, his arm gets jerked out of its socket! Four - Even if he can hang on, the torque of those big blades might pull him around and we're back to that scenario where he can't let go in time and the weight of his body makes one end of the blades dip down, and the ship tips over on its side. I take a breath, as Gunner looks on at our discussion of his fate.

"OK, wise guy, what *can* we do, just sit and watch and wait for disaster?" "Well, yea, I guess; maybe the wind will die down and we can tie the blade down safely when it gets slower". So, we wait. But the wind keeps blowing, the ship keeps rocking and we're powerless to do anything.

Before long, we're relieved to be ordered back in the air. But then we are faced with the real quandary: the blades are still spinning and the engine is shut down. Pilot worries that when we try to start the engine, it'll spin too fast, get too much fuel and without the resistance the blades apply, we'll get a hot start. Damn college boy smart ass, he's got a point. But we still can't stop those blades (I can't let a Gunner do that anyway, I wouldn't order anyone to do something that risky if I wouldn't do it myself - and I don't want to go up there and go body-to-blade, I'm too skinny.)

Wait, I suddenly ask, what can happen? Not only do we seem to have no other choice, but it suddenly hits me that the principle of fluid drive is on our side. Start the engine like normal and rev it up like you always do. The turbine blades will not 'know' or 'care' that the shaft blades are already spinning - and will soon be going fast enough to give the whole 'drive line' the catch-up speed needed to spin the blades normally. Besides, what do you wanna do? Call the Cat Doctor for advice?

They consider this for barely a second - how humiliating that would be. OK, says the AC, it's your 'end' that gets heated if we have a hot start, so the Pilot hits the switch, and we hold our breath during the familiar whine of the starter, and the click, click, click of the igniters. Come on baby, do as designed, do not explode, please make me right just once in my life. Ah, the wonderful *whoosh* of a normal start, sounds like an angel blowin' me a warm kiss. Told you so. Now rev it up normal; turbine whine sounds fine, alright! The blades spin faster, under our control now; rotary-winged victory snatched back from the wind of defeat. Gauges normal, load these people, we got to get out of this place. It might have been balls that got us into this, but it's brains that will get us out. Do I get credit? I don't remember. Just another day, just another mission. Clever lasts forever.

Flying this far north is different too, because we're surrounded by so many sharp edges - the sea on one side, the mountains on the other, the open plain to the south and the DMZ to the north. It isn't the DMZ area itself that's strange,

the land looks just like the rest of the land leading up to it. What makes it look so forbidding and bizarre is what man has done - or not done. No buildings stand, no crops grow, no people are seen anywhere. Just barbed wire and way over there, just visible with the naked eye, their flag. The flag of North Vietnam. Few Americans who come to Vietnam see this - the enemy flag planted in the real enemy territory.

Mortars, rockets, gunfire and Viet Cong sappers come out of nowhere, and disappear like phantoms, but here's a line, a flag and proof beyond doubt that this really is a war and there really is another nation involved.

Rumors and legends swirled about the place whenever it becomes the topic of conversation. One rumor has it that there are U.S. military units composed of helicopters painted black, crewed by guys in plain clothes, stripped of all ID and insignia, who fly night time search and destroy Recon missions into and beyond the DMZ. Unconfirmable to an average soldier, of course.

Legend has it that the 101st Airborne Division, an old Army parachute unit that had played a famous part in D-Day and other WWII battles, has tried unsuccessfully to capture this North Vietnamese flag that flies over the DMZ, and has a standing reward of one hundred thousand dollars to anyone who can go get it and bring it back. It's that reward I think about when I see that flag. Hey, it's not really that far, looks like we could low level over and snatch it before anyone knew we were coming; I even discuss it with the rest of the crew. But even if you do get the flag, from whom, exactly, do you collect the reward? Do *you* trust guys who willingly jump out of a perfectly good airplane? And where do you meet them to make the exchange? Is that reward in cash or gold? Piasters or pesos? And how do you get the cash out of the country anyway? That's a lot of money orders. Oh, well.

Fun thoughts, but slowly, as we fly around up here, other things begin to dawn on me about that unfortified line in the dirt. Thoughts like, why don't we keep pushing on this line until we reach Hanoi? We have tons of equipment and thousands of people on hand, why don't we use it in one ma-

gor push and end this farce once and for all? If you cut off the head, a snake can't rattle its tail for long. Why do we have to keep dancing with death all the time, fighting for territory that we then give back, only to have to keep retaking it over and over again? So many questions, so few real answers. Just forget about it, G.I. It don't mean nothin'.

Sept. 20

Howdy Salve

Wow! That Core package was definitely something else! I really dig it. What would I do without you? It was really outside! And that "Race Riots" book was fantastic! The Perbeck jokes were just great.

Well, I finally went and did it; I sent away for a stereo outfit. I got a lot of back flight pay last month and my total earnings for the month of August was \$49.00. So I sent ~~250.00~~ 250.00 home for savings and brought this stereo (picture enclosed). Do you like it? Well, I'm afraid I'm going to need some records to play on it, and since we can't buy them over here I'm going to ask you to send me a big batch of them. I'm getting a tape player, so I'll tape all the records you send me and then send them all back. I think you know what records I'll want: Hair, all the Beatles, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, etc. Also I'd like to see if you could get that "Pink Floyd" album off of Frank, tell I promise to send it right

back. Also I don't know if you have these records but I'd like to have them if someone else around there has them: Box Tops album of "Cry like a baby" + In-a-godd-da-vice. I sure would appreciate it good buddy. I don't know how you put up with me, it seems like I'm forever asking favors of you and ~~to~~ you always seem to come through for ~~me~~ ^{me}. I value your friendship more than anything else in the world, I can't wait to get back to the world and have some of our old "rap sessions." I don't know how to repay all that you've done for ~~me~~ me, but I'll try. Did you get your birthday present yet? It's not much, but I'll dress up the apt. If anyone asks you what it is, tell them it's a genuine ~~piece~~ piece of Southeast Asian sculpture (and be sure to stick your nose in the air when you say it haha!) It should be there soon I sent it airmail. I hope

All I say about the whole period up there, is that Quang Tri is 'nice'. By day the Army owns me and I give what's asked of me. But at night, I write letters to my best buddy talking about my one true love, Proud Mary, and how much I'd made in the month of August - a whopping five hundred forty-seven American dollars. Mercenary work pays well. I don't recall what the Race Riots book was or what the 'Pollock' jokes were about, but I sure wish this memoir could be less insulting, I'll be apologizing to half the human race by the time I'm done here. Can't change the past, but sometimes you can atone for it.

This is such a typical letter of that period - dig my new stereo, send me some records to play on it; (still want that *Pink Floyd*, gotta find a way to get high without actually taking drugs!) hope you like your birthday present, miss our old 'rap' sessions. Desperate to think I still mattered in back-home affairs. Thanks for the care package, don't know what I'd do without you...

Words are so inadequate to express gratitude. Keep up the chatter and then get back to work. The thing I need, and want to say most, I can't - I'm lonesome and I wanna come home.

Flying in that northernmost region of South Vietnam also gives me a look at something else few people got to see while they were in-country - bomb craters. Not just a few here and there, but vast tracts of them that, even seen from two thousand feet in the air, seem to stretch out and go on forever. B-52 strikes. Measured in tonnage, calculated to intimidate the enemy and render the ground useless for anything but breeding mosquitoes. Each bomb makes an enormous hole in the earth, which will take, it would seem, forever to fill back in, even if you had a fleet of big bulldozers.

Sometimes at night in Quang-Tri, we can hear the bombs dropping, the sound of their 'high explosive' loads making a deep pounding thud that exerts pressure on your chest, and a surrogate pain, like hearing someone taking a beating in the next room. Even if it's your enemy that's being beaten, the pain scares you. The sound of B-52 strikes has been compared to rolling thunder, but Nature makes no sound like this, there's no such emotion in nature. A B-52 strike creates a hyper-natural sound of deep anger and extreme hatred that only man can create.

A 'crater field' is a sick sight. It looks like an attempt to punish the earth just because the wrong people walked on it. It wasn't an attempt to destroy the enemy's population or war-making capability, this is in South Vietnamese territory. How can it send a message being so far from a population center? From the air, the hundreds of holes looked more like

practice. As if someone was checking the shot-pattern of a new gun, and the ground was their target.

This wasn't Teddy Roosevelt's 'Big Stick' projection of American Might. This was a giant teenage bully using his father's night stick on an ant colony, viciously, ignorantly, pounding at the ants, sending dirt flying in the soft earth, until nothing but the holes remain as evidence. But when the bully turns his back and proudly returns to Base, the ants come right back out, seeking out their meager living from whatever remains of the earth, as it ever was and will ever be. And each ant that survives this most powerful message from the most powerful force on earth, lives with the knowledge that he is stronger, just for having survived. Making those that sent the bombs just that much weaker and that much less able in the future to frighten and intimidate him with their powerful weapons.

War footage always shows the bombs exploding in an orgy of color and light, and the crushing of structures and rending of the earth. But film cannot convey the feeling of concussion impacting the air around the explosion. And there is seldom if ever, footage taken of the craters that are left, and which are probably still there, impossible to drain, or farm. Lasting evidence of a bully's futile attempts to teach some ants 'who's the boss'.

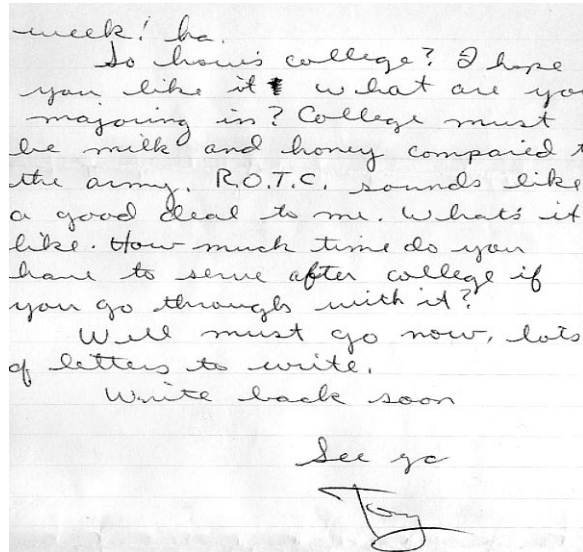
CHAPTER 22 - ASH AND TRASH

So Quang-Tri, like all adventures, ends where it began back at Marble Mountain. Back to being just another Chief; but at least there are more new guys around to harass, and a chance to live in a better hootch...

Sept. 11, 70
3

Hi Mark,
Well I'm just sitting here on the
bed so I thought I'd write you
a little note and let you know
I just got done eating a homemade
pizza. Elaine sent me a chef-boy
ardee Pepparoni pizza. It was
pretty good we "baked" it in an
electric skillet, not a hell of a
lot going on around here. I
changed hootches the other day. The
one I'm living in now is air-
conditioned, has a TV, and a stereo,
plus one of the guys has a movie
projector for "skin flicks." War is
hell. ha. Really, though, being
away from home is the worst
part of it. Besides the fact that
Viet Nam sucks! They pulled us
out of Quang-Tri permanently. That
was a genuine Bust! It was
so easy to get a decent piece of
ass up there. It's hard as hell
to get one down here in DaNang.
Oh, well, I should be going on
R+R soon so I'll fuck for a

September 11, 1970. That fabulous projector and 'skin flicks' must be what's got me behind in my letters to Elaine - that and the work, which is 'go here and stop, take this there and pick that up'. The monsoons make a wet chore out of everything we do. Oh, well, at least my little brother is in college now, he'll join the protests and get us out of here...



week! ha.
Do you like college? I hope
you like it. What are you
majoring in? College must
be milk and honey compared to
the army. R.O.T.C. sounds like
a good deal to me. What's it
like. How much time do you
have to serve after college if
you go through with it?
Well must go now, lots
of letters to write.
Write back soon
See ya
Jay

The Army is busting guys for smoking up on top of the bunkers at night, and I'm assuming that 'heat' coming down here on pot heads is also happening back home. Over-active paranoia creeping in - this is bad, but getting busted would be much worse; I'm in the Army because I'm scared of prison, so I continue my warnings to Elaine...

15 SEPT. 70

Hi!

Wow, you're up on me three letters already, you're really been ~~on~~ on the ball haven't you?

So, you've turned into a regular pot-head, huh, O.k., well you'll learn in time, I don't mess with it over here, it's too easy to get busted, last night they caught a ~~hand~~ bunch of guys up on the roof smoking, they'll probably go to jail for a while, I don't want that shit at all; I'm coming home, By God. And watch out when you're smoking and who with. Don't smoke with strangers and never, never tell anyone that you smoke other than the people you smoke with. That's how the cops get wind of a potential raid. Also don't keep it in the house, not even a trace; they've got dogs that can sniff it out where ever it is. Ok?

8 OCT. 70

Claine!

God damn I've have your letter for over a week now and I'm just now getting around to answering it. Well the only excuse I have is that damn week of rain we had. We couldn't fly, but when the rain did stop, they flew the shit out of us catching up on the missions we missed. It's been really hectic this past week. Blivet went on the rag today just as we started out. It was just a minor maloperation in the turbine engine, I could have fixed it in 2 hours, but it took me all day, I didn't ~~feel~~ feel like flying. Fuck it!!

Blivet 'on the rag' means Red X-ed. In this case, something I could have fixed quickly, a faulty gauge, sent us back to the hangar, where I took my sweet time diagnosing and fixing the problem. I always assert 'mechanic's privilege' whenever possible. You know - the look, the sighs and the body language used by mechanics everywhere - peering with furrowed brow into an open hood or cowl and shaking your head as if it could only be bad news. Respond to any and all requests for details with a resigned "I don't know, could be the distributor, could be the coil." Keep them off guard. Push back; resist at every opportunity, don't let them have all the power.

Some days, a Red X was preferable to going out. Our missions get annoying, ferrying VIPs and Vietnamese civilians. It's almost as much work for me whether we're flying combat missions or playing high-priced taxi (except for repairing shrapnel and bullet holes). Sometimes it feels like we're being used as a 'perk' for some Vietnamese hierarchy

- shopping trips for mistresses, things like that. There's one regularly scheduled mission that we call the Hoi An run that sends us south of DaNang and keeps us there all day, doing short trips that are almost never interesting or fun. Always at someone's beck and call, someone who treats us like servants, and who show us no respect or gratitude. In my own small way, I let them know that the feeling is mutual - I salute only when absolutely required, and smile only at the rest of my crew, or at the kids who sometimes gather around the chopper when we land in a village.

If we're on one of those helicopter pads out amid the rice paddies too long and we get bored, we work the tip off a tracer round of 7.62mm M-60 ammo, dump a bit of the black powder out and reinsert the round, add some gunpowder back on top of the round, stick it in the ground (point it away from the ship, please!) and set it aflame with the tip of a cigarette. It shoots the round up and out, spinning and hissing like those bottle rockets we used to light on Fourth of July. Makes a nice "whoosh" sound. Sometimes



it pisses off the Brass, who think, from their perspective indoors, that we're facing imminent attack. Someone has to order us to stop, otherwise we just keep doing it, especially if there are any kids around to scare - or who enjoy it with us.

Another outlet for our idleness is playing with a 'Wrist Wrocket', a slingshot fashioned from aluminum tubing that continues down from the bottom of the y back and over the wrist into a brace that makes the force even out for a much better stability - you don't have to grip it tightly, the wrist portion takes the pressure. Surgical-strength rubber was coupled with a leather patch for the ammo pocket. Shooting ball bearings can do real damage, and probably did, to anyone on the receiving end. We usually just shoot small rocks or dirt clods at targets. Harmless fun, (what young cowpokes do for entertainment while they're ridin' the range).

After a while, wrist rockets are outlawed because, by this time in the war, the Vietnamese understand the American concept of 'damage compensation', and they often demand money if they suffer any injury caused by the American war machine. So if they see us with a Wrist Wrocket, and can prove an injury, we'd get into trouble.

Some Vietnamese used this compensation well - if a helicopter scares off your chickens, the U.S. pays you not just for the chickens lost, but for all the eggs that chicken would have produced over the course of its life span. A good deal - egg money without having to pay for chicken feed. And eggs are chicken feed compared to a water buffalo, which can run into big Piasters.

Which led to one of the oddest sights seen in the war: Flying water buffalo. If a farmer was being relocated, a large helicopter would be brought in to sling-load the animal to its new home. You'd look up and see an airborne, cud-chewing bovine, and for just that instant before you see the tether, it looks like the damn beast really was flying. Besides the bewildered look on its face, the buffalo doesn't seem to mind - and damage to the meat was minimal. Your tax dollars at work, bringing democracy to a people 'yearning to breathe free.'

PACKAGED WITH CARE

In Vietnam, it was possible to have things sent to you often enough and regularly enough that perishables arrived still fresh. By the time I went into the Army in 1969, this was already standard practice and a routine way for society to 'support' the troops overseas. Mail service was quick and reliable, due to the fact that soldiers were only assigned duty in Vietnam for thirteen months and planes were going in and out constantly. And the Army considered mail a very high priority, both incoming and outgoing, so if you could keep it from breaking or leaking out, you could have it sent to you. Some guys were never happy with Army pistols, for example, so they'd have one of their own sent from home.

All manner of contraband got through, but the thing most guys liked to see in a *Care* package (as they were called), was food. An Army may run on its stomach, but Army chow makes you wanna run the other way. It was bad enough stateside, but by the time things like meat, fruit or fish got to Vietnam, it just wasn't much good at all. Too much traveling, too much heat and humidity once it got there, and way too little skill in its preparation. And by the time a crew got their aircraft parked, their gear stowed, paper work done, guns cleaned, or maintenance done, the mess hall was a sad place to be, the food looking more like what we used to throw to the pigs back at Ft. Gordon.

The other problem was how far down the food-chain-of-command we were. We're a long way from Saigon, where everything starts; then we're third in line after the Air Force and Navy, who get much better stuff cause they ship or fly the stuff in, and then we have to settle for what the Generals, the Vietnamese ruling class and the CIA don't suck dry, so that there has to be a bumper crop of apples in Washington or oranges in Florida before we see anything fresh. Certain varieties of C-rations are prized and coveted, but some of this canned stuff was leftover from the Korean War! I swear. Rumor has it that some is even left from W.W.II, but I can't confirm that.

So send me cookies, cakes, hell, canned tuna fish, Dinty Moore's, potato chips, all those things we don't or can't get over here. So Care packages constitute more than just love from home, sometimes they're all that keeps us from starvation. That's why pictures from the war are of skinny American guys. Yes, we were a spoiled bunch, grouching about bad food and demanding our favorite treats from home, but it wasn't our fault. If the war had been fought with more urgency and more purpose, if we had *moved* more, we wouldn't have had so much time on our hands to make such demands.

17 OCT. 70

Hi,

Well, I've had your letter for more than a week now and I'm just now getting around to answering it. I'm glad to hear you got your teeth fixed. I'm going to the dentist since Blinck is for 100 hr. overhaul. They'll tear my mouth apart, I know. It's one big cavity; that, is what teeth I have left.

I got Shirley's Care Package the other day. It was really nice of her to send it. I ate the pizza the first night; mushrooms hamburger + all. It was great. And those cherries! Wow!! The older they get the better they are!! I get stoned just smelling them. ha ha. 3 in a row knocks me out! That was a great idea. I'm looking forward to yours with the records. The stereo should be here in about 3 weeks. I also ordered a good set of headphones to go with it.

I got a letter from Ray

I don't remember where I got the idea for the pizza baked in an electric skillet. I'm sure I inherited the skillet from a guy who was going back to the World, but the idea that you could cook one of those bake-your-own pizzas in an electric skillet sounds like something I might have just expanded upon from what was going on before. I urged other guys to have boxed pizza mixes sent from home. (I had practically lived on pizza in Columbus)

These pizza-in-a-box kits (Can't remember, was Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee better than Kraft?) consisted of three parts, a small can of grated cheese, a tall thin can of sauce,

which also contained the sausage, mushrooms or pepperoni, depending on the type, and lastly, the packet of flour. Dump the flour in the skillet, add water, mix, then carefully work the dough evenly over the surface of the square Teflon-coated skillet. Douse with sauce, dust with cheese, put the cover on the skillet (the real secret, since that would heat up the cheese and sauce without burning the crust), set the thermostat, and in about twenty to twenty-five minutes pray that there aren't too many 'friends' around to have to share it with. I could easily eat a whole one myself, but never did, they became popular quick. And the smell wafted around the area, making it hard to keep it a secret.

By far the craziest thing ever sent to me, was sent, amid great humor on both sides, by none other than my Father. It was a baby bottle full of Gin. I must have said something in a letter about how hard it was to get booze, and my father took exceptional pity on me - can't let the boy be without his favorite drink - or a good laugh. And it *was* a good laugh, mostly because I could imagine them all trying to figure out how to send booze through the mail, and coming up with the idea of using one of the plastic baby bottles that were still stored in a box from when my youngest sister was weaned three or four years earlier. And my Dad, figuring that the best way to seal it was to invert the nipple, put on the flat plastic disc and screw it on, just like you do when you take milk on trips for the baby.

The stuff arrived in good shape and not a drop was spilled or wasted. The Lawless Family, bringing new meaning to the term 'Bottle baby'. I remember getting put down by some guy, who thought how low-class my family must have been to do such a stupid thing. But to me, just the vision of them all gathered around the kitchen table, laughing as they put the package together, carefully cradling the baby bottle in the box, and knowing that I'd get a laugh out of it, well, that was just our way. Our way of saying I love you. I can still 'see' my Father's mischievous grin as he's doing it. And always will.

Over the course of my time in Vietnam, letters and packages from home and family dwindled. We ran out of things to talk about. Except for Elaine. She never faltered. Never shied, never strayed.

The one hundred hour overhaul is a scheduled maintenance inspection where the helicopter is torn apart and we go looking deep inside it for trouble. One of the regular routines of maintaining a ship was to collect oil samples from the transmission and engine, which were sent away and analyzed for fragments of metal and other debris that might give a warning of impending internal breakdown. The thing is, I never ever heard back about these samples and always wondered if they weren't just being dumped somewhere.

A helicopter's life is measured not in miles, but in hours, and the engineers at Bell Helicopter had worked out a lot of formulas that specified just how much flying each component and system could take before the vibration, heat and stress began to jeopardize its ability to perform. But what they couldn't factor in, even with a wide margin of safety, was the stress that combat missions exerted on the airframe and power plant. We routinely overloaded them, flew them too fast, forced them to maneuver counter to their design, operated them in extreme conditions of heat, blowing sand and driving rain, and let way too many under-skilled hands (like mine) be involved in their maintenance.

On top of which, we lied about the actual number of hours they flew. Even though there was a 'clock' on board that was supposed to keep track of engine hours, it got fudged too, in small ways. When I first saw my own flight record, I was shocked by how much it under-reported flying hours. The ship didn't fly without me, so I know we flew for more than what got reported.

There were times when the flight record is accurate, as I noticed a strangely low-entry on October 8th of only zero point eight hours. Impossible; four-fifth's of an hour is about enough time to taxi out to the runway and back. Then I saw the letter I wrote to Elaine that same day, saying that a minor malfunction occurred that I could have fixed in an hour, but

decided to take all day to complete. The Pilots may have gotten another ship to complete the mission, or maybe they too got the rest of the day off, appreciating the Red-X as much as me. It's for sure that I did not hurry to let the Platoon Sergeant know I was available after swapping the gauges. I may have taken the time to catch up on a few maintenance items, but most likely I spent the afternoon 'catching rays' up on the roof, or laying in bed, catching up on my sleep.

There were specific chores a Crew Chief had to perform during their one hundred hour inspection, such as replacing certain parts, greasing that damn short shaft, and polishing the plastic windows, etc. Anyone who has suffered through an overhaul of their car, knows that sinking feeling when bad mechanical news gets worse, and anyone who has ever had to go to a cut-rate dentist for an extraction knows how much physical pain can be made worse by the person inflicting it. (Turns out I was to see one of those 'unlucky' dentists in Vietnam, after all, just as I'd feared back in Alabama; but luckily novocaine was also available there.)

Such is how things are going for me during this period. And part of the reason - I loved sweets; Elaine's Mom had sent me some homemade Brandy-soaked cherries that indulged both my sweet-tooth and my need to get 'stoned'. Bad news gets worse - the tooth can't be saved, it has to be pulled - and parts to fix Blivet have to come all the way from Texas. So, I plead with Maintenance to take the part off some other ship sitting in the hangar. No can do, pal. Me and my swollen mouth can't argue, as a process of cannibalization begins of my beloved Blivet.

It starts slowly, a part here, a part there, and the next thing I know, the entire blade assembly's gone. I'm crushed, furious that other ships are being put back together while mine is being eaten away a piece at a time like roadkill torn apart by buzzards. This Humpty Dumpty might never get put back together again. Leaving me to be pecked at by the head vulture called Platoon Sergeant.

CHAPTER 23 - TRAINING 'DINKS'

So now I have to fly in ships I'm not familiar with and, because of the new task assigned to our company of training pilots of the South Vietnamese Air Force, all the fun of interacting with the Pilots vanishes. The A.C. has to use up all his spare time on excruciating instruction, making every flight feel like being in the back seat while a kid is getting his second driving lesson. ("Hey, didn't they teach you nothin' in that classroom?")

I wouldn't have minded so much how poorly they spoke English, or how thick their accents; and I didn't mind flying with them so much, despite their lack of real skill in handling the controls, which they didn't seem to improve on as quickly as our guys did. I could have forgiven their smiling faces, which made them seem like they weren't taking the whole thing seriously, like it was just a big joke or fun game. (Note: There was a racial element to this - we totally misunderstood that the Asian smile was often an attempt to cloak insecurity - whereas we always expect a serious face to accompany any great effort.)

I could understand their elitist attitudes, since they probably thought that to be an officer, you had to be curt like an officer. But their superior attitude was not tempered by any real-world understanding of the mutual need the two sides had for each other in an air crew.

And I suppose I could have accepted their lack of commitment to their own people when, during monsoon flooding, their 'Air Force' refused to join us Black Cats in rescuing people trapped on rooftops and in trees in the low-lying areas south of DaNang. (This is a fact, recorded in our company history, circa late October 1970).

I flew several of these rescue missions as a Door Gunner, some at night, while Blivet was in repair. The reason I remember is: a) I have a couple of pictures of flooded out areas, and b) because of clear memories of being drenched by monsoons and swamped with people needing

rescue. Frantic people converged on our ship, arms loaded with meager possessions (which included chickens and piglets) and I had to force people to back away once the ship was full. Some possessions (and most livestock) had to be discarded, and all human emotions visited that one place at that one time - greed, hatred, desperation, etc. It was survival of the fittest. I was a peasant, deciding the fate of other peasants, while the ruling classes stayed warm and dry that day and fretted over our 'morale' and willingness to fight.

A part of me, more now than then, understands that the Vietnamese Air Force understood the value of their personnel and equipment and how much more precious it was than the fate of a few thousand peasants. Peasants who, after all, had knowingly staked their lives on an area that always flooded during monsoons and who would refuse to evacuate when warned, for fear of losing that very land they'd staked their lives on, which could easily have been taken from them by the Viet Cong or someone else, before they could return.

We Americans were the naïve element. All we saw was the superficial: people needed help and we had the means to help them. No time to think it all through, just go do. Get on your horse and ride, cowboy. So we did. Risked our life and limb to save theirs, in a great display of our can-do spirit. And their Air Force didn't even come out to watch - "we don't fly in the rain", they said. The lessons they could have learned from the skill-on-display of our pilots would have been invaluable! But these Vietnamese guys just didn't seem to want to 'get with the program'. Even after all this time and all this money we've lavished on them.

Maybe I could have handled their attitude, their slow accumulation of skill, and their seeming lack of will. But the thing that got me the most and could not be explained away, was the fact that they were being given all brand new fresh-from-the-factory reconditioned equipment. Our tax dollars paid to give them the newest ships in the inventory. It wasn't the newest design, just factory rebuilt-like-new, and it was as good as new to someone like me, desperate to gather a few old parts in order to cobble together a ship that would be fly-

able. My thoughts burned and churned. How is it that old equipment was supposed to teach me lessons in how to keep a ship flying, and these guys, who were supposed to have a real stake in the outcome of this war, how come the same 'logic' didn't apply to them? We couldn't give them old equipment, the story went, they'd feel that we were disrespecting them. I didn't buy that or any other argument. It was rank-ass politics, you could not in any way explain this away - we were *not* all in this together.

I could not be consoled or convinced, and from now on, I was to see things differently. This was clearly an effort to prop up a bunch of puppet egos. If I was fighting for my life, I would use any scrap at hand, any piece of equipment I could scrounge to defeat my enemy. I would not make decisions based solely on someone's feelings. Look at the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, they use bamboo sticks for booby traps, convert unexploded American bombs to use against us, hide out for months in tunnels, eating only infested rice; they fight this war with spit and fingernails. Why aren't the South Vietnamese just as committed?

The answers to that question were many, but didn't matter to me. I was only nineteen and losing my teeth because the Army did not give a damn about my mouth - except for words coming out of it they didn't want to hear. And even though we weren't allowed to go get an enemy we knew was out there, we weren't allowed to leave either.

Blivet not only does not come out of the hangar, but one day I discover the worst thing that could happen - they've pulled the engine and put it into another ship. And all the Army seems concerned about is that we *look* like an Army, and that nobody dare smoke a joint. Exercising control over us and modifying our behavior seemed to be their highest priority and never-ending obsession.

CHAPTER 24 - DESCENT INTO HELL...

...ALSO KNOWN AS THUONG DUC

What made a resupply mission so dangerous was our complete lack of protection once we got close to the ground at the drop-off zone. Our M-60 machine guns were no threat against an enemy that could hide himself in the jungle and lob mortars, grenades or rockets into the place where we were going to land. We were a slow moving target. Instead of buzzing in and out like a bird, we lumbered in - loaded down as we were with as much material (usually ammunition) as the ship could carry - in order to reduce the number of trips (known as sorties). That was always the first indication that we were going into a hot spot - ammo boxes at the pick up point. If we were taking in artillery shells, that usually meant that there was a fight going on and the guys needed more ammo, and that made the area too hot and unsafe for the larger, slower Chinook cargo helicopters to get supplies to them.

At wherever we picked up our load, we (or more accurately the Pilots), would be advised of the situation, what kind of fire (mortar, rocket, artillery or ground troops) the Base was taking, and how intense it was. I don't know how it would've been communicated, but I recall that we, either as a crew or as individuals, were given a chance to refuse the mission. It would have been a Hobson's choice: Either do it, or go back to Marble Mountain and explain to someone why not. The underlying truth was, fly the mission or you probably won't be flyin' much more. Hero or goat, there's little room for wiggle in a war zone.

And it may have happened that, between the four of us, A.C. , Pilot, Gunner and me, the Crew Chief, there was no discussion other than maybe a wisecrack, a nod, or maybe even a mean look back, as if to say, "who's ass you pickin'?" Nothing else to do today. You called on the 'Black Cats' to help, and here we are to deliver. No argument, just tell us

what needs to be done.” We never resented helping those in need, it’s what we came to do; it’s *those* guys who have it tough, we thought; *they’re* the ones who are getting attacked, and live with that threat day and night, all the hell way out here, away from hot showers and soft beds with Mama-sans who changed the sheets once a week, like us flyers had.

So the Gunner and I load the ammo boxes (or whatever it is, we didn’t always know just what it was we were risking our lives for) as carefully as possible, making sure we didn’t drop a box and blow up the whole show (possible, but not too likely). The true fear of the whole mission for me, since the payload is the Crew Chief’s responsibility, is that we don’t overload the helicopter. This is sometimes hard to determine and a Chief has to have an instinct for how much his ship can lift. Sometimes we get the load on and the Pilots can tell just by trying to take off if the thing’s overloaded. If the blade and engine RPMs sag too much, it means you’re trying to lift too much for the power available. This is where a Crew Chief has to decide, do we drop a box off, or assure the Pilots that the ship will make it ok? I’m too under-trained for this responsibility but, somehow, things get figured out.

The other important part of loading is making sure that the Gunner and I can unload the boxes (two to three foot long by about eight inches or so) quickly once we got there; getting in and out as fast as possible is our number one goal. Sometimes the pickup point doesn’t have a runway but is just a bald spot Landing Zone on top of a hill, so the ship strains under the load trying to take off, forcing us to actually fly down the mountain a bit just to pick up air speed.

We don’t talk much on the way, just monitor radio traffic from where we’re going, to keep abreast of the situation. What do I think about on the way to certain death? “I owe a letter... should I use my G.I. Bill to study helicopters, or do I still wanna be a lawyer? Build a drag racer with the money I’ve saved? Did I grease that short shaft right? God, a sniper could hide anywhere in this damn jungle.. What the *helicopter* am I doing here!?! Will they all cry at my funeral? Stop! I forgot to tell them I want to be cremated! Shut up!

Pay attention, boy!” Keep your eyes peeled for tracer rounds, check that load, don’t let it shift, straighten those boxes, make sure the rope handles are all unbroken and free so you can grab them when the time comes. Hands on the gun, adjust what needs it, recheck everything. Visually scour the area for movements or glints...

There it is! Thuong Duc Special Forces Camp. All the times we’ve been here, it was just another routine stop. But now the war is stopping by, and what a hostile looking place. All of a sudden every wrinkle in the landscape is an enemy hiding place, and we’re going to just drop in, drop off and then fly out? Good luck son, you’ll need it. Closer, and we can see the drop spot, but no people in sight (they’re all in bunkers) “Get ready, Chief!” They throw a smoke grenade out onto the pad so the Pilots can tell which way the wind blows. You want to go in against the wind, so it will help slow your descent; the wind from your back or side could make the difference, especially when your overloaded like we always are, between going in on a cushion of air or being blown over by it.

Final approach, heart racing, that final word to yourself: ‘No turning back, boy, if this is your day to get it, tough shit, you signed on, remember. If it comes, let it come quick, please, I don’t mind dyin’ but I don’t wanna suffer.’ Descend like a drunken elevator - ground sucking us down. Man, the air sure gets still when we’re going this slow. Faster, please hurry! Don’t make a mistake, done this before. *Boom!* A puff of smoke says they just lobbed something into the compound, but not near enough to us to feel the impact. We’re coming in too fast! *Boom*, and a wind gust knocks the tail rotor off trim for a moment - was it the impact of the concussion or just the Pilot flinching, since his slightest movement at the controls gets transferred to the larger movement of the ship? But he corrects, nice and easy.

Then, that dreaded sound of the rotors losing RPM, the pitch of the engine whine changing, the transmission gears slowing - this is where stress can break delicate machinery and flight becomes falling. I can feel the heat of the

ground, look over at Gunner and his load. So close now, that dust is flying up from our prop wash. Why do these ships have to rattle so much during ground effect? Old piece of shit war horse. Steady baby, you can make it, I'll give you a good wash tonight, just don't let me down now! You're me, and I'm you and we're in this together, remember?

Ok, quick, park the gun, unhook my intercom line so I can move freely, step out onto the skid, grab the pole with my right and with my left I grab the rope of the first box. Feels good to finally be getting rid of this stuff. Our descent has stopped, now! *Grab* and *Pull* and make sure those boxes leave fast and land soft. We hover just feet above the ground, so each box has to land in a slightly different spot or they'll pile up and I won't have anyplace to fling the next one. And they're too heavy to send flying out away from the ship. Adrenaline makes them weightless, muscles go numb, but be careful not to get nicked by a box as it's dragged out. *Boom!* A mortar goes off, but I'm too busy to respect it. Faster! *Hurry!* A box snags, pull harder, kick back on one, then with one more to go, pull and fling.

Check Gunner's side, his last box is moving! Yes! Scream "*LET'S GO*" I swing back into the well, *go! go! go!*. We rise up, lifted by that giant's hand so suddenly that it takes a minute for the stomach to catch up. Oh! I love that feeling of power! Get your gun pointed, look for tracers, plug the headset back in. Don't look back. The routine turns euphoric suddenly. The ship stops shaking, cool air mixing in, air speed picks up. Nothin' to it, folks...

Did we cheer afterwards? No, but we sure shared some kind of feeling - some way. Praise comes over the radio "Thanks guys! Now go do it again!" And we'd do just that. Over and over.

Back at Base, did anyone acknowledge our great victory? Hardly. Most likely we were greeted by some hassle - a back-up at the fuel depot, a broken skid jack that squirted fluid all over me, or a busted cowling. For sure, the crew did not celebrate together. The pilots would head for whatever debriefing they had to attend and be sippin' a 'cold one'

while I'd still be out in a revetment, begging for help with the ship. Clean the particle separator, take oil samples, wipe this, check that. Was this leaking yesterday? God I'm hungry, and the mess hall is always closed. The Pilots would be eating something tasty (at least I imagined it that way), and I'd be up to my elbows in grease, still covered in the sandy grit and sweat of the day, desperate to fix what was broke and get ready in case we're needed to go flying tomorrow. Don't get caught unprepared. Avoid the Red-X.

If I was lucky, I'd have a Gunner who would stop by after cleaning his guns and help. But there wasn't much in it for him unless, like my friend Joe, he was ambitious and wanted to become a Chief. Otherwise, a Gunner had no incentive; tomorrow he'd probably be on someone else's crew and besides, it's night time and there's drinkin,' smokin' or just plain livin' to do. Sorry Lawless, gotta go.

Who'd want to be a Crew Chief anyway? No glory in it, no special status, or bragging rights after it's over. There was more you could do wrong than right - only middle class white grease-monkeys like me found anything about the job interesting or promising for the future.

THUONG DUC POST SCRIPT

After I re-read the citation awarding the Gunner and I Air Medals for this Thuong Duc mission, I noticed the line "During three of the five sorties, rounds exploded within the compound." So we really did go do it again and again. Five times we had to do that long slow slide into certain death or uncertain mayhem. Was the fourth sortie as scary as the first? Or do we just go numb at some point and operate on automatic? Were we the only ones out there that day? Was there any other way to resupply that camp? Where was the rest of this goddamned Army? Why were we always sticking our hands into a hornet's nest so far away from home?

Months later, the Gunner and I were awarded Air Medal 'V' devices (V for Valor) for that trip to Thuong Duc. It was my ninth Air Medal. Air Medals were awarded almost

automatically based on hours in combat flight, so even though they weren't the kind of medals you could put on your resume, you still had to come forward during morning formation so some Officer could ceremoniously pin the thing on you in front of everybody. For doing what we all had to do at some time or other during our time as Black Cats. Everyone knew that getting medals was as much luck as anything, often the result of fate's serendipity as much as any battlefield bravery. And I couldn't help wondering, and still do, what medals the Pilots received for the same mission.

CHAPTER 25 - PILOT APPRECIATION (STICK)

TIME

One day, on a long flight between two far away places, I got the ultimate gift Pilots could bestow on a Crew Chief, which some of us badgered and begged for constantly - 'Stick' time. It had been semi-official policy to let a Crew Chief up in the Peter Pilot's seat during flight, to familiarize him with the feel of the controls in flight, so that if both Pilots happened to get hit, he could have some chance of bringing the ship and crew home.

There was no rule that designated who gave the stick time or even that a Chief had it coming to him - it was just something that happened if an A.C. and a Chief found themselves flying together a lot, and the A.C. felt obliged to do it. I got the impression that it had happened a lot more in the past, since so many people had passed through the company and the old war mentality was being lost because of the routine nature of our current missions.

'Fast Eddie' finally succumbed to my pestering, and asks the New Guy Peter Pilot to give up his seat so I can get Stick time. It was an awkward task, since that seat on the right was not designed to be exited from the left, you were meant to open the door and go out that way. He has to be very careful and climb out without hitting the cyclic stick or any of the switches on the console. But he manages to climb back into the cargo area and I go just as carefully up into his seat, a much easier task.

The difference in the feel of the aircraft is noticeable right away. In more ways than I can describe - so different than sitting in the seat when it's parked and shut down. It's all different, really. The sights, the sounds, the vibration, and the jerking up and down are all more intense, but more than anything else, the sheer feeling of flight is incredible up here. Immediate vertigo, like dangling your legs over the edge of a

tall building and feeling it sway. For the first time I can really see where we're going: up - through the transparent ceiling, down - through the nose bubble, out - through the side door - and then that huge windshield, with a view that makes you feel like you just drove a motor home off a cliff. The blades chop the light up giving it a strobe effect, making everything you see inside the ship appear in a kind of stop-motion, adding to the unnatural sensation.

But I have no time to take the full measure of all these thrills, the big thrill is coming on fast - the controls and how to use them. It takes both hands and both feet to fly, but no muscles; you don't actually *move* the controls, you *think* about where you want the ship to go - up, down, back and forth, over and around. My feet are on two pedals that control the tail rotor pitch - this determines your 'trim', keeping the tail of the chopper straight or with its tail to one side. I barely have to touch them, they're so sensitive. There's a round ball on the 'dashboard' that displays your trim, and it's not as easy to maintain control as I expect it to be, the torque of those big main rotor blades wants to pull the tail around on you (which is why you need a tail rotor on a single-rotor helicopter in the first place.) Also, the wind pushes against the tail, adding to the unpredictability and need for constant correction - and near total concentration on them alone.

But that's only one-third of the controls it takes to make the ship fly. Next is the 'collective' a long baseball bat-like stick that comes up out of the floor, anchored just behind your seat on the left-hand side, angled at around forty-five degrees. In flight, it's just at a comfortable distance off the floor to hold on to, and has a twist grip, which controls the speed of the engine. But the turbine engine runs at just about the same speed all the time, so once it's at operating RPM, it doesn't need adjusting much during flight; whew, there's one thing I can set and forget. The collective's real function is to alter the pitch of the main rotor blades - in other words change angle so that they keep spinning at the same speed but blow more air downward. Pull up on the collective and you go straight up; down and you crash unless

you catch it in time; but while flying (and at that time we're up above twenty-five hundred to three thousand feet, at least), you don't adjust it much, it's used in conjunction with the 'cyclic'.

The *cyclic* is that stick sitting between my legs, that comes up out of the floor, and has a hand grip perfectly positioned so that my fingers grasp it just so in an uncramped grip. This is what you 'fly' with; it controls the main rotor blades position in relation to the rest of the ship and is like a controllable fan. Feeling that stick in my hand in flight has to be one of the oddest, most unnatural and sensitive-to-your-movements sensations I've ever felt. Fast Eddie warns me not to move the stick - just *think* about moving it, and still my hand can't hold it steady enough - it's moving and vibrating, constantly wanting to wander all around. I try to hold it steady, but can't relax my hand muscles enough to produce smooth movement. No matter how hard I try to be smooth, I'm making the ship pitch (forward and backward movement) and roll (side to side). The stick just seems to have a mind of its own. He lets me hold the stick just long enough by myself to get a real sense of the difficulty of the job - and the sheer ecstasy of controlling the vehicle in flight. There is such a feeling of heaviness to the ship but such a feeling of delicateness to the controls that it's uncanny, like the first time you drive a car with power steering - that moving of a great weight with such little effort.

My time with the stick amounts to less time than it took to read this page, but it impresses me more than any other machine I've ever controlled, and is more thrill than any carnival ride. I don't want to give up the stick; it's a real challenge, handling these controls and I want to master this new skill, wrestle the beast until it's under my control. But this isn't school and I can't say I take to it like a duck. Probably no worse than most, though. I can feel Fast Eddie's subtle regain of the stick and the pedals, which is my cue to let go, and I feel an immediate difference in the steadiness of the ship. I manage to cough up a few questions to extend my

time in the chair, but then I have to relinquish, rolling back into the cargo area, and into my gun well, where I belong.

The Peter Pilot comments on how weird it felt to sit back in my seat, and I now know forever (and deep) just what I missed because of the fact that my nearsighted eyes kept me from becoming a pilot. Life lesson number eight hundred and forty nine: some limitations are impossible to overcome. I'm buzzed from the thrill, but cursing yet again the inequities of life. Lucky enough to fly in helicopters and lucky enough to actually *fly* one for a few seconds, but feeling a lot less-than-lucky for having lived a life that teased me, but seldom really pleased me.

That night, back at the hootch, I could only tell my closest pal or two about my luck. If you told someone that you got 'stick' time, their first question would be "Who gave it to you?" Insisting on an answer. And then that Pilot would get badgered mercilessly by every Crew Chief he flew with from then on, driving him crazy. So part of the deal for getting stick time was keeping it to yourself. So I waited for thirty years. Hope that's long enough to keep the secret. Thanks, Fast Eddie.

I understood from that moment on why pilots were willing to put up with the training and discipline; why they acted just a little bit superior to the rest of us mortals, and why they took their jobs just that much more seriously than I took mine - they had to. But they also wanted to. It was fun to fire a gun, but even more fun to fly a helicopter - a lot more fun.

But not easy, as I learned in those few moments at the controls. Difficult, because everything is constantly changing on you - the wind, the light, the mission itself, (which could switch from routine to 'hot' in an instant) the 'flight attitude', which depended on responses from the many electric control relays, hydraulic servos and linkages that differed from ship to ship. Some flight controls even wore out during flights of high stress, like combat and hot resupply or rescue.

A Pilot had to be in complete control of more of his body parts than any athlete, soldier, or other kind of aircraft pilot. Muscles wanted to tense up and over-react, and he had to keep his responses steady or he'd jerk the ship around, which could break what was actually very delicate machinery. His feet had to keep the tail straight, his left arm had to hold the collective lever to control blade pitch, and the air-speed it controlled, at the proper level. His ear had to be tuned to his left wrist in case of a change in the engine speed. His right arm had to steady the cyclic stick that determined the direction in which the ship was flying; his right wrist making the tiny movements that keep the ship on course, always compensating for shifts in wind, air pockets, landscape and obstructions (especially if flying at low level where trees and power lines could snag the skids and cause a crash).

His index finger had to control his microphone, which couldn't be left open or he wouldn't hear anything. And, if it was a gun ship, his thumb would operate a trigger that fired grenades or rockets, both of which required a further change in the ship's attitude in order to aim the guns at the target.

A Pilot heard an almost constant chatter in his ear - not just air traffic control or Army command, but also input from the other three crewman, who tried to keep him aware of potential intrusions (or firing) into his airspace. Had to keep his eyes peeled for trouble that could come from all sides, as well as from above and below (was that a puff of smoke, a glint of light, a friend or enemy?) - all in a split second. And all the time taking instruction from, of all things, his own ass - truly, 'flying by the seat of his pants', since it receives those physical signals, like vibrations, the ship sends that don't reach him any other way.

Then of course, there are those other asses, the ones in Command, who fail to give him permission to fire back at some son of a bitch who's shooting at him. And the annoyance of a Crew Chief screaming for permission to fire back, *NOW!* So, with all parts of his mind and body engaged, his

brain is now embroiled with questions of being judge, jury and executioner, to what might be hostile fire, or just a soldier testing his just-cleaned weapon. Does he take evasive action, fly away as ordered, or fire back, risking prosecution by overriding Command for the sake of his ship, crew and cargo? All in the blink of an eye.

A lot was asked of a Pilot. And I *never* flew with one who did not deliver. I am writing this today, and you are reading it now, because every one of them did a great job and brought me home after each day's work. Their names were Farnsworth, Augustine, Leith, Bledsoe, Blood, Fore, Rodriguez, Anderson and many more. My heroes. If you meet one, shake his hand and say thanks for me. 'Cause all I ever did was pester them and make jokes and whine. Never got a chance to thank them, and now the word seems so inadequate, considering that I owe my life to them all. But I'm saying it here and now, just for the record. Thanks guys. For everything.

CHAPTER 26 - MR. SALUTE AND HIS LUXURY

LINER

Boy, once you've had 'stick' time, it's hard to be happy back in the gun well. Especially when you have this gut feeling that it's all you're ever going to get. Being a Crew Chief is fine if that's what you wanted to do, but if you really wanted to be a pilot, Chief is close - but no cigar.

So the usual missions now become even more monotonous. The war is still the thing, and I still want to do what I came to do, fight a war and prove something, but it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore all the excess privilege afforded to those in Command and Control of the American and South Vietnamese military, as well as the civilian power structures of both countries. When you see tailor-made, always-pressed uniforms day after day use this expensive war machine to taxi around from meeting to meeting on what can only be shopping trips, long languorous lunches and political glad-handing visits to bestow perks and favors in exchange for support, it becomes difficult to believe that this is really a war, and not just some kind of scam. It's hard to see it any other way - our rich people insist on fighting a war against their peasant revolution, using the poor people of our country to the benefit of the rich people of their country.

A battlefield reduces everything to a simple struggle of kill or be killed, but flying around in a luxury model helicopter with a shiny paint job, padded captains chairs and carpet? What message does that send to the enemy? I only fly on a General's ship once or twice, and it's a good thing I don't draw the assignment regularly, or I wouldn't have been flying for very long. It is the worst ship, the worst duty, the most thankless obligation and the most 'pussy-ass' job you can get stuck with. But more than one Crew Chief got the assignment and one I'd known since Ft. Rucker, seemed

quite happy to become the full-time Chief on a Vietnamese General's ship.

He spends so much time cleaning and polishing his ship (with real wax! Un-fucking-war-zone-believable) and fussing over the accoutrements - everything in its place, the General's helmet always right *there* on his chair - that it drove me crazy, just watching him work. I asked him if it bothered him and he said no. And I believed him because he seemed to be living it and not just walking through it.

I could relate somewhat, remembering the closeness to those we worked for in Hue and Quang Tri. "But you're missing out on all the fun," I say. While we're down there doing hot resupplies, combat assaults and other 'fun' stuff, he has to circle around up above two thousand feet, out of the action, so that the General can stay in charge (and stay alive). Nope, doesn't bother this guy. I respect him, and over time I come to respect his luck, too.

The General almost always flies with a star painted on the side of the ship (a one-star rank, B.F.D.) which, along with *Mr. Salute's* shiny wax job, alerts every Viet Cong and NVA regular who sees it that this is the big prize that could win you a trip back to Hanoi to meet Uncle Ho, if you managed to shoot it down. The crew on the General's ship also suffers the disadvantage of not being able to go 'guns out' or to return fire as much as the rest of us 'slicks'; they're usually restricted to evasive action if fired upon, so that they draw no more fire to themselves than necessary. For these two reasons alone, I believe this is a terrible assignment and combined with the protocol requirements, it adds up to a pretty negative experience. All the hassle of being a Crew Chief, but none of the fun.

Or so I figure. But over the months that we're flying, I can't help noticing that his ship comes home more shot-up than just about anyone's. Shrapnel and small arms rounds puncture holes in his ship, and more than once the Crew gets bloodied and Purple-Heart-ed. More reason to pity the guy and appreciate his willingness to do the job. I don't mind

taking fire, (something that seldom happens to me - I'm lucky, remember) but I hate being a sitting duck for it.

One day, a wound to his ship got everyone's attention. They flew it home somehow, and people gathered around to see for themselves - it had taken a hit in the engine. A bullet had pierced the hot (combustion) end of the engine, leaving a hole in the casing and breaking off some of the turbine 'blades'. This had to be some kind of mechanical miracle; it should have thrown the engine so out of balance that it should have blown up, seized up or at the very least shut down. But it brought the boys home, somehow. No wonder we fell in love with our helicopters. Sure had to respect the luck - and that great turbine engine.

(Jump forward for a second: Just recently, I saw a March 15, 1971 *Newsweek* article entitled '*Can choppers be Vietnamized?*', General Lam, commander of *A.R.V.N.* forces, admits he would not fly with a South Vietnamese crew. He flew a Black Cat. His crew were my friends and comrades. To me, that said it all about their 'Air Force' and how much of a chance Vietnam-ization had of working.)

CHAPTER 27 - BUNKER HUNTER

I'm not sure how much this all affected me at the time. I might have been envious of the other guys' brushes with death, because I was still hungry for action. I'm no longer an FNG or a living, breathing hoping-for-a-future human being. I tend to assert myself - push back - when and if I get pushed. If I feel like showing some swagger, I'll step out onto the skid with one foot, and lean out to catch the breeze as we were descending into a landing zone - a gesture of bravado that looks and feels good. That it's unsafe is part of the allure. I become a bit less safety conscious, too, using that hot and heavyweight 'chicken vest' as little as possible and often feel it unnecessary to be tied to the 'chicken strap' as well. Much less likely to call a Peter Pilot "Sir". Hey, we're all in this together, pal, and you're the one surrounded by armor-plating (the pilots' seats were lined with ½ inch-thick 'armor plate').

And if a Pilot has a nickname, that's what I call him - some right to their face and some, only behind their back. So a guy nicknamed 'Roger Ram Jet' probably doesn't appreciate being called that, but a big-boned curly blond-headed doofus type named Eddie probably doesn't mind at all being called 'Big Ed'. As long as you remember not to address him that way in front of the Brass. Being familiar like this with a Pilot makes the relationship closer, which helps us all bear up under the strain of overwork, boredom, and terror that hovers over us like we hover over the ground. It also gives me a bit of license to push a guy's 'buttons', and shame or harass or spur him on to doing things he might otherwise be reluctant to do.

One day, we picked up an Infantry officer, an American instead of a Vietnamese, making it special right there, as we usually hauled only A.R.VNs and American advisors. Somehow, I got in on the briefing for this mission, the Officer explaining that there were V.C. hiding in a network of tunnels and underground bunkers in an area too far flung and

dangerous for his guys to go find on the ground. The problem was figuring which bunkers were actually occupied and which were not. Well, hell, that's what we have helicopters for, mister, we can definitely help. It was good to be working a necessary mission for an American, who needed our Air-mobile capability.

So we're flying over the territory, and this guy has his map of suspected bunkers, but we can't really tell what's what, because the pilots are flying up around nine hundred to a thousand feet. The Officer is peering through his binoculars, so I get on the mic and tell Big Ed that this is stupid: We're not high enough to be safe (from small arms fire) and not low enough to really see the entrances to their bunkers. (which are camouflaged with vegetation taken from their surroundings). So his response is to climb higher!

I see the Officer turn to his aide (a Lt. or Staff Sgt.) and shake his head, as if to say he can't see anything. Off mic, I ask the guy, would it be better if we flew closer to the ground and he nods yes. On the intercom, I pass the message along to Big Ed, who is looking out the window while Peter Pilot flies the ship. No, he replies, it's against regulation to fly treetop, hell we could get shot. So what, I say - feeling free enough to voice my opinion - we're accomplishing nothing up here, and these guys need our help. Nah, we'll just get into trouble, he says. "Come on, E, these guys are going to think we're a bunch of pussies, let's show 'em some brass" (meaning brass balls) and go down there where the action is.

I catch the Officer's head going ping pong between Ed and me while this exchange is taking place. My words hang in the air for a moment. Then Big Ed adjusts in his chair, looks over at the Peter Pilot and gives the signal that he's taking over the controls. He immediately angles the nose down sharply and swoops toward the ground. The Officer and I smile as we put our stomachs back in their rightful places and pretty quickly, we're at low level, following a long mound of earth separating two rice paddies. Someone says "There!, two o'clock, looks like an opening." In a

smooth move, Ed kicks the tail out and angles us back around to face the place.

We flit like a dragonfly over the land, swift and agile, Big Ed's initial reluctance is quickly replaced by a gusto for the job. It's dangerous work, the kind you don't get medals for - the job itself has to be worth it somehow. The Infantry Officer directs us to another place on his map and we zoom toward it, our speed our only real protection at this low an altitude, since anyone with a cap pistol or a bow and arrow could do some kind of damage to all this exposed flesh. "Over there! Nine o'clock, that pile of thatch.." And, as if we're all one mind and that one mind is guiding that chopper, over there we'd be in a flash.

We circle the area like a hawk hunting a hamster, while the Officer and his man confer. Can you fire into it to see what happens?" Sure, I say; Big Ed wonders about our 'rules of engagement', and the Officer assures him that he has jurisdiction. I lock and load as the ship arcs around and comes back at a safe distance from the pile (in case it's an ammo dump, we don't want it exploding in our face.) I pull the trigger and pump rounds into the mound in a widening circle as we slowly retreat and put distance between us and the now-burning mound, watching for anything that might come running (or crawling) out. We keep an eye on that while looking above and beyond it, in case there's an exit.

Spotting something at the edge of a rice paddy; someone suggests a grenade would help determine if there was anything there. So the Infantry guy pulls the pin on a H.E.(high explosive) and drops it right at the spot. (Shucks, I wanted to do that!) The spot blows up - but still no bad guys. We go back to the other entrance and if anyone is in there he's staying put, so they mark the spot and we move on.

Big Ed is putting all his skill into this, and it's without a doubt the most fun any of us have had lately. This is what Air Mobile is all about; this is where our technology matches our purpose to a 't'. By the end of our fuel load, the guy has his map marked up and knows where he wants to

bring his guys to do further investigation. Before he leaves, he thanks us and we beg him (or I do, at least) to please call us again whenever he's got more work like this to do, giving him all our names. He promises he will.

On the way home, I relive the moment, savoring that carnival ride feeling a helicopter can give you when it's used to its fullest capacity. And I feel good about helping a fellow American search out the bad guys, using our skills and our air mobile capabilities to maybe, just maybe, save the life of a fellow G.I. Fun is good, but doing good is even more fun.

CHAPTER 28 - SHORT?!

Maybe it was missions like this that clouded my judgement. Maybe it was the heat. Or maybe it was a case of the newly insane learning to love the insanity. I don't know. But my response was - what else? - more insanity, of course. I signed on to stay in Vietnam for another six months. I had perfectly sound, logical reasons for this, as most crazy people do for their inexplicable actions.

Just as I was beginning to get 'short', I signed up to take the long way home. Hated being there, but was scared to go home. Still had two years to go in the Army and couldn't think of any other way to get through it, other than to stay in-country, maybe get a promotion or a chest full of medals - anything to cure this damn sense of nothingness inside of me. Hard to explain, even to Elaine. I detailed my 'reasons' to my Brother Mark in a letter dated October 19, 1970...

The real reason was only hinted at, when in 'reason' 4, I say I'm moving to another company, one that's more involved in the war. With all my dissatisfaction with the Army, the war and the Vietnamese, there is still a desire, a need, to see what I consider real action. The kind where you get to see the enemy and kill them. I had come to fight and was now mad enough at everything to kill anything, and wanted to do nothing else.

It was rumored that there were other companies 'out there' who got to fight instead of playing taxi like we were doing, (someone else's bucket always holds more beer) and I saw extending as my only way to get in some action before the Americans were pulled out completely - a pullout which had been promised, threatened and even planned for, over the years.

On the disposition form you sign requesting an extension, they include a last line 'This request is not based on the purpose of marrying a foreign national'. You're not crazy for wanting to stay and *fight* for the Vietnamese, but if you want to *marry* one of them, well...

Personally, I think you both are crazy as hell, wanting to get married before your out of college, but there's no use in me telling you not to because your going to do what you want to do and damn way. Just make sure you both got your shit together and above all that you love each other (other than physically, if you know what I mean, Ha Ha). And I wouldnt mind being beat man as long as I get to kiss the bride. Oh, and one other thing, if you wait till I get out of Nam You'll have to wait a long time because I f just extended for 6 months. I'll still be home in April. the reason I extended is 1. For the money, I'm making about 110 dollars more over here 2. Promotions are easier to get here; for example my next promotion would increase my pay by about \$150. 3. The duty itself is better, because there's not quite as much lifer ~~bullshit~~ bullshit. 4. By extending, I get my choice of duty station in Nam, and I want to go to an assault helicopter company in NHA TRANG, it's supposed to be ~~xxxxxx~~ a real ass-kicking "war" company and I'd like to see a little more action than I see in this pussy-ass place. 5. The living is cheaper over here for example: most Mail is free, I don't pay and taxes, all little items like beer, pop, soap, all that little shit is a lot cheaper; plus we get outasite discounts on stereos, clothes, cameras and most of all American card, which I especially like because I think I'll order My Z/28 from here and get it for about a \$1000 cheaper than back in the world. I already have \$1250 saved up for it. 6. By extending I lessen my chances of being sent to Germany or some other foreign contry; As it is now, I have almost a year to swerve when I get back, so it wouldnt be practical for them to send me overseas again, and with 18 months left they could have very easily sent me away. After all this bullshit, I want to stay back in the states where we get ~~xxxxxx~~ weekends off and get to go home once ina while. I just counted it up and when I count the 2 thirty-day leaves I'll have coming (1 in April, then 1 in November) I'll only have 9 actual months left to do when I go back from leave. ~~Then~~ Then if I decide to go to college, I could get a 3-month drop to start the summer quarter, which means I'd only have 6 actual months left, which sounds outasite to me.

There was another element to it, unstated, and that was fear. While in Vietnam, the war kept the Army off your back a lot. As long as you were fighting, or flying in our case, they left us alone. But I was afraid that any other duty station outside Vietnam would be so intolerable with military brown-nosing and boot-licking that I would go crazy or be so rebellious as to end up locked up or kicked out, negating the gains I'd made so far. Not to mention jeopardizing my accumulated benefits. Better death than dismissal. And hey, I was supposed to get another R&R. (Rest and Relaxation, a paid seven day holiday in either Bangkok, Tokyo, Manila,

Sydney or even Hawaii!) And you were supposed to get a trip home after your first tour, even if you extended.

Certainly can't turn up my nose at those extra bucks from flight pay and combat pay, not to mention the great discounts on consumer goods. Save a thousand on that Z-28, boy. Ya can't beat that with a stick. It must have been those monsoon rains pounding down on the tin-roof hootches. That's all I can figure, Your Honor. Needless to say, I didn't brag much about extending to anyone - since now, I was not only Regular Army, but here I was extending, pushing my ass into territory only lifers occupy. Man, was I alone.

CHAPTER 29 - THE BRAVE GO IN WAVES

“Damn, Joe, I need a drink. Bad. C’mon, let’s go to the club, I’m buying.” At least Joe understood the forces at work on my psyche. I could tell Joe. Him I could talk to, about most everything. Every young drinkin’ man needs a buddy like Joe.

Joe Rohlinger and I had met during doorgunner training back at Ft. Rucker and struck up a friendship that continued when we both ended up as Black Cats at Marble Mountain. His father had been a military officer, and even though he didn’t talk about it much, I think Joe ended up in the Army enlisted ranks, rather than the officer corps, because his rebellious nature had landed him in trouble early, forcing him to give up whatever civilian dreams he may have had, and into the Army, as a way out of that trouble.

Joe was a fighter by his nature, not by choice. He was tall and lanky, but walked with a cocky self assurance that was made of quick fluid movement, just short of arrogance. Not bony and awkward like me, Joe got picked for the team instead of picked on by the gang. He liked to talk about fights and girls and could be fun to listen to as he recalled his experiences with both. I can still see his eyes, (were they blue? Guys seldom notice such things about other guys, even their closest friends) deep set and well framed in their sockets, lighting up as he sunk his teeth into a story. Girls probably found him attractive because of those eyes. Those little-boy eyes that melt every mother’s heart, enflame every young girl’s passion and are the object of every casting director’s star search. Eyes that got him liked, envied, and into lots of trouble. Trouble he never seemed to look for, nor shy away from.

Joe understood my frustration; he wanted to get out there and fight that war, too. Army bullshit annoyed him as much as it did me, and we commiserated over quite a few beers at the bar. I enjoyed those rare times flying with him more than with any other Door Gunner, because Joe wanted

to become a crew chief and for this reason, he was always eager to learn, never had to be told, and took instruction well, never chafing or getting a bruised ego. We worked well together, and it was about the only time I was able to pass along what I'd learned to someone who wanted to learn it. And I enjoyed it. But when I got stuck in the hangar fixing Blivet, Joe flew with other crews, learning all he could.

I don't know who told us about Joe's death, or exactly where I was when I heard; probably sitting on my bunk in the hootch. I also don't know how the story got circulated that he died twelve times on the operating table before finally succumbing to his wounds. Twelve times he died - they saw it as eleven attempts to live - but all I could think of was they took too long to stop the bleeding, Joe probably didn't realize himself how bad he was hit. And it was a long flight to that hospital in China Beach. He'd lost too much blood, probably an artery wound.

My sadness was worsened by anger, Joe was killed doing a lousy assault without gunship support. On the lousy-assed Hoi An run, to boot, the most boring of our routine missions, and usually the safest. I never found out any more details about the mission, and I guess it's just as well, it could have only made me angrier. There were so many lousy ways to die in Vietnam, why should this one be any different? Any more heroic or mundane?

How can someone be in a war zone so close to death and destruction and still be so affected and shocked by it when it finally hits close? I don't know. Denial, disbelief, disassociation perhaps. Happens all the time in big cities; someone dies tragically on the 11 o'clock news, but not until it happens to someone you know does it become real.

Nov. 3, 1970

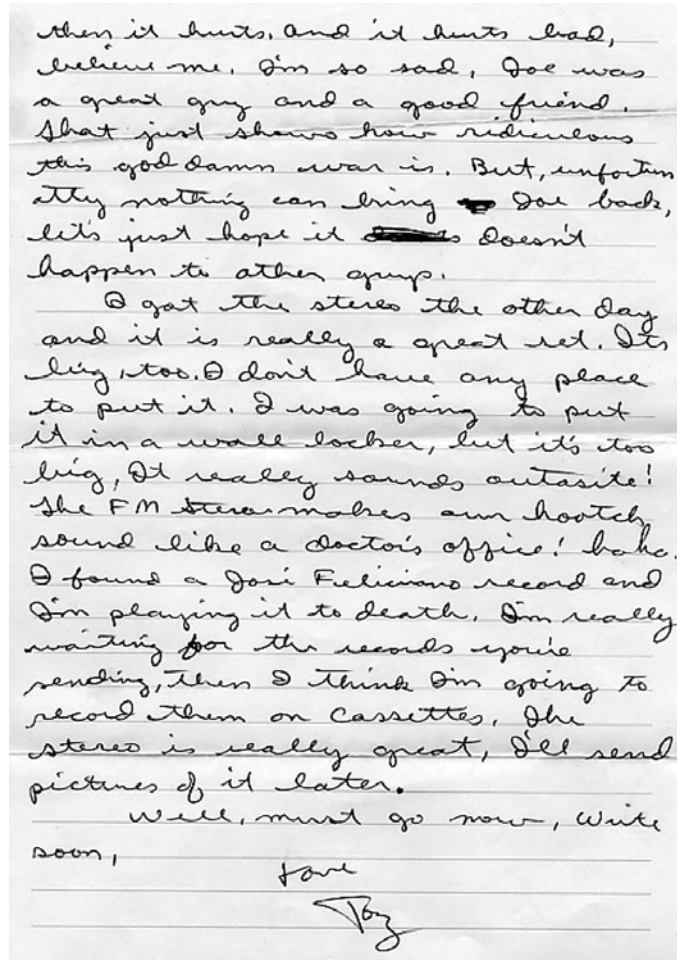
Hi Babe,

Sorry I took so long to answer your letter, but Sunday my best friend was killed. I've been so broke up I couldn't even think straight let alone write letters. His name was Joe Rollinger, he was from Dayton, we had been together since Ft. Rucker. It had been raining all week solid, flooding all the low lands around Da Nang so all the flyable ships in the company (excluding Beind who is still in the barge) went on a rescue mission, evacuating approx. 10,000 Vietnamese civilians in one day (this was less than 20 ships). But along with the civilians, the V.C. moved around, too. They occupied a place that used to be a village, that's when they assaulted it with about four ships and no gunship support. Joe's was the first ship in, he got it in the leg and died on the operating table. You never realized how horrible this war is till it hits ~~at~~ right next to you

I know for sure I didn't want to go to his memorial service, which was held near the same area of the company compound where we'd started so many of our days. What was I supposed to do while they went through this stupid memorial service? All solemn and religious, what did it have to do with Joe's life? What was I supposed to do? Stand there and cry? Just because I wanted to, needed to? What we needed was to talk - not get preached at. I needed to tell

someone something but there was no forum for that, no sitting down to share the grief.

The most wasted words are those spoken over the grave of a man who dies too young, his promise unfulfilled. At least, Joe the fighter died fighting.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat slanted. The letter is written on a piece of paper with horizontal lines. The text is as follows:

then it hurts, and it hurts bad,
believe me, I'm so sad, Joe was
a great guy and a good friend,
that just shows how ridiculous
this god damn war is. But, unfortunately
they nothing can bring Joe back,
let's just hope it ~~doesn't~~ doesn't
happen to other guys.

I got the stereo the other day
and it is really a great set. It's
big too. I don't have any place
to put it. I was going to put
it in a wall locker, but it's too
big, it really sounds outasite!
The FM stereo makes our hootchy
sound like a doctor's office! haha.
I found a Josi Feliciano record and
I'm playing it to death. I'm really
waiting for the records you're
sending, then I think I'm going to
record them on cassettes. The
stereo is really great, I'll send
pictures of it later.

well, must go now, write
soon,

love
Taz

A part of your self is taken away when someone close to you is carried off, no matter how it happens. I had promised myself, way back in Commercial Point, that I wouldn't get close to anybody ever again. They'll move, or

I'll be removed, either way, it only leads to pain. Like, but don't love, need, but don't rely on people and never ever trust. Don't expect much. That way the disappointment won't hurt so much.

And again, I was not taking into account that there were others being hurt worse. Somewhere, there were two guys knocking on a door, delivering bad news as solemnly as they could to some people who were never going to see their son again, and who were never going to know if they'd done right by him or not.

But I was more than just sad and angry. I was guilty. Just as guilty as the man who pulled the trigger. Why? Because I'd encouraged him - "Take the Hoi An run, Joe," I said, "it may be a pain, but it will give you hours as a Crew Chief and get you closer to your own ship. Never refuse a mission, Joe", I said, "take each one they give you, show 'em you're willing, show 'em you're up to it". "I'll pass on the mission, Joe, so you can take it. It'll get you closer." Closer. Just as guilty as the man who pulled the trigger. Whether or not I was really guilty is no longer an answerable question. Too late now, the damage has been done, and redemption is not for mortals to ordain, only my dying will bring peace to this guilty conscience.

Twenty-five years I carried this around and never told a soul. Never contacted his family, even though I wanted to. When Elaine sent me the letters in 1991, I thumbed through them, then put them all back in the box, figuring that someday I could deal with it all, but not right now. It would take four or five years, a major breakdown and a painful admission that I wasn't going to be able to go forward with my life until I dealt with this. Two years of psychiatry and every modern anti-depressant, and still I couldn't force myself to face Joe's death, or my guilt.

Then, one day in 1998, as I was packing up to leave California, I stopped while transferring the letters to another box, and started reading them. And couldn't stop. Suddenly, I discovered something in them I never realized was there - a story of a boy, me, who came of age in that moment and

changed from something into something else; from that into this. And I realized that I owed that boy something. The boy can't know what the man will learn, but the man should not forget what the boy felt while becoming the man.

I also discovered a debt I owed - to Elaine, to Joe, to all my friends and family, and even to myself. To explain what happened to that boy who never returned, and to try in whatever way I could to explain why I am the way I am now. And to thank them all by giving them as much of the truth as I can, however much it hurts or shames or even embarrasses me. They shouldn't have had to tip-toe around the subject all these years just out of sensitivity towards me. They deserve an accounting of what happened to that boy. Perhaps in this way, I'll find the forgiveness that this shell of a man owes to that boy who wrote those letters and who wanted so badly to do something right and righteous. Just like Joe tried to do. Just like we were all trying to do.

Farewell, Joe. You blessed me with your friendship and I'll carry you in what's left of my heart for all the rest of my goings. Wish we could have flown more missions together. Wish I could have said goodbye...

CHAPTER 30 - SHELTER FROM THE STORM

When I read this letter again, telling Elaine of Joe's death, I was shocked that I could tell such a sad story full of anger and self-pity, and then continue on the next page to chatter away about my new stereo and the music it makes. What a cold, insensitive character, I thought. I could never show this to anyone. I should tear it up right now. To be so sad about Joe's death, then thrilled by a new toy. What a terrible person that was, to worry his best friend like that and then go on as if nothing happened.

Then, after I thought about it, I understood something. Don't be so hard on the boy, after all, life goes on, and that's what I was telling Elaine. In my own clumsy way I was trying to tell her I was ok. Somehow, Elaine must have understood, I don't remember her ever remarking on it or scolding me for my childishness. But, I now know that the reason I could do this was because something inside of me had snapped. Something, some belief, some mechanism of hope and optimism shut down and I gave up. I was just as dead as Joe. Only, my death was going to be the long, slow, agonizing kind; more of that dull ache, when what I really wanted was some sharp sudden spike to put a once-and-for-all point on my lump of a life. No need to worry, anymore; I carried two certainties around from then on - I wasn't going to die here, but at the same time, I'm already a dead man. Forget it, G.I., it don't mean nothin'.

'GETTING DOWN' UP ON THE ROOF

This is the point in the story where Hollywood would have our hero go on a classic bender, his disillusion and depression turning to despair, his first reaction being a 'good drunk'. After which he would be saved by the love of a good woman and a character-turning opportunity to save someone's life in a huge action set-piece that snaps him out of it and ends with him finding new reason to live. Sun appears

from behind the clouds, old Sparky ambles into the shot wagging his tail, hero and lover smile, music swells. Fade out.

Well, Hollywood is a great storyteller but a terrible historian. Truth is box office poison, but so too is fantasy poison to real character development, since life is never as easy as a movie. I do not consider my choices at this point to be wrong or my actions to be the worst thing that could have happened. Change occurs because something has run its course. Like so many other aspects of my life, despite bad things happening, I would have to say I was lucky that there was a new and different pastime to indulge in around this time.

One thing changed right away. I don't know if it was that night or one of the following nights, but it was soon after that memorial service. I joined the guys up on the roof who were gathered in a loose circle, took a deep toke on a joint and asked, "Where can I buy some of this?" This is where the story of this war differs so greatly from all of America's previous wars. Us versus them now applies to the war amongst us, with lifestyle, wardrobe, drug of choice, music, attitude and belief systems all becoming points of contention.

The air you breathe can feel new and sweet after you've had the wind knocked out of you. I had said back in the summer of '69 (seems so long ago, and it's only November of 1970!) that I was going to get a good stereo and smoke some good dope while I was in Vietnam. And now, whatever restraint that had held me back was gone and I decided to experience everything I could while I could. I'm dead anyway, I figured, so why not live? I've heard it said that those who come late to a revolution are often its most fervent believers. I realized right away just how much I'd missed while living the life of a middle-class middle-American 'juicer'. I hurried to get my consciousness raised by guys who'd been smoking dope, protesting or just resisting back home for years.

Hippie culture had spread across America by that time and there were guys from Wisconsin, Iowa and Utah

who were filling me in on drugs, music, politics, festivals and how to 'get over' while in the Army. I soaked up hippie lore of 'happenings' that had occurred while I was making other plans over the past few years of my life. Rap sessions, like we used to have back home, now had an undercurrent of 'something happening here,' for us, not them.

I learned how to smoke a bong - only blew the wrong way on that piece of bamboo a couple of times before I got the hang of it. First thing I notice about these guys is their aversion to violence and their good natured attitude. Never did like fighting and I'd had enough of being put down all my life - it was good to be among these gentler 'positive' vibes. I didn't stop drinking, just stopped getting drunk, which had another great side-effect - no more hangovers. That alone was worth the extra care it took to stay 'cool' and not let the Army catch you smoking a joint.

I found out why you could always see guys up on top of the bunkers at sunset each night. Laying on my bed, someone passes by and stops to ask "Hey, Lawless, wanna come up and get down?" Yea, I say, knowing that means do ya wanna get high. I follow him silently into the bunker and crawl up some barrels to a rooftop that is semi-closed off with plywood and/or sandbags so that what goes on can't be seen by anyone on the ground in the company area. I'd always wondered where everyone went at this time of day, and why, when flying in, it seemed like half the company was on the roof watching the sun go down.

I understood immediately. Cannabis heightens awareness and makes your senses more acute, which made that sky more blue, those clouds more white and the sunsets more brilliantly hued than any I had ever seen. When the sun reached a certain level behind the mountains west of DaNang, and shot light up through the clouds that always hung around them, the colors produced were rich, deeply saturated, and would change by the second, subtly getting better as the sun moved down, like a snail twisting a kaleidoscope. Awesome, psychedelic and a daily event that could,

with a little psycho-active augmentation, dissolve the dust off your day and make you glad to be awake.

During storm season, the clouds would pass through like performers on a stage, thrilling us with a show that seemed to have a beginning, a middle and, just before disappearing into dark gray, a spectacular climax of long multi-colored rays and cotton-candy-puffs of pure color. And after more than one such visual concerto, I remember an appreciative audience standing as one to applaud and exult as if the whole thing had been done just for our benefit. Just in case the Maker does hear the gratitude of his creations. Probably looked nutty, a bunch of shirtless guys applauding a sunset like it was a hotsy-totsy show, but it felt perfectly normal.

I also noticed something during one of the standing ovations: across the way, where the officers quarters were, there was a small group on top of one bunker also enjoying the show. Couldn't prove it, but rumor had it that some of them also smoked dope.

If it rained, the party retreated to the inside of the bunkers, which gave the proceedings an entirely different vibe. The smell of wet sand mixed with perfumed incense, moldy plywood and soggy jungle boots gave it a unique aura, aided by the candlelight that provided most of the illumination. The intimacy of the surroundings led to a closeness among us that felt as if it had always existed and would last forever.

I promised to be as candid as possible in this recounting of my war in Vietnam, and to include as many memories as I can recall. Which requires that I tell of my drug use, regardless of how it may appear to be an encouragement to others to follow my path. Just as I do not encourage anyone to follow my path to war, I also do not recommend to anyone that they pollute their flesh or subdue their spirit with anything designed to make them feel 'better'.

Drugs - and I include everything from aspirin, caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, psychedelics, pain killers, tranquilizers, anti-depressants, and opiates - are a measure of humankind's failure to understand and respect his own body.

Drugs can not be trusted to fully fertilize our positives, nor weed out those painful negatives that lead us to seek their help in the first place. The body is the technology of the human spirit, and each soul is responsible for his own, and by extension, for those of his fellow men.

So too is war a failure of humankind to understand and respect each other's societies, which are the technology of our collective spirits. Each nation brings with it a soul that, while seeming strong, is only spirit, and must be nurtured, protected and tended just like the soul of the individual. War by its nature, once allowed to proliferate, cannot discriminate between the good and bad of society it is waged against. Lost first is that which is most delicate, like canaries in a coal mine. A tilling machine, once set upon a garden, cannot distinguish between the flowers, the vegetables and the weeds, it rends all of the earth and everything growing there. So too a killing machine, once set upon a people, cannot distinguish between those that are good and those that are bad.

Our lack of perspective and our shallowness of perception prevent us from satisfying our souls and providing our needs, so we turn to drugs and war when what we really need are faith in reason, self-awareness and mutual understanding. We shouldn't demand shelter for longer than the storm lasts, as the sunshine always returns, and it is that in which we should place our faith.

My transformation was a convergence of many things: a new musical spirituality that had been building since I was a 13-year-old, shared by a group of people larger than any such group on earth before, at a time of prosperity both material and social, unprecedented in mankind's recorded history. We truly believed that we could change the world, that it needed changing and that we were the ones who were equipped and compelled to do the changing. Since chemicals had forced the earth to bring forth a bountiful harvest of food, so it seemed to follow that chemicals could lead to a bountiful spiritual harvest that would nourish a world

starving for peace between nations and tolerance among peoples.

Here again, our generation should not be blamed entirely for our arrogant assumptions. During the fifties and sixties, we were preached at about the superiority of our system, and how we were better than everyone else. We were harangued constantly by television into believing that tobacco calmed the nerves, aspirin cured headaches, Alka Seltzer relieved overeating, beer brought on good times, laxatives cured constipation, personal products like deodorant, toothpaste, hair crème, make-up and vitamins made you popular and attractive to the opposite sex.

Got a problem? Buy this. Doesn't work? Switch brands or take more. Or take it to Dear Abby, and when all else fails, take it to Jesus, he can take care of anything for you. In that bunker and on that rooftop, all these remedies were questioned, scrutinized, weighed and analyzed in this new light, provided by the altered perception of a different kind of chemistry. Here was a chemical reaction that was questioning all chemical reactions and none got a free ride.

I quickly discovered that almost everything we'd been told about marijuana was a lie - it did not make you insane, sick or crazed for more. It was not physically addicting like tobacco and it did not make you want to go out and kill people. Information was passed among us about how long marijuana had been used by man (four thousand years), how it had been used as medicine and religious sacrament, and how its fiber had been used to make rope, clothing, paper and a wealth of other products.

The only connection I could see between marijuana and harder drugs was the fact that they were both illegal and therefore only available from a criminal underground. The same dealer who sold weed often could sell (and would try, after all, he's in business, too) speed, cocaine, and heroin. None of this was discussed rationally by the public. It was another of those 'because I said so' rules that parents and society impose out of its own need to control people and pro-

tect business, much the same way we were being told about Vietnam - 'Because we are there, we must continue.'

If it seems inappropriate to speak of drugs and their relationship to this war, it must be stated that it was a very real part of the whole story of the people who went to Vietnam - who were inseparable from the music we listened to, the movies we watched, the books we read, the 'slanguage' we spoke, our attitudes toward each other and higher authority, as well as the drugs we took and how we took them. You were affected by drugs, whether you took them or not; being so dependent on other people forced you to be concerned about their personal lives in a way that civilian life seldom requires or allows.

I began to realize also that we'd been lied to by the very system we were being asked to serve. The lies we'd been told about the 'glory' of war and how it makes us better people and a freer country led us into the unwinnable quagmire of Vietnam. So too, the lies about marijuana were leading us into questioning everything else we'd been told about other drugs. Therefore, it became very hard to convince some younger guys that speed, for example, was internally corrosive and caused a real deterioration of physical and mental health. Some guys refused to believe heroin was addicting unless you used a needle, so they'd smoke it or snort it, and be addicted before they realized what happened.

I was lucky. I fell in with a group of guys who had enough experience and respect for the drugs to steer me away from the worst, and into a new realm of enlightening self-awareness. I already had knowledge and experience with alcohol and speed, and the higher quality marijuana available in Vietnam afforded a chance to really assess its effects, which for me, were almost all positive.

And there was no attempt by my new pals to hide or excuse the very real other truths about marijuana, which are well known but which affect people somewhat differently and in varying degrees of severity: It does speed up your heart rate and metabolism, which gives you the 'munchies' (one of those drug terms that have become part of everyday

speech) and the urge to urinate more frequently. It does diminish short-term memory, relaxes your sense of urgency, cools your ambition and tends to flatten out the ups and downs of physical and mental life. In other words, it makes you lazy, slow-witted, short on ambition and prone to over-eating. But so what? Do I or do I not have the right to make my body feel the way I want it to feel? As long as I do my job, obey the law and pay my taxes, why should society care whether I waste my free time smoking dope or going to church, or playing golf or whittling hickory sticks? Just what was freedom and what was slavery? We were supposedly fighting after all for 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.

That word 'cool' took on an important new meaning for me after my 'conversion'. It was now being used to separate those who would turn us in or cause us trouble from those who, whether they 'turn on' to drugs or not, tolerate us and leave us alone. It was impossible not to see people from this point of view. It could make a critical difference between staying free or going to jail, adding a whole new need for character assessment. "Is he cool?" "Yea, he don't smoke, but he's ok."

Marijuana can make you see humor in a lot of things, so that a bunch of laughing pot heads *can* seem like escapees from an asylum. It can also sound like someone who is not party to the joke is being mocked. And I think this is what a lot of people resented - that they were being laughed at. Which wasn't true. If someone truly could not smoke, it was only when they projected a righteous attitude towards us that we lost interest in them. It's the same as a friend who thinks something you do that you find interesting is a betrayal of the bond between you, and a gap opens that spoils the whole friendship. Divisions could be drawn wide and deep in those days - which is why, for example, there developed over time, certain hootches in our company area that were occupied by 'juicers' and others occupied by 'heads' or straights, etc.

Reasons why my memories of people and after-hours events were determined by the kind of drugs used or not used.

I recall coming into the hootch or bunker, to see some guy proudly showing off a new pipe he'd made from copper tubing, hydraulic hoses and fittings. Using war machines to get high was a delight even though smoking out of metal pipes made the smoke taste bad. The point was, it was home made, using materials meant for killing, to pass around a circle of comrades in a spirit much the same as American Natives used the peace pipe as symbol of their brotherhood.

Just what I needed, a new interest to keep me from dwelling on the ever-deepening depression I felt about Joe's death, and the irrevocability of having extended for another tour in Vietnam, which was not fulfilling any of my plans, dreams or schemes the way I had expected. (I was denied R&R, and even that trip home I spoke to my brother about when detailing my reasons for extending my tour) I might have been lucky, but sure wasn't feeling lucky.

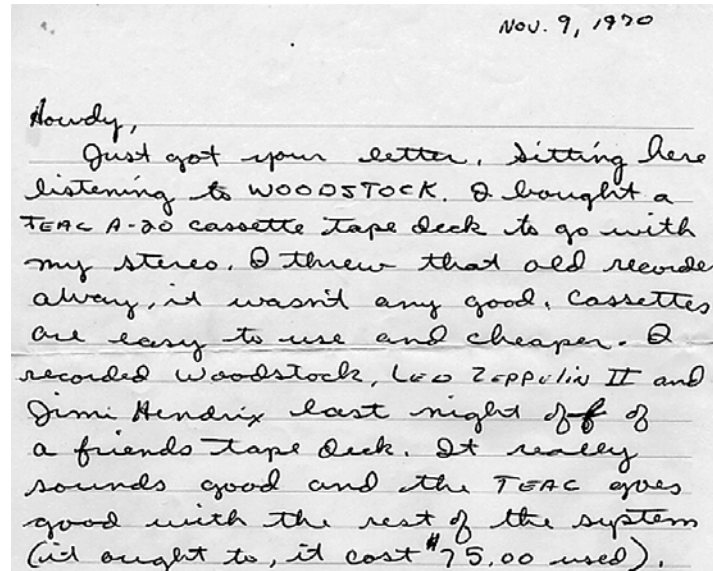
Regardless of the cliché about pot heads being mellow, peace-loving, non-violent pacifists, it did not change my desire (or that of any other crewman I was around) to go out and kill the enemy - as long as that's what the job was really focused on. I very much wanted to go get the guys who got Joe, even if it wasn't the same ones who killed him. Vengeance was added to my list. *Let me at them.*

Though changing on one level, my daily life followed the usual routines. I just felt differently about things, and this new attitude, coupled with my being seen with a different group of people, let the Army, most notably the Platoon Sergeant, know that I now 'belonged' to that group. It didn't make 'them' any fonder of me, even though I still felt like a part of the team.

Blivet stayed in the hanger for nearly five weeks, during which time I only got to fly sporadically and spent a lot of time frustrated over problems in the hangar and excessive military formalities. It seemed like everyone was getting 'hassled' (another drug term) from the top ranks to the lower, and it was all because the war was in flux and we weren't

flying anything but taxi and shopping runs. After our involvement in combat assaults and flood rescue missions, the normal routine 'ash and trash' runs felt pointless and a waste of our time. Understandably I suppose, grumbling about my cannibalized aircraft got me no pity from any side.

So my letter to Elaine November 9th, 1970, was all about my new stereo and the records I was taping.



Nov. 9, 1970

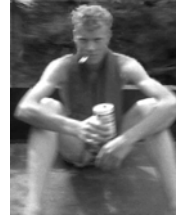
Howdy,

Just got your letter, sitting here listening to WOODSTOCK. I bought a TEAC A-20 cassette tape deck to go with my stereo. I threw that old recorder away, it wasn't any good. Cassettes are easy to use and cheaper. I recorded Woodstock, Led Zeppelin II and Jimi Hendrix last night off of a friends tape deck. It really sounds good and the TEAC goes good with the rest of the system (it ought to, it cost \$75.00 used).

My entry into the hippie world coincided with an explosion of great music, good equipment to play it on and because of our increased time off, time to enjoy it. More than just music, this was the call and response of revolution, set to a four/four beat. It gave me a sense of having crossed over into this territory just in time. And it promised a new world to look forward to when I went home - they were called festivals and they were happening all over the country and the world. It was 'us' and our music and it was fun. And all I needed was to get out of this place and I could be a part of it.

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT?

During these slow times, the company would sometimes have cook-outs with steaks and beer at the beach or in the company area. Occasionally, the Enlisted Men's Club would have bands in to entertain us. Usually Vietnamese, Philippine or Thai bands, who could barely play their instruments, and who 'sang' the lyrics phonetically, often so totally missing the point of both the notes and the words that you were forced to flee after only a few minutes listening.



The song repertoires, Top Forty stuff, mostly, were always filled with the kind of songs that reminded G.I.s of home, their girl or their car; lots of Beach Boys, Beatles (the early 'happy' stuff) and gawdawful kids stuff we used to call 'Bubble Gum' because of its popularity with young teen girls, (the Archies, Tommy Roe, Jackson Five, Donny Osmond, etc.) and old garage band favorites like *TIGHTEN UP* by Archie Bell and The Drells From Houston, Texas; the usual covers of Credence Clearwater Revival; (oh, how I hated how they would torture the song *PROUD MARY*, making me miss my old car and hate the song at the same time) Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Little Richard and of course, Elvis. They'd rip them all off, and tear them all down to a level of screeching incompetence that would send you racing back to the hootch for your records and headphones.

One song that every single band played as a must, which always got a loud sing-a-long response, was the old Animal's hit *We gotta get outta this place*. Even the lifers and the straights would yell along with the chorus of that one: "*We gotta get out of this place...if it's the last thing we ever do!*" The reasons for its popularity should be obvious.

ZILCH

Conversely, the simplest things could entertain us when smoking marijuana, such as a Zilch. You took a plastic dry cleaning bag, (with no dry cleaners for 10,000 miles, I'm

not sure what came wrapped in that plastic film.) tied a knot in it about every three or four inches, then hung it from the ceiling and lit it on fire with your Zippo. Be careful to catch the flaming drops in a dish or lid, otherwise it made a mess on the floor that had to be scraped off. Turn out the lights while it burned, and it created quite an interesting blue flame that danced around the room and the sound it made from the flaming drip, *zheooooom, zheooooom, zheooooom*, was unique and 'spacey'. Minutes of free fun, and a hint of what (they said) it was like to experience an 'acid' (LSD) trip.

Accompanied, as always, by the 'spaciest' music available. Not sing-a-long music or tap your foot tunes, but something that plumbed into the depths of your imagination. I had always wondered what hippies did, just sitting around smoking weed, and now I could understand that it was a combination of the effects of drugs, music and a shared experience with others, as if they had found some 'yellow brick road' that paralleled the main road everyone else was on, and were making their way to Emerald City in a much more colorful and meandering way, unknown to those out on the everyday blacktop highway.

CHAPTER 31 - THE MOST FRIENDLESS GUYS

The most dangerous guys in Vietnam had to be the ones who were consumed with hate and made mistakes while acting too aggressively - either toward the enemy or the military - since, one could get you killed, while the latter could get you jailed or stripped of your rank. Many were unlucky as well; but at least we all shared some measure of bad luck since after all, we were here in Vietnam instead of back home, where it was a constitutional right to shoot back at anyone taking a shot at you, without first asking permission.

But it was quite another thing to be all this way from home, and to be friendless to boot. And the most friendless G.I.s were those poor souls who fell in love with a Vietnamese girl, despite all the warnings, overt and covert, from the military command. The military doesn't mind you whoring around, they prefer that to homosexuality of course; but you are not supposed to fall in love or even see any one girl regularly. There wasn't even a safe, authorized place to spend time together - G.I.s weren't supposed to hang around off Base, nor were Vietnamese supposed to be allowed on Base unless they were working - so it was nearly impossible to safely carry on an affair.

It was automatically assumed that the G.I.'s love was just a boy's infatuation with his first real girl friend. The military liked to remind and warn of the 'substantial prejudice' (their wording) such unions faced back home. So much for our society's racial tolerance. And there was always the suspicion of the girl being a spy for the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army, which was absurd, considering that the guys it usually happened to were so far down the chain of command that they wouldn't have been able to keep track of a bowel movement, much less a troop movement.

To make matters worse, other G.I.s made fun of them, either behind their backs or sometimes even right to their face. Accusing them of being 'pussy whipped' or having a 'ring in their nose'. I remember a guy in our company

area, his girl at his side, trying to hide their affection, lest the Brass see them 'fraternizing'. He was telling someone how much trouble they were having getting permission from the Army to marry (which, if it happened, meant that she could return to the World with him, that much no government agency could stop) and that even her family was opposed to the union, out of what the couple suspected was racial prejudice, mixed with a bit of snobbery because the guy wasn't from a rich family. He was making an effort to learn Vietnamese, but struggled, having never been taught a foreign language back in school. He must love her, I remember thinking, look how much everyone puts him down and yet he persists. Behind his back, he suffered the ultimate insult - "She ain't even pretty..." the guys would whisper to each other "...at least get a good looking one, ferchrissakes." He was the most isolated, friendless guy I saw in Vietnam.

Of course this wasn't new, such prejudice happened to G.I.s stationed in Asia after WWII and Korea. Movie fans saw it dramatized in the Brando movie *SAYONARA*. That nothing had changed was what made it so sad to see. If you brought home a German, French or English wife, only the language would be an issue, regardless of which war we had just fought - acceptance would surely follow. Back home, guys fell in love and got patted on the back for being a 'stud', but Vietnam distorted and distended everything - sex was accepted, but romance took a severe beating and love was strictly off limits.

CHAPTER 32 – ‘UNDERGROUND’ BUNKER

It was one thing to hear talk of protests and war resistance back home, but when I saw it first hand, just a few feet from my bed, I was shocked and awed by the seriousness of some of the guys who had decided not to participate in this war anymore. There was a secret hiding place inside our bunker, a false wall behind some sand bags that appeared to be an otherwise solid pile. It held about two or three men if they crowded and crouched in tightly. (knowledge of which made me realize that I had been ‘accepted’).

One of the ‘heads’ in our company used this hiding place to give shelter to a guy on the run. While he was hiding there, this guy, formerly of the Infantry, told us of other guys, fed up with the war and the Army, and even the U.S. itself, who like him, were just walking away, heading to India or Sweden (Sweden was a haven and sanctuary at the time) through either Cambodia or Laos. And some were supposedly going to cross over into North Vietnam and try to make a deal for their passage by giving the Communists some valuable information. This last I found impossible to believe, and never heard any proof. But the guys who had decided to ‘walk’, I believed - at least in their desire, if not their method. Why? Because they had reason, and no alternative.

Some (most) were draftees who were put into the Infantry companies that saw way too much action, in places too far from Base for far too long. The terror had imprinted itself on their faces - of attacks in the night, outposts overrun, fellow G.I.s ripped apart before their eyes by booby traps; of sapper attacks that left whole platoons gutted by shrapnel, sniper fire that ended conversations in mid-sentence, a guy dead before he could finish his thought.

These guys weren’t going AWOL, they were already listed as missing in action, and their units unaccounted for, never to be heard from again. Some had been put back into the field too many times and weren’t going to face this war

anymore, even if it meant never seeing home again. They just felt that they had no choice. And they weren't necessarily losers, resisters or cowards, but regular guys just like me, who'd seen too much killing and just could not or would not take it anymore. They would have been unrecognizable to their family and friends back home, they were that desperate and damaged.

I always felt sorry for the families of the POWs and MIAs, but these guys were the walking dead, whose corpses kept going, off into the mountains to face even more desperate times, unable to face their own loved ones, for fear of doing damage to them. They couldn't go back and they couldn't go forward, and their poor families could only wait and hope for word, never suspecting for a moment that their sweet, strong little Johnny had just finally got up, put down his gun and walked away from the whole goddamned thing. Not our Johnny, they'd insist, he was tough, he believed in something, he would never... This was one of the real prices of war, but only a silent few ever had to pay it.

We gave the guys money and food, and got 'em stoned, but were secretly glad when they left, since they reminded us of what could happen - to any of us - if that chopper should go down in the wrong area with a broken radio. It was also a 'bust' to have a fugitive in the company area; some lifer would ask too many questions and get too few answers and trouble would happen. Such a bedraggled stranger might get followed and lead them to our bunker. And it was our sanctuary, as well as a way station for the underground. Yet another lesson in the inequities of life - There is always someone who's got it worse, man, always someone living a more desperate drama, enduring worse trauma.

CHAPTER 33 - RIP OFF - WHAT WAS THEIRS AND WHAT WAS OURS

We called them Dinks, Slopes, Gooks, Zipper heads, or New-yen (our bastardized pronunciation of the common Vietnamese name Nguyen). I never got to know them. We were forbidden; we were supposed to consider them our hosts, friends, allies, comrades-in-arms, but they remained strangers - and strange. Small, skinny people who smelled funny, (like nothing I'd ever smelled before) and who spoke a rat-a-tat language in a high-pitched voice that was incomprehensible and unlearnable to us. Their hair was like black spikes thrusting out of their skin. When they motioned with their hand for someone to come this way, it was palm down rather than palm up like us. Weird. They'd squat to piss in the middle of a field, or on a beach with no modesty. They didn't celebrate the same holidays as us, they were Buddhists, mostly, which we didn't understand. The old ones had black teeth from chewing beetle nut and didn't like having their picture taken; the young ones always seemed to be on the hustle, trying to get stuff from us.

They didn't manufacture anything that we wanted. Their houses were of flimsy construction, hardly any structure in the country seemed built to last. Their only products appeared to be rice and children. We saw no evidence of craftsmanship, artistic flair, technological achievement or even the slightest desire to enter the modern world. Maybe in sophisticated Saigon, but not up here in the hinterlands of 'I Corps'. Whatever curiosity I may have had about them was stripped away by their shyness about talking about themselves or their lives. We suspected them of eating dogs - disgusting. They made a sauce from fermented fish heads, called Nuc-Mom that smelled so rank that we never touched their food. We tended to be more interested in what they thought about us than learning about them.

They all seemed to wear those same black 'pajamas' and cone-shaped straw hats. If they expressed an interest in

the U.S., regardless of how motivated by honest human curiosity, we always assumed they wanted to go there to escape the poverty of their own country and live off the fat of our land. We also assumed that when they did ask about the U.S., they could be trying to get information to give to the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong to use against us, or to learn details about us that they could use to weaken us or compromise us strategically. Naïve and paranoid-sounding now, but, then it was just a matter of caution, self-protection and of course, racism, bigotry, prejudice and culture clash. An enemy must be de-humanized, or a good conscience won't allow you to kill them.

We always suspected their motives and laughed at their efforts to be like us (especially, as noted here before, their attempts to make music that sounded like ours). I remember once a G.I. asking a pregnant hootch maid what she wanted a boy or a girl. She said a boy. Why? She was asked, and without hesitating she snapped back "To fight Viet Cong." The assembled G.I.s approved of her answer, but it struck some of us as rehearsed; she knew what we wanted to hear. That's what conversations with the Vietnamese were often like - they knew what was expected of them and they usually kept to the script. And if they didn't do what we expected, we could get very angry about it.

One day, we're returning from a shopping trip to China Beach with quite a few boxes loaded in the back of the truck. The guy sitting in back looks on in horror as a Vietnamese guy, riding on the back of a motorbike, suddenly gets off, reaches in, grabs a stereo box and hops back on the bike before he can be grabbed. By the time our guy yells for the driver to stop, the box disappears into the crowded side streets. Our shocked disbelief turns to anger, even hatred, at this bold thievery.

We discuss whether to stop and tell a white-gloved Vietnamese cop, (called White Mice - the white gloves reportedly hiding dirty-corrupt-hands.) then decide it would be a waste of time, and even dangerous to stop - all these Vietnamese around and us with few, if any weapons. Sons-a-

bitches. Luckily it was just an amp (not mine) and replaceable, but this story gets spread around the company, and worsens an already strained relationship with the locals. How could they do this to us!? We're over here to help them out and they treat us like shit. Like ants at a picnic, it was their field but our blanket and our food.

CHAPTER 34 - FRANKEN-BLIVET

After an agonizing period of rebuilding, Blivet finally came out of the hangar and got me back in the air on a regular basis. And not a minute too soon, as things in the company area were getting oppressive with the Army all the time looking for guys who weren't busy, to put on various details like attending pointless ceremonies and filling sand bags or rebuilding bunkers and revetments. It was good to be back flying in my own ship again, even though Blivet was now a Frankenstein of multi-colored sheet metal with a crazy collection of old, new, used and rebuilt parts.

On top of requiring another learning process for me, it made Blivet one of the least desirable ships in the Black Cat inventory for pilots. Nothing inspires less confidence than an aircraft that has been put back together piece by piece by a succession of mechanics. Flight controls maladjusted, either too loose, or too tight; gauges giving erroneous readings that inspired no confidence, and the whole thing shakes, shudders, rattles, wheezes and whines, making me respect for all time the title 'test pilot'. But I worked hard to stop leaks, tighten here and rewire there so that I could avoid the dreaded Red X, and assure the pilots with some confidence that it was flight worthy. Whether the flights were worthy of *it*, now became the question.

TOUCH & GO – "...ON GLIDE PATH"

Without a doubt, the most supremely boring flying assignments we could ever draw were pilot re-training runs. More of that 'kissing-your-sister' luck - you're flying, but only in the strictest sense of the word. You never left Marble Mountain Air Space, so even the view was the same, unchanging bore. One exercise was called a 'touch and go', where you 'touched' the runway (almost) and then took off again, circling around, coming back and doing it again. Just practice, round and around. No thrill at all, and if it was a

cold day to begin with, the rushing air and the jerking of the helicopter's ascent back up to altitude could make for an altogether unpleasant ride. And unpleasant rides always last too long, just as the opposite was also true.

The other training mission was I.F.R. practice; *Instrument Flight Record*, meaning having the control tower and radar 'talk' or guide you in. At first it's interesting, using instruments and guidance by something other than the Pilot's eyes. It was good to know this could be done, and one foggy night, we actually had to use it to find our way back to the runway. Luckily we caught sight of the lighted tarmac, so that we didn't have to rely on the radar to keep us from crashing into the runway.

Both of these practice exercises left us sitting ducks to any V.C. who wanted to take a pot-shot at us, and there was no way we would have been allowed to fire back, even if we *could* have zeroed in on where the shot came from (a near impossibility anyway). It was 'secure' territory, full of 'friendlies' and as such, there was no firing back allowed.

And at this distance you could see the company area, maybe even see the guys hanging out on top of the bunker or, if it was night, catch the flicker of Zippos lighting up. I was wishing I was there and not in this damned helicopter (with no real role to play in this exercise), taking chances and having my ear filled with... "On glide path". That's what the guy in the tower kept repeating every few seconds, which told the Pilot he was on course. "On glide path...", meaning you're coming in at the right angle, staying on course, at just the right speed. "On glide path" every fifteen seconds or so, interrupted only by the occasional course, altitude or speed correction. Once in a while, the tower guy would throw in "You are...on glide path". It was hard staying awake, but there were still other aircraft to look out for. The monotonous droning became a hypnotic lullaby.

I had only been flying for about eight months, but I couldn't deny the fact that I was getting tired of it. Flying was getting tedious, irritating even, a chore necessary to escape the company area. But I'd learned about as much as I

was going to about this whole business, and the action I still craved seemed like it was never going to happen. I was denied transfer to that other company, the one I'd hoped to join to see more action, because it was being dissolved. The promised trip home didn't happen for reasons of money, and the R&R got put off due to my being 'needed' for the Company's missions. Charlie was just going to 'run out the clock' on me until it was time to go home.

"On Glide Path...". I wanted to hurry back to the hootch, where there's a party going on, or some new face had news of the Revolution. The real war was taking place back home, in the streets and on the campuses, a war not only to stop this war, but a war on young people and freedom itself. Here in Vietnam, some of us were fighting both wars, one we saw during the day and read about in Stars & Stripes or other mainstream papers, and the other war, the young people's war, was fought with information passed strictly by word of mouth, after someone would get a letter from home, or an alternative paper like the Detroit Free Press or the Village Voice.

"Speed up just a little bit... you are now..On glide path". So imprinted on my brain that, for years after, I repeated it whenever I needed reminding that I was on course, even if what I wanted was elusive or obscured by uncertainty. It takes a delicate touch and a lot of concentration, and if you don't know yourself or where you're going, it's really hard to stay.. "On Glide Path".

COMING THROUGH! (HOT, YOU MEAN)

While the missions we flew had not changed that much, my general attitude had, and it extended toward the new pilots that were coming into the company. I considered myself a Crew Chief, not an FNG, but not 'short' either, since I had a lot of time left in-country, and therefore didn't want to get pushed around or led stupidly into unnecessarily dangerous situations.

Some of these new Pilots looked really young and green to me and, since Joe's death, I had gotten grizzled and less concerned about military protocol, having come to the conclusion that being a dead man afforded certain privileges. As the saying went at the time "What are they going to do? Shave my head and send me to Vietnam?" So when a new 'Peter' Pilot asked a question, he was likely to get a terse, non-committal answer instead of an involved explanation that I might have given in the 'old days', or one that might actually answer his concern, not just his question. And if I felt like laughing...

Just before a Pilot pulled the starter trigger to fire up the helicopter's engine, he yelled "Coming Hot!", a warning repeated loudly by the crew, whose job it was to make sure there was no one standing near the ship who could get hurt by a spinning tail rotor blade or a rush of hot flames out of the engine (in the rare event of a hot start). A ritual of warning that said to all within earshot that this beast was about to awaken and only we can control it, so buckle your ass in and shut up or get clear of the area. (Before I got there, I think the call was "Fire in the hole!", which got changed so as not to be confused with something actually being on fire).

One day, some new guy Peter Pilot was getting his first shot at starting the engine, and instead of yelling "Comin' hot", he turned around and said, in a not-loud-enough voice: "Coming through." At which I busted out laughing without even thinking, and then spit out "coming hot", just to emphasize that whatever they taught you at flight school, rookie, this is war, not a restaurant - we come *hot*, not *through*. Always made me wonder if it wasn't just an inside joke by those back at flight school to humiliate the new guys once they reached their duty stations. I remember one of them trying to explain the new term, but it didn't take.

HAMMERHEAD AT THE HAI-VAN PASS

There was no real harm meant by my laughter, and I recall no friction or animosity between myself and any pilot

ever. Whatever protocol was required of an officer, either Warrant or Regular Army, once we were flying, the relationship was professional and mutually respectful. Each crewman knew their job and did it without much need of 'pulling rank' or using threats of any kind. Some Pilots were more formal than others and some could be outright 'cut-ups', like whoever it was that buzzed Red Beach that one time. I got used to their different personalities, and enjoyed some more than others, but I didn't distrust, mistrust or dislike any of them. They were mostly too smart to be too arrogant, knowing how dependent they were on us back in the gun wells.

And there were a few things that Pilots could do to make the day pass more pleasantly, such as play the music while we were flying, and letting us 'kick back' while we were waiting out on the pad for the order to crank 'er up again. Or seeing that we got a decent lunch when possible.

Some pilots were classy, some were smart alecks, while others were grumpy, but most didn't mind being given some good-natured guff. One of my favorites was a Warrant Officer known as the best Pilot in the company by all the crews. Whether the other pilots considered him so, I don't know, but after flying for a while, you learn to tell the difference between a 'stick jockey' and a real pilot. It was part personality, part skill, and a dose of obvious natural-born talent. There was flying and then there was *flying* - some guys performed just good enough, some tried to be as good as they could be, and a very few just seemed to command the whole process, maintaining control of every part of the aircraft, making it smooth and effortless every step of the way. Hovering was steady, ground flight felt like we were on rails, they seemed indifferent to load weight, welcomed wind changes instead of being thrown by them, and always flew straight, ('in trim') never stressing the airframe or the power train. (I hated it when a pilot overshot or over-committed the ship, forcing it to endure too many G - Forces) Confident without being cocky, cool, but never aloof, *He* was the best, and I loved flying with him. And I never called him anything but Mister. Eyes like Clint Eastwood and a cockeyed grin

like Sean Connery, I always figured that if I was ever going to cast one of our pilots in a movie, he'd be the one. And one day, he proved that he was on our side, too.

High on a hill north of DaNang was a place called the Hai Van Pass, an observation post with a view to the south that encompassed all of DaNang, and to the north all the way to Phu Bai. Only one road snaked its way up there, but it could be treacherous, so it was safer and quicker to resupply it by chopper. On this particular day, we fly in with a bunch of non-descript boxes that Gunner and I unload onto the tarmac, as was our SOP, spending no more time near the ground than absolutely necessary, then taking off with our usual haste. Next thing I know, Mister A.C. was having words with someone on the radio. Then he arced back around to return to the little landing zone, saying he'd just gotten an 'earful' and a direct order from some high-ranking asshole who demanded that we come back, land, and move those boxes from one side of the tiny tarmac to the other, closer to the command bunker. I could tell by the way he relayed this message to us that he'd already tried to get out of it and that his cool blood did not like it one bit.

Of course, I was the one who had to do the work, so I yelled out some choice profanity to help relieve my severe urge to grab the M-16 and spray the place. (I never yelled into the mic, respecting our intercom's amplification in someone's ears) But despite the noise and the helmets, you could hear that someone in that helicopter was cursing at top voice. So we land, and drag the boxes over, casting the dirtiest I-hope-looks-can-kill glances at the command bunker, leaving the boxes in the unruliest pile possible.

We take off and I'm fuming so much that I don't notice that the ship is arcing back around yet again, only this time, heading at the LZ with speed - a lot of speed. Quickly becoming clear that he's going to buzz the place! Faster and faster till I thought old Blivet was at her limit, heading straight for the middle of the LZ. A couple of guys who had come out of the bunker to pick up the boxes must have

caught sight of us coming, as they jumped back into the bunker quick as hell.

Then, just as we reached the pad, He pulled back the stick, sending us into a straight-up climb called a Hammer head, which blasted the LZ with our noise and exhaust air, and slammed me into the back of the gun well with a good couple of G's of force. But I was cheering so much I didn't even feel it. "Eat my prop wash pal!! Ha Ha! Take that you ass-wipe lifer motherfucker!" Blasted that place with sound and fury and the smell of burnt JP4 jet fuel; I hope they choked on it.

We zoom straight up until it seems we'll stall out, but just at the precise moment before upward motion stops, He pushes the nose forward, the tail levels out and we continue flying straight and true, as if nothing had happened. That's what I call flying. The Airmobile version of the 'finger'! I think, maybe I caught a wee smile on his face. A major victory in a minor skirmish in my war in Vietnam. Sticking up for your crew and showing the Army how we feel, all in one glorious gesture. Thanks Mister. Another of those things that you won't find in the official Army record.

CHAPTER 35 - DROP THAT ASSHOLE! - THE RE- VENGE OF AUTO-ROTATION

A Huey helicopter was capable of landing without power, through a technique called auto-rotation. If the engine shut off, and if you were at a high enough altitude, you could position the pitch of the rotor blades to use the up-rushing air (as the ship went down, the air rushes up) to keep the blades spinning - much like a windmill or a whirligig spins when facing the wind. With careful and well-timed reintroduction of pitch, that momentum could be used to slow the descent of the aircraft, and if done right, would allow the ship to land safely with no power from the engine. This was a skill technique that required some practice, but I only remember one time when it was done with me in the ship, and that time it was purely for the sake of malicious mischief.

An American of some rank had been abusive to us one day, and the A.C. took offense at the way his bunch was treating us. It was an American Military Advisor, (who were arrogant fucks to begin with) an ARVN officer, and some Vietnamese civilian, whom they were both trying to impress (or coerce or convince). They wanted us to salute the ARVN officer each time he got back to the ship; we resented having to salute anybody, much less an ARVN, and saluting was a dead giveaway that the person you were carrying was 'important', which made you an even juicier target for some opportunistic sniper.

Somehow, the A.C. let it be known to us crew members that a 'drop' was going to occur - but he couldn't say exactly when. So when it came, it was actually a surprise to me. Flying along and suddenly - down we drop! And at the same time the engine quiets - even I believed it! The three passengers' eyeballs popped out with fear, gripping their seats and looking around frantically. Once we stop falling, one of them reaches up to ask the pilot what happened and I tapped him on the shoulder. "Temporary power loss, it's OK

now”, I said. He wasn’t satisfied until the A.C. gave him the thumbs up - “temporary power loss, nothing to worry about now.” I then busied myself rearranging items in my back shelf to keep from showing my smile, which would have been a dead giveaway.

The American Officer seethed the rest of the time he was with us, but I think the Vietnamese Officer got the joke. At the last-drop off of the day, I gave them my crispest, most proper military salute of the day, then checked the seats for brown spots.

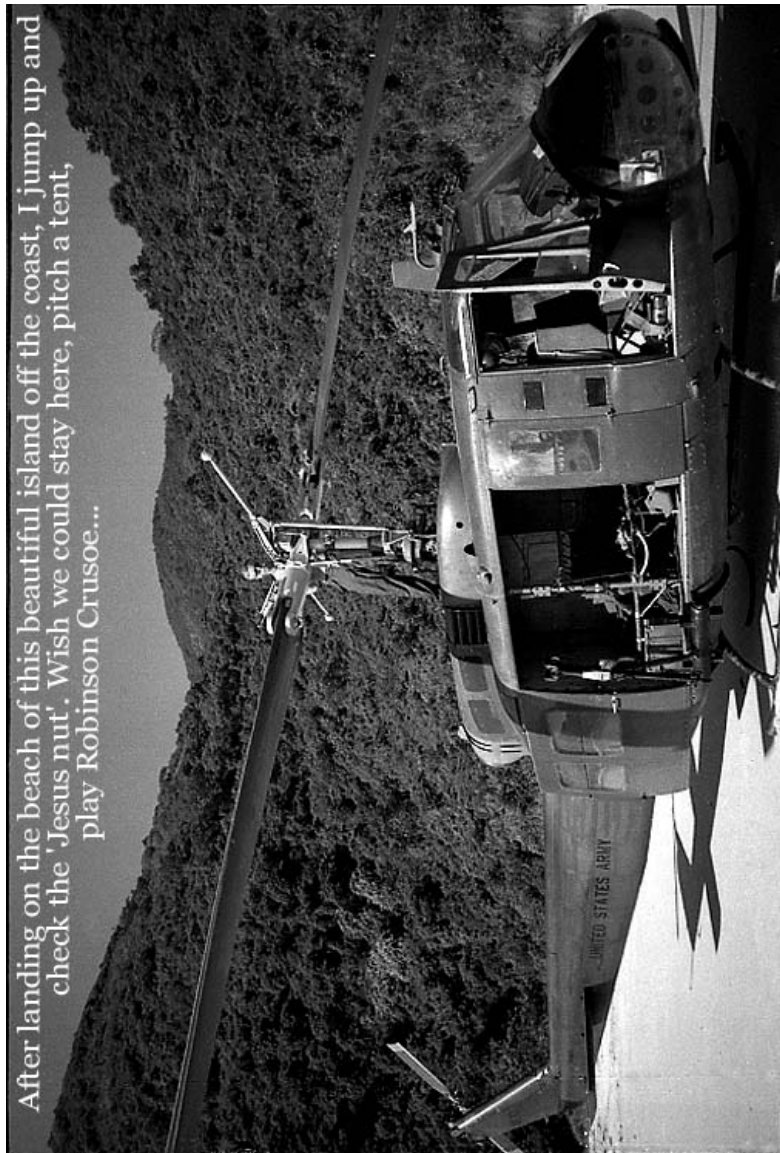
CHAPTER 36 - HIPPIE LRRPS

Because our Battalion and our Company worked mostly with ARVNs, it was rare for us to work with U.S. Army Infantry units. Most American units in 'I Corps' where we operated were Marines, Air Force and a bit of Navy (who mostly kept to ship or shore areas.) So when I saw my first veteran LRRP (*Long Range Recon Patrol*) unit, I was awed and very impressed. I know it was up around Dong Ha, sometime in late 1970, a time of transition that saw our people being replaced by ARVNs.

This was the 'best' dressed Army unit (seven to eight guys) I had ever seen - their faded uniforms a mockery of uniformity with Peace symbols, car product decals (*STP*) talisman patches (*yin and yang*) shark tooth necklaces, a shriveled human ear, (I swear) and all manner of adornment and personal statement covering them and their equipment. But at the same time, it was obvious they weren't to be trifled with, even by the Brass. They had a quiet reserve, an unforced cool and a unity that you felt as much as saw. They weren't big and muscular, but average-sized and lean; not pretty, but far from ugly. From the ground-in dirt and the wear marks on everything they carried, I could tell they had been in the field a long time. And by the looks on their faces I could see that they had been deep into the core of the war. They must have thought I was seeing soldiers for the first time, as I stood there, my mouth agape, my eyes wide, smiling stupidly at them. They had survived what must have been the most grueling, and terrifying test a war can provide.

I remember thinking at the time "Now this is what 'freedom fighters' are supposed to look like" - part Indian scout, part Minutemen, part hippie dragon-slayer. Forget Armies, send these guys in with orders to cut off the head, then sit back and wait for the snake to twitch madly on its way to certain death. Yet another realization occurs to me at the sight of this small band of warriors without parallel: our

war in this part of the country is nearly over. These guys are being brought in for good, going home, or to some other war, but this one is being turned over to the Vietnamese, for better or for worse. This show is just about over. Or so it seemed



CHAPTER 37 - MACHINE GUN DAYS, SHOTGUN NIGHTS

After a typical day, as the Gunner heads to the gun room and the Pilots head for their side of the tracks, I hurry to get Blivet secured, the particle separator cleaned, the daily maintenance done, then hit the showers. (8 to 5 chance of it being warm). Get something to eat, read the mail if there is any, and see if there's anyone around smoking something.

I had discovered an easy way of getting marijuana, which had been around for a while, but I'd never been hip to before. The Vietnamese loved our menthol cigarettes, their tobacco was the strong French-type that stinks to our noses, so cartons of Salem became the favorite currency for trading anything. And it was something the Vietnamese were allowed to take off base, whereas M.P.C. or other gifts were viewed suspiciously. (they also coveted oscillating fans, but they were harder to carry off Base)

These 'ten packs' were loosely rolled joints of low quality, made worse by the fact that the Vietnamese (who didn't smoke marijuana, and who were hit with stiff penalties if caught) didn't clean out the stems and seeds very well. So they'd go snap, crackle and pop when you smoked them. And all you had to do to 'score' five of these ten packs was leave a carton of Salems on your pillow in the morning. The Brass figured it as a 'tip', which it may have started out to be, but that was a lot of tips! And you only bought these joints to send back home or to carry around during the day (if they got wet - just pitch 'em out) or when good stuff wasn't available for some reason.

It was good that once the Mama-sans got their work I.D. cards, they were allowed to come on Base without being closely searched, otherwise they would have never been able to get the stuff to us. (Americans always believe that, once in place, their security measures 'send a message' to the bad guys warning them to avoid attempting anything, when in

fact, it lulls *us* into complacency that makes those very security measures an easy wall to leap over).

And the price of a carton of Salem? \$1.80. Boy without all them taxes, tobacco is a good bargain! No wonder I signed on to stay an extra six months. Mama-san (we never knew their names) could also bring in other things, but I was only into marijuana at that time. And I didn't know where the good 'Cambodian Red' came from, only that, when it was offered, you snatched it up. Some guys knew how the drug business worked back home and applied their knowledge to the current situation.

THE BIG SCORE

One of the boldest 'missions' I ever witnessed was pulled off by a guy in my hootch who had helped me learn 'smoking etiquette' (the first guy to say "Don't *Bogart* that joint, man" when I'd held it too long) and weed safety (careful when you drink, they multiply each others' effects). I'd never before met anyone who was tough *and* smart, and not afraid to be either. A cunning guy, he was always trying to 'get over'; talkative but still cool, and able to make friends with a broad range of guys regardless of race or background. The kind of guy you want on your side, come the revolution; the guy whose smile would be seen during the peak of the battle, whether that battle be a bar fight, a political debate, or just a discussion of how best to get stick time out of a Pilot. He might have been dubbed an anti-hero, but for the fact that he would never waste his effort on a 'lost cause' or a challenge for-its-own-sake. His actions were reasonable, and he had good reason for his actions. Like when he boldly took off and came back after a few days with a duffel bag full of dope.

Somehow he got permission to go 'visit' a relative in another area of I Corps - he could tell plausible stories like that and get away with it. He told me before he left that he was going to a place in the mountains with 'Papa San,' some old Vietnamese drug dealer he'd been scoring weed from.

He wanted to make a bigger-than-usual haul directly from Papa-san's supplier, an audacious plan, and it caused me to fear for the guy - a million things could go wrong, he could be captured, ripped-off, or caught by the Army even before he made 'the buy', simply because he was in an area that was off-limits. He gave me a box of something before he left which I was to see that his family got, in case he didn't return - which made the whole thing seem more dramatic, and proved that he understood just *how* risky it was.

Luckily, I never found out what was in the box, because in a couple of days he returned, unshaven and a little wild-eyed from dope sampling and lack of sleep - but all in one piece just the same. And with his duffel bag full of dope. I was one of the very few he showed the haul to, and it was impressive: several pounds of high quality Cambodian grass, a block of black opium the size of a loaf of bread, and a dinner-plate sized, one inch thick layer of white heroin on top. If I hadn't seen it for myself I wouldn't have believed it - nor would I have believed his outrageous recounting of the journey.

He and Papa-san traveled by jeep quite a ways into the mountains. The score, itself was as nerve-wracking as any dope deal, (like I knew) only more so, because of the language barrier, the quantity involved and the amount of money (Greenbacks, I think) he had to turn over. But the most fun he had in telling the tale came when he told me how he got back to Marble Mountain. He hitched a ride on a General's plane! He still couldn't believe it himself. At an airstrip near Quang-Tri, he had casually approached the small jet, asking where they were headed, and when he heard DaNang, asked if there was room for one more, giving them a story about going on R & R in China Beach or something. "Sure, soldier..." the General was magnanimous, and not surprisingly, didn't ask to see travel orders - there was no reason to be suspicious of this all-American-looking boy with his duffel bag, "...we can help".

During the flight, he chatted with the General and even dozed off for a bit. All the while that duffel bag full of a

twenty-five-year jail term was sitting right *there*. The General had no idea. (and I guess the weed must not have smelled too much). Whew, that was courage, that was cool. Find a way to recruit and motivate guys like him and you could win any war, anywhere, anytime.

Later I found out why he wanted to make such a big score: he bought some big stereo speakers and packed some of the dope in them to ship back home. (mostly the heroin, since it couldn't be easily sniffed out by dogs and it had a higher profit margin). One day, he had the back of the speakers removed, the guts splayed out all over the place, and some young Officer came into our end of the hootch looking for some guy. The Officer looked at the situation, saw my buddy calmly shaking his head no, "He ain't here," then quickly backed out the door. The speaker-stuffing continued as if nothing had happened.

He was why I felt increasingly bold about sending stuff back. Packed powder-fine marijuana into a cardboard pipe cleaner package so that it resembled a thick letter, and I think most of what I sent made it through. But I didn't send that much really, and nothing like a gutted-speaker-full. I never did hear if he got all the stuff through. But I don't doubt that he did, he was good at it, and he was another one of those guys who had 'the luck'. Always wanted to hear what happened to the guy, his haul, and whether those speakers ever worked again. There's a chapter I'd like to see written and added to the big book. This guy could tell some tales, I bet. But he never did. Maybe he did in prison, where of course, no one would have believed him.

But for that bit of excitement, for which I had to keep quiet about, it's back to the routine that night. Go 'up top' and listen to the latest - someone got news from home about police busting up a demonstration or some other new battle in their war on our revolution. Stories of 'this' war seem inappropriate, so I listen rather than relate to anyone what I heard or did that day. There's new music to listen to, new bullshit to complain about - the Army, the job, the food, the heat, the sand, the rain or Mama-san's laziness.

Go down to the bed, shake the sand off the blanket and hope it hasn't sifted all the way down to the sheets. Doze off thinking how weird it is to be in a war that has so many fronts, and allows us so few victories. We were part-time soldiers by day, full time revolutionaries by night. I'm a warrior at breakfast, and a hippie at supertime. But when do we get to be heroes? There didn't seem to be an answer to that question. We were, in a phrase often repeated at the time, the 'unwilling doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful'.

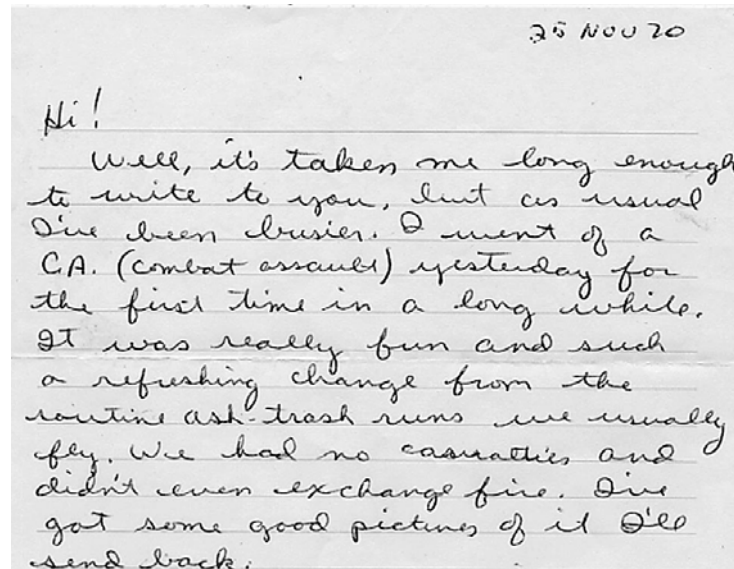
'DUST-OFF'

The only real heroics I knew of were performed by those un-armed ships with the Medevac star on them that picked up the injured. And the heroes were those medics who bandaged the wounds and administered first aid, as their Pilots sped their ships to the hospital. They were called 'Dust-off' helicopters for some reason - more of that Vietnam gallows humor, I guess. I know for sure that I didn't want the job, and although we never refused it, we never went looking for it, either. Guys like Joe died in those ships, which could be ambulance one minute and hearse the next, as a guy's wounds would all too quickly overwhelm his right to life, and the efforts of the medics to save him.

I remember once a call going out for Dust-off that we responded to, but were beaten to the job by none other than General Lam himself, who was supposed to have better things to do. But it was right on their way and the word we got was the General "would be proud to pick up the wounded soldier". This got a chuckle out of our whole crew, as we cynically assumed the General was out to prove something to someone, if not just himself. He probably figured it a chance to be a hero. I'd love to hear his account of this great rescue operation; probably gave himself a medal for his bravery in the line of fire. Of course the only fire he encountered was probably from someone burning shit near the L.Z. where they picked up the wounded guy. Such is war.

PICTURES FROM A COMBAT ASSAULT

And it was good to go on an operation where Dust-off wasn't needed, like the C.A. of November 24th, 1970.



Our first Combat Assault in a long time, and 'fun' to get into some action. One of those days when preparation was anything but routine - every job was important, every check was double checked - chicken straps, body armor, ammo belts, extra clips of M-16 ammo, smoke grenades, film in the camera - nothing escaped the eye of those preparing to die. And I had to think that way - this could be it - make sure that if it does happen, it isn't because I forgot something or left something back at the Cat house. Still eager for action and willing to do the job with gusto.

The pictures were taken with a thirty-five millimeter Konica C-35 that I'd bought at the China Beach P.X., a step up in sophistication from the little Kodak it replaced. (After a lifetime of making fun of things made in Japan, we had come full circle and were now respecting and demanding the kind of innovative designs and high quality of Japanese goods)

Because of its compact size, slightly bigger than a pack of cigarettes, the Rangefinder fit perfectly into a homemade shelf on the back wall of my gun well. (picture a metal spice rack riveted together in shop class). So it was almost always handy and it worked great, despite the vibration of the ship which caused a scarring on its bottom edge where it rested on the sheet metal shelf.

And by this time I no longer hesitated to point and shoot at will, since the Army seemed to be uninterested in censoring our letters or our pictures. As with so many situations from the past, I wish I had been a better photographer and had taken more pictures.

The upper left picture shows the ship stripped down and ready for battle. On the way to the pick up zone, I lean out and snap a shot of the other ships. You can tell we're on the way to the pick up point, since our M-60s are in the 'parked' position:



In the lower left, the ARVN infantrymen are loaded onto our choppers. The lower right shot shows the ARVNs all dressed up and loaded down with equipment that was meant for a much larger size of people - us.

One detail this picture reminds me about is that, because of the language barrier, the younger ARVNs, being new to the process, didn't realize that once on the ship, three of them faced out one door, and the other three faced out the other door - for faster unloading. Sometimes you could motion them around, sometimes, a senior ARVN would explain, but because you didn't want to have to juggle them around once we took off, it became necessary sometimes to physically grab their shoulders and point them in the other direction, which felt like being a schoolteacher on a field trip trying to line up a bunch of five-year-olds.

This little group of shots of a C.A. leaves out the one crucial part that we couldn't see - the actual fighting. We dropped them off and pretty much forgot about their fate; it's their country, it's their war, let them fight it. "I'm going home by helicopter." We flew away, either for another load, or back to Base, leaving those poor suckers out in the field where who-knew what fate befell them. We seldom heard back about these operations, and even if we did, guys like me paid no attention, preferring to recreate myself or keep up the maintenance routine that would ensure I'd be able to fly if we got to go out there and do it again tomorrow.

Continuing on in that letter of 25 November, with the CA successfully accomplished, I hurry back to my care package from Elaine, the cup cakes and some of the latest records to tape; so much to do! And 'dew' to do...Funny, Elaine and I didn't seem to discuss this transition of mine from one Bud (the beer) to the other 'bud' (marijuana), but it must have been a parallel change that seemed so natural that we didn't even have to explain it to each other. Or maybe it was a case of two great minds running on the same track. Or, blame it on the music, that's what the old folks did at the time.

The care package was just great as usual. We recorded all the records and I'm sending them back because I know how you love them. The baked goods were fantastic, especially those cupcakes. Everything was just great.

Do you had some good grass, huh? Well just wait till I get home; I'm ~~bringing~~ bringing some "Vid Nam Dew" as we call it. It will definitely kick your ass. The Panama Red stuff

you had is actually supposed to be better than U.N. grass, but I don't agree. This shit is heavy; I'll prove when I get home. Oh, by the way, if you get a package with a return address you've never heard of and it's from here, open it in private. I may send some home, I don't know. I have to be real careful, it's ~~so~~ dangerous in the mail, but I'll have some when I come home for sure!

Well must go for now,
write soon,

Love

Tom

Look at that date, November 25th. Forgot to wish her a Happy Thanksgiving. Must have spaced out. Calendar dates seldom entered our mind, the days ran together when we were flying day after day, except the count of days till time to go home. The fact that it was Thanksgiving probably only sunk in because it was a day off and the chow was better. Well, most people got the day off, anyway...

CHAPTER 38 - THANKSGIVING, 1970 - EVEN WHEN WE TRIED TO DO GOOD

Growing up, I had never really liked Thanksgiving that much. The food was good, but it took all day to get it. And too often we'd have to travel long distances to be with relatives who pinched your cheeks and talked only about how you'd grown, and about other relatives who you didn't know. Always had to get dressed up, threatened about our behavior and bored to death. Then I learned to drive and had to use my car to pick up Grandma, or something from the market which we just could not do without. I didn't get into football, I still don't like cranberries and still am not sure what mincemeat is. Never really my favorite way to spend a day off of school or work. Thanksgiving 1970 wasn't even a day off for me.

Instead of being able to rest and catch my breath that Thanksgiving morning, I was assigned to go with a few other guys in some pick-ups to a local orphanage. Someone had gotten the idea to bring a bunch of orphans back to the company area to share our dinner with them. The orphanage was somewhere not far from Marble Mountain, north of China Beach, I think, and was run by some Catholic Nuns.

In a building that might once have been a school or a hospital, there was a long dormitory room with one bed after another. The place was clean, but well-worn and so very plain, every penny probably going just for the care of the children. And every bit of effort from the Nuns was needed to keep up with all the work, leaving nothing to make the place look like a home - no art, no mementos, hardly any toys, none of the clutter that surrounds the activity of children. In bed after bed, face after face stared at us - some in awe, some happy for the break of the boredom, and some just sitting there staring, unable to respond. There must have been some children there with American G.I. fathers, but I don't recall noticing the color or shape of their eyes, it was what was behind the eyes that I saw - that look that only kids

and dogs can give you, the one that breaks your heart. The one that pleads, please take me with you. I'll be good, I promise. Just let me go. Did I do something wrong? Why am I being held here?

And then there were the flies. The children were clean, but still flies buzzed around the room, and landed on the children's heads. Can't they swat them away? I thought. Can't they afford screens to keep them out? The damn flies would collect on the corners of the eyes and mouths of the crying or the slobbering, and they wouldn't or couldn't swat them away. The Nuns obviously were kept hands-full getting those chosen ready for the ride back with us, and probably had no time to keep the little ones from being swarmed over. No one there to watch them every minute.

We loaded up a bunch of them, ranging in age from around six months up to eight or nine years old, it was hard to tell the age of the older children, given their hard lives. Some of the children cried as we left the orphanage, but they soon settled, and some of the older ones took to us and our trucks as to any adventure. Back in the company area, each orphan suddenly had a bunch of uncles who carried them around the place, bounced them on their knees and let them romp over strange machines, all the time chattering away in a language few of the kids had ever heard.

Some of the guys, especially the ones who had siblings or children of their own, took right to the kids and knew how to entertain them, and those kids probably got hugged and kissed more that day than they had ever been before. Or ever would again. Some guys wanted no part of this, they got their food and split back to the hootch to sleep, write letters or watch the Big game on TV. Some guys just had no interest and no skill with kids. I envied them, and wished I didn't have to go through this either, for a lot of reasons; not the least of which, it reminded me of how much I missed my own brothers and sisters. But there was no choice, and no one to hear my complaints.



Then the big feast, but most of the children didn't chow down the way we expected. Our food must have tasted funny, there was too much of it, and too much variety for their little excited stomachs to handle. It probably wasn't food they were hungry for anyway. As I'm sitting down at the table specially prepared for this day, I couldn't help thinking that it was just like so many Thanksgivings in my past - sitting at the 'kids' table, taking care of my younger siblings, so that the adults could feel special - they never stopped reminding us kids how 'thankful' we all should be. I'd joined the Army to get away from all that, and look at me, got a kid on my lap and mashed potatoes in the eye. What a joke life can play on you. At the end of the meal, the kids get loaded back in the truck and, despite trying to weasel out of it, I get to take them back to the orphanage. "You're good with kids, Lawless" probably the only positive thing Sarge ever said to me.

Yea, what choice did I ever have? At twelve years old, I'm put onto a Greyhound Bus in Lexington, Kentucky with my two younger brothers, bound for Columbus, Ohio. Imagine what's on that bus in 1963 Kentucky. "Take care of your brothers," they said. Okay, but who takes care of me? Only an idiot would have harmed three little white boys, and the bus driver kept his eye on us, but whose shoulder do I cry on? Who's going to say, "It's okay, Tony. It's okay." Next thing I know, each of my parents have babies and I'm fourteen and going through changes. I need help, but I'm told, "take care of your sister". So I do, what choice do I have?

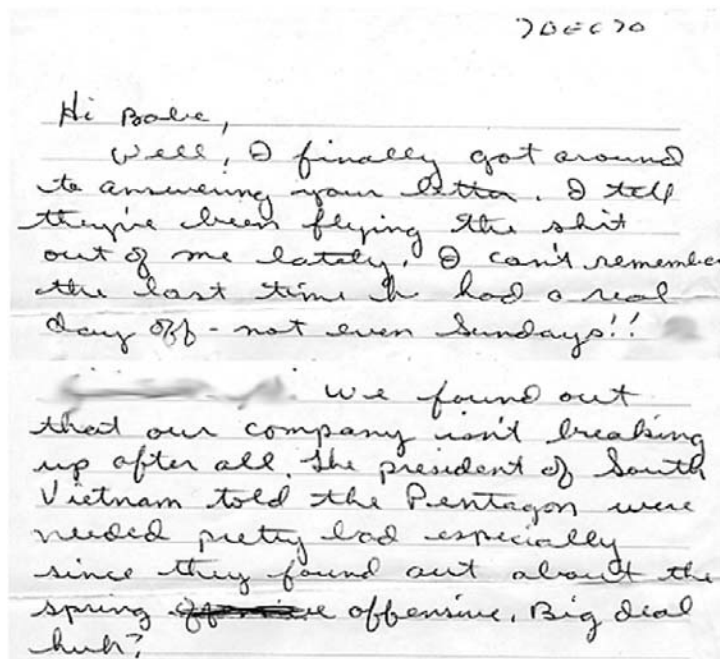
And as all children of divorce do, I'm going from one household to another and back again. Never feeling at home anywhere, because now, new families are the priorities. I know what it's like to be taken out of one box and put into another. Then put back. I joined the Army to be a man among men, but I'm now nineteen years old, and here I am, still being a child among children, doing to them what was done to me - lifted out and shown another life, then put right back into the box. No explanation, just a peak, a tease, then it's gone. It's over. Be thankful, they say, be thankful.

Most of the guys who played and ate with those children that day probably have fond memories of it and feel that on that day, something good was done. Can't blame them. They didn't know, perhaps, about the life of an orphan, what it's like to live in a plain box. They probably didn't think about the fact that back home, our dogs ate better than these children. It probably didn't occur to the organizers of the Day or to the rest of the G.I.'s to go down to the orphanage and pitch in, put screens on the windows, give the orphans something real, tangible, usable that would really improve their quality of life for a long time. So little from our bounty would have meant so much toward their need. But instead, we only use them to remind us of how much we have and how thankful we should be for it. Just like we set up Thanksgiving dinner for the poor people outside churches and shelters back home, so that the Day has meaning for us.

Yea, a lot of good feeling, as long as you weren't the one that had to put the orphans back in their box. That box swarming with flies.

CHAPTER 39 - XMAS PAST AND CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

But you learned to shake those things off, life kept going ever on, like it or not. There was a helicopter out there that needed maintenance, letters need to be written, and Christmas gifts need to be ordered from PACEX mail order catalog, or picked up at the China Beach PX.

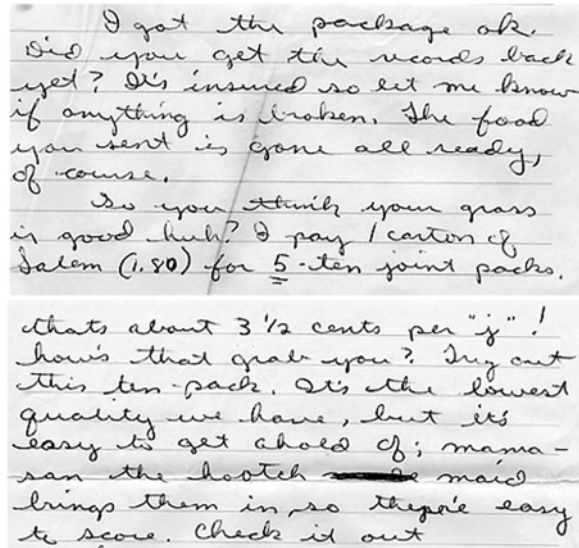


Hi Paule,
Well, I finally got around to answering your letter. I tell they've been flying the shit out of me lately. I can't remember the last time I had a real day off - not even Sundays!!
We found out that our company isn't breaking up after all. The president of South Vietnam told the Pentagon we were needed pretty bad especially since they found out about the spring ~~offense~~ offensive. Big deal huh?

And don't get all 'bummed out' about spending your first Christmas away from home. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how much they make it worse by constantly reminding you that it's Christmas. If I could just stay flying, keep busy, (like I have been for what seems like forever) and if they'd just quit playing carols on the radio and quit decorating the place, then I could feel less homesick and sad.

"The more they tried to make it like home, the farther from home we felt" - APOCALYPSE NOW.

I told my Dad to go ahead and spend some of that money in my savings account on the family's Christmas. What does a dead man need with money sitting in the bank, might as well somebody has a nice Christmas this year. I sure ain't.



I got the package ok.
Did you get the records back yet? It's insured so let me know if anything is broken. The food you sent is gone all ready, of course.
Do you think your grass is good huh? I pay 1 carton of Salem (1.80) for 5-ten joint packs.
That's about 3 1/2 cents per "j"! how's that grab you? Buy out this ten-pack. It's the lowest quality we have, but it's easy to get ahold of; mama-san the bootch ~~is~~ maid brings them in, so there's easy to score. Check it out

Christmas had never been that spiritual a time in our family, (unless you count the spirits that came out of a bottle) and I had come to dread the let down that always came after all that build-up. Only remember two gifts I ever got for Christmas. The first was when I was nine, my Dad built me a go-kart. The most perfect gift a boy could get in those days, better than a pony. If only there had been a track to race it on, instead of a short driveway that soon became off limits to the noisy thing. If only Dad could have had time to take me to a track, and if only they hadn't divorced and forced me to leave it, along with all the other things I'd come to love about my childhood, in my hometown.

By the time I was fourteen, I had met Elaine and our long correspondence had begun by talking about the Beatles and other music, as well as school, pep rallies, grades, and me bemoaning the fact that I didn't have any records or stereo to play them on...

Dec. 14, 1964

Dear Shirley and Elaine,
I got your letter today. I
was really glad to hear from you.
Guess what I will get to come up
on the day after Christmas. Oh,
we'll have a real blast! (I hope)
I wrote Daddy and told him I was
coming up. I guess he didn't tell you
guys about it.
I may just take her up on
that sex-pal. (Even though she lives
in D.C. fine territory). I hope she
likes all the to stars. She's a
triangle if she doesn't. (A triangle
is a square \square with something
missing Δ . What?). Did you see
the Beatles in their Saturday night
show? Boy what a mid-century
night dream was absolutely **FAB**
I don't know if you heard the
5 (and more) **BEATLES** records? I
like "That Rock n' Roll music". Of course
I love all of them. I feel fine in
No. 9 down here (and still climbing)

No stereo, but the year before, my brothers and I had gotten portable transistor radios for Christmas, with a little 'earphone' (mono, not stereo) included. They were cheap because the transistor had dropped in price a few years before from 3 dollars each to 3 cents each, because the U.S.

government had ordered millions of them for the ballistic missile program. That radio was my connection to the outside world, where music was changing, and changing the world of my generation. At that time in little cities like Lexington and Columbus, TV only got two channels, and were strictly controlled by the parents - and no Saturday morning cartoons for us either, that was house-cleaning day.

At night, I'd hide my transistor under the covers, and listen on the earplug while a local DJ on WAKY-AM ('wacky' radio) spun the latest from whoever was hot at the time. I was a Beach Boys fan long before the Beatles hit the charts and bit me. Music I still love today.

from 8th last week. I sort know where she's "a woman" is on our survey. The D.C. Fire are going to be on 2nd Wednesday. I am not sure what's ~~Friday~~ here. I will find out before long. The Honeycombs have the Pick of the week with their new one.

I got my report card a long time ago. Here is the way it went:

math C	Physical Education C
science A	English A
French B	History B

It was pretty good but Hey! #1 song is "Mountain of Love" anyway - I could do better. The first 2 weeks of school, I was president of my American Math Class. Boy that room was a M-F-S-S, the next time they elected a girl.

We have played 4 basketball games, we lost our first one and won the next two ~~but next one~~ some real cute cheerleaders. ~~too~~

I ninth graders 4 eighth graders and 17th

"Boys" No. 15 Norway

grades (and also a D.O.I.) before we celebrated our second, we had a wild Dip Rally. Boy we raised the roof then.

Oh, who sings "It's a woman?" I'm glad Ringo's out of the hospital & hope it didn't change his voice too much.

It snowed about 2 weeks ago and it hasn't snowed yet since then. By Ho-sh we better have a white Christmas.

I guess you can't decide whether you like ~~to~~ Thomas Antoine George that middle name is French for Anthony or Tony, so from now on call him Tony just for kicks, but nah. I hope I'm not like him. You say he's a creep, but you go bowling, skating etc. with him. You're all goofed up you dip.

I'm glad you got your stereo back & know I'd die if she took my radio away from me. I don't

have a stereo or a walkable record player or either, only real swinging records so I have to settle for the radio. Billy Joel is our Best D.T. I listen to him every night that I can.

Bye Bye,
Till Christmas

M E

Anthony Harold Lawless II.

“I’d die if she (my mother) took my radio.” My mother - our war had been going on for quite a while.

That’s why my second greatest gift, and the Christmas of 1964, was such a shock and so memorable. I think my Stepfather’s parents (Grandma Annie, again) had a hand in it, understanding that this new music was a tide that wouldn’t be turned, a trend that couldn’t be bucked - might as well try to contain it, control it by compromising. (Even though they never stopped declaring, by god, that this new fad - Beatle music - would be over in a year.) It was a total surprise that Christmas morning: a stereo!

A fold-out record changer with two swing-out, detachable speakers, the latest thing in portable music machines. It even came with a Beatles record, albeit one of those ‘interview’ things and not a full-fledged album like I would have preferred. But hey, to their credit, rather than warn us away from music they considered dangerous or radical (The Rolling Stones were considered devil music - that was the *Blues* already!) they just cautioned us to not waste our money buying singles, but to save up for the album, it’s a better deal. A whole new reason to hope the parents went out together of an evening, so we could play records - loud. I started working more, selling *Grit*, a weekly national newspaper, door to door, mowing lawns and babysitting to pay for a habit - buying music - that I still suffer from to this day. A great gift indeed, but one I attribute more to the times than to the time of year.

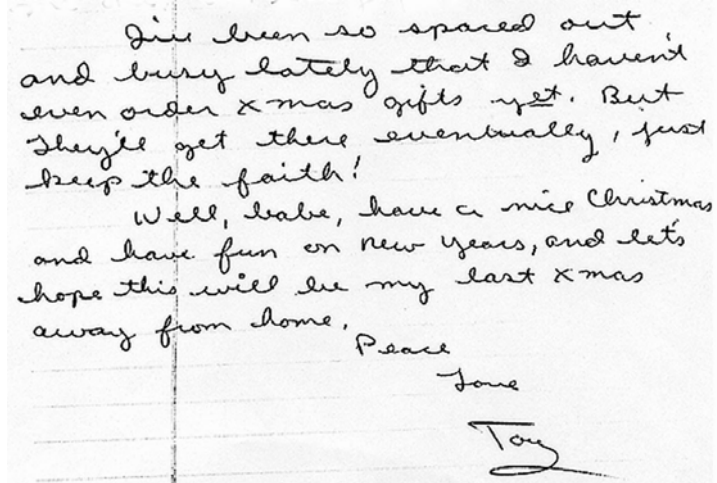
Christmas didn’t mean as much to me then as did New Years. Where Christmas meant being bored by family, New Years at that time meant that Elaine and I could stay up late while the parents were out. We listened to the top 100 countdown on the radio, played cards or Monopoly, drank Cokes, and whatever booze or beer we’d managed to hide away - and talked. Wishing we could be ‘out there’ like adults, instead of ‘in here’ like kids. But at least with each other, we could talk and know that there was someone who listened, and understood. I feel sorry for any kid who didn’t have a friend like Elaine.

21 DEC 70

Howdy,

Got your letter yesterday and I'm just now getting around to answering it. I hope you enjoyed the J's. Like I said they're not the best, but they're convenient. You may have to roll them a little tighter in order to make them smoke better. Let me know how you like them, and I'll send more later. Just before I come home on leave (which isn't too far away) I'm sending a small box full of the best stuff I can get. So if you get a box resembling it, just put it in some kind of metal box (airtight, so dogs can't smell it) and hide it, (outside of the house; like in the back yard, under the porch etc, just so you don't get hunted), then I'll really turn you on when I get home. I'll get you stoned like you've never been stoned before!! It'll be really good grass,

Six years after that first letter, and Elaine and I have a whole new pastime to discuss (weed), on top of the music, which is still an important part of our lives. My last letter of 1970, and I'm wishing Elaine a nice Christmas, but a fun New Years, hoping this will be my last one away from home.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "I've been so spaced out and busy lately that I haven't even ordered X-mas gifts yet. But they'll get there eventually, just keep the faith! Well, babe, have a nice Christmas and have fun on New Year's, and let's hope this will be my last X-mas away from home. Peace Love Tony". The signature "Tony" is written in a stylized, cursive font at the bottom right.

I've been so spaced out and busy lately that I haven't even ordered X-mas gifts yet. But they'll get there eventually, just keep the faith!
Well, babe, have a nice Christmas and have fun on New Year's, and let's hope this will be my last X-mas away from home.
Peace
Love
Tony

According to my flight record, the last time I had to fly was December twenty-second, meaning I got some 'time off' for Christmas, which was spent in the hangar repairing that albatross of a helicopter I was charged with keeping aloft.

The big news around the hootch at that time was that the China Beach PX had a new stock of stereo equipment that was the best anyone had ever seen. But I already have a stereo, I said, it's compact and easy to pack, what would I do with bigger, better stuff - and you're talking about some big money here. So a quick trip to China Beach was undertaken and the rumors were true: big powerful equipment by Pioneer, Akai, Sansui, Panasonic, Teac, etc. Some guys buy right away, but I come back bewildered. What do I need it for? Luckily, someone talked me into it, pointing out that it's the only chance I'd ever get to own the best-available equipment for a price like this.

Okay, I'm some dumb but not plumb dumb. Now which system to buy? Discussions are held, pluses and minuses weighed, and I make my decision, based mostly on the

simplicity, elegance and sheer beauty of the stuff. Another trip to the PX, luckily they still have what I want, (the stuff is being snapped up quick), and I fork over the dough for a Sansui amp and speakers. Second most expensive thing I've ever bought, the first being Proud Mary.

Pick up whatever treats the PX still has for our Christmas feast, load the stuff into the truck and try to figure out how to lock it up once it's in the hootch. Our end of the hootch looks like the back room of a stereo store. Someone constructs a big 'cabinet' with a locking latch, but even that won't hold the massive (and heavy) Sansui speakers (6-speaker, 5-way - still the sweetest, warmest sounding speakers I've ever heard.) Leave the plastic on, try not to mar those beautiful hardwood veneer (not plastic) cabinets. Such beauty. Glad they talked me into it. Hook up someone's turntable, Wow! What an incredible sound! The company area sounds like a battle of the bands. Let's see what this record sounds like, oh, the bass, what separation, what a great stereo effect. Plug in the headphones, yea, it drowns out all other sound. Far out, man.

Run an extension up top, listen to music, get stoned, and then assemble all these Care packages into a Christmas Eve feast, what a bounty. Eat (home cookin' from Care packages!) drink (Cold Duck time!), smoke (some really good Thai stuff that just makes you float!) listen to 'jams' through brand new stereos, then pass out on the bed; a very merry Christmas, considering.

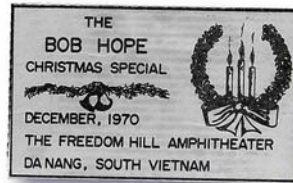
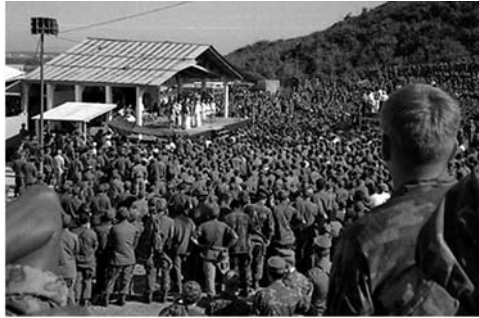
I'd be willing to bet money that I did not connect that stereo Christmas gift to myself to that one from the parents back in 1964. That was kid's stuff, after all, and I was not in a reflective mood anyway - looking back wasn't a good idea. There was only this and nothing else; nothing came before and nothing would come after. I still had more time in-country in front of me than I had behind me. Enjoy today, you never know about tomorrow. At least this tomorrow will be a day off.

Wrong, again “Wake up! Wake up, Lawless, get yer ass out of bed! Let’s go”. What? “The Bob Hope Christmas show”. No thanks, man, I just wanna sleep. I haven’t had a day off for real in a long time, Sarge. “This is not a request, you are going to the Bob Hope Show, now be on that truck or be court-martialed!” You got to be kidding. I was not invited to the Bob Hope Show, I was ordered to go. Under penalty of court martial. Which I almost chose, that’s how much I didn’t want to go.

Getting up that Sunday was an effort alone, since I had been working seven days a week for what seemed like months. Flying combat assaults, flood relief and our routine scheduled missions had me exhausted, grumpy, wrapped pretty tight from the stress (another word we didn’t use then, unless it was applied to what happens to sheet metal that gets beaten or vibrated too much) and looking forward to a whole day off. I was probably as angry as I’d ever been at whoever’s job it was that day to order us into those kidney-killer deuce-and-a-half trucks at the crack of dawn. Crowded into those trucks, bouncing uncomfortably all the way across DaNang, just to make the performers feel gratified, and the only highlight for us was a pretty white girl in the truck next to us, who smiled and waved, making everyone drool. And reminding us of how far away we were from anything we cared about. (admittedly a racist observation, but up this far north, white girls were a rarity, unless you were being treated at the China Beach Hospital, a place I already made a vow to avoid, even if it meant getting sent home).

Not only did they not understand what we needed, but they were arrogant enough to lecture us about how this was being done for our sakes. We were not starved for entertainment, especially at that moment, with all that new stereo equipment sitting around. It was hope, small ‘h’ we needed most, not Hope with a capital ‘h’. Bob Hope, by that time, was hopelessly passé and square, an anachronism, a throwback to another era that didn’t even resemble ours. For dec-

ades, he'd been fulfilling the needs of undemanding audiences, lobbing gentle jibes and toothless critiques, meant to show how tolerant the establishment was with dissent, when just the opposite was true. And even if he'd brought the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix with him, I would still have preferred the day off. But it was Jerry Colona and Lola Falana with Les Brown and his Band of Renown, and we weren't



even seated - Freedom Hill was a Marine Base, so Marines and Navy personnel got all the up front seats; with, of course the obligatory wounded surrounding the stage. I wonder if any of those guys felt like I did, that it was all a show to make the Hawks and the folks back home feel like they were supporting us.

Yet another packaged event trying to make this war seem like the righteous cause that they so desperately wished it had been. We were too diverse a group to be entertained by any one aspect of culture - unlike World War II, where most Americans listened to the same music, saw the same movies every week, and read a very small but influential list of periodicals, all of which could make us feel as if we were all in this together. One size did not fit all of *us*, however.

Luckily, there were more treats to indulge in that week. Like buying that tape player I had my eye on at the PX, a Teac 4010S, reel-to-reel with remote, just the thing to go with my amp and speakers. Put records on high-speed seven inch reels and preserve them forever! Two-hundred, thirty-eight bucks, but well worth it for a beautiful engineering masterpiece. Glad I listened to the guys who know about this stuff, I was *always* thinking too small. I'm never going

to live to buy that Z-28 anyway, and I did vow way back in Summer of '69 to get the best stereo money could buy, didn't I? And 'more' is always a good substitute goal when all else is failing you.

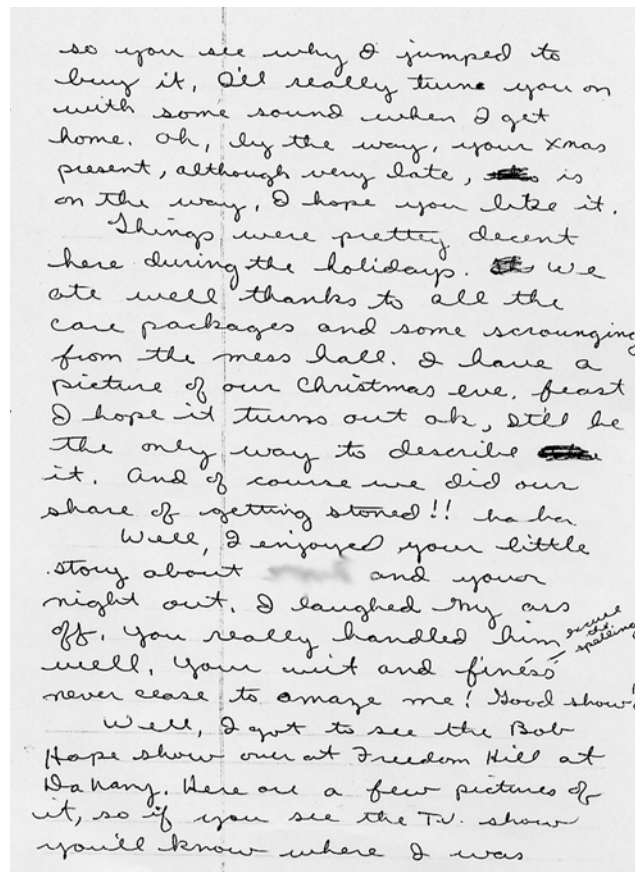
4 JAN. 71

Hi Elaine

Sorry I haven't written in a while, but I've been all spaced-out for quite ^{a while}. I think I'm setting a record for being stoned; I doubt if I'll ever get straight till I get home, then I'll just be naturally stoned! ha ha!! We dropped some mecoalin last night and I'm still tripping from it. It was a nice trip, but Vietnam just isn't the best place in the world for tripping. We smoked a lot of dew last night, too. I'm just sitting here listening to ~~the~~ Christmas present I bought my self, a Sansui 5000A amplifier and 2 Sansui 2000 speakers. (with a borrowed cassette player) I sold my other system to a guy who was going home. It was a little less than what I want, this one is just right; all I need is a tape player and a few odds and ends. These 3 pieces together cost \$351.00 (a whole month's paycheck) but back in the "world" it's worth about \$700.00

The Flight Record shows that, like so many New Year's Eves before when I'd find myself babysitting, on this New Year's Eve 1970, I was on the job as well, only this time babysitting my helicopter, which was being used to taxi some Army Big Wig to his New Year's Eve party.

Oh, well, at least I had that Christmas party with my pals; good thing I did it all then, won't be much partying for me this New Years. By the time I get Blivet done and take a cold shower, nothing will feel as good as that bunk. Sure hope Mama-san left me a li'l somethin' on my pillow. Ah, yes, there's my ten-pack. At least this supply chain is reliable. Nineteen seventy-one is going to be better. *Got* to be.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and appears to be from the 1970s. The letter is written on a single sheet of paper with horizontal lines. The text is written in dark ink and is somewhat slanted. There are some corrections and additions in the text, such as "supposed" and "speaking" written above "him" and "well, your wit and finesse" respectively. The letter is addressed to someone who has sent a Christmas present and is discussing a party and a TV show.

so you see why I jumped to
buy it, I'll really turn you on
with some sound when I get
home. Oh, by the way, your Xmas
present, although very late, ~~is~~ is
on the way, I hope you like it.
Things were pretty decent
here during the holidays. ~~It~~ We
ate well thanks to all the
care packages and some scrounging
from the mess hall. I have a
picture of our Christmas eve feast
I hope it turns out ok, I'll be
the only way to describe ~~it~~
it. And of course we did our
share of getting stoned!! ha ha
Well, I enjoyed your little
story about ~~me~~ and your
night out. I laughed my ass
off. You really handled him ^{supposed}
well, your wit and finesse ^{speaking}
never cease to amaze me! Good show!
Well, I got to see the Bob
Hope show over at Freedom Hill at
DaKang. Here are a few pictures of
it, so if you see the TV show
you'll know where I was

Funny, I had remembered everything else, the Bob Hope Show, the stereo shopping, and the feast, (can't find the pictures though) but I did not remember the mescaline. I had avoided any other drugs but weed and speed up to that point, and had refused any psychedelics, out of a very real but unspeakable fear, deep inside, that it might aggravate my already shaky mental state. LSD was illegal and feared, in large part, because TV personality Art Linkletter's daughter had jumped out of a window to her death while reportedly on an acid trip. And this was the child of one of America's most famous children-lovers; he'd made his TV career interviewing kids (*Kids Say the Darndest Things*) and getting them to say funny and precocious things about life. So it couldn't have been anything wrong with his daughter, right? It had to be the drug. Right? All of America believed it. It must cause mental illness, so I figured since I was so close to the edge already, I'd rather stay just this side of the 'men in white coats' and out of the 'snake pit'.

But the same guys who talked me into buying the stereo convinced me that mescaline was a very mild psychedelic, the effect more like marijuana, but with more 'head' effects. A peek through the door without having to go all the way 'out'. I survived with no lingering effects, so I left the door 'open'. I don't remember 'tripping', probably because we were in such a stoned state of stimulation from the food, the wine, the music, and the good weed. Didn't feel much of anything probably.

CHAPTER 40 - PARRY AND THRUST

After the holidays, it was right back in the air, flying missions that had such a sameness about them, after the thrill and terror of the combat assault, that they weren't memorable or worth mentioning in my letters to Elaine. Only the nights were interesting. Not many 'machine gun' days, but there were plenty of 'shotgun' nights.

15 JAN. 71

Hi Elaine

Just a short note to let you know I'm still alive.

20 JAN. 71 I started this letter the 15th and I now more got the first line done and some of my buddies came in and said "let's smoke some pot;" so here I am 5 days later trying to finish your letter. I've been pretty spaced-out as you can see. Not much happening around here. The lifers are ~~are~~ jumping through their asses trying to ~~prepare~~ "prepare" for this year's "T+T" offensive, so I've been pulling all kinds of shit details.

You mentioned in your letter that there were quite a few people who have smoked at your house. I hope you know all of them personally or they may be pigs. I've been reading in the papers that a lot of people have been getting busted in Columbus; so I don't think it

Oliver

In late January of 1971, there was a major 'crack down' against marijuana called 'Operation Intercept', which was a big news story. An effort by the Nixon Administration to arrest lots of people across the country and stop the flow of drugs coming across the border from Mexico. (a way of busting anti-war people, really) This was another reason to send weed back home - they needed it and we had it. We assumed that just like all his battles, Nixon's attention would soon focus elsewhere and the supply would resume.

One day, all the Mama-sans on Base got held up at the front gate - causing a long line to form - *that* got our attention. "What the fuck, over"? Was it weapons or spying equipment they were being so carefully searched for? No. It was marijuana - Operation Intercept was waged against all of us regardless of where we were. No more ten-packs from Mama-san. Mmm bummer, man.. Luckily the supply of good stuff came in another way, so we didn't feel the pinch right away. There sure were a lot of unhappy Mama-sans; weed had always been a major source of income for them. It didn't make any of us G.I.s happy, either.

would be too cool for you to have more than a couple of people smoking in the house. It's also advisable to keep your stashes out of the house. After all, we don't need a bunch of bust-happy pigs around ~~here~~ during party time, right? Remember, if you don't know 'em, don't smoke with them.

Speaking of smoking, if I don't space-out too much I'll include some Cambodia Red. There should be enough for a few skinny 5's. Don't smoke anything before this shit; try it by itself first; let me know how you like it.

From what I can see in these pictures, the apt. looks really avarite. I can't wait to see it with some far-out posters on the wall. I have some good stereo stuff to fill it full of sounds ~~while~~ while in home. Well must go for now, write back real soon
love me

Nixon just kept declaring war on more and more people; the anti-war movement was gaining momentum and this was his response, opening a new front in the war on drug people, since he could no longer claim that we were winning the war in Vietnam.

Whatever has the 'lifers' all worked up in this letter of January fifteenth and twentieth is a mystery to us; it feels

like maybe they are going to disband the Company after all - they've threatened as much before. All kinds of equipment is being packed up, moved around, and trucks are being brought in and loaded up. They don't bother telling us what's going on, so I don't try to keep myself straight; I just keep on staying up late smoking, speeding, talking and listening to music. My motto: *FTA* - Fuck the Army. Such hostilities between people who were supposed to be united against a common enemy! Tsk Tsk; so many cross-purposes, and cross exchanges between us. No wonder so many guys came back determined to be either cop or criminal, Vietnam forced you deep into whatever corner you found yourself unwillingly backed into.

Coming somewhat full circle, I've gone from worrying Elaine about drugs to warning her about 'uncool' people and 'pigs' - the first reference I've made to the name leveled at cops and anyone else in authority who would put you in jail just for getting high on a drug they did not approve. By this time, cops (*narcs*) were wearing long hair and infiltrating groups of friends so they could catch them and jail them, which was what I was worrying about in this letter.

People who smoked marijuana were such peaceful folk, I could never understand why we were so hated. I was more worried, at this point, about my friends back home getting busted and jailed than I was about my chances of surviving my own war in Vietnam. We who dared to smoke in the Army's territory were sitting ducks, but there were so many of us, and replacements were so hard to get, that we felt some safety in numbers.

I never knew why we called the good stuff 'Cambodian Red' - it wasn't really red, and where it came from no one knew. Considering what happened to the nation of Cambodia, we couldn't help speculating that marijuana cultivation was the real target. (naw, according the *Pentagon Papers*, that too was political - Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk defied Nixon and Kissinger and they retaliated by invading).

We'll probably never know for sure, those who own the presses get to write history. I just wanted to share with

my friends, since the weed available in Columbus, Ohio at that time was of very low quality, coming mostly from Mexico. The good 'Panama Red', 'Jamaica-say-you-will' and 'Maui Wowee' got used up along the coasts and didn't make it inland all that much. I spent a lot of time acquiring, cleaning, packing and sending back the best stuff I could find. Later, I would even send seeds. I wanted to get my friends high, but I was also hoping that Elaine would squirrel some away so I could get high on it with them. Elaine did manage to save some for me, but more importantly, she kept sending those Care packages.

CHAPTER 41 - ALLEY CATS

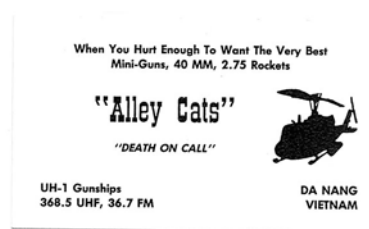
Whenever possible in those first few weeks of 1971, I was getting high with my friends. What few missions we flew were so routine that it was just another day at the office. There seemed to be more people getting high these days and the parties at night spread out over a few more hootches.

Then I get another one of those 'just in time' reassignments that shakes things up and makes things interesting, with a new plaything and a different perspective on the war that would return me to those 'machine gun days' - I turned from an ordinary Black Cat into an Alley Cat.

I had not always wanted to be an Alley Cat, as those in Third Platoon were called. I thought at first it was too needlessly dangerous and that the kind of combat assaults, and hot resupply missions Second Platoon flew in 'slicks' were actually more interesting and kept you flying more. But by this time, I'm bored sick of the Hoi An run and all the other boring missions the Slicks fly, so this turned out to be just the thing to get me closer to some action.

Third Platoon was Gunships only, and instead of flying UH-1 'H' models, they flew the older, smaller UH-1 'C' models. Slicks flew almost everyday, but Gunships sat around a lot, just waiting for the call to: "Scramble the Alley Cats." That was when I envied them, when they would grab their equipment, hell-bent for take-off, their mission always the same, go kill somebody.

By the time I joined them, the Alley Cats didn't have quite the bravado as when I first joined the 282nd. They were needed less and less and therefore were watched closer and restrained from some of their crazier antics, which had made them the stuff of such legend in the earlier months of my tour. I joined because rotation had sent a lot of Alley Cats home, and because I had also been denied my first R & R



due to this big secret operation that was as yet not discussed officially, so to prove they needed me, I think becoming an Alley Cat was my 'consolation prize'. Bangkok will always be there, we got the war on here and now, that was my thinking. I doubt if I would have been an Alley Cat in the old days, I just didn't appear tough or grizzled enough.

I flew a few missions as Door Gunner in and around DaNang and quickly perked up, discovering, among other things, that being in Gunships was just what the witch doctor ordered for my blue-tinted morale. Alley Cats didn't have to put up with Army Brass during their flying day, they hardly ever landed except to refuel. And while in the company area, they were left alone and pretty much free from shit details, in case they were suddenly called into action (scrambled). No one had ever pointed that out to me before. Now I could understand why they often resembled a club, with secret handshakes and such.

There was no room for passengers in a C-model, its only purpose was to be loaded with various weapons such as mini-guns. (funny, the sixties were the 'mini' decade - fashion brought us mini-skirts, hotels stocked mini-bars, and gun makers gave us mini-guns - none of which inflicted any small amount of damage on what they replaced) The mini-gun is nothing more than a six-barreled Gattling gun, powered by an electric motor. It spits out bullets at the rate of three to four thousand *Rounds Per Minute (RPM)* - a mechanic knows it as 'Revolutions Per Minute' - a soldier knows it as 'Rounds Per Minute' - an easy transference of abbreviations) From inside our gunship helicopters, all you hear when it's firing is the mechanism - the *Ka-ching, Ka-ching* of rounds being expelled from the chamber, the whir of the motor spinning and the 'log-chain-being-dragged-fast-across-a-fifty-gallon-drum' sounds of the ammo being pulled through the feeder belt on its way to the firing chamber.

But from a distance, when fired in anger, in bursts of (usually) less than thirty seconds, it sounds just like a tiger's roar; the same growling timbre and deep-throated pitch. Wherever and whenever you hear it, it grabs your attention -

at first because of it's similarity to a wild animal, but then the reality hits that it's the sound of death to someone. Hit it again Mister, I love that sound! How like nature and how not like nature, when you realize it's a 'just' a gun.

On the nose of a gunship was a turreted 40 millimeter Grenade launcher capable of shooting spit balls that could blow up a house, or kill a squad of humans with fragments that penetrate flesh like hot rocks with sharp, jagged edges.

Then there were rocket pods hanging just outside the door on the inside of the stubby little 'wings'. It was this last thing, rockets, that made it scary for me - the loading and firing of the rockets. I always held my breath when they wheeled out that cart full of rockets and began loading them one by one into their pods - the engine was already running during the loading, making the whole process even more nerve-wracking. Usually, I was already seated in the 'well', since it was safer not to have to climb over the pod once the rockets were loaded and armed.

So I could only sit and watch (and sweat) as the Ordnance guys, (who never seemed to be quite serious enough about the job), inserted the long white rockets into their tubes, and hooked up the trigger contacts that set them off. I also didn't care for the moment when they were shot off. *Crack* from the fuses, then *Whoosh*, as they shot out of their pod like some ungodly projectile flicked by a giant's finger. Even though I knew when they were coming, it was still a very hot and sudden explosion just inches from my feet. Two things could go very wrong - in your mind if not in reality - one, the propellant could ignite up in the tube, burning the hell out of you; and two, the warhead, which could be high explosive, white phosphorous, or 'nails' (one-inch metal 'arrows' called *flechettes*, designed to lodge in any flesh they find) could explode, ensuring horrible death to you and the entire ship.

Then there was the unnatural flying attitude that the ship had to be held in so that the rockets could be aimed; we had to almost hover, or at least slow down, and dip the nose down - since they weren't 'guided' missiles - in order to get

them near their target. I always hated hearing the sound of the powertrain enduring the stress at this moment, and felt even more 'target-able' in the open gunwell at such slow air-speed. But it was the ultimate firecracker, just the same.

Even the M-60 machine guns that the crew used were adapted differently on a gunship. Instead of being mounted on a fixed post as in a Slick, a gunship M-60 was attached only to a bungee cord that was affixed on the ceiling and which let the gun 'hang' at just the right level so that it 'floated' right about at the crewman's chest. The trigger handles were replaced, and the infantryman's shoulder-butt and pistol grip were reinstalled. A gunner would grasp the trigger grip with his right hand, feed the ammo belt over his left arm and hold onto the carrying handle with his left hand, to anchor the whole thing.

After shooting the M-60 on a mount all that time, It was wild holding all that power in just your two hands, and feeling the kick on your shoulder was an incredible adrenaline rush. It took some practice to maintain a decent aim, and if a slick mount could shoot up your tail, this thing could shoot up *everything everywhere*, if you weren't careful. Whoever devised this set-up was a real rowdy kid who just could not be satisfied with the old way of killing. It allowed a Gunner more freedom of movement, an ability to fix his shots on a target for longer, and provided more flexibility to switch targets.

Now that 'chicken strap' became extremely important - it was all that kept a Gunner from following his bullets right out of the ship, since there was no gun mount to serve as a brace and brake as he leaned out. And no brass bag on the gun, so the spent shells were shot all over

A couple of Pilots 'pre-flight' a gunship equipped with the old-fashioned 'open tube' rocket pods. The mini-gun hangs limp, pointing down just outside the rocket pods



the floor and around the interior of the ship, clanging around noisily as if someone was shooting into the ship's interior. And it was not unusual for a hot shell to burn the exposed flesh of a pilot or crewman.

On routine missions we'd fly escort alongside Slicks, sometimes our mere presence serving to warn the enemy that this might be a good time for him to stay hidden. But it was those 'free-fire' missions that got your blood excited, where a territory was declared a 'free-fire zone', and Alley Cats were able to strafe and shoot and launch all the weapons they had on board at anything they saw on the ground.

And sometimes, some of those weapons were off the 'official' list. In the 'old days', guys would carry 'Grease Guns' (a .45 caliber machine gun similar to what gangsters used), all sorts of *side arms* (the .38 revolver wasn't too powerful or popular) and every gunner's favorite, 'the gift that kept on giving' - a fragmentary hand grenade in a Mason jar.

Put it in a jar, pull the pin just before you drop it, and throw it where you think the enemy is hiding from you. Being in the jar kept the timer from starting. Then impact with the ground would break the glass, so that while you're flying away, the enemy comes out of hiding, thinking all is safe. Then the explosion, *Boom!* Lead fragments and glass pieces sprayed in all directions. Like throwing firecrackers at unsuspecting stray cats, war has a way of bringing out the delinquent in all of us. The whole gunship package was a real hot-rod honed-in-hell, just itching for some dumb-ass to get in its way. If clever lasts forever, it's the cleverest killers who survive the longest.

The other great thing about Gunships was the fact that, at the end of the day in order to land safely, they let us shoot our guns off to get rid of excess weight; if nothing else, we'd shoot at sharks in the water. This included the mini-gun occasionally. We also got to sweep our spent brass cartridges out the door before returning home, which was fun to watch,

as they cascaded down like little bombs, splashing in the water of the bay or a rice paddy.

The reason we had to shed weight before landing is because a 'C' Model was under-powered and almost always overloaded, causing it to act more like a bouncing lead balloon than a helicopter. The old ones struggled to hover when loaded, and Crewmen would have to walk them out to the runway before getting on, just to let the engine reach full RPM before attempting take-off. Loaded take-off required the ship to rise just off the runway and use the whole length of that runway to build up enough air speed to take flight. And even then, gaining altitude took forever, you just could not put much lift (pitch) into those rotor blades without slowing down the engine RPM, which risked losing power and then flight itself. After seeing slicks take off, Gunships resembled a bird that had picked up too large a prey and was always near to crashing for its greediness.

But taking off was nothing compared to landing. You had some control over take off, but it was really hard to judge how much power you had after a flight, (even though the fuel load was lighter) so getting closer to the ground always felt like you were going to belly-flop. And if you touched down too soon with too much forward speed, you could tip forward and somersault into sudden and sure death - or at least ruin the skid pads and damage the skids and the airframe itself. So, lose weight, waste Uncle Sam's money on ammo, but don't try to come in with a full load.

CHAPTER 42- BIG SMOKE ON A BIG SUNDAY

My most memorable day as an Alley Cat may or may not have had anything to do with the fact that it was a Sunday. Odd that I was even aware it was Sunday, since the days could pass without regard to the day of the week, calendar date, or even decade. Probably religion again, since some went to church, which meant the rest of us could sleep in.

But on this particular Sunday, we not only got to watch the big game, but we got to play in it as well. The full force of American military might was on display that day. Everybody got a piece of the action, including us Alley Cats.

On a broad plain that led up to the foothills and mountains beyond, somewhere south and west, but not far from Da Nang, it was familiar territory, we'd flown here lots of times. I have a couple of fuzzy pictures that show a patchwork quilt of rice paddies, farm houses, and even a small collection of thatched roof buildings that might have been a village. But on this day, the whole area has been declared a free-fire zone, which means 'kill anything and everything that moves'! Yee Ha! Now we're havin' some fun. How they determined that there were no innocent civilians in the area, I'll never know, and on that morning we couldn't be concerned in the least. This is what we do all this work for, a chance to go out and shoot the shit out of something - and maybe some bad guys to boot.

First, the Navy fires their big guns from offshore at the spot. They have to go first because they're so damned inaccurate that no one's safe until they stop. Next, the B-52s drop some high explosives on the area, because there is nothing in this world that sounds more terrifying than that unmistakable boom, boom, boom sound they make. Nothing comes close; and if you happen to be anywhere near, it's impossible to escape, because you can't tell where it's coming from. From our perspective inside the helicopter we can't see the B-52's, only their 'shot pattern' of explosions walking a line of big smoke puffs on the landscape. I feel a bit of their con-

cussion impact inside the chopper as we're flying around the perimeter of the area.

After the B-52s come the Phantoms - F-4 fighter jets, either Air Force or Marine, depending on whose battle it is. The F-4 is a joy to watch as it goes through its paces. Like maniacal birds, they fly screaming in arcs around the target and then like an eagle going in for the kill, turn back toward the target, and dive suddenly, gaining so much speed as they near the target you think they're going to crash. But just at the point where an eagle would extend his talons, small explosions erupt under the airplane's wings and suddenly, missiles zoom ahead and the F-4 pulls up, kicks the go-fast button, and after-burners blast the plane out of the area as fast, and as vertical, as possible, making a harder target for the enemy to shoot down.

Then your eye is taken by the explosion, sometimes high-explosives, or white phosphorus, which makes a white cloud, like a giant sack of flour exploding upon impact. The effect is like the smoke a magician uses, only this is killer stuff that seers everything it touches. Sometimes F-4s would drop napalm, that great American invention, which exploded in such a conflagration that it seemed to foretell the ball-of-fire end of the world that will rhyme in reverse with its Big Bang beginning. Run after run they work the target area until ammo and fuel are spent, then, collecting themselves into a wing-to-wing formation, leave the stage in an airborne pose that makes them appear proud of their function and their form. Hard to think such a fine form has such a terrible function, but that's what you get for thinking.

Next come the Cobras, single-rotor two-seater assault helicopters, one pilot behind the other with no space for cargo. Slow, compared to the F-4s, but like angry wasps working around a hive, they can whip that tail around and reverse direction and altitude so fast that they can be firing back at the enemy before the enemy realizes he's even being shot at. Cobras have a wicked ability to precisely point their weapons, and hold still, while raining round after round of hellfire onto their target. Much like our C Model Hueys, they

have a nose turret for grenade launchers, and two stubby 'wings' from which hang a variety of weapons, from the usual mini-guns and rockets, to fifty-caliber tank-stopper machine guns. They can carry more, carry it faster, and out-manuever the C Model; but there's one thing our C Model could do that they couldn't - fire sideways and backwards simultaneously out of both sides of the ship and hold that fire on the target while flying forward.

Next up on the Big Show.. 'Puff the Magic Dragon'. G.I.s can put the most playful names on the most awesome weapons. Puff the Magic Dragon is a C-119, a large, wing-over cargo plane with two giant turbo-prop engines (the beast that flew me to DaNang) which, when fully outfitted, was just another platform for weaponry. Like a 40mm grenade cannon or a fifty-caliber machine gun that was operated by a gunner from inside a huge opening carved out of the side of the plane. I could not imagine anybody being more vulnerable than that gunner in that slow and awkward looking bird. But those weapons can kick up a lot of dirt. And what was not hit or blown up by the tank-killer rounds, was set on fire by the tracer rounds, which helped the gunner see where his shots were going, and which reached their target as a small ball of meteor-like fire; if there was any kindling, like thatched huts or dried vegetation of any kind, a good fire would erupt and further the job of getting 'Charlie' out in the open - which is where we come in.

As if to bat clean up, we were eight eyeballs peeled for movement of any kind, flying low looking for trouble. After observing everyone else in action we were primed, pumped and puckered up. Flexible fire power, that's what we offered in the big show. We can do things those other guys can't, like play chase and shoot. Anything moves shoot it! Yes, ha! A real free-fire zone. Finally! I get to shoot at something; really heat up the ol' M-60, see if I can make the barrel red hot; hope the gunner 'souped-up' my gun, as well as his own. In a fixed-wing airplane flying high above the scene, an Observer alerts us to movement on the ground "...something moved by that burning hootch, go get it!" Cir-

cle around, not too high, then jam that stick forward and zoom toward the target. “Gunners, see the target?” “Fire at will!” Yes, sir! Aim, hell, just start firing! Whoa! Not over there! Brace yourself better, this damn gun wants to go everywhere except where I’m pointing it! Tighten up on the grip. Tracer rounds get closer to the target now! Yea, that’s it, hold a nice straight pattern. Shooting forward, my rounds are zinging right about at the A.C.’s ear level, I have to take care to steer them out away from ship, while still keeping my shot pattern fixed on the target. Now we’re past it, but I’m still hitting the hootch as we climb past it and away. Remember, don’t shoot your own tail and God forbid don’t put a round through the tail rotor assembly, we’d crash for the stupidest reason of all.

G-forces pulling down and then tilt-a-whirl sideways, hold on! Don’t fall out. Pay attention to the ammo belt, feed up some more rounds, get ready, adjust my sleeve tighter so it won’t snag. Gunpowder stings my nose and hangs in the air even with all the wind rushing around inside here. Damn this is fun. Sweep spent rounds out on the ascent so they’ll fall harmlessly to the ground, (sweep them out on *descent* and they could get sucked up into the rotor assembly, mess up the machinery. That’s why the Army wants you to keep it inside, but the Army ain’t here now, and I don’t want to need to step right where that brass is waiting to make me slip.)

Over the intercom: “Hey, something moved over by that tree line!” “Where?” “Ten o’clock, low, see it?” “Yea I got it.” Something black, but I lost it. Then pulling up higher - there they are!! A man holding something and a woman running behind! In plain sight. Christ, don’t they know this is a free-fire zone? They must be civilians, or they’d know to never move. Target sighted, tail up, nose down, forward speed, getting faster. Peter Pilot, loses track of them in his mini-gun sight, passes on the target! Says “you take ‘em Chief, they’re all yours”. Good God all mighty my first chance to cut somebody down. Got ‘em in my sights but suddenly I see faces, scared. It looks like a family. It could be, can’t tell if.. yes it is a kid in his arms. Shit. Instant deci-

sion, over the intercom: "I'll pass, they're all yours Gunner, wanna go back for them?" By this time we're passed the target, and the A.C.'s bringing us back for another run, but the Gunner has lost sight of them, the targets disappear into a tree line, and we rejoin the other ships attacking other targets. Not a word is spoken between the four of us; I never hear of the incident again.

Back at the Cat House after we're parked, one of the Pilots says to me as he leaves, "That was good shootin' you did out there today." Pointed, as if to say.. something, not sure what. Maybe, "...don't worry, this is between us." The only compliment I ever got on my shooting.

I carried this memory all these years, and have wondered all along how weird it was that we all thought alike at that moment. And I've always felt that it was the right thing to do on that day - somehow a kind of counter balance to all the bad I'd done. I could have killed them but didn't. Why? Our awesome might restrained by our humanity? Phooey. It wasn't until I sat down to write this all out that it occurred to me that that guy was probably Viet Cong and had probably grabbed that child, hoping the mother would run after them, thereby giving him protection against the American, who just might find it harder to kill a family than a single gook running for cover. That was good thinking, dude; very clever. They were willing to do whatever it took - we were the ones with the guilty conscience, the ones unsure. They weren't unsure. They were committed, determined, and single-minded with a single common purpose to rid their country of foreigners and foreign ideas. They were the Minute Men. We were the Redcoats.

The four of us in that chopper probably felt pretty good that night; we'd given the enemy what-for and felt proud of our judgement to let someone live. But that night, while we were hoisting a cold one, smokin' a doobie, or writing home about our big day, that man was probably feeling good too - he'd survived to fight another day. Maybe, or maybe not because, it was Sunday.

CHAPTER 43 - MAMA-SAN SAYS...

The Army could keep it from us no longer, we were indeed moving. But instead of breaking up the Company or moving to the south like we suspected, we were going north. How far, we didn't know - just get ready to go. It was not the Army that told me where we were going. They *never* did. It was Mama-san, our hootch maid. As I was putting clothes into a duffel bag and she was finishing up her chores, she looked around to make sure no one else heard her say it, then looked at me, and said, "You go to Laos." I didn't understand at first and made her repeat it. She did, without elaborating, then went back to making up the other bunks.

I was shocked. She had never said anything significant to me before, we'd never really talked. While I'd never mistreated any of the hootch maids, I was also not overly friendly, either. And here she was delivering crucial news as if she were telling me the laundry would be back on Tuesday. We'd flown close to Laos before; it was an inescapable geographical fact that, if you flew west into the mountains far enough, you were in Laos. We'd been pecking away at it, I knew that for sure; the CIA had been waging some kind of war there for years, as it was just then becoming known.

Our Company was definitely readying a lot of trucks and equipment to go somewhere, what could this all mean? I tried to keep a count (to myself) of how many days it took for the Army to tell us about the operation. They never did actually say so in so many words, they just kept referring to 'Operation Lam Son'.

Then one day, after loading cargo onto trucks for an operation that I 'know nothing about' (still not sure if Mama-san wasn't just bullshitting me), I get off early and find a Care package from Elaine on my bunk. Usually, I wait till evening to make the pizza, but on this late afternoon, I tore into the package, putting some of the perishables into my duffel bag, a can of Dinty Moore beef stew into my locker, and the pepperoni pizza next to the electric skillet. Most of

the trucks having already taken off, there were few people around the hootch. I cooked up the pizza and ate most of it myself. It was one of the best ever; I was getting good at it, and I remember how delicious it was. I remember thinking to myself - "Enjoy it, could be your last for a while."

Within the hour I'm ordered to grab my bag and report to a truck, I was going to drive in a convoy. Oh, boy, a night convoy through enemy territory, just like in a real war. None too happy about it, though - I was a 'decorated' Crew Chief and again I was being forced to do grunt work - this time as a teamster, no less. Truck driver - my daddy would be proud. They don't tell us where we're going, how long we'll be gone - nothing.

CHAPTER 44 – LEMME AT ‘EM, THE INVASION OF LAOS

Two things make this a joyless and excruciating trip - first, the speed is a snail's pace, bumper to bumper. And second, my companion is an older Staff Sergeant 'lifer' whom I don't know, and who hasn't smiled since the last time he re-upped. The three-quarter ton pick-up I drive has a clutch so stiff it feels like trying to use my left foot to force a shovel into hard clay. The rock-crusher gearbox requires constant finesse and never shifts smooth (I'll never complain about a factory Muncie again) and the un-synchronized first gear requires a dead stop before it would engage. No power steering, no radio (are you kidding?) and no heater (yes, this is the tropics - but it gets cool at night, believe me). Throw in a kidney-killer suspension that makes every divot feel like a New York City pothole, just enough rain to need the squeaky wipers, and for good measure, combine it with the noise of the under-muffled engine, so that your ears feel a constant assault and make conversation just that much more difficult.

And of course, just to sweeten the deal, my companion is one of those types who just doesn't have anything to say - now I'm no Mr. Personality, but this guy is dullsville. And of course, he's taking this whole thing ultra seriously, as Lifers do, and the normal jawing at the duty and chewing of the fat that usually takes place between enlisted men is replaced here by his strict adherence to the 'code' of conversation on a need-to-speak basis only. Aw c'mon, mister, it ain't like they don't know we're coming. This is a pretty long convoy and there really is only one road and we could only be heading in one direction - north. But no, I can tell without much inquiry that for this guy, it's D-Day on Omaha Beach, and those of us in this man's Army are the only thing standing between Mom's apple pie and Hitler's sausage grinder. Just for that, dude, I ain't sharing my Twinkies with you. I

don't even feel sorry for the fact that he's the type who's too tight-lipped to even get many letters from home - much less Care packages loaded with goodies like I get from Elaine.

We travel through Da Nang, stopping and starting like a constipated caterpillar, (can't the locals just wait for us to pass?) our half-shielded tail lights looking like a conga line of lightning bugs, snaking up and over the hill separating Da Nang from 'up North'. Soon, the city lights fade out behind us and only our headlights light the truck ahead - and just enough of the pavement to see the bumps we're about to hit but can't avoid. Bundle up against the chill wind. Stop. Now what? Word comes down the line - the worst news possible - a sniper attack up ahead.

They warned us, and now it's happened. Orders come to turn dash lights off; no interior lights, no flashlights. No cigarettes. What? No smokes? I can't do this! The glow from a lit cigarette could be a target, the Lifer warns. Bet he wears Army-green underwear. Damn snipers, what do they think they'll accomplish, this coo-coo choo-choo ain't gonna stop just because of one dumb Injun. Man, I can *not* take this. I came here to die in a blaze of glory - *airmobile* glory, meaning flying, not stuck in a truck. I survived too many combat assaults, too many hot re-supplies to be just another death-on-the-highway. "How did he die?" "In a truck." "Hell, he could have stayed home and done that."

So now, on top of having to wrestle the truck-that-bucks, put up with Mr. Tight-lip, the cold, the rain, the terror of being a target and having no side arm (they didn't let low-ranking enlisted men carry side arms - no wonder), I have to suffer through it all with nicotine withdrawal. It was one thing to face a Landing Zone with a load of grunts that took their time getting off my ship; it was one thing to be loaded with artillery shells and approaching a pad that could erupt at any second - all *that* I had signed up for, *that* I'd done willingly, eagerly even. But this I cannot handle. For the first time in my life, I am so trapped, so backed into a corner, that I feel like I'm going to freeze, or wig out; or scream and shout - which I feel like doing. For the first time in my life, I

have to force my brain to pay attention to one thing while trying to relieve the tension by forcing it to think about something else. Need to concentrate. And stay awake. Think of something good, a pleasant memory. Hell - I gotta go all the way back to the Summer of '69 for that.

Yea, my last good memories. Taking my girl out to see Barbra Streisand in *FUNNY GIRL*. Good movie, good time; boy she looked good - not *her* - my girlfriend. What did we do after? Stop that! Don't think of a girl while riding in a bouncing truck at night! Think of something else...

Drag racing days and beer drinking nights. Taking my brother to National Trail Raceway with me one Sunday - he got my trophy-winning run on film with a little wind-up 8mm camera. Coming out of the club Kno-Place in Newark, slogged with 3.2 beer, getting into Proud Mary and hauling ass to the Pure Oil Truck Stop on I-70 East for sausage and eggs, hash browns and toast, and a re-hash of the evening - how bad the bands were, how easy (or hard) the girls were; and I still can't believe that one waiter who can carry all those beer bottles with nothing but his two hands.

Heading home, racing a guy's Dodge Super Bee down I-70, side-by-side at seventy mph, at the nod of a head, we both punch it. Proud Mary's Holley carburetor howls in response and jumps ahead like a stuck pig. The convertible top stretches up and tight, worrying me, since the high speed stability of this Chevy Impala is nothing to brag about, but it ain't often I go foot-to-the-floor, and it feels great. The Super Bee slowly catches its own fire as those three 'deuces' feed the 440's high-gear rear end, and it comes up door to door. Proud Mary's speedometer is pegged at 120 mph, that tachometer getting close to its lifter-floating RPM limit of 5,400, as the Chrysler product pulls ahead like a whipped thoroughbred. Ok, I win first, but he wins top-end. Time for me to ease back on my throttle, hold that wheel steady as we go way too fast around a normally safe curve, but I'm steady, floating over the whole two lanes so there's no real pressure put on the ball joints. That convertible top still being stretched too tight - damn I hate convertibles.

Ease 'er back and cruise along at eighty-five till I see the Super Bee's brake lights; we pull over at an exit to compare notes. His speedometer was at 135 mph when he passed me - damn, didn't know that Impala had it in her. He was pissed - he had traded in a car just like mine for this fancy new tri-power Mopar product, only to see taillights of the very make of car he'd traded in. I was as proud of Proud Mary as I ever was - almost as good as winning a trophy against those 351 Mustangs.

And the thing was - I had also tuned the Super Bee, so I was racing kinda against my own talent. He brought the Bee out to the house not long after he'd bought it, complaining that no one at any of the dealerships in town could make it run right. Could I take a look? Well, I never worked on a dual-point distributor, and there's nothing anyone can do about those three carburetors, they either work or they don't. But I was fascinated by the factory Behemoth and plunged right in - set the points the old-fashioned way with a feeler gauge, according to the little spec manual that came in the glove box. Set the timing with the light, but that didn't sound right, so I set it by ear until it sang. Check the rods linking the carburetors, make sure they're tight, adjust the air screws, button her back up and the guy takes it up Stygler Road. Comes back in a few minutes saying that's the best it's run since he bought it. Sometimes I amaze myself. Maybe there is something in the blood - grease monkeys beget grease monkeys.

Crunch! Damn this Army transmission. We're heading up hill now and I have to pay attention to what gear I'm in; just when second winds out and I put it in third, the truck ahead slows down - shit - can't we maintain some speed or stop and allow a gap between groups, or something? This is torture. My left foot is about to Charlie Horse. We inch up the curved road and I realize we're going right up near the spot we all referred to as the Hai Van Pass. Sight of the famous Hammerhead Salute. Seems like another lifetime ago. Sure wish I was flying now; a lesson never to take anything for granted - as if I needed to learn *that* one again. It has

taken us hours to get up here, we used to fly up in a matter of minutes. Place sure looks different from the ground at night. Don't recognize it at all. Who would.

From the top of the pass, look back to see headlights, stretching all the way back to where we started at Marble Mountain; then look north and see red tail lights for as far as the eye can see. Whew! This is one humongous convoy. How many miles? Impossible to tell - Memphis to Mobile, New York to Philly, Columbus to Commercial Point? Yea, the Dinks are really going to be surprised all right. This convoy can be seen by those guys playing golf on the Moon.

There's a strange thought - men are on the Moon, but here I am in a night convoy of trucks that would feel familiar to any WW II veteran - same basic uniform, same vehicles, steel helmets, the Sergeant's .45 sidearm. The world has progressed, but some things haven't changed. And it sure doesn't *feel* like WW II. This isn't like *THE LONGEST DAY*, which they showed us on a school field trip upon its release in 1962. We're not a great fighting force united in our efforts to speed as fast as possible to a confrontation with an enemy who threatens the very existence of our homes and families. John Wayne, Robert Mitchum and Red Buttons aren't here - they're back in Hollywood where they always were. We're not the *DIRTY DOZEN*, either, this war doesn't require heroics from jailbirds.

As the lights behind me are lost and I see only darkness on the downhill side of the pass, I start to worry about the brakes on this truck. Rev the engine and slip the clutch to maintain speed without making the thing buck like a bad carnival ride. This side of the hill is dark as your bedroom was the first time they made you sleep without a light on. The tail lights glow red, out of focus, like the burning tip of a cigarette, mocking my need for nicotine.

Close attention has to be paid here - if you can see or sense the hill on your left it offers no comfort, since it could be a hiding place for a Viet Cong, who could have been waiting for just this moment to spring out with a knife. And if I

don't sense a hill there, it can only mean being on the edge of a cliff, the bottom of which can only be imagined. The darkness, the eerie glow, the idling motor (I've given up, and use only brakes to slow me now) are beginning to get to me.

The Staff Sergeant dozes but still sits ramrod straight - I could sure use someone to talk to right now, but I have to admit, conversation wouldn't be safe. It could divert your attention and the slightest hiccup could send us right off this narrow goat trail, and off into a plunge down to God-knows-where. And we still have a long way to go - the lights I could see from up on the Pass stretch out way above Phu Bai, so I know we're not going to stop for a while. And I'm sleepy. Sure could use some Obesitol now. The Army used to throw some 'Bennies' (Benzedrine, a stay-awake pill) into survival packs, until they all got ripped apart by drug-hungry G.I.s. Hell, I haven't seen a survival pack this whole tour, except in that General's helicopter. What I really need is sleep.

Damn, this is not what I pictured war to be like. Why does reality always have to be so distant from dreams? Whatever this convoy is leading to is not going to be the big decisive battle I imagined myself being involved in. When they say 'war' you imagine fighting, not creeping up a dark hill in a truck in the middle of the night with no medals to be won, no bigwigs to impress, no tall tales you'll get to tell, just this urge to piss from a full bladder, and a throat full of fear. And an urge to crawl into the back of the truck and make the Lifer drive while I sleep. Can't shoot what they can't see, and I can't fear when I'm no longer the target in the driver's seat.

How does this keep happening to me? Why me? I'm smarter than most of them, I'm supposed to use my brain to avoid getting caught in positions like this; but here I am in Catch 22, either take my chances that the dinks get me, or refuse and go to the stockade. Why didn't I think this through? I should be making choices between college courses and which party to attend this weekend, like the rest of my smart 'peers'. But no, I didn't like studying, I was too impatient, I wanted action. Sure feel like a dumb ass now.

Instead of action, I get aggravation, agony and no one to blame but myself. I can't take this much longer; wish I'd been born rich so Daddy could've gotten *me* into the Reserves or National Guard. I wish.. "I got a new dress..."

Shit. I would have *that* pop into my head. Bang! Foot slipped off the clutch and the spring-back wakes the Staff Sergeant with a start. "Sorry, Sarge, just my foot fallin' asleep". But I feel no embarrassment and he doesn't try to hide his aggravation with my mistake. Getting down to lower ground twisting and turning through the foothills, but the rain is picking up. Gaining some speed, using the motor to brake, a relief not to have to ride the brakes so much..

"I got a new dress."

Just when I'm at the bottom of my well and feeling sorry for myself, *she* is there. Just when I think things are as bad as they can get and can't get any worse and I want to wallow in this misery stew I've cooked up for myself, I'm reminded of the lesson that just won't leave me alone, won't let me harden and really armor my self-pity with a spittin'-fire attitude. Something inside has to muddle everything up by reminding me that no matter how bad things are, there was always someone who had it worse...

MARSHALL ELEMENTARY AND THE INEQUITIES OF LIFE - LESSON ONE

As if I need reminding. I hadn't forgotten, but hadn't thought about her in years, either. Fourth grade, Marshall Elementary, Cynthiana, Kentucky. Tobacco and coal mining country; my first lesson in the inequities of life. I was a child of divorce, sad as a kid can be that I'm living away from my Dad and my family, the race cars and the hometown where every house contained people who loved me. But in the midst of my self-pity I suddenly found myself a bit of superiority over these Kentucky 'hillbillies'.

Back in Commercial Point, my third grade class had been combined with a fourth grade class, and here in Kentucky I was way ahead of the other kids because of it. I had sprouted tall, so I could star on the basketball court. A sense of humor also sprouted as a reaction to fear of being 'the new kid', so I became a class clown that even the teachers enjoyed. And we lived in a suburban tract house with a huge yard, 'rich' compared to some of these country kids from the hollers and coal mining shanties. Some kids came to school dirty, with raggedy clothes and with few supplies with which to do their work.

It was Show and Tell, that horrible period when kids got up and showed off their new toy or told of their family's vacation. Always the same kids getting up and telling about stuff. But one day this real quiet girl raised her hand, and after the usual chatter boxes, of whom I was one, had had their say, the teacher called on Her. She wasn't pretty and no one fussed over her drab hair, she was obviously poor. She wasn't bright or witty, so she wasn't popular, just sat by herself and tried hard to keep up. When the teacher called on her, we were a little surprised and curious about what she was going to say. She walked deliberately on her flat shoes to the front of the class and, in a voice as flat as those shoes and as drab as that hair, she said without bragging, as if she was informing us that snow was falling in wintertime...

"I got a new dress".

She barely smiled, as she walked back to her desk, fast as she could and sat down. The teacher's thanking her helped fill the hush that fell over the room and covered up a few giggles. I was embarrassed for her; my mother would have used the fabric of that 'new dress' as a rag to dust her furniture. But the brave little girl had never had anything to share with the class and this was her chance. And she took it.

Of all the things I wish for from the past, the past that you can't change and can't even conjure up clearly, of all the things I wish I could say, I wish I could say that I was one of the kids who turned around and smiled at her as she sat down. Please. Let me just think I was one of the few. Getting

a smile just might have made her day, rewarded her for her courage and helped her forget about those who laughed at her. Please. Let me believe I did the right thing. I promise I won't forget the lesson. That, no matter how bad things are, there's always, *always* someone...

The road is leveling out and getting straighter now, creeping along in third-gear and the rain is letting up. I can breathe again. Look over at the Sergeant and he's got that I-never-dosed look in his sleepy eyes. I notice a gray-ness out his window; first light and it's good to see the South China Sea. I don't care, I'm lightin' up. The first drag makes me dizzy with relief.

Looks like Mr. Lucky has made it through another trial. The jury finds you guilty, the sentence is - life. Hunger is the proof. Boy this sure would be a good place to put a Pure Oil Truck Stop. Eggs over easy, burn the sausage but not the toast, coffee so strong you can stand a spoon up in it. One section of the counter has a sign that says 'Truckers Only'. Gum-chewing waitress with a beehive hairdo. "More coffee honey?" If she don't call you honey, she doesn't like you. The things ya miss.

Hey, we're near Hue Citadel, wonder if that 'O' Club will be serving lunch. Now you are dreamin' son. You got in because you were a flyer, you're a truck driver now, you can forget about it. They come around with some cold coffee that tastes like day-old socks and it only makes me want to piss more. "You want to drive, Sarge?" "No, you're doing fine, soldier." Hate being called soldier. Breakfast is C Rations passed out as we drive by, and of course the Sergeant takes the beans 'n weenies, and of course he carries a P-38 fold-up miniature can opener - one of the most elegant little tools I've ever seen in this Army. Again, I get turkey loaf.

Stopped along the way, I jump out and take a picture. All it shows is a line of military vehicles against a gray sky. If the picture



didn't include the rice paddy on the left and the unique power poles that line Highway One, I might have a hard time proving the shot was even taken in Vietnam. But there's also that white lettering on the bumper of my pickup: 1st AVN, which stood for First Aviation Brigade, of which the 282nd Black Cats were a component.

That long night turned into a longer day, as we pushed beyond Hue, and up past Quang-Tri to an open field near Dong Ha, a broad, flat plane equal distant it seemed from the mountains, the sea and the DMZ. The place was already actively being transformed into a military compound, with landing pads laid down with P.S.P, concertina wire stretched around perimeters and command centers-on-wheels being hooked up to generators. Looks like we're getting set to do *something*. Lucky me, instead of getting some much needed shut-eye, I get to play carnival roadie and help erect tents. One is set up immediately as a field kitchen. Good, I'm starved, and I've eaten everything I brought from Elaine's care package.



Now, that first meal that comes out of an Army field kitchen - before the potable-water tank-on-wheels flushes out the sediment, and the cooks get used to the 'wandering' heat put out by portable bottle-gas cooking stoves - is a meal so bad that your stomach stays mad at you for days. Taste buds curse your stomach for being hungry - hell, kids in 4H feed their prize hogs better than this! In heaven, your cook is French or maybe Italian, but in hell, he's got a tattoo on his arm that says United States Army.

Here is another reason why a picture is worth a thousand words. Who would've believed a modern army heading out to the field with tape recorders? This picture of a reel-to-reel set up outside a tent means it could only be Vietnam. Army discipline would have prevented such a



thing at any other duty station in the world. Wherever we went, we took our 'stuff' with us - and to many of us, music stuff was the most important of all. That's why I say that, in order to understand who we were and what we were about, you have to listen to our music. It identified us; relieved us, inspired, intrigued and protected us.

One thing I never stopped being grateful for was the fact that Vietnam was warm. Uncle Dick had been in Korea and all the film footage from that war showed snow and cold weather. Up north here it got hot and muggy during the day, but sleeping in partial shelter wasn't nearly as bad as it would have been if the nights had been cold.

Growing up, I hated cold weather, and only enjoyed snow when (and if) we got to go out and play in it. (or when, in Kentucky, they'd cancel school because of it.) After two tours in Vietnam, I developed a liking for warm weather and now live as close to the Equator as I can. We were also lucky that it was early in the season before things got real hot and dusty dry. It was here that I also got my first and only bout with 'Jungle Rot' - white spots on the skin from parasites in bad water - a grunt problem that flyers weren't supposed to get. After a few days of working like a dog, I flew back down to DaNang, grateful that I didn't have to drive that truck back. I dash off a letter to Elaine, (6 Feb., 1971).

FEB 6. 1971

Hi Babe,

Sony I haven't written in a while but I'll explain later. I got your package last week and it was the best ever.

You know all this top secret stuff ~~you~~ you've been hearing on the news about a big ~~to~~ troop movement into I Corp? (North part of S. Vietnam) well it's true; they're moving all kinds of people up north for some big operation. Rumor has it that it's a thrust into Laos, I don't know. I went up there last Thursday in a convoy. That's when I got your package, and was that ever appreciated on that 13 hour convoy. I'm lock down here for a couple of days then I'm going back up. Part of our company is camping up there ~~in~~ right close to Dong Ha.

I ordered all my Christmas presents ~~of~~ out of a mail order house so it's hard to tell when they'll get there.

I'm glad you like the

dope, I'll send ~~it~~ ^{more} later. I was really surprised you got so stoned on it. We smoke fowl after bowl, night after night, and still get a bit wasted ourselves. Remember, keep your house cool. The pigs are really getting down on dope so be cool.

A letter which tells so little and explains even less, like just how grateful I was for that Care package. And the Jungle Rot must have given me a case of the stupids, as I am asking if she's heard on the news about a top secret troop movement. Uh, Tony, if they heard about it, it's not so secret, and if it truly is a secret, how would they have heard about it?

But, by this time, February 1971, I was sensing that America wasn't really keeping that close a watch over Vietnam anyway. Note this letter has that it's still a 'rumor' of a 'thrust' into Laos. In the minds of many Americans, I think it remains just that, a rumor. And as usual, those of us at the lower ranks were not briefed very much beyond the 'need-to-know' level.

Looking back over my letters to Elaine and brother Mark from this period, I notice a lot of time elapsed between when we started preparations in the company area and the time of the actual invasion. It was at least a month. All along I kept wondering how Mama-san knew what the Army did not want to tell us. And I wonder now if that was less about keeping it a surprise to the enemy, than it was keeping it from reaching the ears of the anti-war movement back home. The invasion of Cambodia had sparked riots in the U.S. Maybe they learned not to advertise their big operations until they saw whether or not they succeeded. I couldn't tell either way, from where I was then or am now.

(I'm writing this on 24th Feb. 2001, Lanzarote, The Canary Islands. Put down my pen, turn on CNBC and they're running a *Time & Again* episode about the Kennedys' first trip abroad in June 1961; first Paris, then a Summit with Khrushchev in Vienna. On their agenda: Berlin, the Cold War, and Laos. No explanation is given on the program of what's going on in Laos. It's mostly about Jackie, her clothes, her French and her popularity. True story - but who cares?)

So I go back up to Dong Ha in a gunship, this time as an Alley Cat, and not as a lowly teamster. And I know it's for a big operation; still not announced as a push into Laos, but big, they don't deny. Let the Marines guard Da Nang! The Army's got a war to fight and Marines ain't invited!

The assembled force grew considerably in my absence. Another company of Hueys parked near us and shared our landing pad. ARVN troops camped next to us, so we knew what our job was going to be: take these poor saps somewhere and drop their asses off.



Once all the tents are put up, there's not much to do but sit around and wait. Catch some skin cancer, read a magazine...

Once everyone is up there, though, we don't have to wait long. One afternoon the Pilots are called to a briefing and the word spreads that we're going tomorrow morning.

Only one company of helicopters is needed for the initial assault, however, so a coin toss is held to see who gets 'first string', and who gets to sit on the bench for the first inning. The Black Cats lose the toss, so we have to hang out and listen to the 'game' on the radio.



There is one of those things I do recall clearly - that one small fact that has everything to do with my actually being here now - that lucky toss of the coin that prevented me from being killed on that first day of the Invasion of Laos.

That night, as we Americans sit around campfires, drink beer and sing along with the tape player, we can't help looking over curiously at the ARVN infantrymen in the field next to ours, who are getting ready for tomorrow's action in their own way. We didn't usually get this close to each other;

some G.I.s shout over in fun when an argument seems to flare up among the Vietnamese, which sounds as if they were dealing with dissension within their ranks, too. We hear rallying cries among small groups from time to time, as if someone's going around trying to boost their morale, after which things go quiet again. Maybe the Vietnamese version of the St. Crispin's speech from Shakespeare's Henry The Fifth.

Some smart aleck G.I.s walk over to the fence and offer a beer, which is taken gratefully but surreptitiously; a joint is also offered but refused. There isn't much conversation, due to the language barrier, since both groups are young, under-educated peasants, after all. After this awkward exchange, each side retreats to their respective camps, having achieved no camaraderie despite our being allies, comrades in arms, and in the same slaughterhouse holding pen. Not even salutes for those about to die. In the morning, the ARVN soldiers are up and out early, off to meet their destiny before we finish our breakfasts.

After the ARVNs leave, some guys from our company go scavenging in the abandoned muddy field where they had pitched their tents. They make a grim discovery: hypodermic needles scattered here and there, discarded without regard for discretion or even safety. One or two glass vials are also spotted, but we can't figure out just what drug they were shooting up. Morphine or speed, most likely, we figure - or a cocktail with a little of both; kills the pain and keeps you awake, just the combo to take before a battle, we joked. Naw, it was probably just speed, someone said, keep them awake all day after a sleepless night. But Vietnamese don't do drugs, we thought, so why here, why now? What makes this operation different? We ask ourselves. Suicide mission, can't be anything else - they don't expect to come back from this one. This isn't funny anymore.

Nor is anything else that day. Also up and out early that morning is the helicopter company who had 'won' the toss for the privilege of taking the ARVNs in. They never came back.

I don't know how we passed the time that day. I didn't know that much about the 'C' model, so there wasn't much work for me to do, other than to go over it with a fine tooth comb.

Then sometime in the afternoon word came back that all sixteen aircraft that went in were shot down, the majority of them victims of *SAMs* - Surface to Air Missiles. A *SAM* is launched from a tube, much like a bazooka, one man holding it and another man aiming and pulling the trigger. But they don't have to be aimed precisely



- they have a high-tech homing device in the tip that seeks out heat and guides the missile to the source of that heat. In this case, the heat from the chopper engine's exhaust was sufficient to guide the missile. One minute, these guys were flying along, the next they were an exploding fire ball. Didn't know what hit them. Radio reports were heard of pilots screaming as they saw the ship next to them explode, then radio contact fizzled as that ship too was hit.

The thing is, some evasion tactics could be employed, if you saw the missile (or someone else spotted it for you) and swerved out of its way just in time. The missile would not be able to maneuver back around, and would fall to the ground after exhausting its load of propellant. But you *had* to see them coming, otherwise..

That there were *SAMs* at all, and so many of them, was a failure of our intelligence or a total and complete surprise that the North Vietnamese had kept secret for just such a moment. We had heard of a *SAM* being used before, here and there, but not in such numbers, all at the same time. But a surprise attack? Unfair. Those poor guys didn't have a chance. But there's no such thing as a 'fair' fight-to-the-death, and those missile systems, while designed and built in Russia or China, had been dreamed up by none other than - us. More proof, I guess, that no matter how powerful and

sophisticated a weapon system is, there is always a cheap (relatively) and easy (considering the expertise required to operate it) way to defeat it. In one day, they had leap-frogged over our powerful Airmobile Cavalry and instantly leveled a playing field that had always looked like it belonged to us.

That afternoon, I saw something I had never before seen in Vietnam, even though it happened all the time - I saw a Chaplain giving a service. Giving the sacrament or whatever the religion of the attendee required, all denominations got served. I didn't go; they don't have a service for lucky potheads or foxhole atheists.

I don't recall how I spent what I figured was going to be my last night on earth. Did I really feel that way? Maybe, maybe not. Didn't write letters or do anything special. Probably just sat around the campfire and drank beer, which probably tasted good for a change. Maybe a few of us gathered at the edge of the compound and shared a joint before we went to bed, all in the usual way.

Next morning before take-off, we double-check our chicken straps, so that we don't fall out if we suddenly get jerked by a pilot trying to evade a *SAM*. They tell us to watch for the vapor trail, that's the dead giveaway of a *SAM* on the way. Just when I'd felt that I'd faced down every fear, here was a new one - would it be worse if you *did* see it coming and knew it was too late? Now, on top of looking out for small arms fire, there was a new weapon to peel your eyes looking for. It stung my eyes trying to see, it hurt my head trying to concentrate.

And there's more to it than just the threat of *SAMs*. We fly into a huge valley bordered by sheer cliffs; on top of the cliffs are flat plains, referred to as the Plain of Jars - very uncharacteristic of Vietnam, so the place has this other-worldly look to it that gives me vertigo for the first time in a helicopter, as soon as we enter the valley. It reminded me of Grandma Blanche's favorite verse '*Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death...*' And the death was there for all to see - North Vietnamese Army tanks, which had been blasted by our Cobra helicopters the day be-

fore. (We heard reports that the tank crews had been welded into those tanks, a claim I saw no proof of, but which added yet another shovel-full of fear into my kit bag that morning.) I had never seen N.V.A. tanks before, and we flew so high that day that a close look was impossible, but there were tanks down there; that I could clearly see. I also spot the burnt wreckage of helicopters, but my eyes don't dwell; yesterday's bad luck was ancient history; it's today's missiles I'm looking out for.

Our part of it is over quickly. Our slicks go in to pick up the ARVN soldiers that had been dropped there the day before. The ARVNs swarm onto the helicopters, fighting each other to get on, and our crews have to force some to back away by aiming the M-60s at them. Some ARVNs are so desperate that they grab hold of the skids as the slicks try to take off, forcing the crew to step on their hands to get them to let go. There was no choice, an overloaded slick is not only hard to get off the ground, but can crash soon after take-off from the lack of power. What makes it easier (but more desperate-looking) is the fact that the ARVNs left their weapons and much of their equipment behind; guns, packs, radios, some had even dropped their steel helmets in their mad dash to retreat. Images that stick in my mind. I clearly recall thinking how grateful I was to be in a gunship and not dealing with the chaos our Slick crews endured that day.

So, after all that preparation, work and build-up, it was all over in a couple of days. I couldn't help being haunted by those other crews who didn't come back. I also wondered what happened to all that equipment we convoyed up there - I'm sure I didn't see a convoy of the same size coming back down south after it was over. I think we left it for the ARVNs. That was how we could supply them with war-making material without having to ask Congress for the money; just leave them our stuff and tell the supply chain-of-command that it was 'used up' or lost in the operation.

9MARTI 7

Hi Brother,
Well, I wish you could see me now,
I'm nearly the picture of a lonely HT.
I'm so homesick my balls are blue,
it's raining and we're living in tents
and a sea of mud and madness,
I'm flying again, in a gunship. We
were in Laos the other day, Have
you heard of LZ Sophia on the radio?
We were working out in that
area (25-30 miles inside Laos.) the
past week. There were more
helicopters at Khe San than people
in Columbus. You wouldn't believe
all the shit I'd see. It's scary
as hell. I hope to go back to
Danang this weekend and take
care of business.

(I'm not sure what part Khe Sahn played in this operation, but I suspect it was used as a staging area, if I noticed it had "more helicopters than people in Columbus." Khe San had been one of the bloodiest sieges and remains as the most infamous and deadly battles of the entire War)

I do not recall seeing any press reports or official recaps of this invasion. There must be some official record, and I'm sure there were stories about the Invasion of Laos (officially dubbed Operation Lam Son) in the press, but my attention was easily diverted at that time to other matters.

(One thing I've only recently learned is that, during that first week of March in 1971, much of America's attention was being diverted to a different fight - Muhammad Ali

and Joe Frazier were meeting - March 8th to be exact - for the first, time in a heavily anticipated bout at Madison Square Garden. A fight attended by the most hype and celebrities of any fight in history up to that time. Frazier knocked Ali down to win what has been declared one of the best fights of all time. Some say it was the *whippin'* Ali was due for, he had been bragging too much for too long and this fight 'levelled the playing field' for him, too. No wonder I have no memory of this fight, we took tape decks to Dong Ha, but I doubt if we got any live reports from *this* fight.)

Of all the operations I was involved in during my tour, this 'thrust' into Laos, leaves the most questions in my mind. Since this book is not meant as a history text, I have engaged in no outside research and intend instead to include only these impressions that have remained, so that I can be as sure as reasonably possible that they're mine and not the recollections of anyone else. My hope is that my story will create a curiosity inside those who read it and cause them to seek out other sources that will help illuminate the facts and answer such questions as why we were there, who planned it and what were the goals, what actually happened and what were the consequences for the US, ARVN and NVA forces, as well as the political ramifications.

I was also tempted to research this operation just to see if I remembered it wrong. But there's always that chance that it was actually worse. Hard to believe that knowing more could ever make the nightmares go away. Where does fear go at the end of the day? If you swallow it like you have to 'swallow your pride', how does the body digest it? My strategy over the years has been to ignore it, work hard, keep focused on a goal, live a life of longing, so that there is always some need to fulfill that forces me awake and out of bed each morning. Drinking, drugging, 'cleaning up', anti-depressants, psychiatry - movies worked best - but nothing wiped the slate totally clean. It's still there, randomly flashing disturbing, often incomprehensible mental images inside my head like a hellish haywire projector being controlled by someone who does not like me at all.

CHAPTER 45 - GOOD SOLDIERS MAKE BAD REPORTERS

15 MAR 71

Ki Claire

Sorry I've taken so long to answer but I've been up north and didn't have time to write. We flew into Pass a few days. That place looks like the Woodstock of Warlords! That was scary as hell.

I'm glad to hear you found a new job. I hope you like it and stay with it for a while.

I'm also glad you halted the parties. Dope parties are a dead end, especially in your own house; you never know when that freak sitting next to you is a narc.

“Woodstock of Warlords? Khe Sahn? Gunship? Heard on the radio? Scary as hell? The shit that I’ve seen!” Whew, when I read these letters I want to reach back through time and strangle my inarticulate younger self. Either say something, boy, or shut up. Shameful bragging to my brother, unnecessarily scaring my best friend and in no way am I actually telling them facts or explaining what’s going on. Adding to my shame is a rage at the arrogance of my youthful self for assuming that I would remember everything and someday sit around a campfire and tell of what I saw - or write a book. I’m angry for not being a better reporter - that’s

part of what I went to do - discover facts and relay them to my friends, so that they could have first hand knowledge of the truth of the war, with which to combat all the lies that passed for 'common knowledge' of the time, as put forth by the politicians, media and 'experts' who kept insisting that things were going our (righteous) way. And I could use a lot more of those facts right now to jog my memory, and reconstruct consciously that which my conscious mind (or conscience) has tried to hide. Self-preservation is such a difficult instinct to override. Then I remember...

'Forgive yourself'; that's what all those self-help books advised. "But you don't understand", I always reply, "I asked for all this." 'That's impossible, you didn't know what 'all this' was before you signed on. You were lied to. Deceived. Betrayed by the very myths that led you to believe 'all this' in the first place. You swallowed it without being taught how to chew (analyze) it.'

I have only two things to offer in my defense - first, I assumed that because I was there, they (family and friends) were following the war, keeping up to date with the news of every battle and story; what I wrote back was only intended to confirm my involvement with what I assumed they were hearing about on radio and TV and reading about in 'the papers' (my hometown of Columbus, Ohio only had two newspapers - ever). My thinking didn't go any farther than that; I didn't force them to follow, or check if they were, I just assumed that just because I was involved they would change a lifetime of apathy and non-involvement overnight into being concerned, well-informed readers who sought knowledge, cared about truth and dared to effect some measure of change.

After all, that seemed to be the way the world was going when I left. We had had long 'rap sessions' and those of us with a like mind here in Vietnam continued and broadened and deepened the discussions about not only the war, but American society and the world in general. In the months (and years) that followed, I discovered that just the opposite had happened while we were in Vietnam. People became

less concerned with the fighting *in* Vietnam, and more concerned with the fighting *about* Vietnam. There was less talk and more shouting, as people grew tired of the whole thing - too many radicals, too much extremism and my old nemesis, that 'acceptable level of hypocrisy', had begun winning the days and the arguments - and stifling discussion and dissent.

And two, I had not been trained as a reporter. I was a good reader, but more because of natural interest than good teaching methods. I could write, but had no understanding really of why it was important to know how to write. They could never really predict for me just when or why I would need the skill of writing. My parents didn't know why anyone should need to know how to write - after all, they got through life just fine with only the basics; why, unless I was going to college (and even then!) would I need to know how to string words together to form a clear picture of what I saw in the world? Even teachers, whose job it was to explain things to us, weren't able to make us understand. After all, it's a visual world (TV and magazines) and everyone specializes, (What does a car mechanic need with Shakespeare?) so why make the kids work so hard? Why saddle them with courses their parents can't explain or help them decipher? Why bring down their grade point average just because they can't articulate themselves? Or compose a cogent sentence?

I didn't know until just now - it's because pictures lie. Because we are all reporters on the History of our world. Because if you try and write non-fiction, you gain an understanding of how valuable all those words and techniques are in telling the truth as you witnessed it. And because if you set out to write fiction, you learn how easily those very same words and techniques can be employed to tell any lie you want.

The military is a Cyclops by its nature, it can only see the one side of the story that best suits its purpose; its single-eye view lacks perspective. In Vietnam, there was no live coverage, hardly any videotape, and the only film that got shot was taken by brave reporters who were determined to show the story to the people back home - a kind of advocacy

journalism we can never expect to see again. Pictures are too easily manipulated electronically for emotional effect, and can never again be trusted. Only the peoples' eyewitness reports will convey the real truth of any future war or event, and that's why everyone in a free society must be trained to analyze and articulate that which they observe in their world. Those who don't learn to tell their own stories, are doomed to lose their voice because they will always have to rely on others to do their talking for them. Vocal cords are like any other muscle, they must be used or they will atrophy, wither and become too weak to be heard over the bellows of those loudmouths whose words and ideas are amplified by money and power.

And the right of free speech also needs exercise to remain vital and strong, it can't live encased in glass, nor can it ever be the exclusive domain of any one institution. 'They' can never know what 'I' think. Nor can we expect them to care. Profit comes before public service or you go out of business. Why else did all those newspapers go bankrupt or get swallowed up? And that's why we must be *taught* to demand perspective before being forced to make up our mind about any question of public policy, domestic or foreign. Instead of dismissing conflicting views in favor of a single outlook, we need to be taught to assemble those perspectives into a more total view to reach the whole truth.

Even though others who were involved in the Invasion of Laos saw it differently, if we all had been forced that night to recollect what we had witnessed that day, a very clear picture would have revealed itself to anyone who took the time to listen to all of our reports. Rather than just the one-dimensional official report read by a reporter into a camera, this 'gathering of perspectives' would show not only the front view, but the back, top, sides and bottom, and in so doing, also give the observer a sense of the depth of the story. This is what a historian has always done - construct some truth from out of an assemblage of perspectives. But unless we empower and endow each person with the tools needed to report what they experience, the historian is stuck

with nothing but the 'official story' or the 'pool report', attributable to no one, and the truth will get buried with the people who witnessed it. When you ask your kid, "What did you learn in school today?", demand an answer. And always ask a follow-up question. They will only live a better life if they prevent themselves from making the same mistakes as their predecessors.

I don't think our company suffered any casualties on that day. Losing that coin toss had won us a reprieve from death. One of those victories you can't celebrate. Just fly back to Marble Mountain, write letters back home that contain only the bare facts, go back to a routine and try to enjoy every single sunset, every hot shower, even the less-than-terrible food, and try not to think. Let thoughts of the present moment crowd out memories of this recent past.

One of the worst experiences in my life warrants one paragraph in my letter to Elaine. The rest is given over to the other war, which now has begun to employ the word *Narc* - short for Narcotics agent. They've tried to bust me, and everyone else, who hung out with the wrong crowd in the wrong hootch and had the wrong attitude. That was reason enough for them to hassle us. Send mescaline and candy bars. Every soldier needs some.

CHAPTER 46 - A MONTH OF MONDAYS

Because the old 'C' models were not being replaced, and their role was increasingly being taken over by Cobras, A-10s and other newer aircraft, the Alley Cats needed fewer crews, so 'last hired', 'first fired', and I was dumped back into Second Platoon, flying ever more boring flights, in a newer ship that required less of my work time.

Blivet had been unceremoniously retired and used for parts before ultimate disposal in whatever manner used at the time. With the war winding down, there was more and more trouble among the troops, the Army couldn't disguise the fact that most work was assigned just to keep us busy, and most disciplinary actions were attempts to catch people doing dope, which seemed to bother (and scare) them way out of proportion to any real harm that could be done.

THE SHRINK

Being back in Second Platoon, doing the same old jobs forced me to face how truly terrible I was feeling. Unfamiliar tensions inside my head accompanied by long-stagnating anxieties made me take the greatest leap ever - to a Shrink. It was a big risk on my part, because there had always been an unaccountable fear within me that I was really mentally ill and I would only be proving it by admitting my fear to an Army psychiatrist. But I went anyway. I just couldn't see how being in a mental institution could be any worse than being confronted daily with nightmares and a growing feeling that I was going to lose my mind if that last limb I was hanging by happened to snap.

I told the Psychiatrist, a sympathetic sort to his credit, how I'd come to Vietnam to be a hero, warrior, casualty or at the very least something called a man - and had failed miserably at each and every effort. I had discovered instead that this was not a war and there was no need for me to be here - either for my own or the Army's benefit. "False pretenses",

he responded. "You joined up under false pretenses and now you realize your mistake."

(I would call it a mistake sandwich, piling one mistake on top of the other - much like the Vietnam War itself)

Yea, that's it, I agreed. Even though I knew that there was much more to it than that. I never found that authority I felt was worthy of my obedience and loyalty, and it was causing me to defy the Army in spite of myself - I didn't know who I was, but I couldn't let them define me either. I was on a one-way street to the stockade and I had to get out - now. All that stateside time to serve and my inability to face an Army without war was paralyzing me. He agreed that I should get a General Discharge. That was fine with me, anything other than a Dishonorable Discharge is OK; you can explain a General Discharge, especially with my five-hundred flight hours in combat and nine air medals, two with 'V' Device. Write up the paperwork, I said. So while the process chugged along, I didn't get to fly much.

Also didn't get that R & R I was owed; I was actually owed two, the extra one for extending for six months. But the Army had done everything it could for the last six months to keep me from going on R & R, something that they usually took great pains to make happen, since it was a way of keeping us from going stark raving mad.

So I signed a paper which first requires that I waive my rights, (what rights?) and goes on to assert that such a discharge could lead me to expect "substantial prejudice" in civilian life - it says that twice. (Never once since I got out has anyone, even the Veterans Administration, asked to see my discharge papers). OK, fine, I can accept all that. Now all it needs is approval from your Commanding Officer. What?! That's ridiculous, I'm just a hard-to-replace warm body to him, he's not going to see it from my point of view. And sure enough, he didn't. Using some trite little phrase like, "I'm going to give you another chance, son", he ordered me back to duty.

Suddenly I was worse off, because now I was a known trouble case, and a sitting duck. No more shrinks for

me, I thought. What a waste of time. Held a grudge against shrinks for a long time after that. Swallow the anger and betrayal and depression just like I'd swallowed everything else. I'll doctor myself, somehow. Get through the days however I can and live for the night. Luckily, there were some interesting nights at about this time...

FLYING WITHOUT WINGS

There was an area toward the edge of the company compound, large and open enough to erect an outdoor movie screen. There was a tent nearby, set up as a bar, which one night got converted into a smoking den. To use up what was leftover of the 'haul' he'd gotten on his trip with Papa-san, my friend decided to make the ultimate bong and get as many people stoned on it as possible. A 40mm shell was drilled out (in the machine shop), and fitted with a metal tube that was inserted into a large ammo can lid like the ones mounted on the M-60s of our Slicks. Then four hoses were affixed to the lid for drawing out smoke, and the box was filled with water (then ice) and the water-tight lid was put back on.

One night shortly thereafter, a brave handful of Marines snuck over from across the runway, and we decided to see how stoned we could get them. Well, in the process, I got as stoned as I ever was, or have been since. Once the bong was operational, the tent filled with smoke from a technique, commonly referred to as a '*shotgun*', where someone would blow into the burning bowl and smoke would shoot out the hoses; all you had to do was put the hose to your mouth or nose and inhale. Of course, I was the eager beaver demonstrating it, and ended up getting more ripped than anyone.

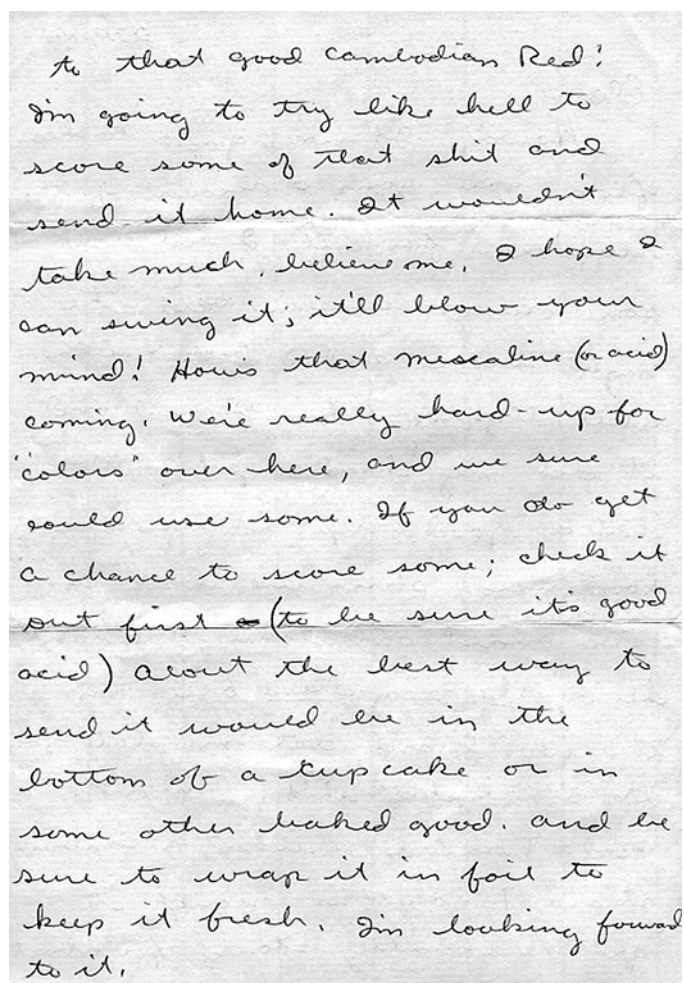
When it came time to walk around and enjoy the high, I felt great and was following a friend on a path outside the tent, when I abruptly stopped and fell sideways like a tree. Didn't collapse at the knees, just went right on down, seeing the world go sideways as I fell. Even felt the bounce as I hit the ground. I lay there for a few moments in the soft

earth, expecting pain, but I felt nothing but the cool night sand. I sat up, collected myself and looked over at my friend, who was now laughing along with others who'd seen it. I got up, dusted off and kept going - and laughed about it for the rest of the night. Non-toxic intoxication, just what the doctor ordered.

23 April
Elaine,
Howdy; It was good to hear from you. your ~~an~~ account of the "trip" was far-out, I had had some orange-sunshine acid the night before and I ~~was~~ was still tripping when I read and it did my head a job. We had a good trip, it was really good acid; plus we had an extra added attraction: Thailand herb, the very best dew in the world and let me tell you it's ass-kickin' shit!!! Wow! acid + Thai dew what a combination! 1 joint is enough to get me totally stoned for about 3 or four hours; and I'm used

"We had a good trip." The first time I ever did LSD, it was something called 'orange wedge' and it contained

some kind of poison that made my backbone feel like it was being 'wedged' out of my body. But the next time I did it, the stuff was clean and I found out what all the buzz was about concerning this stuff they called 'acid'. If Mescaline was a sub-orbital flight of the imagination, LSD was a rocket ship zooming across the galaxy, as I found out the second time I tried it. What would have seemed unthinkable to me just a few months earlier, taking a psychedelic drug in a war zone, was just another leap in a long line of risks I had been taking since I arrived in Vietnam.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and discusses the author's interest in 'acid' (LSD) and their plan to try to obtain it from a source named 'Cambodian Red'. The note includes instructions on how to handle and transport the substance, such as hiding it in a cupcake and wrapping it in foil.

to that good Cambodian Red!
I'm going to try like hell to
score some of that shit and
send it home. It wouldn't
take much, believe me, I hope I
can swing it; it'll blow your
mind! How's that mescaline (acid)
coming. We're really hard-up for
'colors' over here, and we sure
could use some. If you do get
a chance to score some; check it
out first (to be sure it's good
acid) about the best way to
send it would be in the
bottom of a cupcake or in
some other baked good. and be
sure to wrap it in foil to
keep it fresh. I'm looking forward
to it.

Might as well, I figured, since other guys I was smoking with and taking Mescaline with seemed to enjoy it with no crushing side effects. After all, it's just the next step, isn't it? Hadn't we been lied to about weed, Vietnam and all other things? But what really convinced me in the end was the respect that my friends showed toward the drug. It was called 'trip sitting', which meant that you weren't alone on your 'trip', there was someone you knew right there who was on the same 'plane' and who could 'talk you down' if your thoughts strayed into negative territory. It was a caring kind of spirit among people that I had never experienced before - what religion promised but had never delivered. It wasn't the sacrament or ceremony that counted, it was the people.

I fumble for words trying to describe those first LSD experiences, as language is inadequate to describe feelings that don't register through the usual channels. These 'insights' don't appear in everyday life, as this is a peek into the inner workings of the universe that can't be 'scoped out' by the unaided consciousness. This particular trip I'm relating to Elaine was special, being my first really good experience. (Here is another area where I wish I had been more diligent in my reporting, the details would add much to the fun of recollection). Another friend had gone on R & R all the way home to Utah, (it was possible) and brought back a wealth of goodies, including the 'orange sunshine', which was a clean and strong 'brand' of LSD popular at the time. He also brought enough for quite a few people, so there was much sharing of all sorts of goodies.

The Thai 'dew' I'm waxing ecstatic about in this letter is something called Buddha pot or Thai ceremonial - delicate, blonde, finger-sized sticks of marijuana wrapped in string that truly was the sweetest smelling, most powerful around; and hard to get. I never did send any back. But on this one particular night, someone brought out their stash and it enhanced the already-soaring effects of the Orange Sunshine. A real 'carnival in the cranium'.

On top of being warned not to drink alcohol, and not to go around people who weren't 'tripping' while doing acid,

I had also been cautioned to stay away from mirrors. You can get 'hung up' looking at yourself and it can be scary, what you see. Well, on this night I violated the mirror rule and did indeed get 'hung-up', but not in an excessively negative way, luckily. Even a routine 'pit stop' in the latrine was an experience while tripping, sometimes making you feel like you were using these 'parts' for the first time. After standing there for what seemed like forever, the actual expelling of urine came out like the finale of an act of bodily creation. Then, after washing up, I glanced in the mirror and before I knew it, was staring at a changing image. All those miniscule adjustments that happen as our flesh ages were no longer fixed, still images like we see everyday - suddenly the reflection turned from static to fluid motion, as I watched my face get older, quickly and progressively, until I was staring at the bleached skull underneath. Strangely, this did not cause me the fear I thought it would. It made me a bit sad to watch the accumulation of wrinkles, spots, bags and loss of hair, and to watch my youthful countenance turn into a sadder-but-wiser looking me.

But the whole thing seemed to convey the message that I was indeed going to live to be old, (the number 86 came through somehow) a message I've always believed, but have never taken for granted. Destiny is your 'allowance', and free will is how you spend it, but there is no 'bankruptcy' protection if you unwisely risk too much of your 'currency' too often. OK, OK, fine, so I'm going to live a long time, I thought, as the moment ended. Don't mean nothin'. Don't mean it'll be happy just 'cause it's long. Let's get back to that party!

Back out with the rest of the gang, we ended up breaking another rule that night, by hanging around 'straight' people who weren't tripping. Some of us couldn't help being curious about which movie they were going to show that night, since they did get some of the latest releases.

I felt the eyes looking at us as we approached the area where some benches in front of the screen were already filling up with people; but I managed to withstand the paranoia

by feeling pity towards these guys who weren't having near the fun that I was having that night. I had always been a movie fan and have credited (and blamed) the movies for creating most of the myths and beliefs I've based my life on, so I always have some expectations and anticipation about them. And I was especially curious to watch one while 'tripping', to see if they affected me differently - acid could make the most mundane everyday activity feel brand new. The bark of an old tree can be the most involving and inspiring thing imaginable, when you're seeing it through acid-enhanced eyes.

The movie was called *KELLY'S HEROES*, starring Clint Eastwood and Telly Savalas. Right away, my fellow acid trippers and I started giggling at the absolute stunning absurdity of the Army showing us a war movie here in a war zone. The joke was lost on the rest of the crowd, who didn't share our take on the whole thing or see it from our warped point of view. Then, realizing we had drawn attention, we decided to stay, just because we got the sense that some in the audience actually appreciated the fact that it was a war movie. Because they wished us gone, we stayed. And we were rewarded. Turns out, *KELLY'S HEROES* is a comedy about a bunch of G.I.s who push behind enemy lines in pursuit of some gold hidden by the Nazis in a small town bank. They arrive only to find the bank guarded by a squadron of Tiger tanks, and it's how they deal with all the obstacles that makes it funny - and anti-establishment.

We went from laughing *at* the movie to laughing *with* the movie, since it's about a bunch of anti-heroes using their soldiering skills and Army equipment for the sake of their own enrichment. So symbolic of what war does on a larger scale, and so ironic to see it not only within the narrower context of the Vietnam War, but in the actual war itself. Another example, like *ALICE'S RESTAURANT* back in Basic Training, of the Army not looking at or not understanding the full meaning of a movie's story line and our possible interpretation of it. We stayed and howled, far beyond the hilarity on the screen - it was the idea deep within it, as if

someone back in Hollywood really did understand the whole line that we were being sold about war, and wanted to send us a message of truth and understanding all this way. Someone saw things as we did! And we appreciated it - much more than those guys who could only see what was taking place on screen. Someone, somewhere, had reached the same conclusions I and many of my fellow trippers had reached - if we're going to be here anyway, we might as well get something out of it for ourselves; altruism be damned. After all, if you have to risk your life anyway..

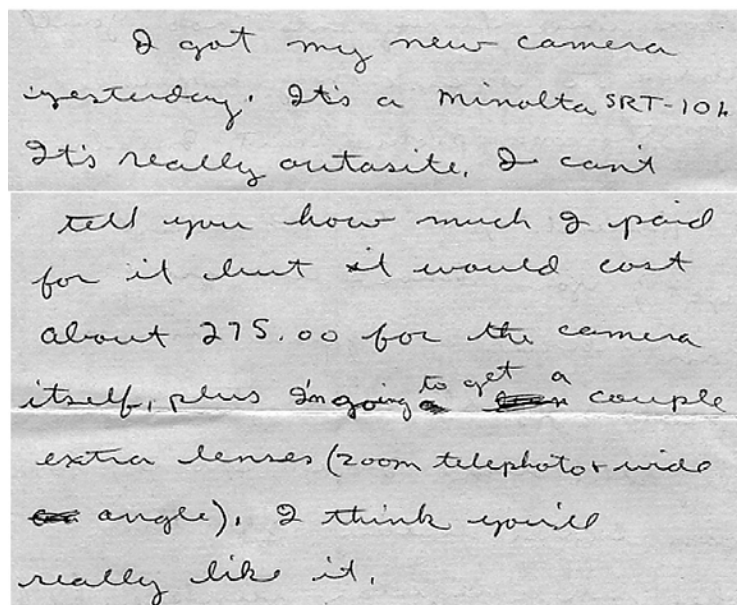
After the movie, we went back to hootch for a smoke, and munched our way through one other treat my friend brought from home - Baby Ruth candy bars. Umm real chocolate in a familiar wrapper, something none of us *ever* got in-country, and which caused some of the sharpest pangs of childhood nostalgia I had ever felt, not being particularly nostalgic about my childhood at the time. (The Military had developed a special chocolate for the jungle that didn't melt in the heat. Tasted like that unsweetened 'cooking' chocolate, mixed with talcum powder. Inedible. So real candy bars were coveted partly for nostalgia and partly for their own delicious quality.)

We also tore into some pineapples someone had stolen from the mess hall. Those pineapples were cut like a ritual, slowly and with a kind of reverence I'd never seen shown to a piece of fruit before; more like carving than slaughtering. A different appreciation for the sweet juice and pulp inside is found when you're tripping - it felt like we were asking permission, which the pineapple was so grateful for that it tasted better for our having asked. So much about the war I don't recall, but a certain pineapple, I remember, gave us its all.

Flying on the day after doing acid was quite an experience, first because I didn't expect to fly that day, being non-assigned to any one ship; and secondly due to the calm I felt and the freshness of a day, which felt like it was not connected to any days that had gone before, or owed payment to

any days that came after. I'm doing this today just as I've done it before, but never has it felt *just* this way.

I also distinctly recall thinking clearly about that gun loaded and ready to kill which rested in front of me. I knew that, if someone out there wanted me to use it, I would use it. Period. I suffered no indecision or uncertainty - if someone wants to die, I will gladly help, and do my best to accommodate the damn fool's wishes. Lack of sleep was cured, as I mentioned to Elaine, by 'speeding all day', which wasn't quite true; I'd wait till I needed it, about mid-afternoon, then do only what I needed to stay awake. I often wondered and still do, if anyone on the crew noticed a certain, different kind of smile on my face that day.



I got my new camera yesterday. It's a Minolta SRT-101. It's really outasite. I can't tell you how much I paid for it but it would cost about 275.00 for the camera itself, plus I'm going ~~to~~ ^{to get a} ~~few~~ couple extra lenses (zoom telephoto + wide ~~an~~ angle). I think you'll really like it.

Then to come back that night to play with my newest toy - a state-of-the-art Minolta 35mm camera. Gee, I am never going to get that Z-28. Well, hell, I have to make it back alive first. And the way things are going...

But if I do make it back to the 'World', I'll have the 'swinging-est' *Playboy*-type life, with a Class A camera out-

fit, the best stereo on mine or anyone else's block, and some groovy 'threads' I'll have made in Bangkok. Look out peasants, a man of class is coming through - uh, 'comin' hot!' I mean. I had already started sending my stereo back (the shipping was cheap) and had Pacex mail-order send a new turntable and headphones directly to my home, so that I'd have stuff to open that was brand new.

Well, I started this letter
this morning and here it is almost
midnight. The lenses + tripod to
my camera came in this afternoon
and I've been playing with them
all day. I've been speeding all
day and I'm just about to
crash, I'm enclosing ~~some~~ a couple of
pictures I took at SongHa when
we were flying into Laos. You'll
have to excuse my appearance
in the one picture but I've lost

weight since I've been here,
I know it's hard to believe,
but I just can't hardly eat
this food over here.

Have you found a new
apt. yet? Let me know as soon
as you get it.

Well, must go for now,
write back real soon

PEACE

Toy

Such are the benefits of being in a war. And the 'why' just never made sense - why are these things only available to us? Why are the goods mostly Japanese? (Couldn't knock the quality, Japanese stuff at that time was just overcoming a post-war reputation for shoddiness). Is it to repay Japan or boost their economy? Mysteries that were never answered, or asked too demandingly - shut up and order more while you have the chance. PXs back home will never be as great as the one at China Beach.

How's that Mescaline coming, Elaine? I notice now that my troubles with the Army were not a subject I included in my letters home of this period. Just didn't know how to relate this stuff, so I kept up the good news as much as possible.

CHAPTER 47 – FRAG

Just as I was learning the rules of being a hippie, people were breaking them all over; mixing drugs without regard for their effects, and mixing cultural and political messages without understanding them - even music was changing. Ozzy Osborne and his band Black Sabbath released an album called '*Paranoid*', which transformed 'hard rock' music into 'heavy metal'. Dropping the Blues influence and the 'Power of love' lyrics, this music embraced instead the 'love of Power', through angry, screaming lyrics and the pure speed of the notes, which were fewer and more discordant. Drums were more important than guitars, and tended to be 'banged' rather than played. Just as I was beginning to appreciate Ginger Baker's drumming and Eric Clapton's guitar, they were being replaced, usurped, even ignored, so that rank amateurs could also call themselves rock stars. And I didn't like this new stuff. It was unworthy of the higher fidelity of our new equipment, and worthless in our search for higher consciousness.

The peaceful revolution that had turned to violent 'blows against the empire' over that previous year (roughly starting with the Cambodian Invasion and Kent State killings of May 1970) was beginning to show up and spill over into Vietnam. In all wars there are stories of mutiny and insubordination that turns violent, but Vietnam gave the world a new word for it - '*Fragging*'. Frag was shortened from Fragmentary Grenade, and it came to mean any attack directed against a person of authority (usually a Regular Army officer). In Vietnam, they seemed to occur mostly in the Infantry, whose soldiers would get angered to the point of violence at those who sent them into known ambushes, senseless missions repeatedly, or who, for whatever reason, got people killed 'unnecessarily' through ignorance, negligence or other lethal mistakes.

Early one Sunday morning, an explosion woke up everyone in our company area, but since it wasn't followed

up by sirens or anything else, it didn't send us scurrying to the bunkers. I fell back to sleep. But it wasn't long before word got around that the explosion had taken place near enough to our Commanding Officer's hootch, that it was being investigated as an attempt on his life - a fragging.

But wait, I thought, he's not the problem! He's not the guy who makes forays into our living quarters handing out dumb ass assignments and laying down 'us versus them' rules that only serve to widen the gap between the NCOs and enlisted men. The Major was only doing his job trying to keep the company in the war while keeping us safe from missions of pure idiocy, of which there were many. The Major didn't play petty games with us the way NCOs sometimes would, using personal prejudices and other base human emotions to judge us by, instead of our actual performance in the field. 'Army bullshit' is not an idle insult, sometimes it's a way for those who committed themselves to this military faith to express their dislike and disgust with us non-believers. Frustrated by our 'blasphemous' lack of respect for the military they tried in a variety of ways to punish us or at the very least, penalize us.

So my first reaction to the news was a chuckle of disbelief at the stupidity and pointlessness of an attack on the C.O. It was our immediate superiors who were unfair, picking on people they didn't like while totally indulging those they did like. An aviation company has a fairly rigid hierarchy to begin with, the flyers occupying special places at the top, so it was natural that guys who worked in the hangar would be forced to pull more guard duty, sand bag details, construction and all manner of other grunt work, if for no other reason than the fact that they were around and not out flying. So a hangar or administrative guy could expect to get Zulu guard, and almost all of them did. The fact that in our company this fell more heavily on Black American soldiers should be the subject of its own book.

And the fact that some who worked in the hangar were tech specialists and were needed to keep the ships flying, made it an ever more stratified organization; one that

demanded a spreading of burden, an approach based more on reason with a focus on results, rather than a devotion to traditions and the Voodoo of the chain of command structure. Get the damn Platoon Sergeant, I thought to myself, he's the one who's always bringing us bad news; he's the one who keeps 'pets' like a school teacher, and who never apologizes or tries to hide the fact that he treats *them* better than *us*. A few Platoon Sergeants were like that fat, vindictive cop-on-the-corner back home who was taking it upon himself to stamp out hippie thoughts and draftee attitudes with any weapon available to him, by any means necessary. A high school mentality with a prison guard's power.

So the C.I.D. (Criminal Investigation Dept.) questioned everyone, but the investigation seemed to center more on some hippie-type guys who'd been in trouble before. I was a suspect, meaning that I got questioned more than once. I wasn't asked about my obvious motivation to kill the Major



- after all, he had denied me a General Discharge, my chance to go home and be free; I could have easily held a grudge. But they didn't ask and I didn't volunteer the information. (they should have known, but they never brought it up - any cheap TV detective would have zeroed right in on my motivation before the first commercial break) I truly did not know who did the deed, - or if it was a genuine attempt, or just a random attack.

Whatever it was, it precipitated a massive search for weapons throughout the company area, including mine-sweeps in and around our hootches. The searching got absurd and repetitive, and seemed to turn up more buried coffee cans full of lethal weed than lethal weapons.

Mostly, it just looked like the investigation was a pretext for harassment and morale-diminishing searches; more mistrust, just when we needed some kind of reconciliation of differences so we could concentrate on the war at hand. But

the war at hand allowed too many gaps between battles and into those gaps fell all those other gaps that fell between those of us who were supposed to be on the same side. I remember thinking at the time that the fragging (*if* that's what it really was) was a futile, stupid act, but the resulting investigation was poorly conducted and the questioning heavy handed. Hell, I could have found out who did it, but wasn't the slightest bit interested in helping. My greatest fear was guilt by association, having hung out with a lot of people who were undoubtedly suspects (or at least suspicious characters).

The results of the investigation were not revealed, as far as I know, and other than the expected increase in overall tension around the company, no big changes seemed to stem directly from the incident. It took time to happen, but through normal attrition and transfer, the majority of hippie-type guys I knew in the company left. (How I later came to find this out - and witness even more bizarre official behavior that was, for me, proof of the Army's unraveling - was one of those truly strange sets of events that no one would believe in a story - only real life is allowed to be this coincidental and capricious.)

I was bothered by the immediate effect of the fragging incident, the questioning, the tension and mistrust it caused on both sides, the paranoia it unleashed within all of us, and the deeply depressing sight of our own people conducting searches with a mine sweeper for weapons which may have been intended for one of our own people. All that was bad enough. But there were two other consequences, one sad, one bad.

The sad thing was, the spirit within the circle of people in my immediate area got popped like the delicate surface tension that keeps water above the rim of a glass. We couldn't trust what we said or who we said it to anymore. I recall becoming closer with some of my pals during this period, because I knew I could trust them (mainly because I knew where they were at most hours of the day - working like I was - so I knew they couldn't be involved in bomb

plots.) But while ‘rap’ sessions were becoming more personal and maybe intense, they were also, out of necessity, becoming smaller, less inclusive and more likely to have beer and drinking paraphernalia around, first as a decoy, but then more and more because ‘line-crossing’ was making it hard to tell the drinkers from the hippies.

What was really bad about the fragging, though, was that it represented a new threat to this fragile thing called peaceful, non-violent resistance. It was a new violence that mirrored the violence back home - falsely blamed on the hippies and used as a pretext to harass and publicly discredit the entire idea of pacifism. All the way over here in Vietnam it happens; proving to me that the other side is not only in possession of all the power, but that they are also not afraid to use it to deceive and confuse citizens, and destroy even the best of ideas.

Up to that point, it had always seemed that hippies and anti-war rock ‘n roll-type people were thought of, even by the Army, as harmless fools, hedonists or just wayward youth. But now, thanks to the Weathermen, Black Panthers and other violent groups back home and the ‘fraggers’ here in Vietnam, we were considered dangerous (and by this time I considered myself an anti-war person who sided with all personal liberation struggles).

The music reflected it. The parties reflected it. The new crop of young people coming in were ‘hip’ to all the drugs and lingo, but they also knew how to scoff at or dismiss any true belief with indifference. They were more concerned with ‘partying’ than the reason for the party. (I think it was around this time that the word ‘party’ began to be used as a verb rather than a noun - “let’s party” replaced “let’s have a party”) These kids (they seemed so young to me, and I was just turning twenty) were more concerned with ‘getting it’ than with getting it right.

For the first time in my life, I’d found a true belief with a group of people and shared the gratifying sensation of the rightness of a movement. But just when I began to be-

lieve, things began to sour. I realized that I truly believed in non-violence. Not just because true righteousness is always outgunned, and not just because it was safe to protest non-violently in our country, but because I hold as a core belief that we humans are here on earth to grow out and away from the need for violence, and that true human progress won't occur until that happens. Guns protect property and privilege, but human rights are protected only by a fragile fabric of civility that must be taught to, and enforced by, the people themselves. Apathy and ignorance deteriorate that civility until it's too weak to sustain even the slightest onslaught of negativity or destructive behavior.

During that spring of 1971, as resistance was boiling over around the world, my battles were becoming more personal, and more selfish - I did not want to help this war effort any longer. After the invasion of Laos, we flew fewer missions, engaged in less combat, and it left me more time to get caught in the Company area with nothing official to do. For all the 'luck' I'd had up to that point in my tour, I suddenly felt totally vulnerable from both the war (popping a soda can makes me jump) and the Army; not to mention the fact that I no longer had what they wanted - Crew Chiefs were now begging for missions. My letters home dropped off, it was too hard to explain to the folks what was happening. Even to Elaine I didn't try to explain. I didn't tell her about the Shrink, I was afraid she might do something weird, like try to help, (by calling the family, the Red Cross, or who knows who) which would have been at least futile, and probably counter-productive.

I had gotten as much from Vietnam as I was going to - I had a camera, a stereo, (which I was in the process of sending back home) money in the bank, and had smoked as much weed and experimented with enough drugs to know what I liked and didn't. I had seen war, close up and from a distance, and had taken part in some of it, even though not as much as I originally wanted. No more goals here, what I want is all going on back home. Vietnam has served its pur-

pose for me. I'm done with it. But it wasn't done with me, unfortunately.

By spring 1971, a lot of the 'old' guys had 'DEROS'ed back home, leaving me fewer people to talk to. I became withdrawn, lonesome, (even though lonesome is a word I would have never used, I considered it pathetic), and more antagonistic towards authority.

I played a lot with my new camera, a device that had a lot more capability than I had talent. I'd waste rolls of film (subsequently trashed - for good reason) trying to recreate on film what I thought I saw through the lens - 'psychedelic' artsy stuff mostly. Pictures are another source of frustration as I write this, because I had a device that could have shed so much light on this history as well as leaving me with more positive feelings about my involvement.



Instead of documenting the people, which would have helped cure the loneliness then and aided in my understanding of all those memories now, I brought back pictures of only a few close friends, a few indistinct drive-by shots, and a lot of shots of what I can only describe as 'evidence for the prosecution'; Proof that we'd gotten everything wrong in Vietnam. (Like shots of a ship aground, a plane that overshot the runway, and all sorts of bombed out structures that tell nothing about what was destroyed) I'm surprised that so many pictures, and even some negatives, survived this long, especially considering how much I moved over the years and how shuttled aside they were for most of that time. Amazing they survived, but maddeningly disappointing because they tell so little of what I saw in my daily life in Vietnam. Maybe photography should be taught as an advanced form of 'readin' and writin'. Commo is commo, after all.

But who at twenty years old expects to someday be an old man with a faulty memory and a need for understanding through recollection? I was thinking mostly of going

home, which was a long way off, thanks to that six-month extension, and thinking how impossible it seemed that I would survive with any ability to enjoy life. The war where we were was winding down, our Army did not need people out on the edge anymore, and I missed being 'out there', while at the same time I realized that 'out there' was now a sucker's place to die - no one wanted to be the last man to die in Vietnam. But 'back here', I'd already shot my mouth off, so they knew about me; even my bunk area, plastered with anti-war posters, screamed out my position.



I would have been a better soldier in a better war. But they were constantly trying to convince me of something completely the opposite from what I was seeing with my own two eyes. If we can invent a million ways to kill, surely we can come up with few more solutions to resolving our differences than just the ones we usually employ, namely punishment and war. It is this one-track thinking that causes the real problem.

There weren't many more pictures and letters, because I had become so numbed that I couldn't see clearly nor compose my thoughts and feelings anymore with the camera or the words at my disposal. What part of this Vietnam can I put a frame around with my camera and focus on to convey accurately any perspective, or explain how wrong it all seemed to me? I'm grateful this many pictures and this many memories lasted this long, though. Couldn't have written this without them.

REDS, YELLOW JACKETS AND BLACK TAR 'O'

There were fewer people around me who could be trusted (paranoia had struck deep) as these kids were short on respect, and uninterested or unconcerned for the struggles

- be they political, social or legal. So while there was less weed, there was a whole new crop of drugs to experiment with - like 'reds', (Seconal, a barbiturate, sleeping pills, really). which were effective at making you 'crash', and especially helpful to counter speed-caused insomnia. And speed went from Obestiol and little white 'Bennies', (Benzedrine) known to truck drivers everywhere, to Yellow Jackets, (Methedrine), a much more potent and lasting 'crank'.

There was no longer any real line between being a drug 'experimenter' seeking 'enlightenment', and just being a recreational thrill/chill seeker. No line anymore, just a broad foggy border. One day I realize I'm on the other side, seeking out new 'head highs' or 'body rushes'. (or was it vice versa?) While Reds and other 'downers' would put me right to sleep, my first few encounters with opium introduced me to a different kind of high. While smoking even good weed tastes like the combustion of vegetable matter, putting the fire to a sticky tar-black little ball of opium produced a perfumed vapor, dominate and aggressive, yet gentle and seductive at the same time. It bubbled and popped as it gave up its essence and turned into ash, leaving a cloud around, and in, my head.

Like a warm new fluid coursing through my bloodstream, it functioned as an instant dose of relaxing nonchalance toward the world that could quickly turn into the 'nods', and then sleep. So an effort had to be made to stay awake and enjoy the high. For this reason, some people would bury a hit of speed in a small ball of opium, (the original 'speedball') and then eat it. Just as the 'O' was making you mellow, the speed would dissolve and wake you up in time to enjoy it.

I never got around to trying that or any other opiate-based combo. I sadly discovered that opium left me with such a terrible stomach ache the day after, that I couldn't stand the idea, even. I'd always had a weak stomach when it came to alcohol, and now here was another bit of fun I was going to miss because of my tummy. No nights at the opium den, no smug indifference towards the world and its pain, no

romantic descent into a narcotic nightmare, from where I could rebound and be able to proclaim that I had been to the lowest depths of despair and returned to write a best-seller. Nope. Not for me. Mine was a different brand of luck. Just as street racing hadn't done it, just as the war hadn't done it, now narcotics were not going to provide that blaze of glory I'd been looking for, that white-hot finish that proves, by its sheer extremeness, that I had been a 'hard-living guy' who died fighting his demons.

Shucks. I'm a '98 pound weakling' again, a 'piker' who passes on joints that have the black tar painted on them. (a messy, lazy but effective way of adding opium to a joint). After a couple of accidental pulls on 'laced' joints, and the resulting nausea, I could no longer trust what was being passed around, so I learned how to tell by smell when opium or heroin was in a joint. I'd have to sniff out the 'bad' stuff, and there's just no way to do that in a crowd of people without looking like you're turning your nose up. More alienation, as if I needed it.

Setting myself apart, just as I was feeling like part of a group. How 'lucky'. I felt like a wine connoisseur at a convention of Vodka drinkers. Alienated and old, as young guys in green uniforms who haven't seen what I saw or felt what I felt were already doing more drugs than me at an earlier age. And since there wasn't much happening in the war, there was nothing I could teach them, or brag about, or pass along.

There is no real aesthetic enjoyment in popping a pill; to swallow this one is just like swallowing that one, but smoking marijuana has a varietal flavor not unlike the variances in wine types. Something that nicotine and heroin, the two most addictive compounds known to man, don't offer; 'the flavor is irrelevant, just give me the fix'.

That's what confused a lot of people about opium. Because of the lies about marijuana, too many people (they *were* young and rebellious, after all) assumed that the warnings about opium were also lies. Opium has been around forever, like pot, the thinking went, and was a legitimate drug of higher consciousness, and not really addictive, as long as

all you did was smoke it. Two lies. Another problem was there were some guys who really didn't *seem* to get hooked on opium, claiming no stomach upset ("What's yer problem, Lawless?") or urgent need to do higher quantities. So more and more new guys, who had been prepared for drug use by word-of-mouth (and the U.S. media), expected and found it. And, because Operation Intercept made pot smoking difficult, those who wanted to do drugs had too many other choices, too little information about the drugs, and too much time on their hands, to be warned off by anyone.

This to me was when the line between getting stoned and getting high was crossed forever. To the point that most people today don't even know that there ever was such a difference. After spending my early drinking years getting stoned on alcohol, I was amazed at how different a body, mind and spirit can feel when it's chemically propelled to the outer edge of consciousness. But enlightenment does not permit mere mortals that power to defy gravity without exacting a pretty high admission price. Either work long and hard at it, (like yoga or other meditation) or take the short cut (drugs) and risk early annihilation.

In the Vietnam I saw, and observed over the course of my two tours, the Army tried to deny, cover up, or ignore drug use, then made feeble but ever more desperate attempts to stem the tide. But each new wave of new guys was bringing with it drugs they had been doing back home, including their 'mother's little helpers', the prescription tranquilizers (precursors to today's anti-depressants) that were just beginning to be widely used in the U.S. I doubt if the Army kept good records on all the drug casualties in Vietnam, but an accurate portrait we'll never have, because to this day, no one wants to study it objectively, we're still embroiled in moralistic debate, an inhospitable environment for any scientific inquiry.

I'd really rather not speak of it here, because of that very moralistic climate in which we still find ourselves. One side will complain that any discussions except the sermons against drugs are tantamount to a glorification. The other

side might wish for more evidence, more details, and more ammunition for their argument against criminalization. Others still wish for more tall tales and amusing anecdotes about the good old days when we were allowed a certain tolerance. I can't satisfy any of the above factions. Just like pondering what life would have been like had I not gone to Vietnam, I also sometimes wonder what life would have felt like had I never altered my consciousness or gotten inebriated. Cannot ever know, so it's all idle speculation. I write this much because I have to, it's part of the puzzle. It affected how I conducted myself and it altered my life for years to come. To speak of my time in Vietnam without some discussion of drugs would sin by omission. To report on a fire without mentioning the heat, is dooming posterity our mistakes to repeat.

So for a few fleeting moments, from about November to April, I heard echoes of a generational upheaval from people who knew people who had been there - Berkeley, Columbia, Woodstock, Kent State - those Bunker Hills and Gettysburgs of that revolution. A great new idea was offered up which demanded civil rights for all American races, equality for all genders, an end to poverty and an end to this war. An idea of reasonable rule for a free people who live in peace on this their earthen home. It seemed an idea whose time had come. But revolutionaries die, get jailed or compromised, and new converts often lack the vision of the initiators, and in the case of the 'sixties', I think the struggle just exhausted everyone; we got tired of arguing and just said the hell with it all. The revolution is over, let's party. And so, before the idea really got a good fair hearing, before the debate was ever begun, it was too late. I began to notice that a lot of long hair, the symbol of the Idea, was covering up a lot of 'Red necks'.

Personally, I became a speed freak. As if I wasn't skinny enough, here I was taking diet medicine. (one of the original uses for amphetamines) I liked being 'up' all the time, constantly alert, talkative, and fiddling with my camera, helicopter or even for a while, finger-paints! Chewed a

lot of gum, smoked a lot of cigarettes and didn't worry about 'them' finding out because speed didn't make you stoned, just hyper-sober. You get a lot of nothing done. Drinkers can stay awake to enjoy their drunk. Potheads find the combination of weed and speed feels a lot like doing psychedelics. It could make for lively-sounding rap sessions that ran long into the night. Speed was deceptive about fear though; at first, it helped lessen the fear that I lived with because I felt more awake and alert, more ready to react, able to fight off whatever crossed my path.

But after doing too much too long, the opposite became true; I'd get jumpy and see shapes and movements out of the corner of my eye that weren't there. I looked at the people around me with unwarranted suspicion, they were mostly new to me, after all, and tales of Narcs circulating within the ranks gave the fear a reality boost. It was all a reaction to a new reality. I wasn't just paranoid, they *were* out to get me. And if I was going to go to jail, I wanted it to be for something I did rather than just for being a sitting duck who got popped.

CHAPTER 48 – BUSTED

The ‘pop’ came early one Sunday morning (there’s that bad-things-happen-on-Sunday thing again). I was playing with some recording equipment, making a tape off somebody’s album, when the Platoon Sergeant comes in, which is a surprise, it’s his day off, too, I remember thinking. I figured he must be trying to bust somebody, the way he just burst in all of a sudden. But he barely looked around at all, his gaze snapped right to me, and when the first word out of his mouth was “Lawless..” I knew it wasn’t good.

Without seeming to take a breath, and with what sounded to me like a lilt of vengeful delight in his voice, he said “..the dinks are off today for some holiday, they need people in the kitchen, you’re coming with me to pull K.P.” I was stunned. I hadn’t been ordered to K.P. since A.I.T. I’d managed to dodge it by imitating an NCO back when I first arrived in country, and I’d escaped it during the bivouac at Dong Ha by flying Gunships with the invasion force. Only new guys and hard-core disciplinary cases got K.P.

While his command kinda lingered in the air like someone just farted, I looked around noticing in that instant that, of all the guys in the room, I was the last one who should have been forced to do menial labor. I either had more rank (I was an E-4, Specialist 4th Class) or more time in-country than anyone in the Platoon.

In one of those moments where my subconscious floods with thoughts while my conscious mind doesn’t appear to be thinking at all, I looked right back at him, holding my gaze and my voice as steady as I could, and said “No”. Never did like conflict or confrontation in my life, so I never really felt cool enough to go toe to toe with trouble. And he was trouble. He said something to the effect of an Article 15 Court Martial if I disobeyed the order, but I had already pulled the trigger, the shot would land anyway. I said “Do what you have to, Sarge, I’m not working.” He did a formal reconfirm of my refusal, this time I just nodded, and he

turned and split, taking no one else with him for K.P. Duty; as if his only reason for coming was to force the issue with me. Sure ruined my Sunday.

It felt good not to pull K.P., but I couldn't help thinking about what was going to happen next, like a kid waiting for his whippin'. I had always been a good boy, because I didn't like trouble; I'd always found it wiser to go along, get along. But this guy was fucking with me and I could prove it.

My mind spun with a defense strategy using my combat record and awards as a credibility base from which I could prove a pattern of singling me out for 'special treatment', going all the way back to Zulu Guard (which I now knew was not in any way evenly or fairly assigned), ship and mission assignments, etc. They'd have to listen to me, I'm not some trouble-maker; I've had some bumps before, but nothing that should require *this* much hassle.

But overriding my comfort in a defensible position was that doom feeling that warns larger trouble could result. After all, I had refused a direct order in a war zone, and any fool knows that military court operates by their own rule, so that stab of concern soon turns to worry that I would force them into a position of having to trump up charges against me, should I mount a real defense with lawyers and depositions. The Sarge had drawn a line and they had to back him up on it. How badly would they want to punish me? Is this just a personal thing, or is this part of something larger that they need a victim, a fall guy for? The Army could be extremely petty and vindictive, given the 'discretion' allowed local commanders, and a small misdemeanor could be used against one to demonstrate to others their willingness to punish severely any breach of discipline.

The real scare was a prison sentence, even a short one. Tiger cages, breaking rocks in the hot sun. I fought the law and the law won. I'd been tagged as a radical hippie dope-smoker. They were more dangerous than the enemy to the Army, because the Army's ability to keep up this masquerade of a war required obedience above everything, and here was someone who not only didn't 'get with the pro-

gram', but was liable to poison the attitudes of the younger soldiers coming in.

I was certainly no rabble-rouser and never evangelized anyone to join our cause, but in the imagination of ignorant military functionaries, we were all disciples of Jane Fonda and Timothy Leary and the sole reason why "we weren't being allowed to fight and win this war the way we know we could". And of course, here's another situation in life in which I found myself with no one to talk to - about any aspect of what I was going through. Someone with more sophistication, someone who understood the system better, could have put themselves in a defensible position. Someone who could approach the system like a free man, instead of an ignorant supplicant, might have insisted on attorneys and process and could have at least created a fair hearing for himself. But the military only warns you about consequences, and the differences between theirs and most civilian legal systems. They help you keep your ignorance of your rights and powers, so that whatever they accuse you of, you can't help appearing guilty.

After all, most Americans believe that you're guilty of something, if not this, then something else, so being arrested is itself proof of guilt. So, that Sunday night, I slept even more restless than usual, doomed again. At least on the night before my first combat assault I was able to envision myself shooting back at the enemy. I found that when someone gets into this kind of trouble, others around you tend to pull back, keep their distance or even step away, as if, and just in case, your bad luck was contagious. Or fear of guilt by association; whatever it is, you walk alone.

'Luckily', my torture didn't last long, as the next day, the paperwork came down and it was with some relief that I read my punishment - loss of one stripe and extra duty. Good - no jail or bad-discharge boot-out. But they had to pile on charges of missing morning formation, just to make me look like a repeat offender (which technically I was, as I had been busted for not showing up for morning formation back in February, but then it had just been a reprimand).

Not showing up for morning formation was one of those reaching-for-it charges, since, as a Crew Chief, I was hardly ever required to be at morning formation. Usually had more important things to do at that time of morning, like prepare a machine for war, or at least for a taxi job. In earlier days, crews were cut some measure of slack when it came to company obligations. But like anything, the Army could suddenly reverse course and ambush those it wanted neutralized. So I signed the Article 15, rather than requesting a trial, because the punishment could be more severe if I pushed them into a corner. Mine was a ‘slap on the wrist’ sentence but an expensive one, as the reduction in pay grade meant less money left over each month to save towards that Z-28.

There was no ‘Hollywood ceremony’ of my demotion, no humiliating yanking away of my stripe. It was all just a paperwork thing. Like being pulled off the line at Ford and being handed your pink slip. “No hard feelings, pal. See ya”.

KILLING FEVER

This episode is one I originally intended to keep out of this memoir. It seemed, before I wrote it, to be such a dull slice, such a pointless, negative anecdote. No drama or comedy, no flash point of politics, war or culture, just an embarrassment, not for being bad but for being caught and dealt with in such a way.

But now I see why it must be made part of this book. Because it reminds me of Lieutenant William Calley, who was accused of killing Vietnamese civilians in a highly publicized case called My Lai, after the area where it took place, not far from where we operated up around Hue. Calley’s case did a lot to bring the war and all its gory details into the minds of Americans, as it made its way from war story to trial story. Much was said, for and against Calley, but I never understood why he was blamed for creating a massacre or being a mass murderer. Even now after all the horrible facts

have come out, I still feel that Calley was heaped with way too much blame.

It's easy to be staggered by the sheer number of dead and the senselessness of their being slaughtered 'innocents'. But as one who went through the process that was the Vietnam War, I can say with some accuracy that we soldiers were never instructed about the difference between war and murder. We were advised that we had certain rights under the Geneva Convention if we became POWs. We were lectured on why we were in Vietnam. But not once did anyone try to teach us (or warn us) that there was a line between soldier and war criminal, nor did they teach us to recognize our actions as being on one side or the other.

It was all a conflict of perception. Calley's actions, like the actions of so many others, should have been understandable, considering the moral inversion layer we all operated under while in-country. To some, the whole Vietnam War was a criminal act, but others had different perspectives. Some may think it's possible for a soldier (or a street cop, for that matter) to see into the mind and know the intent of someone he faces in a conflict situation, and then be able to act properly in a split second after zero deliberation time. Courts, juries and voters, even shoppers, get time to decide - cops and soldiers get none. My fears and humiliation about the Article 15 pales in comparison to what Calley must have endured. I still sympathize with Calley, he was truly a man alone - the country, the military, even, I'm sure, some of his family and friends hurt him. He suffered far more than he should have. He was just like me, a good boy doing his duty, fulfilling his contract.

Since being in Vietnam, I now understand what happened at My Lai. It was killing fever. It should be expected when you place ignorant, under-educated and over-armed young men into a civil war where the enemy can hide himself within the civilian population. Anyone can get killing fever - it's easy. Think of your own reaction to the scenario the average grunt faced every day; not the *numbers* of G.I.s killed, but the face of just *one*. Someone perhaps that you

grew up with, joined the Army with, trained and came to Vietnam with. Then imagine their body parts blown into your lap from an explosive disguised as a piece of fruit offered by a cute-as-pie kid. How many dinks would you want to kill after that? How many? Are you sure you could stop once you got started? Would it matter if they were soldiers or civilians? Remember your dead buddy's face - remember that you were planning to go into business together once you got home, and your girlfriends were planning a double-ring ceremony. Remember how passionate you were at nineteen? Remember how quickly that passion could turn into righteous anger with the right provocation?

Even if Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger had been co-defendants at his trial, (as they should have been) Calley still would have taken more of the blame than he deserved. 'They' would have you believe that they can moderate the killing. That we, the United States Army, were only killing those Vietnamese that needed killing. But Calley reminded them and us that not every soldier can tell which faces are enemy, or which ones might *become* an enemy.

Even if all those innocent civilians were loyal to our side, who's to say that they might not tomorrow change sides after hearing some clever new piece of Viet Cong propaganda? There was a lot of recruiting going on by the Viet Cong all throughout the war - they understood better than we did the sway-ability of the hearts and minds of their people. So who's to say that Calley didn't *save* the lives of countless U.S. soldiers by killing those civilians? Just like they said firebombing Tokyo or the two atom bombs would save countless G.I.s. in the war with Japan. Yes it *is* the same thing. If you don't want this kind of thing happening, don't make us heroes-with-a-gun, killers-for-a-cause, defenders of Democracy. Don't expect me to risk my life and limb just so you can brag about how careful or precise we are at killing.

This was another result of the U.S. High Command trying to manage the war instead of win it. Body counts, and numbers of all kinds, seemed the primary concern for our

military at that time - Calley just bagged his limit of kills in too short a span of time. So take away his gun and his hunting license. Not his life. You fucks.

CHAPTER 49 - MOVED BY FORCES BEYOND CONTROL

I was transferred out of the company within the month, after being a Black Cat for fourteen months. I don't know if the transfer came about because I had requested it or because it was offered or ordered by the Company. Doesn't matter now. In a way I felt lucky to be getting out, things were getting 'hot', and having lived a virtuous past was no protection against this wave of Army purges. I couldn't say goodbye to my friends the happy way I would've liked to; I felt like I was being sent home early from the party.

The only memory I have of the trip is that I flew down to my new company in Chu Lai, in what we called a Loch, or *Light Observation Helicopter*. (Hughes 9000) It was an egg-shaped little buzz-bomber used for forward observation and reconnaissance, among other things. It had four blades instead of two like the Huey, so it vibrated at a much faster rate and maneuvered with stomach-churning swiftness. Like a bumble bee compared to a duck-like, wing-flapping Huey. I think some of these little choppers got fitted with rockets or some other weapon, which must have been the ultimate ride-'em-cowboy Army flying gig.

The company I was assigned to flew CH-46 *Chinook* cargo helicopters; large, ugly twin rotor behemoths that were handy at hauling but had the sex appeal of a station wagon. I knew nothing about them, so I was assigned to do menial chores before 'stepping up' to tool room clerk. Just sat there all day and guarded the torque wrenches from thieving chopper mechanics. My transfer orders clearly stated that I was a 'rehabilitative transfer' and whether my new Company commanders knew details officially, I didn't know, but they had to know I had just gotten busted for something, and had been in country fourteen months, during which I flew all those missions, got all those hours, and the air medals to go

with 'em, blah, blah, blah. All this was knowable, but not much was said by me or to me about any of it.

I wasn't saying much to anyone, even Elaine, as the letter of May 30th shows, I only refer to the transfer, (and the bust, not at all) as part of an effort to get out.

30 May 1971

Dear Elaine,

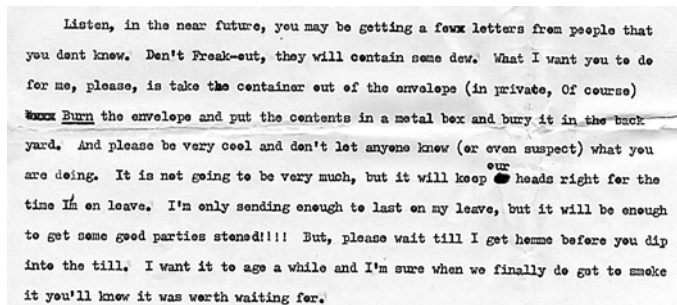
Sorry I took so long to answer your letter but I was transferred last Sunday and ~~now~~ I am in Chu Lai now. This place is even worse than Da Nang, and I really don't like it. The company I am in now is a Chinese company (a Chinese is a big dual rotor helicopter that they use for cargo, mostly). I am working (ha ha) as a clerk in a ~~maintenace~~ maintenance office. It is pretty boring but at least I don't have to work, which is something I refuse to do for the Army. I got paid for being here, not for working my balls off. I still hate this Green Fucker with a passion, and am trying my damndest to get the hell out. But it sure is hard to get out early.

An internal connecting line had broken - a link that went back all the way to Elementary School - School, family, friends, Army, Joe. I had gone from the bosom of my home to the bosom of the Army, always having things mapped out. Even the summer of '69 had a regimented plot. Work, play, plan, project, all according to patterns designed by society and enshrined by the culture I grew up in.

I had been a Black Cat all this time and now I was with a company that had no cartoon logo, no trademark, no esprit d'corps, no swagger to prop up my ego. This was all just anonymous, working class, get-the-job-done and keep-your-nose-clean generic Army service. For the first time in my life, I had nothing to be meticulous about, like a school assignment, a job duty, or a car to prepare for racing. No need to be conscientious, like watching the siblings, attending to the needs of friends, or training for some eventuality in the future. I had no future, no identity to shield me; I was just me, now. I was adrift, suffering an unfocused longing I couldn't articulate to even myself.

However there was also a small part of me that felt strangely free for the first time; free from the stranglehold of

dreams that I now saw were never coming true. I'd ruined my Army 'career', probably disqualified myself from serving in politics, lost interest in helicopters and forgot what was so fun about cars. And though I knew I wasn't going to die in Vietnam, I now had a newer, deeper fear - being awake and aware but not able to move; they could now keep you alive even if your body was dead and for someone who always felt hopeless and hapless, I couldn't stand the prospect of also being helpless. I became physically withdrawn, too, I wouldn't walk around at night, just went from the hangar to the hootch to the mess hall. It was as if I was in a time or place different from those around me.

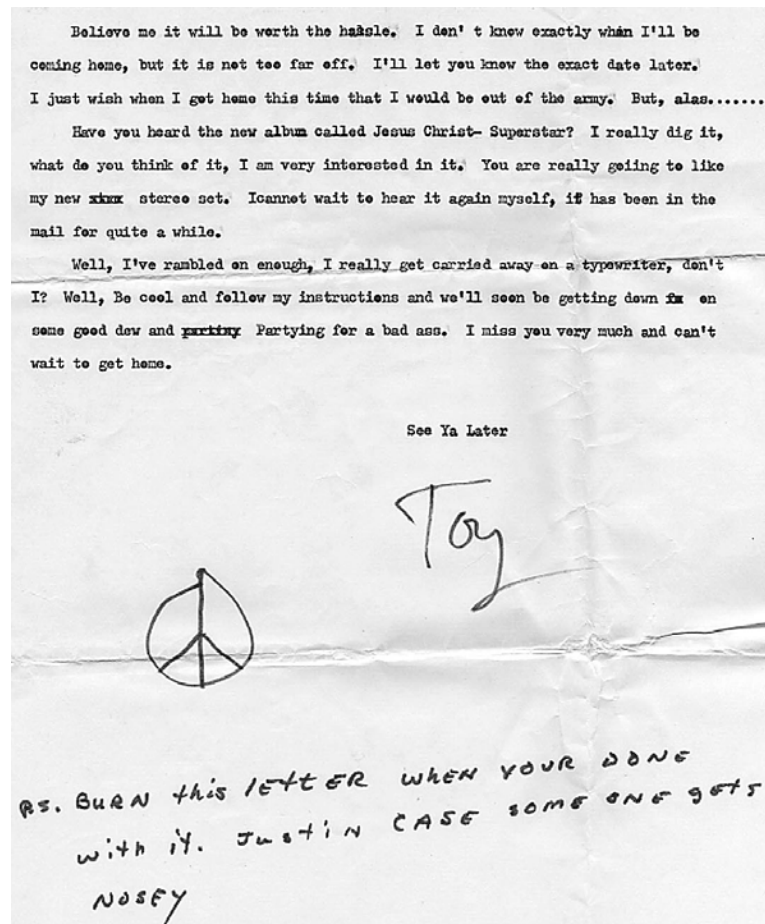


Listen, in the near future, you may be getting a few letters from people that you dont knew. Den't Freak-out, they will certain send dew. What I want you to do for me, please, is take the container out of the envelope (in private, Of course) ~~xxxx~~ Burn the envelope and put the contents in a metal box and bury it in the back yard. And please be very cool and den't let anyone knew (or even suspect) what you are doing. It is not going to be very much, but it will keep ^{our} heads right for the time ~~in~~ ^{en} leave. I'm only sending enough to last on my leave, but it will be enough to get some good parties started!!!! But, please wait till I get home before you dip into the till. I want it to age a while and I'm sure when we finally do get to smoke it you'll know it was worth waiting for.

I talk about sending more 'dew', but I don't remember where I was getting it, all my connections were back in Da Nang. And such paranoia - "burn this", "bury the stuff in the backyard," "Tell no one". I can't trust anyone but Elaine. Not that others weren't trustworthy, it's just that they didn't keep up the correspondence like her - I knew her better because we had talked so much over such a long time.

I let people around me in the new company assume the worst from my sullen attitude and murky background. After all, just as I'd looked at the 'old' guys when I was an FNG, now here were guys, new in-country, looking at me with fourteen to fifteen months of combat, like I was a battle-scarred 'basket case' who had probably seen unspeakable horrors and could erupt-at-any-moment. I fostered it even, in very small ways. I just didn't care what a bunch of rank

strangers thought, I kept to myself and offered no advice or comfort to anyone.



(Good thing she didn't obey all my instructions, or I wouldn't have this and other letters like it with which to reconstruct the past, a past which can't be recalled without a lot of help.)

This story should be over right here and I wish it could be. But maybe what comes next is important, I don't know. I do know it's almost as painful as anything ever was, yet there were moments of thrill and exhilaration, too. The thing is, it doesn't have anything to do with the war, per se.

It just happens to have taken place in a war. Kind of a slow-dissolving denouement of a doomed soul outside the gates of purgatory, waiting for word from the Governor. All because this Company that I had just been assigned to was moving. And for the second time in my life, I was headed to a place that still sounds more like a death sentence than a destination: Da Nang.

CHAPTER 50 - BACK TO DA NANG

Da Nang!?! I almost choked. I don't know who told me or where I was when I heard it, but I know my first reaction was, "Oh, hell, I just got comfortable here and now they're moving? I don't want to move this bunch of crap." Then it occurred to me to ask "Where in Da Nang?" There were places in Da Nang that were less or more desirable than others, having lived there pretty much for over a year and gotten a fair overview of the place. Chu Lai was relatively quiet and peaceful, I only at that precise moment appreciated that fact. Compared to Da Nang, it was less strategic, so it was safer and the Army seemed correspondingly relaxed about military decorum. Too late to start appreciating it now.

I almost choked again - this time on the sheer irony - when told it was to Marble Mountain Marine Base that we were moving. Right back to the old gang. After I shook off a strange feeling of negative G's, I got a positive thought, along the lines of... "Well, I'll know my way around up there", I'll have more dope, fun and, more important perhaps, there are more places to hide out from the Army in a big place like Da Nang. And I'll be closer to the airport, should they someday actually grant me that R & R.

(There should have been a clause in my contract that if I didn't get R & R, I got to cancel the obligation. It was my fault that I was a Crew Chief and was needed for missions for the first eleven months or so, but I did not ask for the kind of petty conflict that always embroiled me just when I most needed the break. And one time, I had purposely timed an R & R request with the maintenance schedule of my aircraft -when Blivet got cannibalized. But something came up, either a typhoon or a Viet Cong offensive. Once, I believe I was denied just because of an I.G. (Inspector General) inspection, which required me to polish up an unassigned aircraft to star in a dog-and-pony show for the Brass while the working aircraft were out... well, working.)

29 JUNE 71

Ki Claire,

Sorry I haven't written in a while, but I had to move again. The new company moved from Chu Tai to Marble Mountain (Da Kang) so here I am right across the runway from where I used to be. (not the same old A.P.O.!) I'm kinda glad I'm back here in a way; after living here for 13 months I really got used to it and the change to Chu Tai for my head.

I should be sending you soon. I'm glad you're keeping it for me because I want to ~~turn~~ turn you all on to it myself. If you know of any good acid or mescaline going around, send me a dozen hits for me and my friends. We need a change of pace now and then.

Sorry to hear about your fingers, I hope they're better sly now.

I know ~~is~~ this is rather short but I'm stoned + listening to JOE COCKER, and I can't fuck with writing a letter.
Write soon Be Cool Tey

In this letter, I sound like I like the move, like I think it will be good for my head. That positive feeling dissipates quickly. Sure, I'll know my way around, but these guys are liable to find out the facts of my past and not be quite as awe struck or intimidated by my grizzled attitude. I needn't have worried, though, since the screw was about to turn again, and even though we were moving north, my life (and my chances for a happy future) were quickly 'heading south'.

I had only been gone for five weeks, but things were different, and not just in the way I was seeing things. 'Business' at Marble Mountain was way down, it was evident that we were going to leave this place some day. There were more cargo than combat operations and no more major offensives in this area. Any Rat With Any Sense Was Jumping Ship From This War.

What I didn't, couldn't, realize until we got settled into our new location, was how things would change within the company, and how some things were still too much the same at Marble Mountain. The Chinook company had seemed a friendly and relatively relaxed outfit while in remote Chu Lai. But once surrounded by all the other military Brass at Marble Mountain, sphincters began tightening and, where a nod and smile would suffice down south, here those same officers were demanding salutes. The sure way you can always tell that an Army unit is drilling instead of killing - first they start getting real picky about uniforms, headgear, (headgear - civilians wear hats, the military wears 'headgear', because contractors can charge more for headgear than they can for hats) military salutations, and personal area (locker) inspections. Some rehabilitation - take me out of the environment, then put me right back in it.

And like all units at M.M.M.B., a detachment is required to augment security. So despite my feeble but heated arguments, I was once again assigned to Zulu Guard with the Marines. I didn't have to wait till I got home to have my combat record ignored - here at Marble Mountain, you're just another schmuck with no rank, and no one cares how many gooks you killed or medals you won.

Another thirty days of torture, but this time it was different because I was different. If I was reluctant before, I was impossible now - I was already stripped of rank, out of a job, not needed for combat or any other aspect of my *Military Occupational Specialty*, unwilling, depressed, withdrawn, sullen and friendless. Yea, the Chinook company would not miss me. And the Marines strongly suspected me of being some kind of Junkie. I did look pale and emaciated. (Speed

will do that to you, its effects linger long after you stop taking it) So I didn't get as hassled as I did before.

But I hated it even more. Where I was at least alert before, now the threat from attack on this Base was so low that I'd routinely sleep while on guard duty at night. It just didn't matter. The first time I'd been sentenced to Zulu Guard, back in April of 1970 I was anxious to get on with flying and fulfilling my 'plan' of making something of this whole military thing. But not this time. I not only had no career to look forward to (either military or civilian) but the only ticking clock was the countdown to my leaving Vietnam. I'd done everything I was supposed to, but somehow it all turned out wrong. I could now relate to guys who started clean but ended up in jail, their high hopes tripped up by a series of misfortunes and missteps.

Wish I'd have gotten that General (Discharge), I could have gotten out with a net-neutral - I'd have my flying record (which by now I couldn't help feeling somewhat proud about - it was no mean feat!) and my 'shut-up' medals. (Shut-up medals were things like the Army Commendation Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, even Air Medals and other anonymous trinkets they'd give to the enlisted man, while awarding officers with Bronze or Silver Stars for participation in the same operations. So if the pilots got put in for Bronze Starts, which happened a lot to Regular Army types, the crew would get a lesser commendation. "You got a medal so shut-up" See?)

I could have gotten by just fine in civilian life. Instead, all I had in front of me was a lot of Army time filled with opportunities to screw myself even more. The Major's words haunted me; he'd refused to sign the General Discharge papers by saying "I'm going to give you another chance, son." Jerk. Turns out it was another chance to get caught and harassed by a vengeful Army bent on bringing types like mine 'into line'. Arrogant military logic that thinks anyone really cares if you get a General Discharge; most in the public at large don't know the differences in the three main Discharges issued by our military to begin with, and

not once since I've been out has anyone asked me if I was even in the military. I never ever offered the information - it's been better keeping it a secret until after people find out I'm OK and not a crazy cliché of combat complications out to avenge myself on them. And of course, despite the psychological evidence that pointed toward me being better off as a civilian, the Major believed, like all military, that theirs is a better life and that being civilian is a lesser one.

Something I noticed about Marines this time that was the reverse of what I felt the first time I served with them was the level of intelligence of certain individual Marines. The first time, they just seemed dumb to me. And robotic. Dangerously liable to turn you in if they thought you violated their 'code'. Maybe it was the difference a year made, but this time I ran into a few of the opposite type - and it still confounds me to this day - the Marine with a high I.Q.

There were some young guys in this Zulu company who were prodigies, geniuses and one who had graduated college at age nineteen. It appeared that the Marine Corps was getting some special fish in their net, guys who could have, but didn't, fight their way out of the draft. The true mysteries to me, a mechanic who would've preferred to be a 'brain' (as we called Nerds then) or an artist, were the guys who had everything I didn't, and who still enlisted in the Marines. *Enlisted*. "Whadaya tryin' to prove?" Different answers came back. It was not always clear to them, even. They could rattle off facts, but couldn't always articulate why they were smart enough to see through this bullshit but still get so caught up in it (whatever 'it' was) that they just had to go off and join up.

Why is intelligence and knowledge not enough? In a way, this was one of the most devastating revelations that came my way during (or since) my Tour. Besides learning how the urge to kill can be found in all of us, I was learning that we had not yet found an antidote for the adrenaline rush. As people, and therefore as society, we were still allowing brute force to rule the day. We were still taking boys and creating attack dogs out of them. Boys still sought a gauntlet

that would rush them into manhood. You could try and explain to them that there's no great transformation that takes place, that you still remain a person with fears and foibles and responsibilities. But boys hate the feeling of powerlessness, (my own actions attest to that) the cannons must have fodder, and being fodder makes proud the father.

Soldiers may be loyal to their Army, but Marines are devoted to their 'Corps'. It got insufferable, how they'd brag on the Corps; "My Daddy was in the Corps," the Corps this and the Corps that. Got sick of it. And my fascination with a few oddballs with brains didn't make the duty any easier to endure. In fact, it touched me deeply knowing that reason and intelligence were still not winning the day in the hearts and minds of the kids back home. Patriotism and 'machismo', two emotions that become potent and volatile when mixed up together, were swaying gullible minds. And Pentagon dollars. So much for Peace and Love.

I am a patriot who has no use for patriotism - it is an emotion that can be raised or lowered by anyone who wants to use the flag to sell their particular brand of ideology. On the other hand, a patriot knows that it's what the flag stands for that's really important. It's the paper it stands for, not the cloth it's made of that gives a flag its significance. And it is what's written on that paper that a patriot pledges his life to defend. I've never been impressed by patriotic displays - if you want to honor me, honor the Constitution, preach the fundamentals of the Bill Of Rights. And work to prevent war. Wish I would have said it but Daniel Ellsberg beat me to it: Peace is not a political goal, it's a human goal.

I don't know when I'll be home but when I do, we're going to throw a party that will be unequalled, short of Woodstock. I'll have 1/2 years of living to cram into 30 days time and it should be quite supercharged.

I wish there was more I could tell you about how things are going over here but after almost a year and a half I just don't know what to say. I'm back in DaNang again, and I'm working in a hot room. I'm in a very secure place so you don't have to worry me getting blown up.

Well, not much more to say. I wish you both the best of luck and I am very ~~so~~ anxious to get home.

Peace

By

Not sure when this letter was written, but it was around this time after getting back to DaNang. My Brother and his girlfriend were closer to getting married despite parental resistance from both sides, and I wanted them to know I supported them. I was proud of my brother's taking a stand for the sake of love; it was like following a soap opera in which you have a personal rooting interest. I envied them, innocent and oblivious, but I did not resent them; to have remained in Kentucky would have been even worse for me - better to live a dream that goes sour than to live a life that only yearns for things undone. Another sign, too, that changes were taking place back home - I was referring to my brother and his girlfriend as a couple.

One day, not long after returning to Marble Mountain, I took a walk over to the old Company area. Even though it had only been five weeks or so, there was hardly anyone around I knew, and some I passed by without a word (guess who). When I decided to see what kind of misfits were now living in our old hootch, I got a shock that I still feel today. They had boarded up the whole hootch! Plywood was nailed over the doors and the windows were covered and nailed. No other hootch had received this same treatment, the ones on either side were occupied - but this one looked like a murder scene or a quarantine. As if to punish the place for having housed the wrong people. This is how notorious the place had been and how determined the Army was to rid itself of the 'element' that used to live there. Wonder if they tried an exorcism, too.

I did find a few of my friends, though, at the beach on the edge of the Base. They had been transferred to Special Services as 'lifeguards'. It was amazing, the Army had put all the 'junkies' they couldn't otherwise get rid of into this one area right on the beach. Then just.. left them. Somehow I got reassigned to this Special Services Company, surprisingly soon after I applied. After Zulu Guard, they put some FNG into the tool room with me, who I was supposed to teach where to find the serial numbers on the torque wrenches; he passed out tools while I passed out on a cot in the back. I guess he let them know that I could easily be replaced, and the next thing I know, I was a lifeguard. They asked if I could swim, I said "Yes," - end of test. I couldn't believe my luck.

We had no formal organized company structure, a schedule was posted and that's when I'd take my surfboard out to the little Lifeguard's chair, which would be the start of the day and the opening of the beach. There were surfboards because the Army figured they were good life-saving devices - just zoom out and use the board for flotation, if someone was drowning.

CHAPTER 51 - SURF'S UP

All of a sudden the days became pleasant for the first time since I joined the Army. In a way, this set-up had things I'd never had in my entire life; there was no one watching over us, telling us what to do, when to clean up our room, go to bed, nothing. I'd hit an air pocket, the eye of a hurricane, that warm cave that shelters you from a storm.

Some of my old friends were with me and there were new people around to chat with and best of all, we were all some kind of runts, rascals or rejects and had just been parked here waiting for something else to happen. We were seldom acknowledged, much less visited by the Brass, so no make-work projects, no formations, and best of all - no uniforms. I went for weeks and never wore anything but civvies. (By this time, like so many others, I was picking up clothes from catalogs, the latest stuff that Hong Kong was copying out of the pages of Playboy - the fashion Bible for young swinging guys, despite the blue jeaned sixties, which were passing away, even then.)

I learned to surf because there were boards and waves. No one really taught me, I just grabbed a wave and aped what the other guys were doing, then spent the evenings talking about it. I'd never been good at anything physical. Back home I'd had a Honda 50 that I destroyed by racing it around a dirt track I'd carved out of a construction site, but that's all. I wasn't a good surfer, but I was competent enough to have fun and feel a lot of confidence pouring back into myself. Some days, I'd surf from morning till almost sundown. (lifeguards could go out early, the beach didn't officially open till noon.) I came to understand a lot of things from surfing. I'd never done anything to exhaustion before, never knew how totally physical activity can take you out of yourself. Better than any drug because you can sustain it. And you're awake to enjoy it. And you can come back tomorrow and do it again (surf permitting), and it's free (as long as Uncle Sam is providing room and board.)

The reason why so many people hate gym class so much is because 'they' are always trying to get you to play 'their' game, rather than helping you find that activity, whether solitary or team-oriented, that works for you. The point of Physical Education should be to help each person find that activity which they enjoy doing so much that they will do it for life - the best insurance against becoming a sedentary couch potato.

And surfing allows your mind to wander. If you're already a spiritually-open person, it is a feeling of being connected to the god, force, universe, all-that-is. Surfing made me feel like a puzzle piece that fit perfectly into a space especially cut out for me by nature. On this day, by this activity, I can feel, in every cell of my body, the power of the ocean as it breaks gently into waves that take me on a swift wet magic carpet ride. It's just me, the board and the next wave. Exhilaration blocked out everything - even the past. There were days when I came in so weak and exhausted that I'd grab something to stuff in my mouth, then pass out, sometimes getting as much as two or three hours of sleep before I'd jump up in a sweat, either from a nightmare or fear of 'incoming' - which was ingrained and hard to shut down, since I'd been on this base when it truly was vulnerable to attack.

I struggled to find decent weed to smoke, and the special treat of the day was Mescaline or Psyllicybin - mild hallucinogens that were simpatico with surfing and good to stay stoned on, because they allowed you to 'keep it together' enough to keep an eye on the beach.

Large storms plagued the coastline sending us indoors, where it felt more like what a college dorm must have been like, and less like a bachelor beach haven. Outside, we were adult-looking, (as opposed to military) but inside, it was hi-jinx and comic books. Giant creepy cockroaches would swarm in, seeking refuge from the storms, flapping crude wings from the top of our lockers down to our beds. Damn fool things, sometimes two to three inches long,

would jump right on you then flap like crazy as if to say, "hell - it ain't my fault I never evolved better flying skills, sue me." So it was war, employing every weapon at hand, the most memorable being a can of Right Guard spray deodorant. Back then it had C.F.C. propellant - put your Zippo in front of the nozzle, press, then *WHOOSH*, a foot and a half flame erupts, forcing you to aim it carefully, or you'd burn everything but the bug; and the bugs didn't exactly stand still and let you zap them with a flame thrower. They'd scamper everywhere, forcing everyone in the hootch to jump up and join the fight, whether they wanted to or not. A wonder that we didn't burn the place down. We certainly battered lockers, scorched blankets and smashed up bed frames. Our antics were comical sometimes, but the fight was serious, these bugs were relentless (and destructive - they'd even eat marijuana, one of the reasons why it was always stored in coffee cans.)

You could be sitting calmly reading when a guy across from you suddenly jumped off his bed and danced wildly around, bashing himself screaming and cussing. Those around him would just watch until the varmint broke from the fight and someone would holler "there he is!!" and jump to the kill. Once the familiar cracking sound of a successful squashing was heard, everyone involved with the operation turned their attention back to wherever it was before, like nothing happened.

I'm not happy to report that roaches weren't the only animals we made sport with, though. American GIs were quick to adopt stray dogs in Vietnam, a natural tendency of the American character, given false urgency by the rumor (legend?) that the Vietnamese ate them, a practice we abhorred, and one we used as proof that the Vietnamese were savage, stone-age monsters.

These dogs posed problems - they couldn't be cared for officially, it was against regulations to have pets. So the dogs became scavengers, and some guys would use food to induce them to fight. These were not men-circled-round two trained vicious beasts with fistfuls of dollars changing hands

as one dog dies a horrible death. These were like neighborhood dogs that were semi-controlled by guys who enjoyed watching dogs fight. They weren't usually bloody fights, just quick bruising battles that always left the combatants fit to return and fight another day. I remember once or twice watching rapt as a couple of dogs went at it - not as men had trained them to do, but as was their nature in the wild - primal and brutal but also involving the dog's cunning and skill. But they did receive shouts of encouragement from the guys sitting around in front of the hootches in lawn chairs and on barrels. And the dogs would get pats on the back and bits of food - food and the approval of a man, that's all a dog lives for. I tried to do my part by never feeding one of the dogs or encouraging a fight (maybe I even prevented a few fights) but I am no less guilty for failing to oppose the fights.

Those guys got fairly harmless fun out of it and it helped keep tensions among the men from turning into a powder keg - which was always possible. The dogs just seemed like another of the collateral consequences of our being there and, like us, were just acting according to their nature. Soldiers feel for dogs because they both give to whomever they are pledged everything they've got, until there's nothing more left to give.

CHAPTER 52 - POUNDED BY THE TIDE, MENACED BY THE JUNK

When storms kicked up off the coast, the usual one to two foot waves with a long gentle break would turn into three to five foot 'monsters' that would rocket you along - if, and only if - you were swimming fast enough or started early enough to catch them. They could break suddenly on you, as if some joker was flipping a switch that shut off the power of their forward motion. And the beach had a vicious undertow that could sometimes suck all the water back into the wave, leaving the surfer up on a wave, headlong toward the beach, with nothing but air under him. Quick, inch backwards on that huge longboard and stay with the wave! What a ride! And what a precarious perch to take it on. But sometimes you got too far out on the board trying for speed, and couldn't get back in time, and the wave would flick you forward onto your face like the board was a spoon and you were so many mashed potatoes.

Once this happened to me; all the water got sucked back into the wave, making the wave huge and, as if from spite or just teaching me a lesson, the wave crashed right on top of the small of my back, pressing my body deep into the sand. I can still conjure up that feeling of imminent death when I hit the bottom and had my whole body driven into the sand for what felt like several inches by that breaking wave. I couldn't see, breathe, hear or move. I'm being buried alive in the sand and will drown before I can free myself from its weight and make it back up to the surface for air.

I didn't have the energy left to panic. I blacked out and came-to seconds later as the wave heaved me up on shore, coughing, spitting and gasping for air. No one hurried to my rescue - the beach was closed, I wasn't supposed to be out alone, especially with a storm approaching. I double-handed my surfboard and slowly slogged back to the hootch. I never told anyone about my near-death crash out, and I suf-

ferred backaches for years afterward. Drugs and surfing - beware of crashing out of either.

One day, I had to paddle the surfboard out to help some chump who'd gotten caught in the undertow. I cussed at him all the way back to shore as he clung to the surfboard for dear life. "Don't be comin' back to my beach, I got better things to do.." and on and on. I hated having to actually be a lifeguard or have my day disrupted.

Surfing was only a sometime pastime, totally dependent on the gods of tides, waves, on-shore breezes, and jelly fish (Portuguese Man-o-war, really, which could infest the beach and drive a grown man to cry from the stings-like-hell attacks.) Best to shut down the beach and hide out in someone else's hootch. This was a common and useful tactic for staying out from under the nose of someone with stripes or bars on their uniform. Out of sight was out-a-site. Drugs were a full-time avocation. While surfing, Mescaline obsession, and being surrounded by cool people made for a pleasant respite, the feeling of being pinched and squeezed by the Army was still with us everyday, keeping the stress level of most guys at whatever high level it had been when they got their individual gong banged.

The situation deteriorated and led slowly to some of the most sadness I endured during my entire tour. I had been alone down in Chu Lai, but here, I was being increasingly alienated from my friends while still within arms reach of them. I had to watch them turn into ghosts right before my eyes, helpless to stop their increasing heroin use. 'Good' drugs, stuff like weed and psychedelics, had been harder to find ever since the Operation Intercept busts of January and February 1971. So by the summer of '71, the easiest, cheapest, most effective drug available was the white powder heroin. I resented not being in their club at first, but even when the weed dried up completely, I couldn't join. I still couldn't stand the 'stomach'. I could never stand needles, had my fill of them in the dentist's chair, so I couldn't be around when they were doing it - either the smoke gave me a contact high, or the sight of someone shooting up would make me queasy.

So I became a floater, moving around in a tight circle trying to avoid as much human contact as possible.

Just when I'd fallen into a new daydream, at night I had to sit back and watch as my friends, two in particular who had been with me during the Black Cat days, got more and more gripped by the Menace. I wouldn't share any weed with these guys if I could help it; the mellowness of the marijuana high is like the gentle flapping of butterfly wings compared to the hurricane force heroin throws on your system, so it would be a waste of precious pot.

Watching them rush for the door made me sick, as they would vomit a lot from the stuff, even long after their systems had gotten used to it. They could sit all day long, not eat, drink, talk or stir much at all. They could read one comic book all day. Then reread it the next, not realizing that they'd read it already. Conversation was impossible. Even the most stimulating exchange could end abruptly when in mid-thought, they'd 'nod out'. This state, called the 'nods', was a common, dream-less half-sleep state most junkies stayed in; if you *could* see their eyes, they were usually red-lined blanks that always seemed to be looking through you, or at you with some insolent arrogance that comes from being totally wrapped up in the warm cocoon of drug intoxication.

Sudden death, like Joe's, had its shock and then a long gradual recovery. But watching my buddies succumb so totally day after day was incremental mental torture. One friend, in particular, had been a Crew Chief like me and had brought the good acid and candy bars back from R & R at home. He was so bright, concerned, articulate and committed to the causes of the day. I had been so glad to see him again, but that warmth turned cold as I watched him 'go away', the body remaining, as if to mock the soul that once occupied it.

As if it weren't bad enough just being there and having to watch this happen, I was also left lucid enough to wonder *why* this was happening. How could 'They' let this go on? 'They' had to know about it; they do piss tests - that's how some guys got here in this company in the first place.

But heroin supply never seems to get interrupted or even seriously disrupted. It always came the same way - in tiny glass 'vial' jars with screw-on caps - and the white powder inside was always one gram of ninety percent pure heroin. And it came through the usual channels - hootch maids and civilian Vietnamese who worked on Base brought it in. It was easy to hide and hard to detect compared to marijuana, which is bulky and has that tell-tale odor.

It was one thing when heroin was just another choice in the illicit pharmacy. But now it had taken over. And it didn't make sense. In fact, this heroin phenomenon became the number one subject discussed among us, including by the very people who were doing it. It was hard to avoid the facts and for the only time in my life, I believe I witnessed a true conspiracy, one so sinister and so outrageous that it would never be really proven; after all, how could you ever prove that the most damage being inflicted on us at this moment was not from the war, the enemy or any collateral cause, but from people on our side? Some very powerful 'entity', with an unlimited budget and no real oversight on their actions, even from our own government, had to know what was going on.

Not only did they know, but suspicion was very strong among us that the heroin trade wouldn't be able to exist at all unless this 'entity' was facilitating it. No mob, Triad or other organization could have muscled into that territory. This secretive 'entity' was too powerful, too much the puppet master, and certain things about the whole picture were unavoidable.

Throughout my flying career, there had been these silver helicopters that shadowed our travels, especially in the North around Quang Tri and the DMZ. Their crews wore civilian clothes, had no weapons showing on their helicopters, no insignia or markings, and everyone I ever saw getting on or off one of their aircraft, always had that "if we told ya, we'd have to kill ya" look on their faces. These alien-looking fliers, I had observed, were always passing around those aluminum suitcases like professional photographers

use, perfect size for dope and money. Let's face it, they didn't need to carry around diplomatic papers, and weapons usually came disguised as relief supplies.

What did the average North Vietnamese and Viet Cong know about those silver aircraft that kept them from shooting them down? Sure, they were unarmed, but so were Medevac choppers with great big red and white crosses on them, and even they would take fire occasionally. But this 'entity', whatever it was, operated with no heavy gun protection like our slicks got from our Gunships. Why? Why did they feel so bulletproof? Why didn't the average soldier have any interaction with them, but everyone else involved in the war knew everything? I never forgot that Mama-san knew about us going into Laos before we even left Marble Mountain, and, to this day, the average American still doesn't know.

Junkies should have been easy to bust; they were the ones bolting out the door in the back of the hootch to puke their guts out. You had to step carefully around the sandy areas between hootches to avoid either piles of dog shit or scattered discs of vomit solids that looked like vaccination scabs, once the sand sucked out the liquid. And nothing happened in Vietnam without some intelligence agency (and there were several of them) or media outlet, knowing about it. After all, 'they' were in Vietnam long before our diplomats or our military. Our military met with surprises in Vietnam, Why? Either they were not informed or our military chose over and over to ignore the information. There is, for example, no other explanation for the way things happened in the invasion of Laos. Someone *had* to know that there was a concentration of troops there, but our military went ahead and conducted a big noisy invasion anyway, not preparing for, or knowing of, the presence of NVA tanks and huge amounts of SAMs.

This kind of knowledge, gathered from personal experience and the eyewitness accounts of others close to us, led myself and others to conclude that the truth of the Vietnam War was even more complicated, inscrutable and resis-

tant to honest appraisal than we'd ever imagined. (No wonder people back home were so divided, these truths could not possibly fit between TV commercials). The military, the politicians and now come to find out, even agencies within our own government, had their own (different) agendas - all three of which required the lowly soldier's involvement like an ox serving three masters.

But the most damning evidence was right there in the junkie's hand. Supply created the demand in a flip-flop of what usually happens. Heroin, by itself, can only be one of many choices since, when there are other choices, only a few people willingly make heroin a regular choice. To make money in the heroin business, every school kid knows that you hook 'em hard and hook 'em fast. And you manipulate supply so that demand drives up prices occasionally. And any idiot knows, you 'step on' or dilute the product, at least two or three times, to ensure a steady delivery when supplies get low and to prevent overdoses. But this smack was always the same five bucks a pop and eighty to ninety percent pure.

Somebody wanted to make some 'hard currency' fast and had a lot of heroin to exchange for it. All that was needed was consumers, so, why not sell it to G.I.s? They're there, and without marijuana and in the absence of an effective anti-heroin information campaign, there was no resistance. Any mob, triad or even loose affiliation of supply sergeants would have escalated the price (GIs could afford it, all other of their needs were met) and diluted the heroin down to about the fifty percent purity level - and there also would have been a lot more busts of middle men along the way. But none of that took place in Vietnam. All blame was on the individual soldier. I wish books were written about this aspect of the Vietnam experience by the people involved, from top to bottom. It's a tragedy that should be taken into account when any assessment of the war is undertaken.

One day, a young officer came in looking for someone as I was pulling on a 'joint'. He had me 'dead to rights' and even had a witness with him. In that moment when I realized the trouble I could be in, my stomach hit the floor and

my heart stopped; fading freedom flashed before my eyes. Everything up to that second in my life suddenly seemed sweet and carefree when compared to what could happen if this guy's intentions were to make a bust. Luckily, my torture lasted only seconds; he turned around and left and I let out a puff of smoke that was about to turn me blue from lack of oxygen. I felt great relief, but I also felt a rush of power. I felt I had won something, that the Army didn't have the will or stomach to go up against us. It was easier for everyone to just let us alone - which is what they did for the most part. It was obvious that the Army just didn't know what to do about the drug problem in general, so they herded us together, so as to not 'infect' the general population and thereby corrupt the other soldiers.

Their only response to the heroin problem was to test soldiers just before they left country and if they tested positive, keep them in 'rehab' barracks until they could clean up and pass the piss test. How many heroin addicts were 'saved' by this blockade, I don't know. When you were leaving country, you didn't ask questions. And when I got back here, I didn't demand answers. And in all these years, I've never talked to any of the people I knew in Vietnam to see how they fared with the habit and the piss test. I was and always have been grateful that I didn't get busted. That or any other time. Although I felt powerful when that Officer left, it renewed my resolve to be more careful and stay free at any cost. The Army was as close as I ever need to come to incarceration and I believe that my problem with drugs is small potatoes compared to what would have happened in jail. I can handle drugs, but not jail.

That single incident changed things; everything began to tighten around me. I had gotten a hint of how good you can feel just by changing your environment and how much less oppressive life can be when simplified and reduced to fulfilling one's true desires. It was a dim glimmer, but it was something - one that was hard to keep lit in the midst of all the darkness that was my world at that moment.

Surfing almost made it worse, some days, because for those few hours, I was free, after which there was nothing but despair, loneliness and a new, deeper kind of depression; I couldn't define it, couldn't control it, and couldn't put my finger on just what any of it meant. I was confused about the heroin menace and I was angry at what it was doing to my friends as well as to other guys. None had signed on to be a pigeon - all deserved better. Again, there was no one to talk to about it, and I was careful not to upset *any* status quo in such an enclosed world, it could have had very negative consequences.

(Of course, I now know, after years of searching for a cure, that Depression is caused by a lot of things both inside and outside a person's head, and its components are not always directly related to external forces. But those external pressures can aggravate and exacerbate existing conditions, and take years of therapy to square away in the mind. Being non-religious, I couldn't talk it over with the Chaplain; and I couldn't trust Army shrinks after that first encounter, which warned me away - more out of fear of creating a mental health record for myself, than any fear of the doctors themselves.)

In what appears to be my last letter home (or at least the last one to Elaine) dated July 8, 1971, 'Smack' is subject number one. Doesn't look like I said anything about my job as a lifeguard or about surfing or anything else that was going on in my life. There were only three subjects I felt like talking about - dope, music and getting out of the Army.

8 July 71

Well, I spaced-out and never got this mailed so I'll add a bit to it.

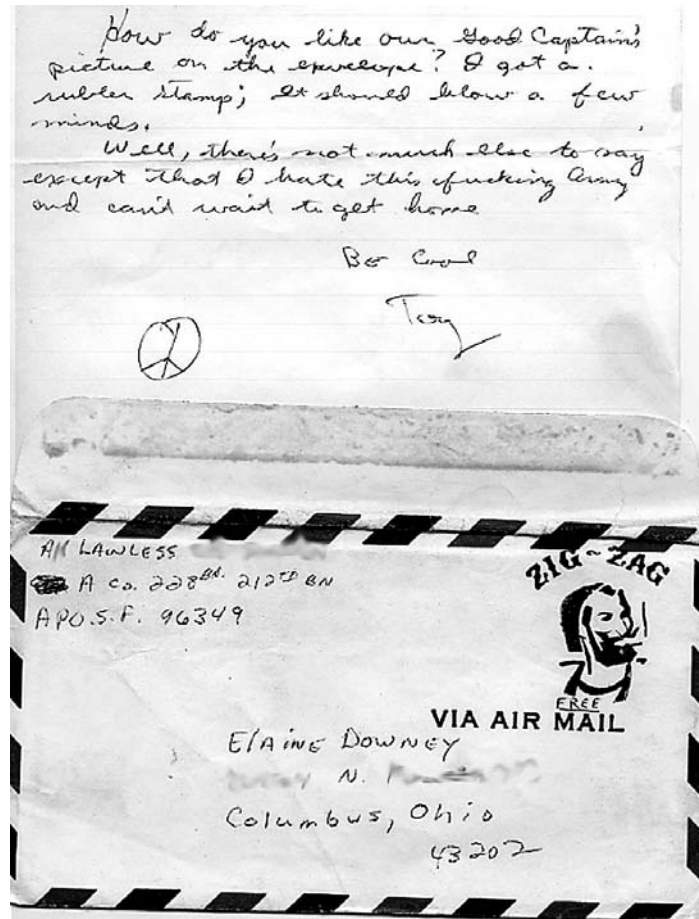
All you've been hearing about smack is true and it's worse than the pigs realize. I'm not into it and never was. I just can't get into downers, they're not my bag at all, Smack is fucked, that all there is to it.

I'm glad you like the Dew. You should be getting 3 letters soon from people you don't know. Remember after it's stacked down the envelopes and write me immediately. If you get some MDA keep it for me, please.

I'm glad you're getting JC Superstar. My tape of it is fucked. When you get the album, I have one big favor to ask - don't play it! When I get home I'd like to record it on my tape but I can't if it's other than brand new (tape is super-sensitive to scratches and it sounds terrible if it's not brand new)

I was asking for 'MDA' because it was widely held that it was a great hallucinogen that didn't linger as long as other psychedelics, so it could be taken at lunch and leave you sober in time to return to work. I'd heard much about it and never got a chance to try it. Still haven't to this day. I was sending weed more and more because I'd heard back that it was getting through, and it was still the most exotic souvenir I could send back. Plus, I was secretly worried that

heroin may pose this same problem back home, and that having some really good, once-in-a-lifetime kind of smoke might help my friends avoid temptation - or at least enjoy a few really good parties with me till the stuff ran out.



That was the one thing I did allow my mind to imagine about the future - that mythical party we'd have once I got home. So sending weed back was the equivalent of stocking up on supplies, as you would for any party.

CHAPTER 53 – “EVERYBODY KNOWS...”

By this time, I had also heard that my stereo equipment, which I had shipped home before leaving for Chu Lai, was piled up in the family basement. I begged them not to open or let anyone else open any of the boxes; I wanted that thrill. That party was going to have great sound and great music. Yea, it'll be a dandy of a party. Everyone will come, it'll last for weeks. I'll show 'em what for, that's for sure.

But my reality didn't offer much hope that the fantasy would ever come true. (didn't stop me from embellishing the fantasy, though). One fear was that there was enough heroin in the air in the hootch at night that just breathing could cause traces of it to show up in a urine test. And there are rumors that there's a test for marijuana as well. Plenty to keep me anxious, and nowhere to go for relief.

Through this darkest of periods (it lasted roughly two and a half months), I was experiencing thoughts of suicide for the first time in my life and thought more often than I care to recall about all that pure heroin and all those guns at hand, either of which could have provided a permanent solution to my problems; even though like all problems, they were mostly temporary and only in my head.

It did not occur to me then that it was a distortion of perspective, a lack of proper perception.

In reality, things weren't that bleak. But I had no defense against these invasive thoughts of failure, despair and alienation from all things human. There wasn't enough dope to deaden this pain, and the one handiest release available to most humans, crying it out, just wasn't possible for me. I couldn't make it happen. Afraid that once started, I wouldn't be able to stop, or even that it would make me physically ill. (Same reason I couldn't crawl back into a bottle.) All aggravated by lack of sleep, lack of nutrition, (which may well have caused a number of nagging infections around this time), and ordinary Army-life boredom.

Knowing that it's a perspective problem doesn't necessarily mean you can just switch your point of view like changing lenses on a camera. What if these other perspectives were never included in your standard equipment package? Hard to imagine living the good life unless you've seen someone like yourself make it. Someone who's willing to look back on their way up, willing to look back to from where they've come and guide you along their same pathway. The only people who served that function in my life, and who were my lifeboat in these troubled seas - physical, mental, and spiritual - were the people who made music.

In Eastern religions, they call it a Mantra. Some of us might repeat a swear, a vow, a favorite saying or a religious passage. It serves as a meditation device, or it's 'whistling a happy tune' whenever you're afraid. The words have their meaning, but their repetition acts as a hypnotic that allows the brain to relax and 'process out' all the stress and fear and other negative issues of the mind. For me it was the simple phrase, "Everybody knows this is nowhere," contained in a song and album by the same name. It had been around for a while. But not until this moment (when I really needed it?) did it hit me as such a powerful statement about my life right then. Sometimes through head phones, sometimes through whatever stereo happened to be handy, I didn't realize how often I was playing the album, or why.

But, for a man just turning 20, who feels out of time, alone and who sees no future for himself, it was that line, in that song which functioned as a spiritual homing device, one that wormed its way past the layers of regret and resignation until it somehow found a kernel of hope. The repetition was like the watering of a seed. Everyday it grew up through this hardened lava and held on stubbornly against the cold wind that blew out from my heart. It did all those things they claim therapy, meditation, family values or religion does but can't, and it reminded me that I was not alone, and that someone else really does know how it feels in here.

“EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE.”

Nothing else got close enough to me to have any effect. Institutions and people couldn't penetrate the callous, but the music of a young Canadian folk singer, struggling with his desires for rock-n-roll success and seeking answers for life's larger concerns, somehow crossed all those distances, bore a hole through my armor, put a reassuring hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry, pal. Everybody knows.. This won't be held against you. You did what you could. Someday, maybe, you'll be able to redeem this effort. Meanwhile, relax, G.I. Remember our motto - It don't mean *nothing*."

EVERYBODY, EVERYBODY Knows!

Over and over again. When I had no one to talk to, no one to tell. Abused children construct their own religions and conjure up their own saviors out of whatever's available to them. I had always found in music enjoyment, enlightenment, escape, empathy, and inspiration. And now here it was saving me from suicidal despair. Faith is powerful, and faith in the power of music has been, for me, the most powerful faith of all. Neil Young saved my life, Goddamn it. And he wasn't even in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 54 - A TALL MAN GETS SHORT

Luckily, storms pass. August crawled into September, and the calendar provided a sliver of hope. I was getting Short.

When you could reduce your time left in Vietnam to a few weeks, you were officially Short, and you developed a tough attitude - take no risks, start no fights and try not to let 'em get you, now that your reward seems so within your grasp. I grew increasingly anxious about going home. The good and bad types of anxiety. I became more isolated, afraid that I might get swept up in a drug bust or roundup; I barely spoke to anyone and spent as much time as I could on the beach. I even showered at off peak hours just to have someplace else to be, should the hammer fall.

I stopped sending dope back home. I had stopped sending letters, having no way of explaining what was happening in my life, much less in my head. I had gotten word from Elaine that my silence was being taken as a sign that I'd possibly become a junkie. I couldn't figure a way to reassure them, and a big part of me didn't care what anybody thought. If I make it home, I'll explain it to them. How could they assume such a thing anyway? Because it was all over the news? I couldn't be bothered.

I realized by this time that my being in Vietnam had little or no effect on those I left behind. (Except for Elaine and a few others.) Life proceeded as if I were away to college. No one ever asked me specific questions about the war, and the newspapers were concentrating more on riots, terrorist (domestic) organizations and the 'big picture' of how do we get out of Vietnam, rather than the individual stories from the war zone itself.

It was hard to tell my personal experiences without editorializing, or cheating, by pumping up a dull story. I didn't want to create some image of myself as a big shot soldier (or hippie, or anything else) that I wouldn't be able to live up (or down) to in other peoples' minds, especially those

closest to me. Too many guys had suffered, and Joe had died, so I had no right to brag or take credit for anything. So week after week, I'd surf when I could, hang out and join in the bellyache chorus of other guys in the area who wished, like me, they were anywhere else.

Then one day, from out of nowhere, came orders for R & R! A hallelujah chorus sang, bells rang, hot dang! I was going to Bangkok! I had been putting in for those R & R's that were owed to me so routinely that I would forget about them. Gave up, actually, especially since I was getting so Short. I guess the Army wanted to make damn sure I got the R & R my contract called for, just so I would not be able to sue for breach of contract or something. As if such a thing would be possible. I could just hear some military-type talking down to me in pre-trial, "Now, son, you *did* get that R & R to Bangkok." "Yea, just days ahead of my DEROS, thanks loads. The damage was already done," I reply in vain.

Oh, well, it was a perfect way to kill time that would have otherwise been spent wishing time would fly even faster than it already does. Time flew fast in Bangkok, that's for sure. More proof that the sleigh ride known as my life was being led by a drunken reindeer with a real twisted sense of irony. Completely out of my control. Well, this was one time I was just going to sit back and enjoy. Why jeopardize good luck by insisting on knowing its origin?

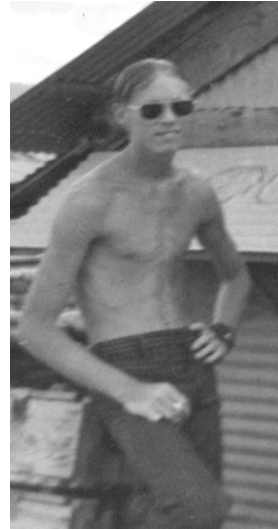
I had chosen Bangkok over Tokyo, Manila or Hong Kong because I wanted to see a world-class Asian city, and Bangkok filled all the 'requirements of the flesh', on top of being close-by, beautiful, exotic and yet still familiar. Hawaii was too expensive (and part of the U.S. - I figured I'd get there later and more often than I would get all the way back over here in the Orient.) I eliminated Sydney because I figured they were just old-fashioned Americans with funny accents. So I was wrong about that one. Sue me.

I sure was right about Bangkok, though. It was as beautiful, exotic and awe-inspiring as I had hoped. What was surprising was how incredibly sweet the people were. Smiles everywhere, and so tolerant and understanding. Eager to ful-

fill every desire. It was a slice of heaven. And such a contrast to Vietnam, where the concern of the nation seemed to be etched onto every face. Thai people, on the other hand, had never been conquered, and it seemed to have left them in enough peace and prosperity to develop a deep satisfaction with themselves, which shows on the face of even the poorest among them.

The only reminder of the war came when I was having drinks with some other GIs and one of them referred to our Thai waiter as a 'gook'. I snapped at him "these people are not gooks. You're not in Vietnam anymore and if you don't realize that soon you're going to miss something, cause these people are great." I don't know if he heeded my advice, but I remember clearly giving it and meaning it, and feeling good that I understood the difference.

Much of what I remember about my trip to Bangkok, like a sailor's tale of wild shore leave, is probably best left to late night bragging around a campfire. But I can say that I did all the tourist things, visited a snake farm, elephant demonstrations, shrines, (Whew! All that gold!) and did the shopping thing; (Whew! All that gold!). Ate like a pig, slept like a baby and smoked like a chimney. Lost two whole days in a cloud of smoke. Don't know for sure what I did on those days, but I am sure I had a good time. I have pictures of places I don't remember visiting. It was 'Back in those days' when your Bangkok cab driver could arrange anything for you - anything. (Thank you Mr. Tasnana, wherever you are)



I didn't realize it at the time, but Bangkok changed me for all time into a 'citizen of the world'. Never again would I be satisfied with one place; travel became not just a dream for me, but an attainable goal, an obsession even. It

had been one of the reasons I joined the Army in the first place - to 'see the world' - as it is and not just as others describe it. It gave me confidence to wade through the strangeness and seek out the real beauty that the real world holds in store for us. Bangkok made me believe that maybe I could become something other than what I'd started out to be. Someone who makes an impact, changes things for the better, someone 'they' have to deal with. A Someone.

I went back to Vietnam renewed enough to believe I might actually get to leave it for good. Hard to believe I really would, that's how thoroughly I was convinced of my doom. So I packed my bag dutifully. Everything suddenly looked different; I'd only been gone a week, but already there were new faces; people who were no longer part of my future. And like a dog that knows the family is about to leave on vacation, I flinched at every sound, scared that I was going to miss the call to 'Go'.

In the old days, when guys got within days of DEROS, they wouldn't leave their hootches, you could barely talk to them, nothing mattered because they were only a few 'wake ups' from time to go. Guys would loudly proclaim to all within earshot.. "this time next week, I'll be eating, loving, sleeping, shitting on porcelain, etc." It could get annoying, but no one begrudged it because we all hoped to someday do the same thing. I didn't do much shouting or singing. It didn't sound right somehow, coming out of me. Yes, I put it in the face of any lifer or gung-ho FNG I happened across, but it felt a hollow brag, considering the shape some of these guys were in and what they would face when their time came to leave.

I had still not given anyone back home any idea of when I was returning. And now I decided I was going to see if I could surprise them. Not sure why, but that sounds like a good idea. One thing that feels good about it is that it's my choice. I like that.

Even though I'd formed some close acquaintances, and amassed a list of home address and phone numbers, Vietnam wasn't a place where good-byes were very impor-

tant. Like people everywhere who had endured something life changing, there was little we could say with words. Our comradeship ran deeper than we could articulate. An unspoken bond exists between all of us and probably always will. Knowing that we would each have to face that great World by ourselves was underneath all our good-byes. It had been a long year and a half. I had changed, in ways that were not understandable to me for years to come. Changes I've never figured out and don't guess I ever will.

All military duty ends the same way - pick up your duffel bag, head for the vehicle and keep your eyes fixed forward. Don't look back, or they might change their mind.

CHAPTER 55 - THE CHEER

At the Long Bien out-processing center, you were required to urinate into a cup in front of a man sitting in an elevated chair in the latrine, so the Army could be sure you did not have heroin in your system. Once all this was done, the paperwork completed, and the minutes-that-felt-like-hours of waiting in that final airport had all ticked away, finally, you were climbing the steps of the Flying Tiger 727 and nodding politely to the stewardess who pointed you to your seat.

Like the good soldiers we were, we stashed our gear, took our seats and listened quietly, obediently, while they told us about the seat belts, the oxygen mask and the flotation device. Gazed out the window for one last look as we taxied out to the runway - the plane turned, then stopped, and my heart stopped with it! I couldn't breath, couldn't look around. The thought suddenly hit - what if we got all this way and couldn't take off? What if... we got called back or they lobbed that one grenade and blew us up. What *if!*

But then it came. It was a simple movement of the pilot's hand pressing forward on the throttle - we heard that beautiful sound of four jet engines getting that surge of fuel to make that roar of power, then the giant hand presses on your back. And then let go of the brakes, moving now, building speed, feel every bump on that runway tarmac, please don't stop. Please don't stop. Still not breathing. Now we've got speed. Lift up that nose, baby, just like you did so many times before - lift up - *there* it happened. So sudden and so real that it shocked us all. *FLIGHT!*

Then, a bunch of individuals who had been turning blue holding their breath for longer than should be humanly possible, let out the loudest, happiest sound known to heaven and earth. It was a cheer. The same sound out of every mouth. Not words or exaltations or prayers or oaths. That all came later. At that moment, it was just a cheer. A collective exhale of emotions of relief, release and joy, that only a very

few who've walked this earth can ever know. One moment of unforeseen, unselfconscious, unadulterated, undeniable, unforgettable happiness. A moment that went straight passed the brain, over the ego and down the back side of our conscious 'selves', and informed each man's heart that, for that one moment at least, no matter what they ever called you, no matter what you suffered from, no matter what pain or loss you would ever experience, for that one moment every single one of us was a winner.

In that split second, with the sound of each man's voice adding to that chorus, each of one us touched home plate after a grand slam, scored the winning touchdown, got the checkered flag, held up our first born son to show the world - all those things that we had missed for that year, were ours. We had survived Vietnam. *We* had won *our* war. All in one big, fat happy little-boy-in-his-Radio-Flyer-with-his-first-birthday-cake *Cheer*, we were all free to be filled with glee.

CHAPTER 56 - SEATTLE STOPOVER - BURGERS OR ROCK 'N ROLL?

The rest of the trip passed without making any impressions on my memory. My guess is we talked and bragged and promised and spoke vows to each other as instant best friends with rich experiences to share, and who could now call Vietnam a part of their past. Ahead lay the World, and the return to being human. Not just a 'human doing', but a real 'human being'. Oh, Happy Day!

By the time we landed in Seattle, we'd all made a million plans; something we hadn't done much of during our tour, since making plans while you're in Vietnam was the same thing as dreaming. Only free people can make plans; it's what becomes possible when hope begins to flood back into their emotional reservoirs.

Before we got off the plane, someone came onboard and said some things, I'm not sure what exactly; maybe they warned us about protesters or cautioned us about our behavior, and they most likely said some nice words, like, "Welcome back to the U.S.A." But only two things I heard struck me - there was a hamburger stand and a record store inside the airport. Wow, my mouth watered at the thought of a big juicy burger, fresh from the grill with a piece of real lettuce.

But all of a sudden, there was only time for one stop as my next plane was leaving soon. Records or burgers? Most guys went for the burger. I've had a lot of forgettable burgers in my life, but I still remember some of the records I bought that day: *WHO'S NEXT*; *EMERSON LAKE AND PALMER*; The Doors' *MORRISON HOTEL*; *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR*; Rod Stewart's *EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY*; And of course a new copy of *EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE* by Neil Young. Eventually lost all those records, but I will take that music to my grave.

Some may say that there is music because we have ears. I contend that we have ears because there is music - the birds were singing in the trees long before we got here.

CHAPTER 57 - COMING HOME

After stuffing the records into my bag, I could have called home from the Seattle Airport, let the folks know I was coming. I had the time and I had the dime. Could've even called collect, but I didn't. Might as well see if I can surprise them, that might be fun. It had been a plan in my head for a while to just walk back into the house unannounced. I didn't feel like a returning hero, so I didn't want much fuss made over me.

Seattle to Chicago to Port Columbus, then a silent cab ride through the village of Gahanna, where I'd left from - and never thought I'd see again. "You just get back, son?" the Cabbie asked, probably wondering why there was no one to meet me. "Yep". Noticing the changes a year-and-a-half brought - trees a bit bigger, showing their colors one last time before winter. Lean up and ask the Cabbie not to pull all the way into the driveway and be quiet, I wanna surprise them. I laid the money and a good tip on his front seat, grabbed my duffel bag and closed the door half-latched, the Cabbie giving me the sign that it was OK, he'd close it the rest of the way. He backed his car quietly out of the driveway and slowly sped away.

I stepped up to the porch, dropped my bag, opened the screen door and tried the big door. It was unlocked! Why? My Stepmother always locked the door before she went to bed. Because it was Sunday. Sure, someone had already stepped outside to get the Sunday paper, and not only didn't lock it, but even left it unlatched. That door was never locked during the day unless the family was away. So that's how I managed to get inside without them or the dog hearing me. Careful to catch the screen door, once inside, I just stood there.

And then I realized why I wanted to do it this way; marching bands, parades and all the welcome home banners couldn't top this. I was glad for the chance to just stand in-

side the house for a minute and soak up the place before anyone knew I was there.

You never know how exotic your own home can smell, how warm a place can feel. Look at the pictures on the wall of my brother and sisters, how they've grown! Is this new carpet? Did they get new furniture? But listen. The kids had cartoons on the TV in their bedroom, and were playing so quietly that I could hear the rustling of the newspaper. Parents were in bed, enjoying coffee and the paper. Never knew what a luxury it was just to be in your own bed reading the Sunday paper. Nothing to disturb you, as long as you didn't read the part about a war that was being fought by other people in a land far away. Nothing to worry about but the day ahead.

I must have stood there for several minutes, listening to the sound of people living life on a Sunday in America. Just stood there listening, smelling, *feeling*, thanking myself for a gift that I had not known I wanted, and wouldn't have thought I could give myself. Right then I knew that all was right with the world. What great air this is to breathe. Landing in Seattle had proven that there was still a place called the U.S.A. Standing inside my father's house, at that moment, I knew that there could still be a house and inside that house there could be a home, and for that one moment, I was really, really Home. Safe. You made it, Tony

I wish I could have stood there forever. I wish Joe could have done this. Did he stop in Dayton on his way to heaven for one last look at home and what we'd been fighting for? If he didn't then I did it for him. Can you hear me Joe? It felt really good, Joe. Really really good. I wish you could've felt it. Just once. I wish they all could have.

Then, my little sister, on her way to the kitchen, stopped at the sight of this uniformed stranger standing in the doorway. I said "Hello", and she screamed, not recognizing me. Then the dog barked, another sister came running out, then the Parents, and after a few hugs that were so tight and squeezed so hard it broke my new Bangkok glasses, some-

one got on the phone with the two word message - "He's Home!" - and pretty soon all hell broke loose.

THE SPOILS OF WAR

It was a great party, but no one remembers any details. The house filled with neighbors and friends; it being Sunday and all, everyone had the day off and hurried right over at hearing the news. One memory seems to have stayed with a lot of them. The memory of how I looked - pale, drawn, malnourished. Elaine was afraid I was sick. A friend of my father's slipped me a hit of speed, offering that it would help me stay awake long enough to enjoy the party. It was all I could do not to laugh in his face. He thought he was being so cool; I didn't have the heart to tell him that I'd done drugs 100 times more potent than his little 'white cross'. I washed it down with a cold beer, grateful just the same.

During a break in the action, I snuck down to the basement for a peek, opened the door to my old room (now occupied by brother Lonnie) and beheld a wonderful sight: My mountain of treasure. A pyramid of boxes, the size of two refrigerators, taking up a whole corner of the room. Lonnie caught me as I was taking a quick count of stuff I'd sent and new stuff I'd ordered from Pacex catalogs, but I held off till after most everyone had gone home before finally tearing into things. Lonnie was even more anxious than me, he'd had to live with that pile staring him in the face, knowing it contained the best stereo he'd ever seen, and he hadn't been able to touch it. He was dying. Politeness, hell, let's fire this mother up! So we tore into it, box by box, amazed that it had made it all in working condition.

Out of one box a big black bug scurried across the floor. I lurched like a mad man to stomp it to death. One last bug to kill. See, I said, that's just what it was like over there, bugs everywhere. But in that instant I realized I wasn't going to talk much about Vietnam for a long time. I was to find out that the less I said about Vietnam, the better things were.

AFTERMATH

The question I was asked most often in the following weeks was something along the lines of, “What are you going to do now, Tony?” The first time I heard it, I almost gave the truthful answer by saying, “Hell, I don’t know, I hadn’t planned on living this long!” Which I didn’t want to admit to anyone, they’d realize how low I’d sunk. I really didn’t know, so I just focused attention on what came next. Enjoy my leave, then report to Ft. Meade for the rest of my enlistment. I knew I still had a long set of hurdles to jump through, serving out the rest of my enlistment term, I would think about my future then.

I had no scars to show off, no stitched-up bayonet wounds, no bullet holes. I was unscarred, unbowed, unblemished, unbruised and unbloodied, but not unbeaten or unbroken. Inside I was a failure; I’d gone away to die in a blaze of glory, and leave money, a legacy of service for the family to brag about, and a very good impression on all but the very few who knew me and my flaws best. But here I was back in everybody’s way again. I was twenty years old, but had no stories to tell between the time of Junior High School and my twenties because I’d moved, then had worked a job and had little to do with High School classmates. Then two years in the Army, which leaves you with no relate-able experiences, no local friends and some very under-developed social skills. I’d wasted two valuable years and exposed myself to physical and mental deterioration that would severely cripple my future. I’d failed to accomplish any of my goals - didn’t transform myself into the empowered individual who determines and controls his own destiny, nor did I return a hero on any level. My medals added up to less than a cup of coffee. “What’s an Air Medal?” “Well, you get one for flying so many hours”. “Were you a pilot?” “No, I sat in the back seat, manning the gun”. “Oh...”

One thing that nagged me over the years about my coming home, I only recently put my finger on. If I had died in Vietnam, every family member and all my friends would have come together for my funeral. I had a vision of hovering above my own funeral service, watching the members of my 'blood' and 'Step' families intermingle with my long-haired friends, and with the various other neighbors and acquaintances that would come to this, my last party. A companion fantasy, one in which I live, is a gathering of all those same people for my homecoming. Neither happened, of course. While my father's family and some of my friends came over, most just figured that since I was home safe, I'd get around to visiting soon enough. I did visit a few, but some I didn't get around to because I moved a lot. And as far as that huge gathering where I introduce all these disparate people to each other and engage them all in a serious discussion of what I saw, how it affected me, and how we could prevent it from happening again, well, it turned out to be just another child's fantasy.

At Fort Meade, Maryland, even the Army had little use for me. Combat-tested crew chiefs weren't in demand. Being only a lowly E-3, I pulled KP and guard duty, watching over empty barracks that hadn't been used since Korea. What the Army needed most, I wasn't suited for: anti-riot training to protect Washington D.C. from the Vietnam Veterans who were converging on the Capitol to protest against the war. From my barracks window, I could see young raw recruits being trained in a remote field; each action they took as a group accompanied by a shout, meant to intimidate their 'enemy'. Sad to watch all those shiny green uniforms and hear their grunting as they went through their parry-and-thrust routines, trying to act tough, being trained to protect the Capitol from the very people who'd been fighting for what it stood for. We weren't the enemy, but because we took exception to authority and how it conducted our business, we were considered disloyal, traitorous even. And all most of us ever wanted was for someone to tell. And someone to listen.

I wasn't among the protestors, I was worried about getting caught and receiving extra punishment, because at that time they frowned on active duty personnel protesting in public. It taught me the futility of protest and offered graphic proof that America was not listening to the Veterans on the subject of the war in Vietnam.

It was the final blow for me; here I'd gone to gain this knowledge and credibility, as well as for all the other reasons most people go to war, and I'd returned to find that society had no use for what I had to say. People had heard all they needed to hear and were reduced to opinions and attitudes. I was never debriefed by military or civilian authorities, eyewitness accounts were no longer needed. So, since most people didn't want to hear, they didn't. So much for my 'report from the front'.

I cringed with guilt every time I happened to hear a report from the war. Sorry bastards. Felt guilty because too many good guys died and here I am alive. Guilty because I should dedicate my life to ending that war. Instead I focus on myself, figuring that until I cure my own ills, I am of little use to those trying to cure the ills of society - and so I believed for thirty years.

When Elaine and others let it be known that they would listen if I so desired to tell, I clamed up. It was hard to talk about it without feeling like I was going to depress them and transfer my hopelessness and loss of faith in our system to them. Even an amusing story came out wrong - I felt stabbed as the words came out of my mouth. If the story caused a smile, I was taking it out of the horrible context, the war, that it sprang from, thereby painting a positive picture in their minds of the war that I can't put back into context without 'spoiling the joke'.

On the other hand, to describe what I saw, of the bloody to the outrageous to the inhumane, required yet another filling-in of the blanks that couldn't be done because such stories make people unhappy. I hadn't been with my friends and family for much of the previous two years, so

why would I want to upset them or depress them now? Where serious and involved conversation had been the norm back in the Sixties, now there was 'backlash', a weariness with seriousness and exhaustion from too much antagonism. It was easier to just join in the fun.

So I got back in step, as best I could. Put in my days at Ft. Meade and took off on weekends, just like real people do. Got my teeth fixed, bought a nice practical used Chevelle. (That Z/28 never happened, money just wasn't there.) Had my hearing checked and found out that the ringing in my ears will always be with me, there is no cure. (turbine engines and machine guns take their toll) Can't stand loud noises, sudden movement, firecrackers, fireworks, or gunshots of any kind. Can't hear a helicopter without looking up. If it sounds like a Huey, I look, then look away.

In the spring of 1972, I got lucky again. President Nixon wanted to cut back Armed Forces so he let a lot of people out early - a plan aimed specifically at people like me who had too much time left on their enlistments and had already decided they weren't going to stay in the Army.

I loaded my Honorable Discharge and a last trunk full of cheap PX groceries into the old Chevelle and headed home for another round of celebration. This one sweeter than any before. I asked Russ and Don Earl for my old job back at the Parts house. They didn't flinch, bat an eye or hesitate. My job was waiting for me, no questions asked, just "When do you want to come back?" They were men of their word, they wouldn't have dreamed of whining or trying to weasel out. There's heroes for you.

Elaine and I remain friends to this day.

Finally, through a special program just for Veterans who had served in Vietnam, I put in for and received a reward from the State of Ohio. It was fifty dollars.

SIGN OFF

“Well, little man, is there anything else you’d like to tell the folks at home before we say goodnight? (Quickly, we’re about out of time.)”

No, sir, guess I’ve said all I came to say. I’d just like to say to all my fellow Veterans and especially to those I served with that I’m sorry if I didn’t remember it right or if I didn’t tell it right, or left too much out. I did the best I could with what I had.

“Anything else?”

Well, I would like a favor, not for me so much as for those others who answered that call so long ago and for all those serving now and who will serve in the future. Whether Soldier, Sailor, Flyer or Marine, no matter how far flung their travel or how severe their duty experience, there’s something we all need to hear when it’s over. Something we all sacrificed and struggled, fought and maybe died to hear. It can come from the lips of a loved one or a stranger, a neighbor or a friend, but it should be heard from everyone. It’s just two words, so simple and plain but so easy to forget sometimes. It’s not ‘our hero’, ‘well done’, ‘Atta boy’, or ‘thank you’, although all those things sound good. These two words above all others help us know that what we did was worth it and that there was someone who appreciated it. Two musical, magical words that say the past will be honored by seeing to the future. The two words we wait most to hear everyday while we’re away, even if we aren’t aware of our need to hear them.

Two little words, that’s all we ask. Not too much to ask for someone who has been gone so long and asked so little. Two words, please, it sounds so good to hear...

...welcome home.



*Dedicated
to the
memory of
Joseph E.
Rohlinger*

*my
friend
Joe*

Vietnam Veterans Memorial

JOSEPH E ROHLINGER

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To all my teachers, as well as the musicians too numerous to mention, I remain eternally grateful for giving my

life the knowledge, understanding, passion and deep meaning I got from nowhere else.

- Miami Beach, Florida, August, 2003

THE STARTER LIST

THE PENTAGON PAPERS - Neil Sheehan
SECRETS - A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM AND THE PENTAGON PAPERS - Daniel Ellsberg
BLOODS - Wallace Terry
RED BADGE OF COURAGE - Stephen Crane
THE VIETNAM READER - edited by Stewart O'Nan
ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT - Remarque
JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN - Dalton Trumbo
FIREBIRDS - Chuck Carlock
THE NAKED AND THE DEAD - Norman Mailer
BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY - Ron Kovic
CHICKEN HAWK - Mason
HEARTS AND MINDS Documentary film 1974 Directed by Peter Davis Rainbow Pictures Corp. Criterion Collection 112 minutes Rated R