

Title to Come



Richard Panichi

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Title Title

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Introduction

(Placeholder Text)

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Able's Story

After officers' candidate school, we newly commissioned second lieutenants entered Basic School, six months of what was essentially training to command an infantry platoon, the rationale being this was a job all of us should be ready to do even though most of us would get additional training for more specialized assignments.

In our class of 200, my friend, Abel stood out. We were constantly being ranked in various categories, and he was always near the top. An extrovert with recruiting poster good looks and a striking blond wife, he was popular with the other student-officers and well regarded by the instructors.

Another good friend, Biff, an enthusiastic likeable guy with whom I shared daily rides to the base from the apartment complex where we lived with our wives.

Besides Able and Biff I spent time with three other new second lieutenants I had met in officers' candidate school, Charlie, Jack, and Guy. During our first week in training the three of us were told to report to the base commander together. That's when we learned we were all law school graduates. After asking us to sit down, the colonel advised us that attorneys in previous classes had a dismal record, almost all had been dropped from the program. He attributed this failure to they're expecting some special treatment because of advanced education and not understanding the necessity of making the same effort as other candidates. Having been assured our education gave us no advantages in becoming officers, we returned to our unit and eight weeks later all three of us were commissioned second lieutenants.

As we approached the end of our six-month Basic School training it was time for each of us to be assigned what was called a Military Occupational Specialty, such as legal, infantry, artillery, armor, motor transport officer. Although the decision was not ours, we each received a form on which we were to list three assignments

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in our order of preference. I designated infantry as my first choice and, although we had some time to consider our choices, turned in my request immediately. Our instructors had emphasized that only the best among us would be considered for assignment as infantry officers and while we knew this was a lie, there was an element of truth to it. A successful tour of duty as a rifle platoon commander in combat was not the only, but the most likely, foundation for a long and successful career in the military. I had no intention of serving beyond my three-year obligation, but I had been trained as a rifle platoon commander, and I wanted to use my training.

Our instructors never tired of reminding us only the best of us would be considered to become infantry officers, and the average life expectancy of a lieutenant platoon commander in a fire fight was 18 seconds. We took this as hyperbole, but the expected high casualty rate among 2nd lieutenant infantry officers had a lot of us considering the advantages of serving as a logistics officer, a motor transport officer, a public relations officer, or some other specialty that involved sitting at a desk. The reality of going from a student to getting shot at and coming home from a thirteen-month combat tour in a rubber body bag, or a wheelchair was now staring us in the face. Consequently, I doubted there were enough outstanding candidates for a, infantry "MOS" to fill the fifty man quota so, a number of extremely average aspirants like myself had to be selected.

Guy, who was a class president, high school quarterback type, and thought of himself as our leader, and called a meeting of the four attorneys. Guy had done some investigation and discovered there was only one position available for a legal officer and therefore if we all listed that as our preference, only one of us would be successful. He felt it would be unseemly for us to compete for this assignment and proposed that we all elect infantry as our first choice and let our superiors decide who should get the prized position. We all agreed and shook hands on it. Not a problem for me as I had already elected infantry.

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When our assignments were announced, Guy was sent to a base to serve as a legal officer, Charlie became a supply officer, Jack went to flight school and I got my first choice.

My friend Biff opted for the artillery. He loved the idea of shooting what he called the big guns and was assigned as a forward observer to accompany an infantry company in combat. A few months later he was missing in action, and presumably dead with the rest of his company when they were overrun by the enemy while on patrol.

All of the above is by way of explaining how Abel and I became rifle platoon leaders, in the same infantry battalion.

Our Battalion was based south of the airfield and port city where troops and supplies arrived in support of the war effort. The battalion's primary job was to this area preventing the enemy from launching rocket or mortar attacks against the airfield and the city's logistics facilities. This accomplished was by having platoons, (three each from the four companies that made up the battalion), constantly patrol from our base.

A month or so after we arrived Fox Company with Able's platoon was detached from the battalion and stationed in an area twenty-nine miles south of us on a hill, a dangerous assignment as the valley was frequented by larger enemy units. The hill was a strong defensive position from which the company could observe enemy movements and patrol. On one of these patrols the company encountered a large enemy force occupying a prepared defensive position in a tree line. The company commander, "D", ordered his understrength company, (one platoon had been left behind to secure the base.) to prepare to assault this superior entrenched force across an open area.

I wish I had had the talent and energy to write a detailed description of what happened that day. I could have interviewed the survivors and the people in the chain of command who ordered the

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assault, maybe even located the enemy commanders and learned their prospective. In my 85th year most of them are gone and the opportunity has passed. I am left with my memories of what Able related and second and third hand accounts.

At the time of the event, I was occupying a hospital ship while recovering from a gunshot wound. A few months later a piece of luck came my way that brought me into contact with Able again.

I was ordered to the base where Able was now stationed for a few days as part of an investigation. Able was working there as base Special Services Officer, (in charge of recreational activities)? After his experience in the valley, he had taken a step that made it impossible for him to serve in our battalion. A standing executive order by the President prohibited two members of the same family from simultaneously serving in a war zone and Abel's brother was in country with another branch of service. Able had somehow circumvented this regulation by signing a waiver. After the battle Able had elected to withdraw this waiver and been transferred to this safe, low responsibility job. His decision probably damaged his prospects for a military career, but under the circumstances I doubt Abel cared. Someone viewing his service records could wrongly view his decision as cowardice, I know the survivors from his platoon did not. I called him and suggested we go to dinner

That evening Able arrived at my quarters with a car and driver. To be showered, shaved, clean, in borrowed, civilian clothes, and headed for a restaurant was a nice change of scene from the last few months. At dinner he avoided any mention of recent events. Although I was curious, having nothing but second-hand information I was careful not to bring the subject up.

After dinner Abel called for a cab which arrived carrying to young women he apparently knew and we headed for the entertainment district. We hadn't gone far when the street was suddenly blocked by demonstrators. Quickly the car was surrounded by hostile

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locals, pounding on the hood and windows. We could not understand what the men were shouting, but it was obvious they were not pleased by the site of local women in a car with two foreigners. The girls, who were in the back seat with Abel, jumped out of the cab, pushed their way through the crowd, and took off running. Without thinking, Able and I followed them down a side street. Thankfully, the demonstrators did not chase us. I was impressed by how fast and far frightened young women could run in heels, and when they finally slowed down to walk, we were all breathing through our mouths. There was nothing for us to do but follow the women through a series of unlit, narrow streets and alleys lined with one story buildings, until we finally arrived what looked like an abandoned store front. The girls motioned us inside.

A few chairs surrounded a cast iron stove in the cold dark room behind the store. Able and I sat down and a girl spread blankets across our laps and over the stove. In a few minutes there was a low fire in the stove, and we were comfortably warm in spite of the damp cold. It was nice to be waited on but it wasn't long before the girls exhausted their supply of English phrases, were bored with our company. They left us for a kitchen to drink tea and talk to each other in their own language.

Just as well, as Abel wanted to talk and I was anxious to hear what he had to say. he started with "I told _____, "Don't do it." (I won't use the captain company commander's actual name) "but he ordered us anyway." I knew from others how Fox Company had been running platoon sized patrols from their basecamp on the hill and frequently encountering small groups of uniformed, regular army enemy, (as opposed to the lightly armed insurgents the rest of the battalion was fighting.) On the day of the attack captain had sent out a larger patrol composed to two platoons and the company headquarter group, leaving the base defended by a third platoon and some attached support units. The patrol had found and killed several regular army troops who were carrying a heavy metal base plate for an 82 millimeter mortar, a weapon operated by a crew part

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of an enemy battalion, a unit much larger than the patrol.

These facts were common knowledge in our battalion. For what happened next there might be more versions than survivors. The official reports called it an ambush, which no one I know believe is accurate. I can't pretend what I am about to relate is history or even an accurate representation of what Abel told me that night. It has been fifty-nine years since our conversation. Possibly I have mixed up scraps of information I heard elsewhere with Able's story, or my memories of this conversation are distorted. When you are relating a conversation that occurred long ago and one you have thought of and discussed many times before, are you relating memories, or memories of memories? Impossible to know. The story becomes embellished, pruned of inconvenient details and mixed with other stories. In any case the following is what I remember of what Able related that night.

"I told him not to do it." This is how he started as if I have been playing the events over-and-over in my mind just as he had. The following is an abbreviated recollection of what Abel told me.

"We were deployed in a tree line looking across an open area at another tree line. We could make out fortified enemy positions across the open paddy and tripods for heavy machine guns. The skipper called for me and the other platoon commander and told us to prepare our platoons to assault across the open space on his command. We both objected. They could see us just as we were looking at them. The word "suicide" was mentioned. Our captain had been on the radio with officers up the chain of command so maybe he had explained the situation and been ordered to attack anyway. I said, "Don't do it." but he gave the order and I returned to my platoon.

When the order came, we stood up and a storm of fire hit us before we could take our first step. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw men

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on my right and left go down immediately. The rest of started towards the enemy tree line, firing as we ran. More of us went down but the rest kept running. Between us and the enemy's line I could see some scattered earth mounds, (these were grave sites, raised above the paddy so the deceased could be buried above the water table.). I made for the nearest grave and dropped down behind it. The firing slowed and when I looked back towards our lines I could see my platoon strung out behind me, a few lying flat still firing, some wounded and calling for help or trying to crawl back to our previous position, some dead. I could not tell if anyone else made it to the graves, but I think I may have been out in front of my whole platoon when I got down behind a mound.

I waited for the enemies to come out of their positions and kill what was left of us but for some reason they just stayed put. I didn't try to go back to our lines. There was nothing to go back to. Later when it was still light a relief force, another infantry company, showed up and occupied our original position. There was firing back and forth again but the enemy stayed in their positions. I decided to wait until dark before moving. When it was dark and I was ready to move, the enemy was leaving their positions to pick over the bodies of the dead and wounded. I could hear them moving and talking quietly around me, so I stayed put. At dawn they were finally gone."

Without expressing it directly it was evident he was eaten up with anger at the people who ordered this suicidal attack, for following the order and overcome with guilt for surviving when most of his platoon had been killed or wounded in those few minutes. I was on a plane the next day headed back to my platoon.

What I know about the aftermath of Abel's charge I learned from a variety of second hand sources and official records. The company commander had taken a bullet in the chest as he stood up. I saw him a few days latter on the hospital ship where we were both recovering from wounds. The captain's wound was more serious as the projectile had pierced the spiral notebook in his breast pocket

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before entering his ribcage distributing shredded paper throughout his chest cavity. He went on to a long and distinguished career in the military, retiring as a general. The other lieutenant platoon commander was not so lucky. He took a round to the head in first seconds of the assault. In the next few days multiple battalions arrived by helicopter at the scene. As one helicopter discharged its passengers the enemy fired mortar rounds into the landing zone creating multiple casualties among a battalion headquarters group including a colonel. Over the next month or so there were major battles throughout the valley with many casualties on both sides, including in Echo Company when both our company commander and his successor received wounds and were evacuated.

The official report characterized Fox Company's destruction as a tactical move designed to lure enemy formations into the Valley where they could be engaged and destroyed, one of many successful operations executed by our military which proceeded our losing the war.

Forty-five years later, I talked to Able again on a phone call which started something like this: "Do remember me? Yes, of course. (a pause). "I told D not to do it." We agree to meet but never did. Later at an Echo Company reunion I met a veteran who had been Abel's platoon sergeant and spent that day on the hill with the perimeter security. I learned that Able had had a successful career in sales, multiple marriages and divorces, and was currently suffering from alcoholism. Some years after the event a reunion of the Fox Company survivors was held. The company commander, now a senior decorated officer attended. I didn't get any details but apparently there was some bitterness among the attendees. In any case, there was never another reunion. A few years I had talked to him on the phone, Abel had escaped from a convalescent home where he was living and was found dead in an abandoned building.

There is no official name for the events that occurred on the day of Fox Company's assault and, as far as I know, no written accounts

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of what Abel and his platoon suffered that day. The numbers of their dead and wounded were combined with the larger events that occurred later and were never reported separately. There are no accounts of heroism or memorials for Abel. I know he was liked and respected by the men who served under him and, to my mind, there is more honor in that than in any medal or citation.

Airport Mafia, Ballet & Other Problems

It was sort of an outdoor going away party for our group. We had spent a couple of weeks traversing a section of taiga I was confident no one from my part of the world had ever seen before. It had been a grueling, two weeks, not made any easier by the mistake that destroyed our food supply on the first day and forced us to live on a sack of potatoes and a case of vodka, our guide Nikita, had thoughtfully brought, plus the fish and mushrooms we were able to harvest.

What was I doing in a part of the world where the top twelve inches of the ground only thaws for a couple of months during summer, traveling with three of my countrymen, a married couple, Larry and Karen, Don, a practicing physician also was an amateur boxer, Alex our translator, and Nikita, the sole government law enforcement official for a huge swath of almost uninhabited wilderness who also served as a shaman to the scattered tribal inhabitants? The answer is I badly wanted something, but at the time I didn't know what it was.

During the preceding Winter, I had scouted this trip when I attached myself as a construction/development advisor to a visiting group looking for business opportunities, hoping to acquire the necessary maps and contacts I need to plan the expedition. This was geography that had been off limits to foreigners for a long time but a recent thaw in relations between the two governments had attracted companies looking to profit in this mineral and agricultural rich but underdeveloped area.

The Winter trip required a ten-hour flight to the capital of our destination country, a county where you could cross six time zones without leaving. Then another seven hour flight to the capital of the Eastern republic where we had meetings scheduled. The subjects of the meetings were not of much interest to me but the interactions between the national representatives, the local tribal officials and

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my countrymen were worth watching. The representatives from the capital were crafty and suspicious, the semi-tribal people who represented the republic, did a lot of shouting, and the businessmen, my countrymen, were solicitous and tried to hide their contempt for the other two groups. A typical response by the English speakers to a technical question would go something like, "Tell the dumb son-of-a-bitch I could answer his question but he's too fucking stupid to understand." The translator, in her late twenties, attractive, professional, and being paid by our group would instantly launch into an equivalent response which obviously did not convey the insult but caused the other group to smile and nod. By their body language and smirks I could tell our adversaries were indulging in equally insulting comments knowing our interpreter would cover for them. This kind of exchange went on for long hours daily with our never tiring translator improvising to mask the rude and sometimes crude behavior of all parties. By the end of the week she had even charmed the tribals, who were initially insulted by the necessity of having to communicate through a woman. Watching her work I was fascinated. We were given a nighttime, fifty-degree below zero, tour by our hosts which included crossing of the third longest river in the world riding in military vehicles with a sacrificial advance vehicle manned by younger officials who were to locate weak areas in the ice and probably drown if they found one. I made small talk with our translator in the back seat of a jeep and saw her briefly at the formal dinner later. Dinner on our last night, which included hors d'oeuvres of curled raw horsemeat bites, was followed by speeches, poetic toasts, (recitation of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star), singing toasts, and finally dancing toasts. I kept my distance from our translator who was the only female in attendance and, after her weak long performance, loved by everyone. I was a married man at the time, maybe not the best husband but better than some in the same situation. The closest I came to infidelity was brief eye contact from the far end of the table.

An important tactic of our hosts was to get us drunk every day at noon and dinner. I had resisted successfully, but the dinner went

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on to the early morning hours and at some point, I couldn't say no again. I was enjoying a conversation with a local who had been introduced to me as the chief justice of the Republic's supreme court. He had some English and we hit it off well enough. The last thing I remember was him challenging me to a local game which consisted of trading punches to the midsection. The next morning at the airport, with a hangover worse than I had ever experience before and certainly not since, I could not locate my watch cap. Since it was a short distance to the boarding ramp, I was planning to make it bareheaded when a local stopped me, pushed a fur hat on my head and tied the flaps under my chin before admonishing me that by the time I got to the ramp uncovered the sub-fifty air would freeze ears so badly, they would need to be amputated.

It was a successful trip. In my free time between horrible meetings, I had acquired the necessary maps and made the contacts I needed to organize my next summer's expedition. My thoughts on the way home kept going back to our translator. I was not to have another conversation with her for ten years.

Eight months later I had recruited and organized my expedition group, assembled the aluminum frame and canvas canoes, tents, food and other equipment we would need, selected the river we would run and made flight reservations. Arriving at our starting point on our chosen river was as complicated as the river trip itself. Our flight to the capital was ten hours, overnight at a hotel, meet our guide, Alex, then another long flight to the capitol of the far eastern republic, meet our local guide, Nikita, necessary permits, another hotel night where Don whose appearance was closer to a heavyweight boxer than the country doctor which he was, was challenged to arm wrestle the local champion, after which Don graciously held his arm upright long enough so as not to humiliate his opponent before finishing him, the next day embark on a "rocket bottle" a vehicle with an airliner shaped body which travels at high speed above the river supported by a series of underwater wings. Five hundred miles on the world's third longest river and a

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major tributary to a small port city where we spent a night in the crew quarters of what I think was an abandoned river boat, then a several day ride on a six wheeled military vehicle on a dirt, almost not, a road to our river's headwaters put in point. Along the "road" our driver explained we were driving on the bones of exiles". In the 1930's and later the government would send gangs of criminals, purged army officers, political prisoners, etc. to build this road to nowhere by hand. By the end of the summer most of these would have died from lack of food and their bodies incorporated into the road itself. Survivors would spend the winter in one of the barbed wire fenced, crude watchtower guarded camps, the remains of which we saw at intervals. Survivors, if any, would be joined in the spring by a new group of exiles. The road was never maintained or used because it literally didn't go anywhere. During the drive we never saw any humans except once an indigenous woman and a few children picking red berries and tossing them on a sheet of plastic.

At the point where we intended to assemble our canoes and enter the river, we made our first important discovery. The container of gas which we intended to cook with had been inspected by a curious boatman on the rocket bottle. When he replaced the cap, he had crossed the threads causing the cooking gas to leak contaminating our food supply. Nikita thought not a problem as he preferred wood fires anyway and he had brought a large sack of potatoes and twelve bottles of Vodka. The rest of our sustenance would be provided after appropriate intercession by the tree and river spirits by the bounty surrounding us and it was.

Let me say here that, although I have no religious or other beliefs myself, I do religiously avoid mocking other's beliefs. If Nikita's ideas about the spirits he saw animating trees, rocks, rivers, and animals seem quaint to you, they were deadly serious to him, and he insisted we follow him in various daily ceremonies he performed. For instance, at the end of every day's paddling, we built a small fire and placed small potions of food in it. While the food burned Nikita taught us a chant to sing with him. On the last note he would

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pour a drop of vodka on the fire which would flair up. Then he would pour a portion into each of our cups, and we would quietly down them before eating whatever he had prepared for us. I had seen a similar performance inside the hotel by a local official before Don's arm-wrestling match with the fire being ignited on the floor in the corner of the room and quickly extinguished after the ceremony completed.

The first night Karen protested she could not drink undiluted liquor, but Nikita gave her a long, grave look, and she held her cup out to receive the few drops he gave her. This vodka did not seem very strong to me, Larry called it reindeer piss, but it was calories and after a long day of paddling I looked forward to my cup. On the third day Karen held out her cup to receive her drops and before Nikita could withdraw the bottle, she made a subtle gesture which consisted of tiny circular motions of her free, cupped hand. Nikita filled her small cup. Thereafter Karen received the same ration as the rest of us.

Our truck ride had been through rolling hills dotted by conifers. Now we were paddling canoes on a river winding through a flat valley. The river's margins were densely forested with cedars and pines, old growth which had never been timbered. There were no signs of human habitation and the animal life we saw were mostly consisted of small groups of wild horses on the grassy banks and what was swimming in the river. We were hungry some days but never starving. Nikita brought us mushrooms and edible plants he picked among the trees and fried them on a clean piece of sheet metal he had brought. We used the potatoes sparingly as Nikita had brought only enough for himself. He also had a small amount of bread but this he reserved for ceremonies. Once Nikita shot a swimming duck with the rifle he carried, an older military model I knew as an SKS. The soup he made included mushrooms, potatoes and some greens and was one of our best dinners. Most of our calories, however, came from the fish we caught. I had some fishing equipment, a fly rod and streamers, feathers tie on a hook to look

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like small fish, and a spinning rod with lures I lent to the others. Don was an expert fly fisherman and had the necessary equipment. Some days we had good luck with Lenok, a beautiful spotted trout-like fish with a bright red streak on its side. One was particularly large. When I gutted it, the stomach contained two rodents. Some of these fish we fried with mushrooms which were very oily, but our staple was Nikita's fish soup with cut up fish sections including the heads which he liked best, showing us with sucking sounds how to extract the morsels from the cheeks and other cavities. Aren't we all willing to try something new when hungry enough? We caught a few taimen, a larger fish that can grow up to sixty inches. Larry hooked the largest on a spinner which he had difficulty landing. Nikita rushed over with his SKS and prepared to shoot, but I stopped him. Finally, the Doc and I herded it into the shallows and drove it onto the bank. Earlier that day Nikita had offered to shoot a wild horse for us, and I had told him we were not that hungry yet. This fish proved to be our protection against future hunger when Nikita showed us how to preserve the flesh by pressing it between flat rocks with his stock off salt. We still had quite a bit left when we were picked up by motor boat the following week at the junction of our river with the larger river we had traversed in the rocket bottle.

In the evenings after eating and washing our bowls and soup pot, I liked to talk to Alex and Nikita about their lives and mine. Alex's business was organizing trips where sometimes he carried no food and his clients lived on only what they could kill or find, rafting trips down white-water rivers with dangerous rapids and falls, or visits to exotic destinations with fascinating culture and people. Some of his stories made my few excursions seem tame by comparison and I envied him for it. Nikita's life on the other hand was a continuous adventure living in his environment. One day he had showed us a winter cabin he had built on the river, accessible only after traveling on foot for days. The log walls supported a flat earth covered roof only a few feet off the sunken floor. No need to heat more space than necessary to sleep and eat he told us. This is

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where he had trap lines including a barbed wire bear trap which fortunately was empty. Nikita's right cheek bore three angry raised scars, parallel lines with a fish-hook shaped curve at the end of each. No one had asked about these scars but one evening I could not contain my curiosity. Nikita smiled and Alex translated his response as scars from bear skinning. I asked how could you scar your cheek skinning an animal? Bear not completely dead was his answer. Nikita carried a large knife in a leather scabbard slung over his shoulder by a raw hide strap. Had had made it by grinding the shape from a piston rod he found in an abandoned diesel. Good steel he said. The scabbard was the boiled skin of an animal tail formed by inserting to pieces of wood and letting the leather shrink over them. The knife's handle was a smooth piece of gnarled birch. Later he traded it to me for a factory-made knife I carried which he admired. As I write this, I am looking at Nikita's knife displayed on a shelf next to the fireplace.

Some nights instead of talking I would walk off a short distance and find a place to sit and think alone. On trips when I am in the company of the same small group of people 24 hours a day for extended periods, I need some solitude. My thoughts at these times often turned to my lost interpreter, who I was sure I would never see again.

We arrived at the river mouth. A boat powered by an outboard motor picked us up at the river mouth to deliver us to the rocket bottle. On the way we stopped to visit a farming community. We were surprised to find how productive the land was. The large fields cleared of trees, rich soil and many hour of daily sunshine produced corn, soybeans, sunflowers, and vegetables despite the short growing season. While Irrigation water sprayed, we walked to a small square surrounded by three storied barracks-like living quarters, faded paint peeling off the weathered wooden siding. Not a single architectural detail visible. No sign of people either until I see movement in an upper story window. A child peeks out and then quickly replaces the curtain.

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Alex translates the script on the bronze monument commemorating the village's contribution to the Great Patriotic War with the names of the villagers who served. Apparently, one was a sniper who recorded a remarkable number of kills. The square also contains a large billboard displaying the production quotas for long past years and whether they were met or exceeded. Where are the people? In the fields? Hiding from us? Are they afraid of us? Alex has no idea.

The long trip back to the republic's capital by rocket bottle was uneventful, the novelty of skimming above the water at sixty plus miles per hour while viewing miles of dense forest punctuated occasionally by herds of wild horses having worn off. And this brings us back to our going away party. We are being entertained at the rustic home of a government official sitting around a fire drinking with Karen, Alex, Don, and Larry and various government officials who issued permits necessary for our trip. These desk sitting, suit and tie wearing, bureaucrats are far removed from Nikita's world and consider our return from the remote taiga something to be celebrated. Vodka, speeches, and toasts are flowing. I have the good sense not to ask what animal the meat we are eating comes from. At this moment I have no fear of death, but alcohol poisoning is not my preferred method of leaving, so I discreetly spill vodka on the ground before each toast. By the end of the evening, I had dumped so much alcohol on the ground I am afraid one of the smokers would accidentally start a fire. At the airport the next morning my head was splitting.

We waited in the shabby terminal for our seven hour flight back to the capital city while Alex checked us in. "Guys, we have a problem. The agent says our baggage is overweight and there's a charge." I asked why this was a problem. "In your currency, about forty-six thousand dollars?" It was a problem. Our baggage consisted of packs with tents, dirty clothes, sleeping bags, cooking utensils, and folding canoes. Nothing we couldn't easily replace and, as always, our essentials were in carryons. "Alex, tell them they can keep our

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equipment. We'll leave it here."

A few minutes later Alex is back. "Sixteen thousand dollars?" I didn't say a word, just gave him a look. Again, a short conference with the ticket agent. "Four thousand dollars and that's final". By this time, I had started to like the idea of traveling home without all this well used equipment we were lugging around. Maybe this was God's way of saying she wanted me to have a new tent and camp stove.

Ten minutes later we boarded, having paid four hundred dollars for our overweight baggage.

We all tried to sleep during the long ride back to the capital's airport. Alex tells us a foreigners' cab ride from the airport would be ridiculously expensive, so he arranged for a friend to meet us with a van and take us to the hotel. After we loaded our gear and were seated in the van, but before we could pull away from the curb, two large men appeared in front of our vehicle and a third motioned for our driver to roll down his window. Alex translated. The big guys are representatives of the company which had the exclusive right to drive foreigners from the airport. Our driver said something they didn't like, probably a mistake, as the third guy grabbed his lapels and pulled him out of the van through the open window.

I was in the van's middle seat between Don and the door. Prior to medical school, Don had been an amateur boxer and worked as a bouncer in a strip club. When Don talked about those days he said things like, "I hit him once and he went down." As I braced myself to try to keep Don in the van, Alex was shouting, "Don, Don, there's three of them." Don answered "Pretty soon there'll only be two." Alex said, "Don. They have guns."

I've travelled enough to know when to negotiate and when to pay the asking price. I paid our burly new friends and thanked them for allowing us to leave. Don sat quietly, arms crossed against his chest,

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unnecessary adrenaline coursing through his bulging veins.

After checking into our hotel, cleaned up and relaxed, we were ready to use the ballet tickets Alex had arranged for us. Don was married to a retired dancer and was excited to see a performance in a city famous for its ballet company. The Doc was an interesting guy, a student of medicine, the sweet science of boxing, fly fishing, and high culture.

I know nothing of high culture let alone this particular art form, but I was surprised to be enjoying the performance. I had visions, probably derived from old films, of scenes in the lobby with beautiful women in elaborate dresses and cavalry officers wearing swords with empty sleeve jackets draped over their shoulders. The lobby wasn't quite that colorful but none-the-less interesting. People watching is a hobby for me and there was plenty to observe during intermissions. I made a mental note to do this again. Don had been unusually quiet, and I suspected was still angry over the airport mafia incident. Overdosing on adrenaline will do that. At dinner he finally relaxed. The wine and the food were especially delicious that night.

The Bamboo Bridge

Our war was fought on land where three thousand years before men had begun the work of leveling small sections of earth and surrounding each of them with an earthen dike to make paddies. Over the centuries by their labor, and probably through trial and error, these people had created and maintained a perfectly functioning hydraulic system that allowed them to flood each paddy to a uniform depth, drain each paddy, and produce two rice crops a year, making it possible to feed their families and sell the greater part of their crop to less productive areas. Water movement through the paddies was controlled by an intricate system of channeled streams and irrigation gates. Most of us were unmindful of the ingenuity and beauty of this complex apparatus. I was fascinated.

These streams had high banks to accommodate the heavy flows during the rainy season and in most places were too deep, and at times too fast to wade. The farmers constructed bridges wherever trails crossed the streams. These were made by lashing two stout bamboo poles together to make an X, placing a series of these X's in the current and laying heavy lengths of bamboo across the crotches from one bank to the other. Crossing on foot was done by placing one foot in front of the other like a circus performer walking a tightrope, but with the help of railings tied to the top of the X's.

For our patrols there were no alternatives to crossing the bamboo bridges, even though enemies found them ideal locations for inflicting casualties on us. Still, I wasn't concerned that our assigned patrol route would take us over the bamboo bridge in the middle of the market town on the highway. Of the many villages in the area we patrolled, this was the closest to our base, and one of the safest for us.

There were as many inconsistent versions of what happened the first day of this patrol as there were participants. Adrenalin is not a drug that enhances accurate memories. Here is what I remem-

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ber: Instead of splitting into squads and walking parallel routes, we were in a single, long column when the shooting started. I was just behind the lead squad, so instead of using the radio, I sprinted forward to assess the situation. Part of the squad was firing down stream to our right and the rest shooting across the bridge where I could see the backs of enemy splashing through the paddy headed for a tree line.

The machine guns squad was setting up on the levee that bordered the stream. The other squad leaders were feeding their men into position along the bank. No need to shout orders, we all knew what to do. I could see more enemy running away from us than I had ever seen before on a patrol. Rounds were flying in both directions, but at the beginning, we were doing most of the shooting. My first thought was to get a squad across the bridge while our adversaries were showing their backs. I knew we would be expected, probably ordered, to assault across the river and I wanted to do it before the runners got to the far tree line. As the lead squad started across the bridge, heads popped up above the levee on the far bank no more than ten meters away, and the first two of our men were swept off the bridge by a burst of fire. The volume of fire coming from the opposite levee and from the far tree line was suddenly intense. My head down, I grabbed for the radio to call for an artillery mission. Turning to look at the enemy rounds splintering the bamboo behind us, I thought I saw our machine gun squad leader, Larry Hample, frantically tearing at his boot laces.

There was no artillery support available, the battery was firing a mission for another unit. In the meantime we took turns with our enemies popping up and spraying bursts back and forth across the river. When I looked over the levee I could see rounds ricocheting off the surface of the river and Hample, stripped of his helmet and boots, in the water frantically stroking toward the bridge.

I sent Ben, our platoon sergeant, downstream with one squad to a spot where I knew they could ford, to come up on our enemies from their flank, while the rest of us provided covering fire. A few

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minutes later the firing stopped and Ben reported from the position recently vacated by the enemy unit. Hample had managed to drag back one of the men shot off the bridge, gone back for the second, but lost him as they were both sucked down by the current. The water logged riflemen, Palmquist, had been holding his weapon in front of his chest and it had absorbed the rounds that knock him off the bridge. He was uninjured but shaken and who could blame him. We provided security while divers sent from division retrieved lance corporal New's body from the river.

Wayne New, was the kind of person that everyone noticed. Working as a fireman from Texas before he enlisted, New had a bull whip which could flick cigarettes out of his friends mouths, do cowboy rope tricks, and was a natural leader. Although he had only been with the platoon for a short time, and was no more than a few years older than most of his squad, he took responsibility for helping the new guys adjust and they looked up to him as an older brother. It was no surprise that New was the first Marine to step onto the bamboo bridge. There were other good young men from our platoon that died that year, but New's death made a particularly strong impression on us. A few months later, Dick Palmquist hospitalized and recovering from five bullet wounds, contacted New's widow, Vicky and remained in contact with her for the rest of their lives. A few years ago, Dick Palmquist and Ben dedicated a memorial to Wayne New at the Texas firehouse where he had worked.

When we were in training we were told the life expectancy of a rifle platoon leader in a firefight averaged eighteen seconds. At the time we thought of this statistic as a grossly exaggerated attempt to impress us with the seriousness of what we were about to attempt. Later, when I understood the difference between the long range exchanges of fire that could go on for minutes or even hours, and real fire fights, the deadly situations which occur when armed enemies come face to face, I knew better. I would guess some of these last might be only a second or two, or at most a single digit number of seconds at which time the participants are either running in oppo-

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site directions, dead, incapacitated, or standing over the bodies of their opponents.

As actions go, the fight at the bamboo bridge was insignificant, but that few seconds of close range fire, men shot off the bridge, Hample diving into the stream as rounds kicked up geysers of water around him, and News death by drowning, created images that have stayed with some of us. The evening, having spent the day providing security as divers retrieved New's body, we crossed the bridge into the village where we had chased the enemy that morning.

A few days later, back in the battalion base camp, the skipper asked me a strange question. Had our battalion commander or someone on his staff offended me somehow? The colonel thought this might be because I had never made an appearance at the officers club or come anywhere near his headquarters. He had only seen me once when I first reported. I told the Skipper no, I had no grudge against anyone. Leading my platoon simply required every bit of attention I could muster. In the few hours we spent in our base between patrols I wanted to get my squads ready for the next patrol and catch up on my sleep. This was the truth, but not all of it.

Having gone to the make shift, base rifle range, fired all our wet or possibly dirty ammunition and ordinance for practice, cleaned our weapons, drawn new, clean, ammunition, loaded the four or more twenty round magazines we each carried, and packed for our next patrol, I released the platoon to relax, shower and drink beer.

I wanted to satisfy the skipper I was not antisocial, shaved two weeks of beard, cleaned up, drew a new utility jacket from the supply sergeant to replace my torn, filthy one, and headed for the tent with a plywood bar and a few table and chairs that served as the officers club. With a bottle of beer in hand, I asked the officers at a table with a vacant chair if I could sit with them. We introduced ourselves. As I guessed, these were staff officers who had no

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field experience and they immediately took me, with my new utility shirt, and not very tan, clean shaven face, for a new arrival. They proceeded to fill me, the newcomer to the war zone, in on what to expect, peppered with advice on how best to get through my difficult first few weeks. The hot topic was the recent fire fight at the bamboo bridge which they described in such matter of fact detail one would get the impression they were present, or least watching from a short distance. I learned the colonel wanted to recommend my gun squad leader, who had rescued Palmquist, for an award. They actually repeated some of my words spoken to my squad leaders and to the skipper. I took it all in and thanked them for the advice. I now understood the people in the command bunker were listening to our radio transmissions on a speaker and not just the officers on duty, but other staff who heard the firing and crowded in to be part of the excitement. Fifty years later these guys are probably including the fight at the bridge in the war stories they are telling their grandchildren, while mine, hardly know I was even in the military.

I guess I'm a little bit of a snob. I still look down on the people who tell war stories but never fought. Not fair. I'm sure any one of the staff officers in our battalion would gladly have taken my place if asked.

Black Heart

My parents bought the whole boys' package, including shiny black shoes, trousers, light blue shirt, and a dark blue tie. The nuns wanted us to be properly dressed for our first communion and let us know this purchase was not optional if we wanted to be part of the ceremony. My father grumbled about the expense, which was well above what these items would cost in a store, but he paid. Included at no extra charge was a small satin covered book inscribed with our name where we could save photographs of the important day. The picture on the inside cover of this memento has always stayed with me and marks an important step in my early development. The scene shows three children kneeling at the altar railing, their heads tilted back ready to receive the host, a disk of unleavened bread held between the priest's thumb and a middle finger. Two boys with a girl in the middle viewed from behind so that you can see the priest and an altar boy in their robes ready to dispense the small white disc, the altar boy holding a shiny, gold, circular tray, (I think they called it a patten.") by its a wooden handle under the girl's chin so that no crumbs of the sacred body of Christ might accidentally fall to the floor. Although, the children's faces are not visible you can imagine the innocent, vulnerable expressions, their eyes closed, mouths open with tongues slightly extended. Most importantly a glowing red heart radiating through the chest of the boy on the right and the girl, the radiation indicated by a circle of dashes surrounding the heart. I recognized myself instantly, in the boy kneeling on the left, my black heart showing through my back, without the circle of dashes intended to depict the love of god. Not only had I not been able to muster up any love for god but I had failed to mention this omission a few days before at my first confession. Afraid of our iltempered parish priest, I had offered him a few of the innocuous transgressions typical of seven year olds. Compounding the sin of making what was called a bad confession, I committed the equally serious offense of receiving the sacrament with unforgiven mortal sins on the books. The nuns told us we would remember this important day for the rest of our lives and I have.

After graduation from primary school my father rebelled against the nuns and priest and refused to pay for Catholic high school. A few Sundays before our Irish priest had announced, "We didn't need more dagos in our parish, they have their own church to go to." As I sat in the pew with our family I glanced to the left to notice the veins at my father's temple throbbing as they did when he controlled his anger. Father Sullivan's sermon might have influenced the high school decision. Public school had been good enough for my father . It was good enough for me. I was fine with the decision.

Death Threats

Starting at thirteen until I was old enough to get a factory job I worked as a caddie at golf clubs during the summer. When I moved to a new club my last year, the other caddies warned me only people from the "Hill", (a neighborhood populated by descendants a certain European ethnic group) were welcome to caddie there. I continued to show up for work and a few days later I was confronted by Skippy DiVivo who told me since I had insulted his friends by ignoring their advice, I would have to fight him. I wasn't a fighter, but I watched boxing matches on television so when Skippy struck a fighter's pose and started dancing around in from of me I put my hands up. His first loopy punch land on nothing but air as I stepped away. I had no plan, and no experience beyond imitating the boxers I watched on the television Friday nights, I took quick step back forward, and threw my left fist with all my 140 pounds behind it at his face. The result astonished both of us. Skippy staggered then collapsed in my arms. I could feel blood streaming down the back of my shirt as I pushed him away to see what I had done. His nose was gone and in its place was a bloody flat blob in the middle of his face. He put his hands to his face and smeared blood over my shirt front. While his friends drove him to the emergency room, the caddy master told me to go home. Seeing me covered in blood my father's reaction was "I suppose we are going to get sued."

Back at the golf club to work the next day, and every day for the rest of the summer, Skippy's friends let me know that very soon I would be killed. When high school started in the fall people passing me in the hall would mutter something like, "your a dead man" and at home in the evening when my parents called me to the phone to talk to one of my "friends", I got a similar message. It continued for a few months but eventually the boys from the Hill forgot about me.

The pride these guys took in Skippy's prowess as a fighter might have been misplaced, (he had been taking boxing lessons and aspired to a career as a professional boxer.) It was deeply humiliating for them to see their guy breathing though his mouth, his nose packed with gauze in the attempt to restore some semblance of shape to the crushed cartilage. At school they circulated the story that I had hit him while he was looking elsewhere but it didn't sell. Skippy, much bigger and more muscular than me, was a good looking, popular kid and a known bully.

At school I was a nonentity with a small group of friends, a kid with an Italian surname but not considered as a authentic Italian by the guys from the Hill. After the fight, at least I had something of a profile. If I met new people sometimes I got a response like, "Aren't you the guy who . . ." If girls were aware of me at all my image was that of a serious kid who stood up for himself but not a tough guy. That was all Connie knew about me when we met the next year but it must have made an impression.

A Year of Living Obsessively

She was not quite sixteen, blond hair cut short, brown eyed, and slim. Not the buxom build that excited the others, but small up-turned breasts, I wanted to touch but never did, even when they were offered later, and long athletic legs and flanks she showed off in the tight shorts she favored. Styles in clothes and women have changed. In those days no chest was too big and no waste too nar-

row. Women did isometric exercises to improve their “bust lines” and a movie actress even had ribs removed to create the hour glass figure men idolized. Connie was too girly and willowy for my friends’ taste. For me she was perfect. I was mesmerized by those slender, lightly muscled legs, the looks she gave me, the way she held herself when she knew I was looking, and the way her voice changed when she spoke my name. She was amazing then. Still is in my memory. We met in Summer when I saw her walking with friends while I drove her brother home from pickup basketball and he asked me to give her a ride.

We both lived in an older upscale suburb. Her family was white, protestant, educated at prestigious eastern schools, and living in a large older home with a tennis court at the end of a long wooded driveway.

It had only been a few years since the residents of our suburb had decided people with Italian surnames could be white. At my Catholic grade school one boy reported me to the Sister Superior for telling him the Pope was Italian, or as he put it, “He called the Pope a dago”. He was disappointed I wasn’t punished. My father, recently retired from the Army reserves as a colonel, had an engineering degree from the University of Illinois and worked as the manager of an industrial plant. Connie’s family played golf. I had been a caddy. My family was not Country Club material. In the Fall, her relationship with me caused her to be excluded from the snobbish high school sorority her friends were invited to join.

Connie didn’t care. She was proud of me and showed me off to her friends. We saw each other weekends, sometimes for movies with other couples, (my friends, never hers), root beer and something to eat at “Dog and Suds”, any excuse we could think of to go somewhere in my father’s car and be together. She told me, “I’m addicted to you.”

During the week, even if we saw each other at school, we were on

the phone at night. We couldn't get enough of each other and it was driving my father nuts. I listened dutifully to his lectures about teenage pregnancies. Finally one morning after I had come home late Friday night, he grabbed my arm and pushed me out the door. "Come on. We're going to the recruiters." I had always assumed a life in the military would be my future. I am not sure my father really meant for me to drop out of high school and join the army at seventeen, but had it not been how exciting my life had become with Connie, I would willingly have enlisted. I promised I would not do anything that would get us in trouble and he put me on probation. My father understood me in terms of his own inclinations and needs, in other words, not at all.

Together Constance and I had an effect adults. No blatant displays of public affection, but the way we looked at each other was enough to make Connie's mother envious, my mother anxious, and my father's blood boil. The air around us crackled with sexual energy.

The nuns had failed to teach me to love god, or even believe he existed, but they instilled an almost medieval attitude towards women that has made my life less interesting than it should have been. I will give you an early example. In lieu of gym class, our Catholic primary school, required we pay for weekly ball room dancing lessons during our last two years. My father was sure the priest got a kick back. Our dancing teacher, miss Lynch, was a cruel bitch, who never tired of tormenting the girls who failed to attract a partner for each dance. There were always more girls than boys so Lynch never lacked for victims. Miss Lynch would ask the boys to choose a partner for the next dance, and inevitably one girl was always among the small group no boy chose. I didn't want to dance with her myself, she was fat, but after a few weeks our Miss Lynch repeated the same stupid joke, suggesting June's problem was body odor, and I could see her twelve year old chin quiver, fighting to hold back the tears, I walked across the room and made her my permanent dance class partner for the next two years. I had to give up hope of ever dancing with Sherry, who had slipped a note in one

of my books saying she liked me and who the boys rushed towards from all directions when each dance was announced. I do understand modern women do not want, or need, men to take care of them, but that doesn't free me from the impulse. Thank you Sister Agnes.

For me every female can be that little girl in the First Communion Book picture, so innocent, so defenseless, so trusting. I can't bear the thought of causing her to cry. I want to care for them, protect them, even from myself. I would have taken my own life before I would have impregnated Constance and ruined hers, but this was not a concept I had any hope of explaining to my father.

Every Friday and Saturday night, after we had disposed of the movie or whatever other excuse we had for being together, I found a safe place to park my father's car, usually a forest preserve parking lot, and we smothered each other's faces with kisses. I'm not sure now how two people can spend hours kissing but, there are a lot of things you can do with lips and tongues, and we experimented with all of them. Later we didn't even bother with the movie, just found out something about the plot in case we were asked and found a place to park. Jesus kissed Mary Magdalene, there was no sin in that, but I couldn't imagine him touching her with his hands.

If we kept our hands off of each other, it wasn't because I was afraid to sin. At seventeen I had enough unconfessed sins to damn me for all eternity and I never gave it a thought. We joked about it when I pulled my hand away after she had placed it on her breast, and she said, "I know you're going to do it eventually. Maybe we should get it over with."

One night after a movie we were headed for the "Dog and Suds" to meet friends. This drive-in restaurant was located in the neighborhood we called "The Hill" in the town south of our homes. As I pulled up to a stop sign a fat guy in a dirty white undershirt jumped in front of the car and pointed a snub nosed revolver in

my face. I remember noticing his shirt was too small for his belly which hung out over his pants. He shouted, "Police. Tell the girl to get out of the car." as he motioned with the barrel of his gun for her to exit the passenger side door, the only thought in my head was, "not a cop". I jammed the accelerator and tried to run him over. If I had been driving a modern, responsive vehicle like my wife's little Mercedes SUV, that sick fuck, who I was sure intended to rape my just turned sixteen girl friend, would have been lying flat on his back, his fat fingers still wrapped around the little gun, and tire tracks across his undershirt. With my father's fifty seven Chevy, after you stomped the gas pedal nothing happen for a while. Then the car reared back on its too soft suspension, like an animal ready to spring, before it leapt forward. Fatso was surprisingly agile. If I did hit him, I probably just brushed the fender against his hip. A few minutes latter we were at the drive-in, my hands shaking, my blood stream was still loaded with adrenaline. Connie had wet her pants. I got some paper napkins and a glass of water. We cleaned my father's seat cover and I took her home without stopping for our usual attack on each other's faces.

My father and I had difficulty dealing with each other that year. When I tried to explain a minor traffic accident he lost his patience and tried to slap me across the face, something I never remember him doing before. Not a fighter, but I had what fighters call fast hands. I caught his wrist in mid slap and held it. We starred at each other for a few seconds. I watched the blood vessel at his temple pumping and he turned away. I dreaded telling him about the incident with the fat guy, but I wanted to report it to the police and I wasn't sure they would listen to me. Almost anything I said that involved Connie would set him off. He listened and didn't say anything. I could see he wasn't pleased. Later that evening he told me the East Chicago Heights Police Department denied any of their officers had attempted to kidnap my girl friend. This made no sense to me at the time and doesn't now, but there is no telling what kind of garbled version of my story he gave the police. I could see it was very hard for him to listen to me and often he lost patience and interrupted me before I could finish a sentence.

If Connie's and my hormones were surging, the attempted kidnap-

ping, and resulting urination episode opened the flood gates. After school one day Con called me to ask if I could drop her off at a baby sitting job. I asked my mother for her car and told her I'd be back in half an hour. The job was at a home like hers on another heavily wooded lot with a long driveway so, of course, we stopped to kiss. She twisted around to face me, her back against the steering wheel. We kissed and when we came up for air, Connie rolled over onto her back. My right hand, which had been resting lightly on her left hip was suddenly between her legs. I tried to withdraw my hand but she held it in place. I could feel the heat of her body through the thin fabric of her shorts. She said, "We have to stop now." but she continued to press my hand against her until she let out a little cry, gasped for air and her body stiffened, then went limp.

She wasn't breathing, her face was swollen and patchy, eyes closed, lips parted like the girl in the First Communion picture as she lay limp and damp in my arms. For just a few seconds the thought crossed my mind, I had killed her. She had died of an epileptic fit, stroke, or heart attack brought on when I put my filthy hands on her. Then she opened her eyes and smiles up at me. Connie made an attempt at straightening her disheveled clothes. Her blouse was half out of her shorts which were pulled up too high on her body. Nothing she could do about the sheen of perspiration on her exposed arms and legs or her blotchy pink and white face. When she walked into her neighbors' home they must have wondered if she had just survived a car crash.

I am not trying to sell the idea I was so naive I had never heard of a female orgasm. I just had never observed one. During those few seconds when I experienced the horror of imagining Connie had died at my hands, (or hand) the circuit breaker in my emotional wiring tripped, every bit of feeling deserted my mind and I knew what it felt like to be a machine, a piece of wood, or a stone. This was a new experience for me. It would happen again. Apparently my emotional wiring is so fragile my feelings are unplugged for my own protection when they reach a certain pitch, like a short circuit-

ed appliance blowing a fuse.

I wasn't home five minutes when my mother, with the look that said, "Really Richard?" handed me the phone. I checked to be sure my mother was in the kitchen and not listening on the other line. Connie needed to talk about it. Not quite recovered from my emotional disconnect, I listened. Finally I suggested, and she agreed, or at least said she agreed, this was a wonderful accident that we would never allow to happen again. At that time I didn't have a good understanding of the female mind and haven't made much progress since.

Teens fall in love and experiment with sex. Nothing remarkable about it. There was something evidently different about Connie and me. It wasn't just the progression of our sexual experiments creating all the energy and making the space around us crackle with electricity. It was Connie and me pushing hard on the gas pedal and the brakes simultaneously. You can't do this to an automobile without damaging the equipment and my mental equipment was quite a bit more fragile than that of a 1957 Chevrolet. The barrier I had erected for Connie's protection had been breached. Before I could reorganize our defenses, I knew we would make new accidental discoveries imperiling my entire plan. I had reached a limit. Within a few weeks we were dating other people and I was looking forward to getting away to college.

School

My first Sunday away from home at the university, I had located a Catholic Church and noted the time of the last service but for the first time in my 18 year life I overslept and completely missed mass. A sin of course but what was one more. It was my mother who would be shocked and certainly in tears if she knew that should have bothered me. Somehow I was not bothered but in fact elated. Except for the next few years when I lived at home during the summer, and for a few weddings and funerals, I never set foot inside a Catholic church again. Only a few days at the university and I was

absorbing new knowledge.

“Why don’t you drop out and make room for someone who knows what they want to do with their education?” This was the advice I was getting from my grad student counselor/advisor. I had studied my course catalogue, concentrating on completing as many required courses as possible and made it through two years at the university of Illinois without committing to a major or minor. My advisor was only a few years older, but already his time was too valuable to waste talking to me about my lack of direction. “You like to argue, maybe try law school.” he said as I left his office.

Back in the dorm I pulled out my dog eared course catalogue and tried to narrow down my options. Now I realized that all the time I had spent on this book, learning various paths to graduation, were no more than a way to avoid making Important decisions. The hour I had dreaded for two years had finally arrived, and I was on my own. My parents had given up on me. Who could blame them. I had been expelled the last semester for keeping my not quite girl friend, another student, out all night and was readmitted on probation. My mother’s assessments were variations of, ‘you’ll never amount to anything, or you’ll never be half the man you father is’. My father liked to start our conversations with, “You tell us. Where did we go wrong with you?” Now even my student advisor was disgusted with me.

History and English Literature were subjects I liked and I had two years of Latin on top of the four years I had studied it in high school. My Latin professor had suggested this gave me a good start towards a classics major. All I needed was two years of Greek and some literature courses. The field was not exactly crowded with applicants.

My way of studying history/English Lit. was to consume all the course materials and recommended reading the first few weeks of the semester, then coast until just before finals when I would reread

it all and ace the final. I never claimed to be particularly bright, but my above average reading speed and ability to retain information let me get away with this behavior. Besides, I was genuinely interested in the subjects, so as soon as I got back to my room from the book store, I always binge read the text books cover to cover. I've heard college is just memorizing data and puking it up on examinations. It's not true, there is an element of understanding involved, but ingesting and regurgitating will get you a long way.

I had trouble staying awake in lectures. Maybe because I had already covered the material on my own. Also I missed class occasionally and sometimes this meant a failing grade on a quiz or an hour exam, so I couldn't always count on getting an A for a final grade. For the next sixty years I would occasionally have a recurring dream in which on the last days before finale exams, I discovered I had enrolled in a course and neglected to attend a single class. The stress from trying to jam a whole semester of learning into one all night study session must have done permanent damage to my brain.

Friends and family had sometimes asked me about the wisdom of spending four years of college studying subjects that had no relationship to the world of jobs. English literature, I thought, might give me some facility in expressing myself in writing or speaking, History would give me a prospective that might prove useful, but Latin and Greek? A degree in Classics meant a lifetime of study. If I had learned anything in the last two years, it was I was not a scholar. I crossed a major in classics off my list.

Without thought on my part, my catalogue fell open to the law school section. The first course description ended with the line: This course is open to undergraduates as an elective. I calculated how many elective courses I had left to graduate if I majored in history or literature. I figured I had enough room for law course credits to cover more than half of law school's first year.

The door opened, and without any further deliberation, I stepped through it. I had never considered a career in law and the idea of

practicing law had no appeal for me. So what. Wasn't law the foundation of civilization? In a way isn't this a large part of what I had been studying when I started reading history as a child. A degree in law was a perfect finish to the kind of generalized education I had been pursuing, and it was the answer to another question lurking in the shadows, conscription, the "draft". If I could learn to stay awake in class and got decent grades, I'd have no problem getting into law school. Money wasn't a problem in those days. In-state tuition at the U of I was \$135 a semester. Room and board was much cheaper than today. My deal with my father was, if I could pay for my own first semester each year, he would pay for the second. All I needed was to take a summer job, live at home and save one semester's room and board.

I wasn't afraid of the draft. In fact, since I was very young I had always imagined that, like my father, who served in the Second World War and retired from the reserves as Colonel, I would spend at least part of my life in the military. It was difficult enough for me to decide on what subjects I would study. Making a decision to go into the Army was beyond me, and I certainly did not like the idea of a draft board making a decision for me. It was so easy. I had the next five years of my life planned out and all my options were still open.

Four Years Later

Arriving at our apartment from work, I opened our mail box and noticed the letter from the draft board. I was surprised but not upset. My wife of two years and I had never considered this possibility since married men had been exempt until just a month ago, and even then, we assumed not many would be drafted. We discussed it over dinner and decided I could probably get a deferment on the basis of my job with the corporate law department of a major transportation company.

A lot had happened since I hit on my five year plan. My father had died of a stroke at the age of fifty three. My mother could not continue to fund my education. I was married and my wife and I supported ourselves with part time jobs while attending school. My goals changed from staying in school as long as possible to graduating and getting a real job. After jamming law courses into my last undergraduate year, carrying heavy course loads, and summer school, I finished law school in two years instead of the usual three. Not at the top of my class by any means. After years of poor study habits I did not suddenly become a scholar just because I had the motivation. Also, I still found it difficult to stay awake in class and sometime would fall asleep even when I stood up in the back of the room. A few years later I was diagnosed with narcolepsy. Because my father had died at the start of my junior year, half my school funding was gone, so I had to work thirty hours a week to eat and pay rent. Even with my income from the bowling alley, where I worked cleaning up and fixing jams in the pin machines, and my wife's part time secretarial job, we needed extra income from a series of additional part time jobs. The most lucrative was supposed to be typing a manuscript from notes one of my wife's professors gave me. In reality his notes were so illegible and poorly written, to produce anything that made sense, I had to do as much editing as typing and he admitted as much to us over a bottle of wine one night in our apartment. The part time jobs were not the main reason I did not do better in law school. I didn't love law to start with and the intense competition for the spots at the top of our class disgusted me. Given a research assignment some of my fellow students would race to the library and when they found the key case materials they needed, reportedly misplace the case books so the rest of us would miss them. I would have to think hard to remember a single member of my law school class. I never socialized. After class while the rest were headed for their cars and maybe a beer to talk over an assignment or job prospects, I was peddling my bicycle headed for my night job at the bowling alley. Between classes these guys, there was only one woman in our class, loved to hang about the hallways exchanging opinions on why or how this or that Supreme Court

Justice had decided a case, always referring to the justice by his last name as if they were on familiar terms. Once sitting in a movie theatre with my wife, waiting for the film to start, I listened to a classmate a dozen rows behind us lecturing his friends on some fine point of law in a voice loud enough to favor half the theatre with his views. At that moment, if someone had asked me if I was a law student I would have denied it.

Sixty years later I receive news letters with articles about class members' achievements, retirements, and obituaries. Who am I to look down on these people as they die off because they loved the law and were so excited and proud of themselves.

In spite of my lack of enthusiasm, I graduated ranked just below the top tier of students and that was enough to get me a good job in the City, a car, and my wife and I, a beach front apartment in a nice neighborhood on Lake Michigan.

The draft board quickly disabused me of the idea my job was valuable to the national security, so I had another choice to make. If I waited to be inducted into the military, I could look forward to eight weeks of basic training, and serving my two year enlistment starting as a private with a law degree and no control over where I would be assigned, possibly even Asia in the war that was just heating up. There was a good chance I would spend the next two years somewhere where my wife could not join me, something neither of us were happy about. On the other hand, if I joined voluntarily, I imagined being commissioned as an officer, practicing some form of military law, being able to live with my wife, drinking at the officers' club after golf. The Navy seemed the most likely service to keep me somewhere in the country. Why put a lawyer who belonged in an office on a ship? We talked it over and decided even if it meant one or two extra years in the military, we would try it.

I arranged an appointment with a Navy recruiter near my downtown office. I had an hour for lunch, and being a newly minted

attorney I wanted to be at my desk promptly at 1:00, so my appointment was at noon. Either I was a few minutes late, or my recruiter had forgotten the appointment. In any case he apparently was not excited about the opportunity to recruit me, possible because the navy was flush with candidates trying to avoid serving in the army during wartime. I waited for about ten minutes when a gentlemen wearing blue trousers with a red stripe down the sides struck up a conversation with me. Did I have to be somewhere else? It seemed like I was in a hurry to finish my business there. We talked and I mentioned I needed to be back in my office down the street at one. He had a suggestion for me. As long as I was there, would I consider applying for a commission in the Marine Corps? I told him my vision was not good and I doubted I could pass a physical for a combat service. He walked me over to the office next door and introduced me to an optometrist he worked with.

At dinner my wife and I talked about our day. She had graduated from the University of Illinois with me, was a few credits away from a master's degree in English literature and was working in the office of the president of a private college in the City. The jobs, the city, living on the lakefront, it was all new to us and still exciting. At some point I mentioned that I had signed a contract with the Marine Corps and would be leaving for officers' candidate school in six weeks. We were both happy about it.

If you are thinking of me as impulsive, less than thoughtful, feckless, yes, but it was more than that. My first months on the job, while I studied for the bar exam, (the company paid me even though I was not admitted to the practice) were exciting. I passed the bar exam on my first try. A lot of people didn't, including the City's future mayor who needed four tries. My job required some travel I enjoyed. I got along well with the corporate people I worked with. My impression was everyone wished me well and wanted to help me. My wife and I went out with other young people our age and there were company social functions. Life was good but there was the beginning of an old problem. After only six months in the

office I was beginning to be bored. I looked at the older attorneys I worked with and was depressed. They were so satisfied with themselves, especially the litigators, never having lost a case except when stupid judges made patently wrong decisions.

A good lawyer has a mind like a filing cabinet. If there is some important piece of information in his memory bank, it's easily retrieved and available when a decision needs to be made. My brain is more like a pot of soup. When I need a decision I can stir and hope that the information I need bubbles up to the top but sometimes it doesn't. Even if I can't find the idea I need, it's still down there hiding and possibly influencing my decisions.

By the end of 1941, when I was born, my father had returned to the army serving as a captain and eventually retiring from the reserves as a colonel. "Lib", short for Libertario, (My grandfather emigrated from Italy and was secretly an anarchist) was in the Reserve Officers Training Program in College. My mother and I followed him around to various military bases all over the country while he trained with a unit that handled wire communications between the front lines and command posts, After training he was stationed in England, then Holland and Germany. After the war he found work as an electrical engineer, and in management, but stayed in the reserves. The souvenirs he brought back were my playthings. Helmets, web belts, canteens, mess kits, even radio sets and guns. He had a Walther P-38 semi-automatic pistol (German WW II officer's sidearm) we kept in the basement. I took it apart and cleaned it regularly though we never fired it. In the 50's when we traded the hand gun for a used outboard motor at a sports store, I was the only one who knew how to field strip it for the dealer. I still have a beautiful custom target rifle with a hand carved stock my father liberated, (looted) from a deserted German farmhouse. My favorite games as a child all involved war. This is my way of saying, I grew up with the idea that an essential part of every man's life was serving in the military, specifically in the army, especially during wartime. This idea apparently had surfaced in my consciousness in the recruiter's

office, my explanation of how, without forethought or mature consideration, I stepped through the door that suddenly opened for me to become a Marine.

Nine months later, having survived Marine Officer's Candidate School and six months of training concentrating on the skills and knowledge required to lead an infantry platoon, in a lecture room with 200 of my fellow lieutenants our commanding officer informed us we would have an opportunity to rank three choices for the location of our first assignment in order of preference. These choices were: 1.) the Asian country where our country was currently at war, 2.) somewhere in the United States, or 3. any one of a number of duty stations outside of the country. On the form we were presented with I chose number one guessing, I think correctly, the Marine Corps really didn't care where I wanted to serve, but wanted to know if I would go willingly. The form also gave us the opportunity to rank three preferences for our military occupational specialty, (MOS) for example, personnel officer, motor transport officer, intelligence, pilot, (the Marine Corps has its own air force), artillery, armor, (tanks), or infantry officer. There were more choices, I don't remember them all, only that our commander insisted only the best of us would be considered for assignment as an infantry officer.

I knew I was not among the best. In the categories where my class of about 200 second lieutenants were ranked such as leadership, peer evaluation, physical fitness, and academics I was outstandingly average in each except for academics. When I selected infantry I knew, however, I would be accepted. A popular subject of speculation among my peers was what MOS choices were most likely to keep us out of the infantry. We graduated and most of our class left for additional training in the specialty they were assigned. The remaining 50 of us left for on the job training, all, or almost all, as rifle platoon commanders in combat. A fellow classmate who kept track later told me 42 of these were wounded, or killed during our ensuing thirteen month tour.

1967

My only experience leading the platoon was a few uneventful patrols before our first battalion size operation. The plan call for my platoon to lead the rest of the company in darkness from our base South, crossing a river on a bridge, then turning West for a few kilometers, crossing a raised railway embankment and following another river south again to our destination where the company was to set up a blocking force. In the meantime other troops further to the South were to drive the enemy to us. We started badly as the squad leader the Skipper instructed me to use as a guide got lost in a maze of trails before finding the bridge. At first light we had just crossed the bridge, were headed West and behind schedule when the firing started. I was a few men back from the head of the column and could see people ruining in front of us. As I stared at the muzzle flashes someone came up from behind me and pushed me down, saying "lieutenant. You'll get yourself killed." The firing stopped and I gave the order to move out. In a few dozen paces I stepped over the body of a dead enemy, the first human I had seen killed by gunfire. He was lying on his back and his skin was a light grey with no trace of color. Could he have bled out that fast or been killed earlier? He certainly had enough visible gunshot wounds, including one in his face. The image has stayed with me.

The Skipper had told me to expect fire from the embankment and had preplanned an artillery mission on the location where we were to cross the tracts. I was trained to call in artillery missions but our company commander had thoughtfully done all the necessary planning beforehand for me so all I would have to do would be radio him and ask for the artillery fire mission. Also he suggested that I be ready to send one of my squads around to the right and onto the tracks to outflank the shooters. No idea how he figured all this out. I couldn't have been more impressed with how he set me up for success

One of the squads found it the last day of our patrol. We knew right away what it was and how it got there, but when and why no one could figure. The 500 pound bomb must have been dropped by one of our ground support aircraft, probably an A-4 Sky Hawk, but since we always had platoons patrolling this area, a pilot would not, or should not, drop ordinance here without coordinating with the infantry on the ground. Maybe the pilot had to jettison it on the way back to the carrier, or maybe the hard point had been damaged by ground fire and it has just fallen off. I called it in to the Skipper back in the battalion area and got the word to blow it in place.

Sometimes we found unexplored mortar or other artillery rounds but never anything this big. If the people we were fighting found this ordinance they were happy to disassemble it and return the contents to us in the form of improvised anti-personnel mines. Although I had the two man 3.5 rocket team with me whose job it was to use the C 4 plastic explosive we carried, I had the same training and I liked to do these jobs myself.

The platoon was set in along a tree line about 150 meters across an open paddy where the unexplored bomb lay. I took a stick of C 4 plastic explosive from the rocket team, the pliers like crimper, and some fuse material and started across the paddy. I always carried the detonators in a wooden box the size of a cigarettes pack in my breast pocket. The detonators, little metal cylinders about about the diameter of a lead pencil were inserted into holes drilled into the box and were safe to carry this way. Reaching the bomb, I sat and laid out my materials. The fuse was a heavy diameter cord that could be ignited by my cigarette lighter. I measured an arm's length and cut it off with my sheath knife, lit it and watched it burn slowly while I timed it with my watch's second hand. After measuring another generous length, I cut a fuse and attached the detonator. This was done by inserting the end of the fuse into the detonator

tube and crimping the metal cylinder tight while holding it over the top of my helmeted head. The theory was if you crimped the detonator too far from the end attaching it to the fuse and you ignited it your helmet would protect you from serious injuring although you would probably lose some fingers. Then with the sharpened end of one of the crimper's arms, I punched a deep hole in the C4 and inserted the detonator. A stick of C4 is about the same shape and consistency as a stick of refrigerated butter but about three times as large. I placed the stick against the bomb, lit the end of the fuse with my lighter and started to get up, but instead sat back down and reached around behind me, to unfasten the black knee length sock tied at both ends to my belt where I carried a carton of cigarettes. Fishing out a fresh pack of Pall Malls, I tore the cellophane wrapper, ripped off a quarter of the foil covered paper at the top of the pack, hit the pack against my metal cigarette lighter a several times until a few cigarettes protruded, extracted one and tapped it against my lighter to pack the tobacco tighter, lit up, inhaled deeply, then let the smoke slowly stream out of my nose as I leaned back against the bomb. It was time to go but as I watched the fuse working its way toward the detonator I wasn't ready. I relaxed against the bomb and my mind drifted off to regrets about things I wish I had done, and things I wish I hadn't done since I'd been with the platoon. I heard shouting, and looked up to see one of my squad leaders standing up across the paddy and waving his arm. My cigarette, mostly ash now. I picked up my rifle and made my way back across the paddy. When the explosion happened, I was lighting another cigarette. It made the kind of sound you could feel as well as hear.

Like most of what I did that year my casual behavior was an act I performed to impress the troops. Other than the Skipper, I was indifferent to what my superiors thought of me. My audience was the people under my command. I needed their respect and trust to do my job and they were the jury to whom I presented my case.

There were combat situations when I knew if I spoke on the radio my voice would betray the anxiety and intense fear of failure that

I was feeling. I would pause, breathe, and then affect the calm businesslike tone that I knew the squad leaders and their radio operators found reassuring. In that respect the Skipper and I were alike. When he jumped onto a dyke and shouted insults, ("Ho Chi Minh sucks donkey dicks." Was a favorite.) daring a sniper to take another shot so he could locate the muzzle flash for us, he was performing for his troops, not his superiors. The difference between us was his courage was real, mine was not. I knew I was a fraud.

Another patrol found us loading up in several of the six wheeled trucks we used for transportation to be dropped off along paddies on Route One. The truck saved us a day of walking to get to our patrol route. This was my first patrol with a new second in command, Sergeant T. I had met him the day before, liked him, and was looking forward to working with him. T suggested I ride in the cab with the driver but I told him I preferred to sit in the bed, next to an open rear window where I could communicate with the driver and be able to see the other two trucks with the rest of the platoon. T was up front with the driver when we hit the mine. The explosion lifted the front end of the vehicle up enough to throw us into the air. We landed back in the bed, rifles, helmets, and gear in a tangled heap. T broke both his legs against the dash board and the driver was in bad shape. After the medivac, I radioed the Skipper and asked if we could return to the perimeter and regroup, worried that some of the people in my truck might have concussions or other injuries that were not apparent. I had been banged up a little, and my head hurt. Tom said he was sending another truck but we should just continue on the patrol and we did

The average age of the enlisted troops was somewhere between 18 and 19 so I think most of them bought my scam. There were a few exceptions and among the squad leaders, only Patterson, who was my age saw through me and showed me that knowing smile that I interpreted as "Sure lieutenant, whatever you say."

I never worked with any of my first four platoon sergeants long enough to know what they thought. The first one I fired, the sec-

ond got transferred as part of the program to break up the units who all had the same tour expiration dates, the third broke both his legs riding in the cab of a truck the got blown up, and the forth, Sergeant "S" in spite of a dozen years of precious service had enough problems of his own trying to gain the platoon's respect without worrying about me.

Ben, a year older than me, the longest serving and the best of them, was not so easily fooled but gave me some credit for trying. Ben knew what had to be done when the shooting started and did what I needed him to do before I could even ask. For example, if I had to radio for a medical evacuation, he was positioning the squads to secure a landing zone for the helicopter before I could finish calling in our position. We all noticed how calm was in what were stressful situation. Once when we were pinned down by long range fire and waiting for one of our squads to loop around behind the shooters, I watch him meticulously disassemble and clean his rifle while we crouched behind cover bullets zipping a few feet over our heads.

Boogie Woogie Machine Gun

That year we all knew the Selective Service was coming for us. My first thought was why wait. If I volunteered and could serve as a bandsman, at least I'd have some control over my life for the next few years. My music teachers and high school band members said my talent was exceptional. My grandmother played the violin beautifully. People said I had her gift. My training consisted only of public school music courses and playing in a high school band, but I thought it was worth a try.

The sergeant in the recruiting center said absolutely. If I was sure I had the talent, I should have no problem serving as a musician. All I had to do was commit to an extra year. I enlisted for four years. I knew I had the talent, and, as it turned out, I was right.

Recruit training was a challenge I was up to. I was a good student and did well enough on the intelligence/aptitude tests they told me I might be qualified for officers candidate school. When I went for the interview they told me I wasn't tall enough. I'm not a big guy, but strong, I weighed about 100 pounds then. It was for the best. Giving orders is not my style.

I started picking fruit with my grandfather when I was five. We'd be up before light, headed to the orchard with the wax paper wrapped burritos grandmother made for our lunch. Later in the morning, while it was still cold, the foreman would make a fire to warm us for our lunch break. I heated my burrito on the embers, then carefully blew off the ashes and dust. I was proud and happy to be working along side of grandfather. A few years later I got my first trumpet and learned to hunt with my grandfather's small caliber rifle. I made grandmother happy if I brought home a few rabbits for her to cook.

Marksmanship training was a breeze. Hitting a running rabbit with a rifle takes practice and some natural ability. Shooting at fixed tar-

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gets from a stable position was too easy for me. The drill instructors were tough, but they praised me, and even held me up as an example for the others.

As we got close to the end of our training our sergeant became a little more approachable, and I got up the nerve to ask him about my future musical career. In high school I had played several brass instruments. "Sergeant, when will they tell me what instrument I'll be playing?" "Son, the only instrument you're gonna play is the Boogie Woogie Machine Gun."

It's not that I was not smart enough to know recruiters lie to make their quotas; I just didn't have the experience or guidance, other eighteen year olds had. My grandparents who raised me, (after my mother died and my father remarried) were wonderful people but how could they know how to advise me about recruiters.

People say "Hispanic" but most of our ancestors were not from Spain. My mother's father was a full blooded Purepecha, from Michoacan. Some of the Purepecha, who live in the mountains still brag they were never conquered by the Spanish. My mother's green eyed, red haired mother was born in El Paso and might have had some Irish blood.

My father's parents who raised me, were married after their first spouses died in the 1919 flu epidemic. Grandfather, like many others in those days, left Mexico because of his opposition to the Catholic Church. My grandmother, Lillian, and my grandfather, were both Maya. In the old days many Maya bought their freedom from slavery under the Spanish with money they earned playing musical instruments in their free time, so music was a kind of tradition in our family. My grandmother's father played the bass and the violin, but the family business was digging wells. After graduation, I drove my Grandmother to Mexico to visit her sisters, and the family was still in the well digging business only with modern equipment. Once her family came up for a wedding and grandmother played

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violin with a group that included a marimba and a piano. Another time, she played at my cousin Angie's wedding, accompanied by just a guitar, old sweet Spanish and Mexican music, simple, beautiful, beautiful. . .

Because of his baseball skills, my father was a minor celebrity in the local communities. Teams bid for his services, even paid him. Unlike me, he was fairly tall, played shortstop and was a terrific hitter. The story I grew up with was that a local woman, obsessed with my father, poisoned my mother. My father had no relationship with this woman. Today I think we would have called her a stalker. Years later, when I returned from the war, this woman still lived in the community and my family continued to tell this story about her. My father remarried, (not to the murderess), moved away, and left me with the grandparents I loved. If my childhood was less than perfect I never knew it. Finishing high school, I had made good grades, played in the band, hung out with my buddies, and had a cute girl friend.

In war time, the military needs a few truck drivers, clerk typists, and musicians, but not that many, and once created, they usually last for the term of their enlistment. Most infantrymen, however, are single use, like paper cups. A few go on to careers up the chain of command, but the rest of us are discarded after we have served our purpose. In war, keeping the rifle companies up to strength requires a steady stream of replacements. Every man in my training platoon but one was assigned a military occupational specialty of rifleman. I didn't brood. I consoled myself with the thought that at least I would be fighting alongside the friends I had made in training. We were fed into the infantry units one by one as replacements and, with a few exceptions, I never saw any of them again.

The trip to the war zone was interesting. Never been on a ship in the ocean before, or been through the King Neptune, equator crossing ceremony. After a few weeks at sea we disembarked on an island where they gave the thousand of us a few hours of free-

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dom on condition we were strictly forbidden to go into the nearby town. After my friends and I got to the town, we quickly drank up the little money we had, and realized we had no time to hike back to the ship by the appointed time. Article 87 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice reads, “Any person subject to this chapter who, either by negligence or intent, misses the movement of a ship, aircraft, or unit with which he is required in the course of duty to move shall be punished as a court martial may direct.” I didn’t remember the exact wording at the time, but I knew we were in a lot of trouble. Someone had the idea of starting a brawl so the military police would be called, and hopefully, drive us back. Not wanting to hurt any of the friendly bar girls or other patrons, we pretended to fight each other, police showed up, and delivered us to the ship just in time. These are things you do when you are young and headed for a war.

A few days after our adventure on the Island, we were delivered to the routing center to be distributed as replacements. I thought we were interchangeable but no, the officers were reading our service records and exercising some judgement about our assignments. They had skipped over my musical qualifications, but noticed my outstanding marksmanship and test scores. “Did I want to be a sniper or serve in a reconnaissance unit?” Neither appealed to me. I had never considered the possibility my preferences would be considered. All I could think of was a comic book I had read as a child about a specific rifle company that had acquired the nick name, “Raiders” during a previous war. Could I be assigned to the “Echo Raiders”? Why not. My reward for doing so well in basic training.

With about a dozen others I waited by the highway for transportation to my company. Finally a flat bed truck showed up, the driver with a pistol on his hip in a dirty, sleeveless tee shirt. “Throw your sea bags up on the bed.” I asked him when our transportation would be coming. “This is it. Get on”. No side rails to keep us from falling out, just a couple rows of sand bags around the edges of the bed and nothing to hold on to. The road was rough and he drove

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fast. I was sure someone would get bounced out. We could hear gun fire from somewhere down the road. We were unarmed, guarded by a driver in a dirty tee with a pistol.

Finally a few tracers were visible. As we approached the firing, we could see some kind of government military base was trading fire with enemy across the highway and we looked for places where our driver could pull off. Instead he shouted through the open rear window for us to get down then hit the accelerator. As we sped through a hail of bullets from both sides of the highway, I didn't know whether to worry about getting shot or thrown onto the road as we hit pot holes and our luggage, sandbags and bodies bounced. Then we were through, and a few miles later turning onto the unpaved road that led to a base that was to be my new home. We got off the truck laughing. Our first time under fire and no one hit, not a bullet hole anywhere on the vehicle. A great start to my war time experience. In a few days I would meet the people who would become my new family.

I was assigned to the squad with another replacement, Johnny Deer. Deer, a Mohawk, was probably the only guy in the platoon smaller than me. The squad named us "Big Chief" and "Little Chief". When we got our fiberglass platted body armor from the supply tent, Deer wanted the large size. I guess he figured it would cover more of his body, but when he sat on the ground the lower part of his face actually disappeared below the shoulders which was sort of comical. Between patrols we slept in a tent inside the Battalion perimeter. I asked if there was a free cot. No one said a word. Finally someone pointed to an empty rack and mentioned the previous occupant, Sotello, would probably not be coming back. Later, I learned a gunshot wound to his thigh had taken part of his penis off. Sotello had been studying to become a Priest before he joined the Marine Corps.

Our squad leader, Bob Paterson, "Pat", was good, but what I didn't like about him was he had the idea that the "older" guys were

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entitled to priority over us replacements. If you didn't get killed or injured, it didn't take too long to get over being a "new guy", and after getting sot at for a month, you definitely started to feel and think of yourself as old. In the meantime you got all the shit jobs and people hardly talked to you. For our first patrol Pat overloaded Deer and me up with extra ammunition and grenades to the point where we had a hard time keeping up and were at the end of the column. We were halfway across this huge, flooded paddy when the enemy opened up on us. Running in sticky mud covered by six inches of water was a skill I hadn't acquired in training. I tripped over a dike and was on my knees with a rifle barrel pugged with mud. Deer thought I had been hit and stopped to help me. Rounds were kicking up water all over the paddy but as the rest of the platoon reached the safety of a tree line the shooters directed their attention to Deer and me. I wanted to shoot back but my rifle was useless. Deer just froze as rounds started to clip the tassels off rice plants spraying us with the grains. A figure left the tree line and came splashing towards us. It was Roy Couch, one of the squad's team leaders. "Are you guys all right?", he asked. "Then follow me.", and the three of us took off for the tree line. I don't think Big Chief and Little Chief would have lasted very long exposed in that paddy if Couch had not rescued us. Whenever I remember this day I think, why didn't Couch get a medal.

The whole platoon exchanged fire with the enemy until one of the other squads maneuvered around behind the shooters and drove them off. The platoon set up security and the lieutenant called for a medevac helicopter. We had casualties including one dead, another new guy. Pat nominated Deer and me to carry the body to the helicopter. Then he had us load the wounded while the others watched.

Pat was the kind of guy who had his eyes on you all the time. He told us, "Watch the other guys and do exactly what they do." Watch and learn was his motto and with his help, Deer and I lost our "new guy" over the next few weeks and the strangers in the squad turned into family. Fields and Couch were team leaders, Palmquist,

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Horn, Simon, Spock, Knowles, the big blond guy who snored a lot, and everyone's favorite Texan, New. New asked me once to hold a cigarette in my mouth so he could put it out with his bull whip. He never ran out of new skills to show us, like cowboy rope tricks, or throwing rocks long distance with a sling he made. I would have trusted that guy with my life and I did. When he was killed at the bamboo bridge later, everyone in the platoon felt the loss.

One day they sent us over to the helicopter pad at our base on standby to help another unit that was in trouble. That's when we learned that Fox Company from our battalion had been hit pretty bad. It was evening when they dropped us off down in the hill country where Fox had an outpost. At dark we set up a perimeter and because our squad had an odd number, someone, one of the newer guys, me, had to spend the night in a one man position and stay awake all night. In the early hours of the morning I could hear something walking and growling out in front of my position. We had all heard stories about people being carried off in the night by tigers and here I was with nothing but the little plastic stock rifle they gave us, with bullets the same size as the twenty two I used to shoot rabbits. Even if I had another guy to stand watches with, I had trouble sleeping on lines, but not that night.

The next day we moved out looking for the enemy unit that had mauled Fox Company. Once in the distance we could see enemy in uniform moving in the distance. We fired at them but the distance was too great. I never had any confidence in our small caliber, plastic stock rifles we were issued and I wish I could have had the old wooden stocked, heavy ones we had trained with. The next day we had a long climb up a hill. On top there was an area covered in vines where all the trees have been removed. Couch was on point, hacking a path through the vines for us when they ambushed us and was hit first. I was a few places back behind my best friend at the time, Snock who took a round in the forehead and fell over on top of me probably saving my life. While I struggled to get out from under Snock, the enemy fire was so intense our guys could hard-

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ly get their heads up to fire back. Pretty quickly though our two machine guns came up and laid down a steady fire. The enemy fire slowed down and stopped when they took off. That's how a lot of fire fights started and ended.

By that time a corpsman had got to me and asked my to hold Snock's head up. I put my hand behind his head. The back of his skull was completely blown away and my hand went into his head. Jim was a big guy and the nicest person you would ever want to me. We wrapped him in a poncho and I helped carry his body to the helicopter.

A few days latter we were still on the move when we came to a ravine. Our squad had just crossed the lip of the ravine when we were hit with heavy fire from the opposite slope where the enemy was shooting down on us. We couldn't go forward or stay where we were, so we turned around and tried to drag our dead and wounded back. That was the day I saw one of the bravest and craziest actions by our company commander, Tom Pratt. The Skipper was above us walking back and forth on the edge of the ravine and shouting at the enemy shooters to draw their attention away from us. It wasn't long before the captain was hit, but it gave us time to scramble up out of the ravine and find cover. We traded fire across the ravine for a while with the Skipper, in spite of his wound back on his feet and directing us until he was hit again and had to be evacuated with another wound. I don't know if he ever got an award for what he did that day. Maybe there was no one with the time or the means to recommend him, or possibly his actions were too crazy even for the Marine Corps. I don't think this kind of behavior would be something taught in officers' training. We understood what he would do for us and we loved him for it. About a month later, two bullet holes in his leg patched up, he was limping around back with us again.

We had pushed pretty hard and lost people. After the fight at the ravine they pulled us back to the battalion base and our regular routine.

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A few patrols and some new replacements later we weren't happy to be back on the helicopter pad waiting to return to the same operation area. The regular army units we faced were better armed than the guerrilla forces we dealt with on patrols, in my opinion, better armed than us with our small caliber, toy rifles that occasionally jammed. Down there we didn't always have the artillery support we were used to and that meant the enemy could afford to concentrate in bigger units, even battalions, as they had when they destroyed Fox Company. But as we waited for the helicopters I felt confident because of the trust I had in the people around me. We took care of each other. I would have gone anywhere, no matter how dangerous, if I had these guys with me.

Our first day back on the operation we walked in one hundred degree heat. We carried as many canteens as we could mange, but they were never enough, and because the hilly country didn't have many villages, there were no opportunities to get refills. We had a few cases of heat exhaustion, but all of us suffered from some degree of dehydration. To make matters worse, in the early evening when the companies were preparing their night position, filling canteens, and eating the canned rations we carried, the battalion split our platoon off and sent us out on patrol along a river to see if we could make contact with an enemy unit that had attacked another company earlier. We didn't find any enemy which was lucky for us. Even with our replacements the squads were down to about half a dozen each, we had left our machine guns teams and the mortars behind, and we were all weak from dehydration. Out of range from our artillery support, if we had run into an enemy regular army unit, we would have been outgunned and on our own. Sometimes, especially when our company was controlled by another battalion, you could get the impression that we were being used for bait.

Late in the evening we finally got the word to return to our company where they were set in for the night near the river. The rest of the company had already filled canteens, eaten, and dug night time

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fighting positions but left a section of the perimeter for us to occupy. While the rest of the squad started chopping out holes, Pat had me collect the squad's canteens and go down the steep river bank for water. Crouching down to hold a metal canteen's mouth below the water's surface, I looked up to see a uniformed enemy step out of a sugar cane field on the other side of the river. He must have been an officer because he was not carrying a rifle but had a pistol on his hip. He looked up the slope I had just come down where he could see the squad digging in, and then turned and disappeared in the cane. My hands were full of canteens and my rifle was in the grass behind me or I would have shot the officer. I scrambled back up the bank dragging the squad's web belts with our water bottles hanging and found Pat. I thought he would send me back with some others to go after the officer, but he just told me to find the two man hole he had had one of the guys dig for me and get some sleep before dark. Pat knew I wasn't able to sleep on line at night even when it wasn't my turn on watch and he tried to take care of me.

I was awake later that night when the word came down for us to gather our gear, and move out to new positions. We stumbled out of the pitch dark heavy tree cover along the river, on to open ground that led us to the top of a bald hill where the rest of the battalion was set in. It wasn't until a few hours later when the firing started around our old positions on the river that I realized our platoon had left the rest of Echo Company there. I thought surly we would be sent back to help our company which was obviously being overrun. I know we would have gladly gone back but the order never came. There was still shooting going on after first light, with helicopters landing, or trying to land to evacuate wounded, which included the company commander, (the Skipper's replacement). When they finally let us go to rejoin the company we walked through the site of the battle, stepping over dead enemy, their abandoned equipment, and bloody field dressings, and we learned our losses included the company gunnery sergeant. We were lucky to have been moved before the company was hit, but I still felt bad

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we hadn't been there with them.

Back at our base again we fell into our regular routine of three and four day patrols in the surrounding villages followed by some time inside the safety of the battalion perimeter. These villages, populated entirely by women, children and a few men too old for military service, were just groups of bamboo, thatched roof houses located on islands raised a few feet above water level scattered among the flooded paddies, and connected by the raised dikes that separated the different level paddies and served as foot paths. Men young enough to fight had either been conscripted by our ally, the government, or, more likely, recruited by our enemies, the insurgents. There were dozens of these villages our company was responsible for defending, some with just a few families, some with hundreds of inhabitants, altogether maybe as many as five thousand people.

Each of our company's three platoons ran patrols within a few days walking distance of our base. Crossing the expanses of open rice paddy, either wading over our ankles in the muddy water, or walking single file on the dikes, we had good reason to feel naked and vulnerable. When the enemy shot at us from the village we were approaching, there was no cover and nowhere to run except towards the fire or away from it, and we never ran away from it. It was safer to move at night, by the light of the moon and stars in the open when it was clear, or, inside the sleeping villages, trying to follow the trails in almost complete darkness, even safer when the rain muffled our foot steps. We worked in the dark whenever we could, lying in ambush, sometimes in the driving rain, awake and alert all night, or hiking for hours to some distant vantage point where we hoped to surprise our enemies at first light. Daytime was for eating our canned rations, sleeping, and cleaning the rifles we carried which demanded constant care. Even then we had to maintain security, setting up perimeters, standing watch, and sleeping in turns.

You spend days in the villages and you can't help getting to know the people. We met Mai, who spoke our language and like talking

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to us. It had been a while since we had talked to a girl and Mai was almost our age, maybe a few years older, cute, a little flirtatious, and interested in anything we were willing to talk about. The adolescent kids at what we called the “coke stand” just outside the gate in the wire that surrounded our battalion compound worked for her and sold us soft drinks, candy, and laundered our filthy uniforms. Their language skills were not as good as Mai’s but they could joke, trade insults, and bargain with us, and we always stopped to spend time with them on the way back from patrols. As for the villagers, none of us had the language skill to communicate, but I always smiled and greeted them with the few words I had, and if they offered me food, I was happy to accept. Rice, vegetables, and fish sauce was a nice break from the greasy canned foods that made up our rations.

It wasn’t long before Mai was a frequent subject of our conversations. What was an obviously well educated, bilingual, attractive young woman doing living in a community of rice farmers. Of course she was spying on us. Should we have her arrested and turned over to the government soldiers? Some of the guys who had been in the squad longer than me talked about captured prisoners we had turned over and what the government soldiers did to them. No one, not even the guys who hated the villagers, wanted to see that happen to Mai. In the end we just accepted that we should be careful about what we told her. Besides, we enjoyed her company. As for the kids that worked for her, they were spying too. Maybe by keeping track of the pick up dates for our laundry they could tell how long we would be out on patrol, or at least keep track of our coming a going, but so what? Wasn’t it nice to get our sweat soaked uniforms clean occasionally and to be handed a cold drink on the way in from a patrol. We never discussed it, but I wondered whether Mai and the kids really had a choice if the enemy asked them to spy. We controlled the village we occupied during the day, but after we were gone the enemy made life or death decisions for villagers who refused to cooperate with them. Much as we might want to, we could not protect these people.

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Our relationship with the villagers was complicated. We were told we were there to protect them from the enemy and win their support for our ally, the government. While we provided security, the medic attached to our platoon treated ills, scrapes, and even wounds if they got caught in our fire fights. I heard one of our medics had even delivered a baby. We knew where their sympathies lay, with the husbands, brothers, fathers and sons, most of whom were fighting on the side of our enemy and not much chance we were going to change their allegiance with a few aspirins, band aids and candy for their kids. A few were openly hostile and who could blame them. Others were genuinely friendly, though never to the point where they could be accused of collaborating with us. What we all had in common was the need to do whatever was necessary to get through the war. The kids who smiled and begged for candy, were the same ones who kept watch in the tree lines and warned the enemy snipers so they could catch us helpless and exposed crossing a paddy. Because of these children, some of my friends would die, or spend the remainder of their lives disabled or disfigured. And yet, knowing all this, we played with these kids, and gave them candy, cookies and the menthol cigarettes they loved from our rations. Never once did I see a villager injured by the improvised mines the enemy set out for us, grenades detonated when we tripped over almost invisible fishing line or opened a gate. They knew where these mines were placed, but only once did villagers have the courage to warn us and even then, through his own carelessness, one of us lost his legs.

You can see why some of us hated the villages and the people who lived in them. For one thing, there were no sewage systems. The villagers thought of human waste as a resource to fertilize their crops. Often they would squat next to a stick planted upright in the paddy and when finished move the stick a pace over so the next person would know where to go. There were others like Skip, who took our mission to protect the villagers to heart. When he became a squad leader, Skip, cared for the villagers almost as much as he did his own guys. For my part I could not find it in myself to hate

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these people. Besides human waste the villages smelled of wood fires which reminded me of home where people kept chickens, cooked over wood fires and worked in the orchards. Then there was the smell of the people themselves. For me it was pungent but not offensive, maybe I even grew to like it. People smell pretty much like what they put in their mouths. The villagers lived on rice, vegetables and small amounts of fermented fish sauce. Mai told us we smelled like dead meat and cigarettes.

Waiting for nightfall in a village, I watched our mortar squad leader, Cramer, do simple magic to entertain kids while their mother watched. The mothers were hard for him to engage, but sometimes Cromer could get them to smile or even laugh a little. This evening he had help from our interpreter, Sergeant Triu, supposedly a deserter from the other side but, as we later learned, pretending to be one so he could get the reward the government offered and a good paying job. Once Cromer had the mother's attention, he had Triu translate for him. "When you see your husband can you tell him something for me? (He always assumed the husband was fighting for our enemies.). He's shooting too high, all his shots are going over our heads. (Showing her the rear sight on his rifle.). He needs to lower his rear sight about three clicks." (Demonstrating by twisting the knurled wheel on his rifle's sight.). Now he had the attention of the grandfather, who he offered to go into business with after the war, suggesting various illegal or outrageous projects they could work on together. By this time more family members had gathered and were laughing together with our squad and the mortar crew. A nice scene to contrast with one where we are able to kill their missing family member, and release are frustrations by pumping round after round into the body which we would leave face down in the mud to rot.

The kids at the coke stand told us Mai was dead. She had been visiting an area to the south of us designated as a free fire zone, where she was killed by artillery fire. In a free fire zone we were supposed to kill any man, woman or child on sight. In practice we never did,

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or at least no one from Echo company did. I can't be sure about other units. This was the strategy for separating the enemy from the population who supported them by depopulating enemy controlled areas. Our artillery batteries fired rounds into these areas at random times to reinforce this policy and apparently Mai had some bad luck. We would miss her.

I don't want you to think we spent all our time sleeping, passing out sweets to kids, and chatting with our friends in the villages. We inflicted more casualties on the enemy than we took and we took a lot. Only a steady stream of replacements kept our under strength platoon functioning. We gave up plodding through the flooded paddies where the mud could suck you boots off and learned to cross quickly on the dikes before the snipers could get into position. If snipers pinned down a squad, another squad was always ready to circle behind the shooters and force them to flee. We moved in the dark so often, and disbursed into smaller groups so much, sometimes we beat the enemy at their own game and killed them when they tried to cross the paddies at first light. Then there were the chance encounters when the first man in the column, rounding a curve in the trail, came face to face with the enemy. Usually we got the best of these encounters.

Of all the things we saw and did on these patrols, what I remember the most, though, is the girl. Sorry, I never knew her name. She was slim but shapely enough you could tell in spite of the baggy black trousers and shirt that had been in fashion that year and the last thousand years before probably. She was about my age or maybe a year or two younger and didn't have the blackened teeth a local woman got when she first started nursing children and began chewing the mixture of betel leaf and tobacco. When we first passed on a trail and I got a good look at her face I made a sound like "Ahhhh". She was that beautiful she took my breath away. Her skin was a soft shade of golden brown, not too different from mine, and she had the angular, high cheek boned face typical of their women, but more than that, it was her expression that spoke to me,

more than the perfection of her face and figure. When she looked at me I knew she had a beautiful heart. And I saw this before before the first time I saw her smile.

When I say she was beautiful, I don't mean just to me. When we passed through her village, which, until the fight at the bridge, was relatively peaceful, the other guys were all on the lookout for her. The next time I saw her, she smiled at me, and the thought of that Joi smile stayed with me through the rest of the patrol. On our way back from the patrol, we passed each other on the trail and both of us smiled. I mumbled something and she replied. In her language I could count to ten, say "yes" and "no", and a phrase we shouted sometimes which, roughly translated, meant "Stop or I'll shoot." (They never stopped and we never shot.) The look she gave me wasn't flirting. At least that's not how I took it. I read it as more like, "I know you. You're OK." As far as I know, she never talked to or smiled at any of the other guys, so it was nice feeling we were on friendly terms.

If she didn't smile at my friends it wasn't because they didn't notice her or try to talk to her. They talked about her and about things they would like to do with her, or more likely, to her. I didn't like it but I never said anything.

Then one day our squad set up a perimeter in her village. Sitting in my position, cleaning my rifle, I saw her come down the trail towards me. She smiled and nodded as she passed, went to the edge of the paddy, squatted, pulled her black trousers down around her ankles, and defecated right there in front of me. She wasn't embarrassed and I wasn't surprised. There were designated places in the paddies for depositing fertilizer and no opportunities for privacy, so this was something we had seen many times before. "Hey", this from one of my brothers in arms: "You want to take her home and marry her? She can shit in your front yard while the neighbors watch." I ignored him while she wiped herself with a clod of earth, pulled her pants back up and came back to me. When she smiled I

knew I loved her. I wanted to protect her from my friends' insults and leers, and from our enemies who would punish her for our friendship. I wanted to look at her face while she slept, dry her tears if she cried, see that smile every day.

A few days later, we got word the battalion would be moved up North where there were no villages, just fighting.

Convoy

Great News. We were assigned duty guarding a convoy of trucks carrying supplies to the air base a day's journey South on Route One. The city where we were stationed was a major supply hub with an ocean port as well as an international airport. The smaller tactical airbase to the South had been supplied by air but apparently a decision had been made to try running supply convoys down Route One to save resources. Some of the villages on this route were garrisoned by the local militia, they called "popular forces" or PF's, but the highway was not definitely secure. Our convoy was a bit of an experiment.

None the less we were happy to get out of the field for a few days. It was hot and dry, we had been covering a lot of ground on patrols, and I had moved the squads around a lot during the nights, so we were not getting much sleep. Two days riding in trucks was sounded good to us.

We met up with the motor transport people at their base where I talked with the major in charge of the convoy to review our plans. I imagined the local irregulars sniping at the trucks throughout the trip. To suppress their fire, I told the major I wanted to place a squad at each end of the truck column, and I would stay with the third squad somewhere near the middle. As it turned out, I should have stayed with the first squad somewhere near the major at the head of the column. I'll have to remember next time I'm asked to provide security for a truck convoy.

The morning was uneventful. An A-1 Skyraider, the last of the prop fighter planes, providing cover by making beautiful tight turns in front of the column then roaring back over our heads and repeating the cycle. This gave us something to watch for a while, but then, after an hour or so he left us alone. Probably using up extra fuel at the end of another mission. Sometime pilots returning from a mission with unused ordinance and fuel would contact us to see

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if they could be useful. Sometimes they were. The column was so much longer than I had imagined it, with more trucks and greater intervals. I had thought, if we had to stop for any reason, I could get to either end of the column on foot, but I realized this was not practical. I was stuck in the middle for the trip.

It was afternoon when the column stopped. The truck I was riding had just passed through a village crowded with children running along-side screaming for the troops to throw them candy or cigarettes, (the kids loved smoking the menthol flavored Cools filterers that came in green and white four packs with our rations. Most of us threw the Cools away.) Our squad at the head of the column had a radio and was keeping me informed of what was happening. Villagers in the next hamlet had waived the first truck to a stop and made it understood the road ahead was mined. Sure enough the mine disposal squad with the metal detector walked up the road and found the mine. Later I learned the staff sergeant in charge had called his squad together for a teaching opportunity so they could observe how he had detected the mine. All I could see when the explosion occurred was a column of debris blown a hundred feet or so into the air. As I understood later, the debris consisted of pulverized asphalt mixed with pulverized pieces of the mine sweep squad.

Immediately I heard the unmistakable popping sound of a few M-1 carbines. This weapon, which had been issued in the thousands to our allies the Popular Forces and had somehow become, along with plentiful ammunition, the standard armament of our adversaries the insurgents. At close range this little rifle was as deadly as any handgun, but from a few hundred yards we infantrymen considered it almost a nuisance. This was not so for the people in the cabs of the trucks. Many of the trucks were equipped with fifty caliber machine guns mounted over the cab. I doubt the motor transport personnel had ever had an opportunity to fire machine guns in combat and this was their chance. Every third round was a tracer leaving a red trail behind the projectile and creating a flash when it impacted on the vegetation a few hundred meters across the flood-

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ed rice paddy. These little bright dots in the distant tree line looked like muzzle flashes and I think caused our truckers to believe there were dozens of enemies firing back at us. The machine gun fire started at the head of the column but quickly spread toward the rear. The roar of dozens of machine guns can make it impossible for the untrained ear to tell whether-or-not there is incoming fire, so I can't blame the truckers for assuming we were under attack. This makes me think of a comic strip parody of Ceasar's Commentaries: "We have met the enemy, and they are us." Fortunately, the machine gunners parked in the village at the rear had the good sense to hold their fire.

This was not the case for the Ontos crews. A weapon with a Greek name that could be translated as "indeed", consisting of six tubes, 106 millimeters in diameter, awkwardly mounted on a light tracked vehicle, the Ontos was developed for and rejected by the army as an anti-tank weapon but was purchased by our branch of service probably because the price was a bargain. In my view there was no practical use for these ungainly vehicles in our type of war, but someone had thoughtlessly attached two of these monstrosities to the rear of our column and their crews were desperate to fire the anti-personal rounds each one dispersing hundreds of tiny fin stabilized projectiles on impact. When the machine gun fire reached a crescendo the Ontos drivers rotated their vehicles, so they pointed directly into the village where they were parked and discharged all six rifled tubes in rapid succession at point blank range into the thatched roofed homes that lined the road and the people in and around them. Even from my position halfway up the column we could hear all twelve detonations and guessed what had happened.

After a few more minutes the machine gun fire petered out. Since there was nothing to fire at, I don't think any of the infantrymen in the squad I was with had fired a shot. The major, who was up front, (where I should have been) dispatched our first squad into the tree line to go after the people who had fired the original carbine rounds. The insurgents were, of course, long gone. On their return, he ordered them to retrieve whatever pieces of the mine sweep team they could find in the patties. Ted, the squad leader, found an empty rib cage attached to part of a spine and Dick Palmquist, a newly arrived rifleman, retrieved

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a hand attached to part of a forearm. Someone found a head, but most of what they picked up and bagged was just unidentifiable burnt flesh.

I had our radio operator switch to the motor transport frequency and monitored the major's communications with his headquarters. We were to sit tight while another mine sweep team could be sent to us. Nothing happened. I tried not to visualize the scene in the village. I imagined dozens of women, elderly, and children, killed and many more horribly wounded. An hour passed. The sun got lower. Drivers sat in the shade along-side of the trucks and heated up rations on their home-made tin can stoves. It seems all the available mine sweep teams were employed elsewhere, but headquarters would definitely attempt to get us a new team before nightfall -- if possible. I knew if I was a mine sweeper and understood the situation, I would certainly be sure to stay employed elsewhere until after dark. The sun got lower, and I started to think what it would be like to spend the night with the column stretched out over a mile of roadway on a raised embankment. There was no way to form a perimeter, and we would have to stay with the trucks. A few local insurgents were not going to attack us in daylight, and I doubted they would have a radio, but I was sure within minutes after the column was stopped, there were enemy runners going out in every direction with the news. I could picture guerillas swarming toward our position from miles around and preparing for nightfall. They would creep up through the rice in the dark and roll grenades under the trucks then try to set the trucks on fire. Impossible to organize a defense for a position twenty-four feet wide and a mile long. They could fire their B-40 rocket launchers or lob mortars down the length of the column from either end. No way to organize or control the drivers and gunners in the trucks. It would be an everyman for himself nightmare. Just a few dozen enemy could get close enough to us in the dark so artillery or air support would be useless. The sun got lower. So many bad things happened to us in those hours when the sun is low twice a day. Even now after all the years I still feel this sense of vulnerability at these times.

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I took the handset and asked the operator on the other end to put the major on. I won't try to reconstruct our conversation. It wouldn't do credit to either of us. I was frightened and angry. He was just frightened, so I had an advantage. The argument ended and he said "OK, what if we hit another mine." I told him "Push the wreck off the road and keep going." We didn't call Motor Transport Headquarters. We both understood they would order us to stay put if they knew what we were going to do. Three hours later, we rolled into the airbase feeling good.

The air base was beautiful, paved streets, perfectly aligned rows of buildings and tents. We reported in and were assigned quarters in large tents with rows of canvas cots. As I expected the mess hall was closed for the night so I had to go through my usual routine of finding the mess sergeant, asking him to feed my platoon, being told it was impossible, asking where I could find the sergeant's commanding officer, and then agreeing on an abbreviated menu of sandwiches and chips, or something similar not requiring cooking, then standing at the end of the chow line so the men could see I wasn't going to eat until everyone was fed. The guys appreciated this, and I never got tired of doing it.

Early the next morning I was told to report to the Motor Transport headquarters. Our major was there with a lieutenant colonel already and I could see by their expressions and erect posture, this was not going to be a friendly get to know you. Apparently, the colonel had wanted us to spend the previous night out on the highway hiding in the trucks and was displeased we had ignored his wishes. A minute later the major and I were standing at attention in the colonel's office while he verbally assaulted us at close range. I thought this was going to be the ballistic type of dressing down that all field grade officers know how to do but I was wrong. The colonel was not performing. He was genuinely angry and was shouting into the major's face at an uncomfortably close distance. "Majors do not take orders from lieutenants." He screamed at the major. The major tried to say something, but his voice cracked, and he couldn't finish.

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There was more shouting. I could picture the major's chin quivering although I kept my eyes straight ahead.

Eventually it was my turn. At this point I should mention that since our convoy rolled into camp the previous evening, I had been feeling an intense sense of wellbeing and self-satisfaction because my platoon and I had come through yesterday's circus without death or injury, (except for psychological damage to Ted's squad caused by having to bag fragments of the mine sweep team.) Nothing this colonel was going to do, short of a physical beating, was going to dent my mood. Did I understand "Lieutenants do not give orders to majors?" and similar questions were asked aggressively. I answered in the voice I had developed for stressful situations. Not bored but not excited either. Loud enough to be heard by the colonel six inches away from my face, but not a decibel louder, not slow, but not too fast. For reasons unknown, this voice helps me remain calm and speak clearly when I'm stressed, and I hoped had a calming effect on the listener. In any case I think the colonel could see I was not going to become rattled, so I took less incoming verbal fire than the major had.

Because the Colonel was quoting verbatim parts of the previous day's radio discussion between the major and myself, I was sure he had been listening in on his radio. One thing I have never liked about myself (and I am sure others share my opinion) is: I am too quick to ascribe the worst possible motives when others disagree with me. So, of course, my first thought was the colonel could have broken in on our conversation and ordered us to spend the night on the road, but by allowing us to ignore his previous order he was safe from blame no matter how the situation worked out. In a way I felt sorry for these career officers. I was agonizing over decisions that could mean life or death to the people for whom I was responsible. How much worse must it be to throw consideration of the effect of these decision on your career into the mix.

We were dismissed. The major to worry about his next fitness report, me to worry about the platoon. I heard there had been some kind of altercation in one of the tents between our machine gun squad leader and some Korean troops billeted near us. I wanted

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to keep the guys busy and get them away from area. I was told the beach outside the camp was secure and I got one of the motor transport sergeants to lend me a couple of drivers and trucks. The drivers had nowhere to go anyway. Our return trip was on hold. The mess sergeant and I were now friends. Of course, he bristled when I asked him to call his crew back to work after they were done for the day. I understood that. When he saw my rag tag platoon who had come out of the field without a chance to cleanup he softened. Besides being a little dirty and unshaven, there is a look that infantrymen have coming back from an operation or patrol that inspired sympathy from people who don't have to sleep on the ground and get shot at. The mess hall made up bagged meals to go and threw in a tub of iced beer.

We spent the rest of the day and the next on the beach swimming, playing touch football with a ball made from a rolled-up field jacket, and drinking beer. Life was good. I don't think I ever understood how good beer could taste or how wonderful it was to lie in the sun until then. People sometimes express sympathy for me and my friends from the platoon for "what we had to go through". It wasn't all bad. In fact, sometimes it was great. Occasionally I can still recapture the feeling I had those two days when I realize how fortunate I have been. I am sorry for you if you have never experienced the pure joy of just being truly alive.

My newly arrived second in command, staff sergeant S, took the opportunity to make a short speech to the platoon about what a great job I was doing taking care of them. We were all embarrassed by his awkward sucking up. Seeing they got recreation, and nourishment was the easiest and smallest part of my job. What they counted on me for was running the platoon so we could follow orders without too many of them being killed or crippled. They knew on my best days I was no more than adequate, but they told each other my replacement might be worse so they stuck with me. The powers above us decided to send us back without a mine sweep team. Our enemies knew we were coming and harassed us with their silly long-range carbine fire several times, but even the truckers now understood not to waste too much time firing back. The

Convoy

experiment must have been counted as a success. Two weeks later another convoy tried to repeat our performance, this time guarded by our allies, ARVN regular troops. Like us they were stopped by a mine but spent the night on the road. When they were attacked, the ARVN's sensibly retreated and left the convoy to their enemy who looted what they could carry and set fire to the trucks. As far as I know, there were no more convoys.

The colonel had let me know he would be sending a report on my performance to my battalion. If he did the skipper never said anything and I never asked. Fifty years later when we talked about it at one of our company reunions Tom said the battalion staff had discussed the incident and concluded I had done the right thing.

Dino's Story

He was my idol growing up. He could sing, tell jokes, and act in films. The roles he chose were facsimiles of himself, a relaxed, good natured, slightly inebriated, but charming guy who had an eye for beautiful women. He was someone everyone wanted to be around. His parents were from Italy. My mother was from Italy. (My father's family was from Mexico.) I looked vaguely like him In my high school years. He had glamorous, celebrity friends who hung out together in a city famous for casinos and entertainment, and whose escapades regularly made the news.

Notwithstanding the image he projected, it was well known that in his private life, he was never was drunk, a shrewd businessman, and devoted to his family. The vanity license plate on his car read, "Drunky" but the liquid in the ever present glass in his hand was usually tea, not bourbon. I wanted to be him. The name, Dino, suited me and stuck with me even beyond high school.

I was popular in high school, a linebacker on the football team, a beer drinking, muscular copy of my idol, Dino. I liked being talked about and got attention for stunts like hopping onto the moving piston of an oil rig and riding it like a mechanical bull.

She, was a year younger than me, a cute blond, from a conservative Mormon family, who wasn't even allowed to drink coffee. We dated a few times, but it didn't go well. She wasn't having any of the kissing and petting I could get from other girls.

Surprisingly, once we were through dating, our relationship didn't end, but actually improved. She was someone I could talk to in ways I could not with my other friends.

I think she saw herself as my social advisor. She recommended, and even sometimes fixed me up with, the girls I dated. By the time we graduated, she was dating someone else, but was still my friend and someone I talked to regularly.

Dino's Story

I thought about college but never got around to enrolling. There was the war. Fear of conscription induced me and a few friends to sign up for the military. Also, maybe I was drawn to the excitement. Later that year, having done well in training, I found myself assigned to an infantry squad in combat.

My first day was bad. A sergeant attempted to introduce me to my new squad leader who turned his back on me saying, "I don't even want to know his name. He'll probably be dead in a few weeks." Nice welcome to my new family!

Knowing what I know now, I can't blame the guy. He was about to rotate after a thirteen month tour and had seen enough new guys come and go. Fortunately Pat took over the squad a few days later. Pat was a worrier and what he worried about was us. He gave us new guys the unpleasant, dirty jobs, like carrying the wounded to the helicopters, but let us watch and learn duties that required experience which he reserved for the "old timers" who had been in combat for a few months.

I watched Pat and tried to copy him. Within a few weeks I was a fire team leader, responsible for two other riflemen. Promotions come fast when casualty rates are high.

That year I learned something about myself I had never suspected. I needed to be responsible for other people. Not so much to be in control, but to have the satisfaction of being needed, relied upon. I was no less afraid for my own life, but thinking about the others gave me a reason to live with the fear. When Pat finished his tour, I took the squad and had a lot more to be responsible for.

And it was not just my squad. In those first months we were patrolling the rice farmers' villages south of the city and were told our mission was to protect the farmers from the brutal, enemies that lived among them. I knew the reason there were only women, children, and elderly people in the villages. The military age men

Dino's Story

were fighting with our enemies. I understood the children we joked with, who begged menthol cigarettes from us, were running ahead of our patrols to warn the snipers of our approach. But did these people really have a choice? Weren't they just like us, doing what was necessary to survive an impossible situation. When I looked into the faces of the kids, mothers and old people, I saw families just like my own.

Some of the others in the squad didn't see our situation as I did. At best they were rude and I don't want to say what their worst could be. I saw my job as preventing that worst and doing what I could for the villagers. That could mean making opportunities for our medics to treat their minor ailments, evacuating them when they were wounded, caught in a fire fight between us and the enemy, or just smiling and using the few polite phrases in their language I had little earned.

They understood. I knew when we approached a village and the kids ran in front of us shouting, "Dino, Dino", to let the village know it was my squad coming.

Later that year they moved us up north into the hills where there were no villages to protect. One day, while my squad left our base for a patrol, a government soldier sped by on a motor bike shouting at me "Dino, Dino". What did he want from me and how did he know my name? I wondered but I had a patrol to run.

The patrol's plan led us away from the base into the surrounding wooded hills and back along the same route. Usually not a good idea. The sparsely populated terrain was different from what we were used to and we were surprised to find a group of older women and young children living in a run down bamboo house at the end of our route. This wasn't the rice growing country down south where bananas grew on trees and rice was close to free. These, hollow cheeked children were clearly malnourished.

Dino's Story

We had more than enough of the twenty five hundred calorie per meal rations. I ask the guys to collect what they could spare and donated it, we set up security, and the women, kids, and squad all sat down and ate together.

When we shouldered our packs to return to base one of the women blocked my path, pointing to the trail and gesturing for us to stop. She didn't want us to return on the trail we had come in on, and the reason was obvious. Never before had a local person risked helping us in this way. We knew what it would mean for her if the enemy knew what she had just done. Her house was isolated, not in a village so maybe the absence of potential informers? I will never know why she had the courage to do what she did.

I divided the squad in two and started the columns wide of the trail on each side. Just as I suspected in a few hundred meters we came upon a dozen unsuspecting enemy lined up, concealed along the trail waiting to ambush us. Caught from behind, they didn't stand a chance. We killed everyone of them.

As we collected their weapons I turned over one of the bodies and stared directly into the face of the government soldier who had called "Dino" to me as we departed from the base. We know the government troops were often infiltrated by the enemy. He was still wearing the uniform of our allies. A few cans of rations had kept us from walking into an ambush and maybe saved my life.

This is the only story I regularly tell when people ask me about the war. It says something about the people we were fighting to protect, our enemy, and me. There's a lot more to tell, but I mostly keep it to myself.

When my tour ended and I came home on leave, it was not what I expected. At the airport we were asked to change into civilian clothes to avoid inciting the demonstrators who were waiting for us. I didn't like it, but there was worse to come. During my tour we

Dino's Story

sometimes got replacements in the squad who had finished a tour, turned right around, and signed up for another. Why? I was about to learn.

I loved my parents, but as they filled me in on all the doings of our friends and relations I tuned them out. Talk of weddings, new babies, job promotions were not just trivial, but annoying. The family asked questions about the war, but obviously didn't want to hear the answers. I didn't want to tell my parents about, and they didn't want to know, the things that were on my mind. My high school friend, Kandi had gotten engaged and broken up with her fiancé just before her wedding. So? My other high school friends called. I didn't want to see them.

One thing no one wants to admit. Beside hating my time in the war, I also loved it and missed it. Adrenaline isn't a narcotic but it's addictive. I was going through a withdrawal that was every bit as difficult as one from heroine addiction. I wanted back in the war and I started to consider volunteering for another thirteen month tour.

Then there were my guys, my squad whose lives had been in my hands. I had spent a year of my life earning their trust and respect, the most difficult job anyone can ever have. That job had become who I was. Nothing in my previous life had ever given me so much satisfaction. Now I was nothing, empty.

Some of these people were dead now, others disfigured and disabled, would spend the rest of their lives in veterans hospitals doped up on pain killers. The ones I left behind, were as close to me now as my own family and I was laying around, useless, slightly drunk, unscathed, except for a scar from a healed gunshot wound.

After the first uncomfortable week, my parents decided what I needed was to be alone. I retired to my room to review all the decisions I had made during the last year, things I should have done but

Dino's Story

didn't, mistakes I knew I made. Maybe I should go back for another tour and do better.

Alcohol helped. After a week I was drinking a quart a day. I laid on my bed alone with my thoughts, counting what was left of my thirty day leave.

A knock on the door and without waiting for an answer, she was in my room. "Let's go. We're meeting people for pizza." I wanted to protest, but couldn't think of anything to say. A few minutes later I was in her car. She smelled nice. OK. I would eat some pizza and get back to my room. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. "We're going for pizza, but really I just needed to talk to you." Her voice had a little quaver as if she might cry. "You cannot BELIEVE what a horrible year I've had." She had no idea what a horrible year was, but she was my friend. If she needed me to listen, I could do that for her. Also, sitting close to her like this was kind of exciting.

I made my entrance to the restaurant laughing, a little tipsy, a beautiful woman on my arm, ready to entertain my friends. Dino was back.

Love & War

Now I want to tell you about the girl I came to know when our company was defending some villages south of the City. These villages, populated entirely by women, children and a few old people, were just groups of bamboo, thatched roof houses located on islands scattered among the flooded paddies, each island raised a few feet above the water level and connected by the raised dikes that separated the paddies and served as foot paths. There were dozens of these villages we were responsible for, some with just a few families,

Each of our company's three platoons ran patrols within a few day's walking distance of the battalion base camp. Crossing those expanses of paddy, either wading up to our knees in the muddy water, or walking single file on the dikes, we had good reason to feel naked and vulnerable. When the enemy shot at us from the village we were approaching, there was no cover and nowhere to run except towards the fire or away from it. We never ran away. It was safer to move at night, especially when clouds covered the stars and moon, or when the rain muffled our footsteps as we walked through a sleeping village. We moved in the dark whenever we could. Lying in an ambush, awake and alert all night, sometimes shivering in the driving rain, or hiking for hours through the dark village trails and open paddies meant we had to sleep in the villages by day. Even then we had to maintain security, setting up perimeters, standing watch and sleeping in turns. I want to say here, if you have never lived where there's no electricity, you have no idea how bright the night sky can be. Even on the village trails, which could be almost tunnels in the thick bamboo, you could see your way well enough to walk carefully.

You spend this kind of time in the villages and can't help getting to know people. We met Mai, who spoke our language. We liked talking to her. We craved contact with females, even if it was just casual conversation and a small bit of flirting. Mai was young, cute and interested in everything we had to say. Then there were the adolescent kids who worked at the stand just outside the bat-

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talion's wire perimeter selling soft drinks, candy, and doing our laundry. They had barely enough vocabulary to transact sales and trade insults and jokes, but most of us chatted with them on the way out and back from patrols. Even though I couldn't speak their language, I always smiled and greeted the Villagers when I encountered them on the trails, or if we spent time around their homes. Sometimes they would even offer to share their food with me. Rice and vegetables with fish sauce was a nice break from the greasy canned food we got as rations.

It wasn't long before Mai became a frequent subject of conversation in our squad. What was an obviously well educated, bilingual young person, doing living in a community of poor farming families? Then one day her questions became too obvious and we all knew. What should we do about a spy? Report her to the government and see her arrested? Some of the guys who had been in the squad longer than me talked about how they turned over a captured enemy to the government soldiers and what happened to him. No one, not even the guys who hated the villagers, wanted to see that happen to Mai. In the end we decided to do nothing. Everyone was on to her role and was careful about what they said in front of her. We liked her, and spy or not, we didn't want to stop seeing her around. As for the kids at the soft drink stand, they had to be working with the enemy also, but who else was going to get our clothes washed and wasn't it nice to be handed a cold soft drink on the way in from patrol. How much useful information could they get anyway? We never discussed this, but I wondered whether Mai and the kids really had a choice when the enemy asked them to spy. Much as we might want to, we couldn't protect them.

The situation with the villagers was a conundrum. We were told we were there to help these people and protect them, win them over to the side of their government so they would not support the enemy. The medic attached to our platoon treated their ills, cuts, and sometime their wounds when they got caught in our fights. I heard one of our medical guys had actually delivered a baby. Were the villag-

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ers themselves our enemy? Were the kids who kept watch at the tree lines and ran to warn the enemy as we approached so they could catch us helpless and exposed crossing a paddy any different from the enemy. My squad members had become my brothers. Because of these children, some of my brothers were dead, or maybe worse, spending the rest of their lives disfigured and disabled in a military hospital. And yet we played and joked with these kids, and gave them the cookies, sweets, and the menthol cigarettes they loved from our rations. We knew where their missing fathers were — in the tree lines shooting at us. They were rigging grenades and mortar rounds that detonated after we tripped an almost invisible piece of fishing line or opened a bamboo gate. The villagers knew where these mines were. We never saw a civilian set off a mine. Why didn't they warn us, the people who were protecting them from the enemy, and, mostly, treating them with respect?

One day, stuck in a very small village waiting for nightfall, I watched one of the guys from the mortar squad do simple magic tricks for some kids while their mother watched. This was a game he played sometimes. His goal was to make the young mothers, who were generally sour on us, laugh, or at least smile. To do this he had to work with our interpreter, Sergeant Triu, who the government furnished us under a program that paid a reward to enemy deserters. Later Triu confided in us he was not really a deserter, but lied to get the reward and the job of interpreting for us. After he had the mother's attention by entertaining her children, our mortar squad leader would start a conversation about her husband, who he assumed was fighting with our enemies. "When you see your husband can you tell him something for me? He's shooting too high. His shots are all going over our heads and he's not hitting anyone. (Showing her the rear sight on his rifle). Your husband needs to lower his rear sight about three clicks." (Demonstrating by twisting the knurled wheel on the sight.). Not much of a joke, but it usually got a smile. Then having got her engaged, he would go on to joke with a grandfather offering to become business partners after the war and suggesting various outrageous or illegal schemes they

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might work on together. By this time he would have attracted the rest of a group and was getting some laughter. Quite an accomplishment considering we were there to hunt and kill their loved missing family members who, if we found him, would end up lying face down in the mud to decompose, and sometimes, even mutilated by my brothers cutting off an ear, or pumping bullet after bullet into the body until it was an unrecognizable mess. Our anger was that uncontrollable and what else could we do to vent our frustration. I didn't approve and the lieutenant would stop them if he saw it, but I understood.

Some of my brothers came to hate the villages, the way they smelled, the people who lived there. Others did not and felt responsible for the villagers' welfare. Even today my squad leader, Skip says, "Someone had to protect those people." The village had wells but no plumbing, so I will leave the smell to your imagination, but the villages did also smell of farm animals, cooking, and wood fires. This reminded me of my home where most people raised chickens, worked in the orchards, and cooked outside on wood stoves. Then there was the smell of the people themselves. It was pungent, but for me, not unpleasant, just very human and even nice. People smell pretty much like what they eat. The villagers lived on rice, vegetables, and small amounts of fermented fish sauce. They told us we smelled like dead meat and cigarette smoke.

I don't want you to think we spent all our time, sleeping, passing out sweets to the kids, and chatting with our friends from the villages. We inflicted more casualties on our enemies than we took, and we took a lot. Only a steady stream of replacements kept our under strength platoon functioning. We gave up plodding through the flooded paddies where the mud could suck your boots off and learned ways to get quickly across the dikes, hopefully before the snipers got in position. If snipers pinned down a squad, another was always ready to circle behind the shooters. We moved in the dark so often and disbursed so much, we often beat our enemies at their own game and killed them when they tried to cross the pad-

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dies at first light. Then, there were the chance encounters where the first man in the column, rounding a curve in the trail, was suddenly face to face with an enemy. Usually we got the best of these.

I think you can see our dilemma, right? We had two missions, one, protect and win over the villagers, and two, kill their missing family members.

The kids outside the battalion area told us Mai was dead. She had been visiting an area south of us designated as a free fire zone, when she was killed by artillery fire. In a free fire zone, technically, we were free to kill any man woman or child on sight. In practice we never did this, although I can't speak for other companies. This was the strategy for depopulating areas we could not control and separating our enemy from the villagers, who fed and supported them. Our artillery batteries fired 105 millimeter rounds into these areas at random times to reinforce this policy and apparently Mai had some bad luck. We missed her.

Sorry, I don't want you to think this story is about Mai. I just want you to know how things were before I told you about the girl. She was very slim, but shapely enough you could tell in spite of the baggy black trousers and long sleeved blouse that was in fashion that year, and had been for the last few hundred. She was about my age, or maybe a year or two younger and, of course, without the blackened teeth a local woman got when she first started nursing a baby. When we passed on the trail and I got a good look at her face, I made a sound something like "aaagh". She was that beautiful, she literally took my breath away. Her people have a soft brown color, the same shade as mine but with just a little gold hue and she had the angular, high cheek boned face that was typical of their women, but striking in a way that's hard for me to describe. Looking into her face, you knew, besides being a beautiful women, she was a beautiful person. All this was before I first saw her smile.

Note: nursing mothers chewed betel nut, a combination of betel

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leaves and Areca nuts reputed to replace calcium lost during lactation and ease tooth pain. Stains the teeth black and causes cancer.

When I say she was beautiful, I don't mean just beautiful to me. Whether my friends would admit it or not, we found all the young females, even the black toothed, young mothers, attractive. They were all slim and gracefully muscular from working in the paddies, with regular features, smooth, glowing skin and shiny, straight, black hair. The girl though, was exceptional, and would have been considered exceptionally beautiful any place in the world. She lived in a village near our base, so when we passed through, the whole platoon was on the lookout for her. Until the day of the fight at the bridge, her village was relatively peaceful for us, so when we passed through, we weren't in the tense, high alert state we maintained in other areas.

The next time I saw her I smiled, and when she smiled back at me, she lit a little fire that I can still feel when I think about her now. When I saw her again on my way back from patrol a few days later, we both smiled. I mumbled something, and she said something I didn't understand. Then she gave me a look that said, "we understand each other and it's good". How can I truly know what, if anything, she was thinking? Another language, another culture, twelve thousand miles from my home, we had never spoken an understood word. In her language, I could only count to ten, say yes, no, and a phrase I shouted sometimes that roughly translated as "Stop or I'll shoot." (They never stopped and I never shot."). As far as I know she never smiled or gave that look to the other guys when they leered at her. I was sure we understood each other. And they did leer at her and said things I don't like to repeat, such as what they would like to do with her, or to her. I myself have never had an erotic thought about the girl.

Then one day our squad was set up in a perimeter in her village. While I sat in my position cleaning my rifle, she came down the trail. We smiled and nodded as she passed and went to the edge

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of the paddy, squatted, pulled her black pants down around her ankles, and proceeded to defecate there in front of me. She wiped herself with a clod of earth, pulled up her pants, and came back to me. She wasn't embarrassed and I wasn't surprised. There were designated places in the village for depositing fertilizer and no opportunity for privacy, so this was something I had seen many times before. "Hey." This from one of my brothers in arms. "You want to take her home and marry her? She can shit in your front yard so the neighbors can watch." I ignored him. Had it been one of the black toothed mamas he wouldn't have said a word. Then she gave me the "we understand" look, and her biggest smile before she walked away.

At that moment my love for her was so sweetly painful, I did want to take her home. I wanted to defend her from my friends' insults and their lewd stares, from the enemy, and the danger that surrounded us. I wanted to look at her face while she slept, dry her tears if she cried, and see that smile over and over again.

A few days later our battalion got word we would be transferred up north where there were no villages, just fighting. My squad leader, Skip, me, and a few others, stayed behind a couple of days to help pack gear on trucks. The new battalion arrived and Skip and I met one of his buddies from recruit training. Skip thought it might be useful if we showed our replacements around the villages, explained how we had been patrolling and pointed out some of the areas where we most often encountered the enemy. We knew parts of our area so well we could almost plan patrols without referring to the map. "Set up your squad down by the five old ladies house," or, "What if we just bypass Crazy's village?" (An older lady who screamed at us nonstop whenever we approached). It sounded like a good idea so we got permission to leave the battalion perimeter with Skip's friend's squad and took a walk through some of the nearby villages. On the way back we stopped at the soft drink/laundry stand outside the wire to introduce the local kids. Skip's friends loaded up on soft drinks and candy bars and walked away without

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paying. The kids yelled at them. Our friends told them to go fuck themselves. What could we do? Skip and I pulled out our wallets. I should have known then what was coming.

All this happened fifty years ago. I never saw the girl again and haven't thought about her much, but lately she's been on my mind. Of course I was with other women before and since. I had a white girl friend whose parents made her stop writing me after I shipped out. After I returned from the war, I married an Apache woman, but we didn't stay together long, and there has been another wonderful woman in my life for a long time now. The memory of my innocent love for the girl still makes me happy.

After we left the Villages the new battalion didn't do well. We heard they took so many casualties, they couldn't believe we had left the safety of the camp in such small numbers and even accused our battalion commander of falsifying the reports of our patrols. A few weeks after they arrived, and without warning, they called in air strikes and artillery fire on the villages. When the bombing and artillery fire ended, the highway was lined with wounded and dying villagers begging for a ride into the city in hopes of medical attention. In a few more days, the villages were deserted.

As Skip says, "somebody had to protect those people."

Murder

She was not quite sixteen, blond hair cut short, brown eyed and slim. Not the buxom build that excited the others, but small, up-turned breasts I liked, but never touched, and long, athletic legs and flanks she like to flaunt in the tight shorts she favored. Styles in clothes and women change. In those days no chest was the tree on oo big and no waist too narrow. Women did isometric exercises to improve their “bust lines”. One actress had ribs removed to accentuate her hour glass figure. Connie was too slender, too girlish for my friends’ taste. Today she would be a beauty. She was beautiful for me then, and still is in my memory.

We met that summer when I saw her walking with friends while driving home with her brother from pickup basketball, and he suggested we give her a lift home.

We both lived in an older, upscale suburb. Connie’s parents were white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant stock, educated at prestigious eastern colleges and living in an older home on a heavily wooded lot at the end of a long driveway. My family was white, (in our suburb people with an Italian surname were white, but just barely), and had a new, modest home on a couple of acres at the edge of town. My father, a colonel in the army reserves, had an engineering degree from a state university, and managed an industrial facility. Her neighbors played golf. I had been a caddy. We were respectable, but not country club material. That fall Connie’s relationship with me was enough to keep her out of the snobbish, high end of school sorority the other girls were invited to join.

She didn’t care. She was proud of me and showed me off. We saw each other weekends, sometimes for movies with other couples, root beer and something to eat at drive-in restaurants, any reason we could come up with to be together. She told me, “I’m addicted to you.”

During the week we were on the phone at least once a day. We couldn’t get enough of each other and it was driving my father cra-

Murder

zy. I listen dutifully to his lectures about teenage pregnancy. He had nothing to worry about. Our intimacy never went beyond hugs and frenzied kissing. I would never do anything to hurt her. She trusted me.

When one evening she asked me to drive her to a baby sitting job, I knew it was just another excuse for us to be alone together in my father's parked car. I told my mother I'd be back in half an hour, while one of my brothers teased me with his version of a popular song.

"Connie in the morning,
Connie in the evening,
Connie at supper time.

Be my little Connie,
And I'll love you all the time." FCC

Halfway down a long wooded driveway she asked me to stop the car, saying we could be alone for a little while, since the couple she was sitting for wouldn't leave until she arrived. She turned, leaned over between me and the steering wheel and kissed me hard on the mouth. We got a little crazy with our mouths. When we came up for air and she turned onto her back, my right hand, which had been resting lightly on her hip, was suddenly between her legs. It startled us both. I tried to withdraw my hand, but she held it in place with hers. I felt heat through the thin fabric. While she continued to press my hand against her, she said, "We have to stop now".

We didn't. Until she cried out in pain. Her body arched, stiffened, feet together, knees apart, quivering as if receiving an electric shock. She gasped for air.

I thought a heart attack, epilepsy? She was limp and damp in my arms, eyes closed, lips parted, not breathing, her no longer pretty face glistening, unnaturally flushed with patches of whites. I shook

Murder

her gently. No response.

Dead.

My mind raced in a dozen different directions. What had I done to her? What should I do? The only thing I was sure of was I held a dead girl's body in my arms. I had ended her life and ruined whatever was left of mine. The emotion overloaded a circuit in my brain, burned out the fuze and every bit of feeling drained from me. I was as dead as she was.

Then Connie opened her eyes and whispered, "Wow!", and we were both alive again.

Eight years later I sat in a class room with a group of newly made second lieutenants listening to a major, who had never killed anyone, counsel us on how we should feel when the time came for us to take a human life. I smiled. I already knew.

The Gunner

Technically, as squad leader I should have been controlling both gun teams, not lying behind a gun myself pumping out rounds. We were always short of both teams' full complement of gunner, assistant gunner, and two ammunition carriers, so I could justify it. The lieutenant never said anything, we were always attached to the third platoon, and it was rare for other officers to be around when we were in the field. Who was going to stop me. Usually we walked somewhere back in the column, so when the shooting started, we weren't pinned down. If it was anything more than a few sniper rounds, the words "guns up" would be relayed down the column. That was our cue to run up either to the right or left of the head of the column, far enough away to be out of the incoming fire, set both guns up, and start pouring fire into the tree line across the paddy.

In those days two things made me happy. One was the gun. I liked the ingenuity and precision of the system with its gas operated piston that rotated and unlocked the bolt, extracted and ejected the spent casing, stripped a new round off the belt while discarding the link that held it together, loaded the round, locking the bolt in place, fired and then, as long as I continued to depress the trigger, repeated the process ten times every second. Whether it's the levers and gears that open and close an elevator door, or the mechanisms that operate automatic firearms, I have always been fascinated by machinery. Other machine gunners complained about the gun jamming, problems changing the barrels when they overheated, and the trigger housing group becoming detached. They just didn't give their guns the attention this beautiful piece of equipment required. Most of their jams were caused by moisture, dirt, or even corrosion of the ammunition belts which happens when guys were allowed to carry the extra belts draped around their shoulders. Except for what was loaded in the guns, my squad's ammunition stayed in the canvas pouches. What's the point of dragging around that weight if it's going to jam the guns when you need them? We cleaned our guns, and I inspected parts

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for wear, every chance we had. I was strict about firing the short bursts that kept the barrels from overheating, (you could actually melt the barrel if you held the trigger down long enough.) We had a spare barrel, but it was extra weight and changing barrels was not something you ever wanted to do in the middle of a fight. We even attached the metal cans our rations came in to the receiver to improve the way the belt fed and had the assistant gunners pour oil directly into the breech between bursts to cut down on jams. I loved the gun, and even though I was supposed to be supervising instead of shooting, I never gave it up to another gunner except once that day at the bridge.

My other happiness was cards, and on the few days we had in the battalion area between patrols, I played some the most satisfying poker of my life. We were paid once a month and had the choice of taking cash, sending pay home, or leaving our money “on the books” to earn interest. In the circumstances we found ourselves in, long range planning meant trying to survive the next patrol, so most people had extra cash and nowhere to spend it. Combine that circumstance with a steady supply of cocky, young military who thought of themselves as cold, killer poker players, and I was in poker heaven. Unlike the guys who came to play with me, I actually had the skills and experience a competent poker player needs. I could calculate odds, read body language, and look across the table into a player’s eyes in a way that told them nothing about my hand. After I harvested cash from our battalion for a few weeks, I even began to attract players from other units who heard of me and conived to visit our area for a chance to play me. It got so profitable, I actually worried about being robbed and sometimes asked the lieutenant to hold wads of bills for me until I could deposit them into a bank account.

That first month with the company was great for cards, but my time in the field was becoming a nightmare as the implications of my role as a machine gunner sunk in. In training we were taught if, (really when) the gunner becomes a casualty, the assistant gunner

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take his place, and if the assistant gunner is out of commission, the ammo carriers steps in. They told us the average time from when a gun went into action until it was taken out by return fire was seven seconds. In training these are facts to be memorized for a test, but fighting a war, they become more meaningful. I should explain that every fifth round on a belt of machine gun ammunition is a tracer that draws a bright red line from the target leading right back to a spot two inches below the right eye of the man behind the gun. After the first round in a burst, recoil makes the sight on an automatic weapon useless so the gunner needs to see the line of tracers to keep the gun on target. Sort of like watering flowers with a hose. Lying in a prone position machine gunners were safe from gunshot wounds to the arms or legs. All they needed to worry about was getting shot in the face, neck or chest. In a fire fight, if we were lucky enough to immediately put our rounds on or near the people who were shooting at us, we quickly suppressed their fire, protecting ourselves and the rest of the platoon. In other words when our rounds started hitting around them, the enemy shooters would put their heads down or, hopefully, run. Our problems occurred when we couldn't pick out a target and had to fire into the tree line guessing where the fire might be coming from. This wasn't unusual, as the enemy didn't use tracers and would be concealed far enough inside the tree line so their muzzle flashes would not be visible. Also we sometimes mistook our own rounds impacting at the tree line for enemy movement. If our fire didn't intimidate the enemy and they kept firing, most of their fire would be directed right back at the guy at the end of that bright red line, me.

Just doing the arithmetic on the percentage of casualties our platoon took that first month, multiplying by the number of months left in my tour, and factoring in the intangible that I was more at risk than the rifleman who made up most of our platoon, the odds of my finishing my tour without being killed or seriously injured shocked me. This was the hand I was dealt. There's no shame in folding when you don't hold the cards. I gave up on the idea of surviving the war alive or in good health. From that moment I never

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experienced the fear or anxiety the people around me felt. I don't mean I took unnecessary risks. I was never reckless. I just did my job without letting fear affect my decisions or performance, just as I would never let my fear of losing money affect my decisions on how to play a poker hand.

The day at the bamboo bridge, I never gave it a thought when I gave the gun to my assistant gunner. (They gave me the little piece of metal attached to colored ribbons. It's in a box on my dresser.) When you're going to die soon, what's there to worry about?

Just to give you a better idea of how I was operating then, I want to tell you about the little interlude when we guarded a truck convoy driving supplies from the city to the airbase a day's drive to the south. Usually they supplied this base by air but someone had the idea trucks would be cheaper, even though it meant driving through enemy controlled areas. The drive down wasn't bad. We were set up behind sand bags on the bed of few of the trucks, part of the mile long convoy. The five man mine sweep team got blown up and killed checking out a suspect stretch of roadway, and we did trade fire with a few enemy in the tree lines, but otherwise, it wasn't a bad experience, and the good thing was, because of the mine and getting shot at, they held us up at the airbase for a few days.

To look at this airbase you would think the war was over. The roads between the neat rows of large tents that were the barracks were paved, and there were lawns in some places where someone actually mowed the grass! The base was on the ocean, there was a beach, and nothing to do but relax for a few days until some higher up decided it was safe to send us back to the company. After we arrived they fed us, and put us up in a neat, clean tent, big enough for two rows of cots with blankets, pillows and electric lights.

It was a short walk over to an enlisted club for a cold beer. The bartender was a prissy, middle aged staff sergeant in a starched and ironed utility uniform who gave us a lecture on how we were in a

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COMBAT zone and what were we doing walking around without weapons. (Since we we're visiting this country club they called an air base, we had left our weapons back in the tent.) I should mention that our uniforms were not starched. We didn't always have extras to wear if we gave the kids at the gate our filthy set to wash. Some of us never bothered about washing anyway. They just wore the uniforms until they were stiff with dried sweat, dirt, and occasionally, dried blood and when they started to fall apart, went to the supply tent for a new outfit. Because of the heat some guys tore the sleeves off the shirts. Our appearance was obviously offensive to this staff sergeant who tended bar.

Five minutes later we were back with our weapons. I banged my gun down, locked and loaded, the belt of live ammunition laying across the bar, glared at our bartender and waited to see if he had anything else to say about combat zones. "What'll you have boys?" he said meekly. Rank is everything in the military, but still, an infantryman with a few months of combat experience has a certain disdain for those who have never been shot at, and we find ways of letting them know it.

I like beer and had a few, but in those days I was all business and not really drinking like I am now. When I got back to the tent the guys were talking to some Korean military who were quartered nearby. I showed them the deck I always carried. Sure enough they knew poker and wanted a game. These guys thought they knew the game, but they must have got that idea from playing with each other. They raised on hands where a novice would have folded and worse, because they knew I didn't understand their language, they constantly talked among themselves about what they were holding. With all the gesturing and shouting, it was easy for me to guess what was in their hands. Their lieutenant, loosing big, was not happy and even complained when I folded and gave him a pot. Finally, when I had cleaned him out, he came right out and accused me of cheating. There was a little shouting and pushing but the five of them were unarmed and outnum-

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bered. They left.

It was late. We turned the lights out, ready for a good night's sleep. An hour, and apparently a few beers, later the Korean lieutenant was back. When he pulled the chain to turn the lights on, we were staring at each other, him, unsteady, waving a hand gun, and me, waiting for him to return, as I had been for the last hour, my gun pointed at his chest, a belt of ammunition draped across my lap, giving him my "across the poker table waiting for a decision" look. After the lieutenant left, I turned the lights out and went to sleep. Not bragging, but I had a reputation.

A lot of things happened that year I am not telling you about. Nothing remarkable, just stuff that didn't bother me then, but does now. A few years later I was out of the military, with a wife and a child, working a job servicing elevators. After giving myself up for dead, I came home without a scratch. I don't give myself any credit. I know the difference between smart and lucky. Not the same, "nothing bothers him", guy I was in the war, but functional. I drank at night, which helped me turn off the videos that played in my head and kept me from sleeping. In the mornings, I pulled myself together enough that I could do my job as an elevator mechanic and be a husband and father.

One day I stepped into an elevator with two guys who put a gun in my face. I didn't even wait for them to ask, just pulled out my wallet and stripped off my watch. The one with the gun said, "and we need that gold chain on you neck." Something in my head moved. I looked him in the eye and said, "you touch that chain and one of us is going to be dead." I meant it. He knew it. They left, and I felt better about myself than I had in a while.

So that's my story. Now Rosemary and I keep busy down here where its warm year round. No more winter, no more big city. We socialize with other former military at the VFW, I play a little friendly poker, and at Christmas we raise money to buy toys for

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kids. Still drinking and can't say whether I am self-medicating or just can't break the habit, but I don't see the harm in it. You will never see me drunk.

The Skipper

He had so little regard for enemy gunfire I sometimes thought of him as suicidal. He was on his feet when the rest of us were prone and never noticeably flinched from the near misses. Years later when we had lunch with my wife's nephew, a newly hatched second lieutenant, his advice was to always stand up under fire to avoid being hit in the head. Maybe he really believed this. I'll never know, only that his two gunshot wounds, which he received at different times on the same day but reported as simultaneous to avoid being reassigned to a noncombat job, were both in the legs. (This was the policy for service members who were wounded twice seriously enough to be hospitalized during the same thirteen-month combat tour.)

In the field on an operation when he was able to locate his headquarters in an occupied farmhouse, he would sometimes offer to pay the lady of the house for preparing dinner with some of the canned chicken we had using her own vegetables and rice seasoned with the ubiquitous fermented fish sauce called Nuoc Mam. (Nuoc mam took some getting used to but I eventually learned to tolerate it.) One afternoon after setting up the platoon in positions along a heavily vegetated river bank my radio operator delivered the following message: "You are invited to the captain's table at seventeen hundred."

This was a first for me and a nice break from my usual meal routine eating out of a heated can with a plastic fork. The route to the evening's company headquarters was screened from the river by heavy stands of bamboo and was entirely inside the lines of my and the adjacent platoon, so I felt comfortable leaving Ben in charge and walking to my dinner invitation alone. At the thatched roof, bamboo walled farmhouse I found the Skipper and the other company officers seated at a small table. Each of us were provided with a set of the chopsticks the Skipper encouraged us to practice using, a small bowl, and dinner was served.

It wasn't long before the firing started. When you have heard enough gunfire, it begins to speak plainly to you. This shooting was clearly not aimed at us. It sounded like an exchange of long-

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range fire from some distance on the other side of the river. Nonetheless the spent projectiles were headed in our direction and ripping through bamboo. We lieutenants shifted in our chairs as our company commander looked each of us directly in the eyes. A round hit our house's roof and I instinctively pulled my feet under the chair in preparation for a dive to the hard packed dirt floor. The Captain gave me another hard look and I understood this was a teaching moment. I did my best to appear relaxed while I concentrated on technique with the chopsticks, scrapping rice into convenient little piles to be delivered to my mouth while holding the bowl close to my face as I had seen the locals do.

We all grew to love this man. When he saw performance he didn't like, he did not hold back his anger, but his criticism was never personal. Somehow, he always managed to convey the thought that we could do better. He lost patience with some of us, but he never humiliated the ones he decided didn't measure up, just had them transferred. His standard was hard to meet. I knew he never considered me one of the best but I was proud that he found me adequate. He was ambitious and consequently wanted to distinguish himself but not at the expense of the people he commanded. His skill was in inspiring loyalty and confidence but maybe he was lacking in the self-promotion ability that made a highly successful military career.

One of our battalion's jobs was to protect the airfield in the City to the north of us from rocket attacks. The rockets the enemy used were large and required careful preparation of their firing sites. The area our Battalion was responsible for contained dozens of rice farming communities and a section of the country's main North South highway and needed to be patrolled continuously. Tom, (I never felt comfortable using the Skipper's first name, until fifty some years later), came up with the idea of having us make hand drawn maps of each of the tiny clusters of houses in the area our company patrolled, showing the trails, the homes and the names any notable residents. This was more detail than our maps contained and to the extent we committed much of it to memory, was

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helpful navigating in the dark when we did a lot of our patrolling. We made up our own names for the neighborhood, “Five Old Ladies”, “Crazy’s (a cluster of homes where a woman screamed at us continuously”

When our battalion was rotated up North and a new battalion took our place they threw Tom’s maps away. Instead of patrolling in platoon size and then splitting up the platoon into squads to cover more territory, the new battalion tried to patrol with whole companies and then when it was determined it was unsafe they attempted to control the area by artillery fire and air strikes. They left the battalion’s base only to assess the damages done by their bombardment. Eventually they depopulated the area of thousand of farmers. So much for Tom’s idea of learning the land and the people. During our war the foundation of a long and successful military career was body count and kill ratio. In defense of our replacement battalion I admit the farmers universally supported our enemy. They warned him of our approach, fed him and sheltered him and when they died in a bombardment, I suspect they were counted as him.

Three New Guys

We patrolled for two reasons. First to deprive the enemy insurgents of the support of the thousands of rice-growing families who lived in the villages that dotted the paddies, and more importantly, to prevent the enemy from basing their 122-millimeter rockets within range of our airfield to the North. This meant we had to walk every square kilometer of the area for which we were responsible on a regular basis.

I can't say we ever completely accomplished the first task. Since the villages were populated by women, children, and elderly we assumed the men were fighting with the government's forces, or more likely, with the insurgents. We knew the villagers fed our enemies, warned them of our approach, and even collected taxes. Most of us, (certainly not all), still clung to the fiction we were protecting the civilian inhabitants from their insurgent family members, and we would eventually win them over to our side.

We could access a lot of our patrol area on foot from our battalion base, but the outlying villages could take days of unproductive walking to reach so sometimes we rode trucks down Route One and dismounted to start our patrol closer to the villages we were targeting.

Paddies adjacent to Route One were expansive, sometimes as much as a thousand meters from the highway to the cover of the nearest village tree lines. When we left the trucks, to begin our slog through the flooded rice fields, not only were we exposed for an extended period, but the children who kept watch from the villages had time to alert our enemies either to flee or snipe at us. On the patrol I want to tell you about, we were about halfway across one of these huge paddies when we started to take small arms fire.

Two things you can't do well in a rice paddy, conceal yourself or run. When the shooting started that day we chose running. Our nearest cover was a mid-size island a couple hundred meters

Three New Guys

away and we all made for it except for two recently arrived, novice riflemen, who chose to squat down among the rice plants. Gary, whose mother was Mayan and father was Terascan, this being his first time trying to run in a foot of water covering boot sucking mud, had stumbled and plugged his rifle with muck. Johnny Deer, a full-blooded Mohawk, stopped behind him to help him recover. When rifle fire kicked up spouts of paddy water in front of them and started clipping the heads of grain off the rice plants around them, they hunkered down and tried to make themselves invisible. Too late, the shooters had seen them go down, noted their approximate location, and were peppering the area. The leader of their three-man fire team yelled at them to come. Finally, Roy, who was not their team leader, took off running a zig zag route to them and got them to follow him back to cover. Had they stayed out there much longer I am sure they would have been hit.

Their first patrol, they didn't know how to react in the situation, they would be OK. Later the guys sometimes call them "Big Chief" and "Little Chief". Deer was so short when he sat down on the ground with the medium size body-armor we called flack-jackets his head almost disappeared.

Getting shot at in the middle of a flooded paddy wasn't an uncommon occurrence and if our enemies would have waited for us to get closer, they could have shot quite a few of us. However, if they let us get too close before opening fire, they wouldn't have time to disappear into the village and with our superior numbers and fire power, we might be able to kill a few of them. That's not the way they wanted to play the game. Fine with me. I didn't like taking casualties any more than they did.

We had another newcomer with us that day. He was a tall, athletic kid, right out of high school, named Simmons. The platoon spread out nicely on the perimeter of the island and was exchanging fire with, what seemed like, more than a few enemy shooters in the big tree line in front of us, while I looked at

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the map and tried figure out how to get us off the island and into the same village with the enemy. Simmons was firing from a position just a few yards in front of me. Maybe he wanted to get a better view of who he was shooting at. Whatever the reason, when he raised up and moved forward, exposing his position he took a round square in the chest and was knocked flat on his back.

I yelled for a corpsman while I unzipped Simmons' flack-jacket. Simmons tried to take a deep breath but was choking on his own blood. The corpsman arrived sliding to a stop on his knees. Funny. Every time I see a big goal scored in a televised soccer game the scorer celebrates by making that same sliding move and I think of Simmons. There was a lot of blood. My hands and sleeves were wet with it. The entry wound was just left of center. The shooter was good to have made a shot like that so quick after Simons showed himself. Must have been a trained sniper with a scope. Simmons tried to take one more rattling breadth and was still. The corpsman checked his pulse. Nothing we could do for Simmons, so we left him lying there. I had to get on the radio and the corpsman needed to attend to others.

A lot of rounds were flying back and forth now. I asked my radio operator for the handset to call in some artillery on the tree line. Before I could get my coordinates off the map the Skipper called. Back at our base he could hear the fire. Our company commander read gunfire like a book, knew we were in a fight and, had organized some help for from aircraft returning from a mission with unexpended ordinance. In seconds we switched our radio to the air support frequency and were talking to an A-4 Skyhawk pilot. I went through the air strike procedure I knew by heart and a few minutes later the stubby little, carrier-based aircraft appeared from the South.

Every platoon had a 3.5 rocket launcher team with them, and I got ours ready to mark the enemy target. This weapon was designed to destroy tanks, but we used it to mark targets with white phosphorus rounds. Just as the plane was turning to find its path to the target, I asked the gunner to fire into the tree line occupied by the shooters. There is no recoil when this piece of equipment is fired, but our rock-

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et man, who was used to firing a rifle, leaned into the shot dumping the projectile about halfway to the target. I was turned towards the plane. When I turned to look at the target I was horrified to see the cloud of smoke from the rocket drifting back towards us.

I pressed the button on my radio handset to tell the pilot not to drop his bomb but realized I would have to wait until he stopped talking. (Only one person can talk at a time on this kind of radio. That's why people say "over" when they are finished, to let the other participant know it's their turn to talk.) I waited patiently as the plane completed its arc and lined up with the target. I had time. The pilot was chatting nonchalantly about how nicely we had marked his target. I waited for him to finish, watching a stream of automatic tracer fire from the enemy tree line squirt up in his direction. He didn't comment but just kept talking while he released the 500 lb. bomb and passed over the target.

I didn't see the bomb strike the ground. When it hit my face was pressed into the hard packed earth of the island. The blast was incredible, and was followed by the sound of every piece of bamboo around us, which had been sheared clean inches above our heads, crashing to the ground. The elevation of the island above the flooded paddy level had saved us. Every piece of vegetation on the island and the two deserted bamboo homes were now horizontal. My ears were ringing, my head hurt, but my body seemed to be intact. Somehow no one was hurt, unless you count damage to our hearing and possibly soiled underwear.

And the pilot was still talking. As he banked into a turn and headed back towards the carrier, he informed me he could see our enemies streaming out the far side of the village and running across the open paddy.

My problem of how to get us off this island and into the villages solved, I sent two squads to the tree line for security and called for a helicopter to evacuate our casualties and Simmons' body.

Three New Guys

When I tell this story to my friends, they always ask me what I said to our rocket team about their fuck up. The answer is nothing. They didn't need me to tell them how close they had come to killing all of us. I imagine they thought about this event occasionally for the rest of their lives.

A few days later we were back in the battalion area to get some real food and replenish ammunition and other needs. The Skipper assigned me to write a letter to Simmons parents. I thought about the blank look on his face as he took that last rasping breath. There were so many things I wanted to tell them, but I couldn't make the pen put them on paper. Finally I scribbled a few of the stock phrases I had heard used before. I felt badly I could not do better and, as I write this, I still do. A few weeks later I receive a reply from Simmon's father enclosing some magazine articles about next year's new car models. This had been an interest he and his son had shared, and he thought some of the other guys might enjoy this material.

I badly wanted to answer him. I had so many other distractions I could not force myself find the right words. Even now it's painful to write about it. If I knew how long I was going to regret it, I would have made the effort.

I have heard many times that the first week in combat is the most dangerous for infantryman. There are a lot of reasons for this. New guys haven't learned to be constantly alert to all the bad things that might be about to happen. The correct reaction to gunfire is not yet automatic. Getting shot at is still an adventure. There is no bond yet between the new guy and the experienced people around him. I remember hearing Pat telling a new guy in his squad once, "Stay close to me and do whatever I do." I wish I had told all my squad leaders to assign someone with experience to stay close to and keep an eye on each new guy. Too late now.

Tilo & Nobby

My first year at the university wasn't good for me. I rented a room in an off campus boarding house run by an elderly couple. The only other student there was an older fellow working on doctorate. The house was a long walk from the campus so between coming and going, classes and study there wasn't much time for the exciting college life I was expecting. I had enrolled in an agricultural curriculum. My grades were ok, but the most important thing I learned that year was that I didn't want a career as a farmer. I was without any clear direction as I started my second year, but I wanted more social life so I chose different housing nearer to campus where I lived with four other students, all seniors, education majors. My choice of housemates wasn't the best. These four guys were in a final semester taking only a few courses to complete their degrees and had plenty of free time to fill with parties and beer. At the end of the first semester I was on social and academic probation. At the end of the second semester I had flunked out of school.

Back at home and not feeling very good about myself, a friend suggested we volunteer for the military together. There was a war going on. We knew there was a good chance we'd be swept up in the draft, but beyond that I felt the war was right and necessary. Because I didn't have the self discipline to stay in school doesn't mean I was not a serious person. I followed the news, and I understood the reason our country was at war. Also, maybe I felt I deserved some punishment for my failure at school and two years in the Marine Corps would somehow make up for it. If that was true then I guess my only comment would be, "Be careful what you ask for."

We completed boot camp and my friend was ordered to Germany. With a military occupation specialty of "Basic Riflemen" I got another few more weeks of training on the west coast at the Infantry Training Regiment and got my orders to the war zone where I was

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assigned to E Company of the Second Battalion of the First Marine Regiment. I was issued a helmet, rifle, and some equipment and loaded onto a helicopter to join my unit that was engaged in an operation in the field. I didn't know it at the time but another company in this battalion had been in an action with a much larger enemy unit, a few days earlier and been almost wiped out. My company had been sent in and was also taking serious casualties. I reported in to the company and was assigned to the first squad of the third platoon. I didn't know where I was, or where we were headed. We were on the move and the people around me were unshaven, haggard from lack of sleep, and not disposed to engage in conversation. I had brought two full canteens which I quickly exhausted. It was hot, hotter than I can remember it ever being at home. I had not had anytime to get used to this climate. I wasn't the only one feeling the heat because we had to stop at least once to helicopter evacuate someone with heat stroke. I remember thinking if I am going to die in this war, let it be now, i can't stand a year of this heat.

Eventually, after a long day of hiking through the hilly country dotted with thatched homes and fields of vegetables, the sun got lower. We were arranged in a perimeter near a river, and told to dig positions for the night. Someone collected canteens to fill from the river and I got to work with my entrenching tool hacking out a shallow trench in the rock hard clay that would be my nighttime position. It got dark quickly and my partner in our two man position and I took turns on watch, him sleeping and me trying to sleep. A few hours later our squad leader told us to gather our equipment and prepare to move out to another position. It was dark and I had no idea why we were moving to the top of a nearby hill, only that there were already plenty of other troops there. When my squad leader put another guy and me into our new position for the night I got out my entrenching tool to chop another hole but was told we were to keep quiet.

When the shooting started I was awake on watch and could see the red and green tracers flying at low angles around our former po-

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sition below us near the river. There were bursts of automatic fire, high pitched single shots from our small caliber rifles and occasional explosions from grenades. The volume of fire was so intense I thought it couldn't last very long but, whenever it slowed, it eventually picked up again, off and on through the entire night. Now I understood why the people in my squad looked like they hadn't slept in days.

The quiet intervals were longer but the firing continued even after sun up. A battalion is made up of four rifle companies. Where were the other companies? There were a lot of troops on the hill with us only a few hundred meters away from the fighting. Why didn't any of them go to help E Company's two platoons? I didn't know and never found out. Helicopters hovered over the battle and were driven off by fire. After a while, when the firing finally stopped, some of them were able to land and evacuate casualties. We picked up our packs and rifles and walked down to the scene of the fight. Except for funerals, looking down at the casket, the deceased dressed in a suit with his hands folded across his midsection, I had never seen a dead body before. The ground was littered with bloody clothing, dressings and pieces of discarded equipment punctuated by the bodies of uniformed enemy. Amazing how grey and colorless a human body looks when all its blood has drained out through multiple bullet holes, no longer a person, just a cadaver left to rot. Our dead, along with many wounded, including the company commander had already been flown out. A few of the people from the other platoons had slung captured weapons over their shoulder, including a strange looking enemy machine gun. We crossed the river on a bridge and walked for the rest of the day with only a few incidents of small arms fire in the distance. The next day we were helicoptered back to our battalion base camp.

