

#17 Leave – the field Vietnam, and adventures on 30 days leave in the USA

Writer's Notes – This was about before, during, and my return from 30 days leave in the US.

I had just sat down in the shade of a bush when my name was called. Looking over, I saw PFC Hailey approaching. The platoon's radio was sitting beside me, and he was supposed to be checking with the company's chief radio man, White Owl, to cover any communication strategies for tonight's foray. It was First Platoon's night out on ambush, and I wanted to make sure the company had not decided to change any radio frequencies on us. Three nights before, they had decided to do a switch at midnight without telling us, and the platoon had been out of contact for two hours before the company thought to switch back to the old frequency to find us again. It's no fun lying in the bush, knowing that someone screwed up and that you're on your own.

I had switched over to the battalion frequency, but they had changed over also. When I got back, I gave the company's chief radio operator hell. White Owl was a friend, but the whole episode could have turned bad if we had blown the ambush while out of contact. Twice already we had used the company's mortars to withdraw after springing ambushes. Both times we had managed to get a sizable enemy force in the kill zone before initiating contact. And each time, we had to withdraw before the enemy could get reorganized and flank our position.

I was always careful to have a fallback position ready, and so far the platoon had been lucky withdrawing. It was tricky business at night, but each squad would set up a withdrawal position for the men to rally to when the word was given. The person manning the post was responsible for providing rear security for his squad. He would funnel the men up the hill toward the secondary ambush position. This position was secured by a fire team from Fourth Squad. It was set back fifty yards from the primary ambush site, and it had a radio. They would alert the mortar team when to fire its flares and when to bring high explosives into the ambush site. Without the security of the mortars, life would be difficult indeed. Losing contact with the company because of a radio fuck-up was unforgivable, and I was not easy on anyone involved including the company commander and myself.

"Captain Carlson wants you back at the CP on the double, man."

"We squared away with our frequencies?" I asked.

"Yeah, Sarge. No sweat," Hailey answered smiling. Things were getting back to normal between us and it was good to see him smiling again. I was glad. We made a good team and generally got along well. The fact that I had chewed his ass out in front of everyone, calling him everything but white, had not gone over real well with him. I was not in a forgiving mood, so peace between us was returning slowly. I was not in the least bit sorry for what I had done. The platoon had gone almost three months without anyone getting killed. That could not go on forever, but I would have never forgiven myself if something happened because of a fuck-up like the other night.

The command post was located on the fringe of an opening on the top of the hill. Tonight's landing zone for the supply helicopter was not particularly large, but there would only be one chopper landing. Tomorrow would be a big supply day, and the company would need a larger LZ than this in order to handle it. I spotted Captain Carlson sitting up against a tree.

I asked, "What's up, Captain?"

"Battalion called. I have some good news and some bad news." It was a line both the Captain and I had fallen into using. It was like there could never be one without the other.

"Give me the good news. Don't even bother to tell me the bad news. It has a way of becoming apparent on its own," I replied.

"Well the good news is that the battalion is shipping us a brand new second lieutenant for First Platoon. How does that grab you, Sergeant?"

"About time, Sir," I replied. "Maybe now I'll be able to get some rest."

"Figured you would say that, Lou. I can not tell you how pleased I am at the job you have done over the last three months. First Platoon is the best, and you deserve all the credit."

"Yeah. Me and thirty-two other guys, Sir. Having the best squad leaders money can't buy makes me look a whole lot better than I really am. It will be good having someone aboard who has been trained for the job."

"I have my doubts about that, Sergeant. From where I'm standing, things could not be better in the platoon. It will be hard for the new man to measure up to your standards. In a way, I feel sorry for the guy. Anyway, it won't affect you for a while."

"What? You finally decide to court martial my ass for stealing your jeep, Sir?"

Captain Carlson laughed. "I haven't forgotten about that, Sergeant Merrins, and when payback time arrives, you'll know it."

"Yes, Sir. I expect I will."

"You are going on a little trip, my friend. Remember when you extended your tour? You did know that they would give you thirty days special leave for that, right?"

"Yes, Sir. It wasn't the reason for extending my tour, but I am not going to turn down an offer like that. I didn't think I would be eligible for leave until my first year was up in October, Sir."

"Well guess again Sergeant. Battalion says you are to go in on the supply chopper. It will be here in about an hour, so you have a lot to do. I already told Lieutenant Kelp that your platoon will move into his platoon's positions on the perimeter. There is no way I am going to send First Platoon out on ambush tonight without you and with a new platoon leader. Who is going to take over the platoon while you are gone?"

"Sergeant Fry, Sir."

The captain smiled, "I finally get my way on that matter. Took long enough."

"Yes, Sir, it did. Sergeant Fry won't have any problems handling the platoon, Sir. You can tell the new platoon leader just to stay loose and follow Sergeant Fry's lead and that everything will be just fine."

"I'll tell him, Lou. You take care of yourself back in the world. It has changed a lot in the past six months or so I hear. Now get going."

I turned and headed back to the platoon area which was located inside the perimeter. To say my world had just been turned upside down was an understatement. The real world had slowly faded from my reality over the past three months. The thought that I might one day go home again just never crossed my mind. Vietnam was my reality. Each day was a struggle for survival. Early on I had learned that it was better to let go of the past and to live in the here and now. That did not guarantee survival, but I figured it would give me an edge. Too many guys spent too much of their time worrying and dreaming about home when they should have stayed focused on the job of living.

Sergeant Fry was standing over by the radio with the other squad leaders as I approached my position. Evidently PFC Hailey had the foresight to know I would need to talk with them.

"Grab some dirt and light them if you got them," I said. We sat around in a circle just like a group of Indians and held our powwow. I quickly briefed them on what was going to happen.

"You shitting me, right?" Bobby asked.

"Bobby, I wouldn't shit you, now would I?"

"You are so full of shit your eyes are brown, Lou." Every one of the other guys sat around grinning and shaking their heads up and down.

"Fuck you guys," I said.

"Come on, man," Joe Fisher said. "Don't go now. Can't you just hang around for a few months until the new platoon leader get broke in?"

"Listen again, carefully this time, guys. I don't have any say in this. Uncle Sam, in his infinite wisdom, has decided to ship my ass home now, instead of six months from now. You can't argue with the sonofabitch because he ain't real. Besides, I still owe you guys one for making me a platoon sergeant to begin with. Consider this payback."

My eyes drifted from the face of one man to another. These men were not just friends, nor does the term "family" even approach the closeness I felt for them. Over the past three months, we had formed a combat team as good as any in the world. We all believed that, and what anyone else thought did not matter to us. The platoon had been lucky during that time period, but a lot of what had transpired was not just luck. These men were professional soldiers by any standard imaginable. They were braver than I could have ever predicted, having known them in training.

Vietnam had changed each of them. Looking at them then, I felt like I was in the presence of Knights of the Round Table. Each man was as different as each other as day and night and yet they were all made of the same material. Somewhere inside these men, there was a metal stronger than steel, stronger than anything known to man. Each of these men led a squad that would follow them into hell and grab the devil by his nuts. In a fire fight, these

men would hold their ground, and their comrades would not desert them. More than once I thought we would get our ass kicked, and each time, these guys did what was necessary to turn things around.

The captain thought I was being modest when not taking credit for the performance of the platoon. He was wrong. I knew things would have been different with another set of men. I couldn't explain the chemistry that existed between us because it was just too complex for analysis. The fact that I was their leader meant more to them than it did to me. To me, being considered just their equal was as great a compliment as I could ever receive. Leaving them would be hard, but it would only be for a month.

"You guys get things moving. I want to talk with Bobby for a minute," I said. We all got to our feet. One at a time we shook hands. No words passed between us, which was sort of eerie since banter and insults were the norm. Each of us knew it might be the last time we ever saw each other. That was the reality of life here.

"You got any questions?"

"No," Bobby answered.

"You sure?"

Bobby smiled. "Shit, Lou, you taught me everything I need to know. I can handle the platoon for a month without you. As a matter of fact, it might just be nice having some time without your lectures, Professor. By time you get back, we'll have turned into a bunch of ignorant hillbillies, like Fred."

I laughed. The guys were always getting on my case about lecturing them. I sometimes got tired of listening to myself talk and was trying to break myself of that habit.

"The new platoon leader give you any shit, just go to Top about it, Bobby. Don't let him fuck up the platoon too much in my absence. The captain will back you if you need it. Just keep cool. I'll be back before you know it."

"Well get some of that free love we've been hearing about for me," Bobby said with a smile on his face. Bobby still looked like a fourteen year old when he smiled. Even now, after eight months in the field, his smile still reached his eyes. I did not know where Bobby got his inner strength. It was really quite remarkable. Of course Bobby also smiled during a firefight.

The first time I had seen it, I figured he had just gone completely bonkers, but afterward, he was as quiet and sane as ever. I wondered if he knew he smiled when shit was happening, but I never asked. I would have bet Bobby would be amazed to find out about it.

One thing about being an infantryman was that there was only minimal packing necessary to get ready for a move. While Bobby walked off, I gathered my stuff together and headed back over to the company CP. I would have liked to take the time to say goodbye to some of the guys in the platoon, but I wasn't comfortable doing that. To be going home to safety while they remained behind did not feel right. One half of me was rejoicing while the other half felt guilty as hell. They would have given everything they owned to be going with me, and I would have stayed with them if my presence would make a difference. It would not. They would have to face their own fates, just as I would have to face mine. My presence or absence would not affect that one little bit.

I climbed aboard the helicopter at 1500 hours. Thirty minutes later the chopper landed in An Khe. By 1600 hours I was on flight south to Bien Hoi, Brigade Headquarters. At 2100 hours my flight lifted off the airbase at Tan Sohn Ngut.

It was dusk as the big jet liner lifted off the ground. The plane was filled with soldiers heading home, most of them permanently. Their tours of duty were over, and they did not hesitate expressing their joy as the wheels left the runway. Shouts of joy and obscenities filled the air as each man tried to express the overwhelming feeling of salvation. Looking around, I could see men who were crying. Whether from joy or from grief I could not know.

The man sitting next to me wept quietly as the big jet climbed for altitude. The plane quickly reached the sunlight high above the darkening ground below. I felt my spirits climb with each second as the ground below receded and finally lost all shape in the darkness. It was the start of a new adventure, and I looked forward to it.

I got out a cigarette and offered the pack to the kid sitting next to me. He looked at me cautiously as he shook a cigarette from the pack. His hands were shaking ever so slightly as he lit the cigarette.

"It's good to be going home," I said.

He cleared his throat and spoke quietly. "Sorry about the tears," he said. "I didn't think it would happen like this. I knew my time was getting close, but I didn't really think I would actually make it out. You know what I mean, Sarge?"

"The name's Lou, and I sure as hell know what you mean. I kept waiting for the mortars to start falling while we were sitting there on the runway. I think I stopped breathing for a while. You feeling okay now?"

When I had gotten on the plane, I took a window seat. Sitting there, several of the men entering after me had eyeballed me and the seat next to me before moving on. All the men were wearing their dress uniforms with all their insignias and medals displayed. This man had given me a hard look before sitting down next to me. The unit insignia told me he was from the Fourth Infantry Division. He wore the combat infantryman's badge.

"Yeah, I'm okay, Sarge. Ah, I mean Lou. My name's Bill." I shook the hand he offered.

"Glad to meet you, Bill. Thanks for sitting next to me. I thought maybe I had the plague or something. For a minute there I didn't think anyone was going to sit next to me."

Bill smiled. "Most of these guys aren't grunts. I noticed that back at the loading area. I tried to talk with some of them, but they seemed uncomfortable. It's like they don't know how to treat you. Up-country I noticed that also. The guys in my outfit were beginning to comment on the change in attitude from the guys stationed in the rear. Over the past year, things have been changing in the Fourth Infantry Division. I am glad I am leaving now."

"I haven't noticed any real changes," Lou said.

"Yeah, but you are with the One-Seventy-Third Airborne. It's probably the reason some of the guys chose not to sit by you."

That statement made me laugh. "You mean just because of my insignia. You're shitting me."

Bill smiled. "I almost didn't sit by you, but hell, you're a grunt and I didn't feel like sitting by some stuck up asshole who would hold that against me."

"What you got against the One-Seventy-Third?"

"Nothing. It is just that your outfit has a reputation for being hardcore. Most guys in my outfit figure Airborne grunts to be psychotic killers. Half my platoon were draftees who did not

want to be there. To them the idea of an outfit of all volunteers, who spent their life living in the jungle hunting gooks was crazy. Then when one of your companies burnt down the enlisted men's club in Pleiku, they knew you were nuts."

"Sorry about the club," I said. "Not that I had anything to do with it, but it was my company that was accused of the nasty deed, so I apologize."

"Hey. That's great. I always wanted to hear why you guys did it. There were all kinds of rumors going around afterwards. Some said it was because your guys got drunk and decided to torch the place. Another rumor was that some of your guys got beat up, and it was revenge."

"I was company clerk for Alpha Company at the time," I explained. "Battalion Headquarters had just moved up to Pleiku from Bien Hoi about a week before. The battalion area was located about a mile down the road from the enlisted men's club along the perimeter road. Close enough to the wire that we could see the towers and tanks surrounding the base. Anyway, Alpha Company was lifted out of the jungle for a night inside the Pleiku perimeter. They had been humping the boonies for about two months without a break, and I guess someone at Brigade finally decided to give one to them."

Bill was shaking his head and rolling his eyes in mock disbelief. "You sure have caring officers," he said. Lou knew that the Fourth Infantry seldom left their companies out in the field for more than a few days at a time before bringing them to the rear for several days. Each unit had its own area with tents that served as barracks. This operational concept was completely foreign to the 173rd.

"Alpha Company got in late, about 1900 hours when the copters landed. Of course the men were less than ideal in their dress and military bearing. As soon as they got settled into the tents that had been set up for them, they immediately wanted to know where they could get a drink. The battalion had set up a tent to serve them free beer, but after a while some of the guys came to me asking where the enlisted men's club was located on base. I pointed them in the right direction, thinking nothing of it. About an hour later my friend Big John returned fit to be tied. They were moving down the road toward the club when a jeep with an officer from the Fourth Infantry Division stopped. He wanted to know where the hell they thought they were going carrying weapons and looking like a bunch of slobs. The men explained that they

were thirsty and were just going to get a drink. The officer told them to just turn around and head back to the battalion area. They would be welcome to use the club once they put their weapons away and got into clean uniforms. Of course, being the men from Alpha Company, they just ignored the officer and headed for the club.

“Big John said there was a battalion of military police waiting for them by time they arrived at the club. Now the guys were pissed at being thwarted in their attempt to find some hard liquor, but they had no intention of hurting anyone. They were mad when the MPs stood there with weapons drawn and told them to lay down their weapons. The guys just figured *fuck it* and turned and headed for home. Things would have probably ended right there, but the officer in charge of the MPs had them follow the men back. He then demanded to see the battalion commander and evidently stirred up a lot of shit. The next thing we know, word is going around that all the Fourth Infantry Division's clubs were off limits to the men of the One-Seventy-Third.

“By now it was 2200 hours and by all logic things should have been settling down. Of course the guys from Alpha Company are used to being up at all hours of the night. In the jungle there is no such thing as normal sleeping hours. Just being inside a large fire support base was a luxury to the men, and they were willing to stay awake just to savor the safety of the situation.

“The thing that separates the Airborne from other units is pride. It is both the strength and Achilles’ heel of the Airborne. The ban was completely unnecessary since the men were only going to be in camp for the night anyway. The morning after, they would air assault back into the jungle they came from. The ban in reality meant nothing to them, but it was an insult.

“Well, Bill. These men can take just about anything but an insult. They can go without food and water, they can live with the heat, and the rain, and the bugs, and just about anything else either God or Ho Chi Minh has in store for them. Personally, I think both God and Ho Chi Minh understand that and try not to fuck with them more often than absolutely necessary. Anyway, it was just not a good idea, and your CO goofed.

“About 0100 hours, Big John came by my tent and invited me along on a little trip he and some other guys were making up the road. I told Big John it was a bad idea. If I was going

to the field with him the next day I'd be willing to go along, but I was stuck in the rear, and getting into trouble wouldn't help my situation any. Of course I felt obligated to help John and the other guys, to prevent them from getting caught.

"I took Big John and a couple of his buddies over to the tent where headquarters was located. It was late, and there was only one guard around. He was used to me working late at night, and the fact that I had some friends along did not bother him in the least. The men were fascinated by the map of the camp that was located there. Our battalion area could be seen as isolated from other units. Whereas the enlisted men's club was about a mile from the battalion area when following the perimeter road, it was actually quite a bit closer cross country. The guys seemed pleased that the NCO club for the Fourth Infantry Division was also close by. After studying the map for a while, Big John and his friends left.

"An hour later the sirens went off, signaling incoming rounds. I lay by my bunk waiting for the sound of explosions, and after a few minutes when there were none, I went back to sleep. The next morning Alpha Company got an early morning meal, and by the time the sun was rising, they were moving off toward the helicopter pads.

"Of course we heard the news that the enlisted men's club had been hit by mortars and burned to the ground. At least that was the official line taken by the commanding officer of the Third Battalion. I felt it was a miracle of sorts that the gooks managed to miss the NCO club, it being so close to the enlisted men's club. Luckily, the club was deserted, and nobody got hurt. By that evening there as a temporary club open, and construction had begun on the new club. Of course it goes without saying that none of the battalion's companies were invited back for a visit. If you asked the men if the price for their actions was worth the consequences, it would have been no contest.

"No one ever proved that the men of Alpha Company had anything to do with the enlisted men's club burning down. I wasn't there when it happened, so any thoughts I have on the matter are only conjecture. Still, I would hesitate before insulting a man from an Airborne unit. Pride is a terrible burden for a man to bear."

Bill was smiling throughout the telling of the story. "Well. If that's what happened, and I won't insult you by saying that it is, then I think the gooks just got lucky that night."

"Thanks, man. Anyway you guys got a better club out of the deal. It is a perfect example of how mistreated the grunts are though. There is no way they should have been turned away from the club just because of the way they were dressed. Their best clothes would make a bum's wardrobe look good. As far as carrying weapons, the men weren't doing it as a threat or anything. They would no more go any place without a weapon than they would jump out of a plane without a parachute. To tell them to throw down their arms was just stupid. Luckily when they turned away, the officer chose not to make an issue of it. My guess is that the men would have surrendered their weapons if push came to shove, but I am glad no one chose to find out."

"Well, I'm just glad it's over."

"You getting discharged?"

"No. I still have six months to go. Too long for an early out. What about you?"

"Just going home on special leave," I replied.

"You mean you're going back? You extended your tour."

"Yeah."

"Well, I guess it isn't too bad, being a company clerk and all," Bill said with a bit of sneer on his face.

"I was a company clerk, but I've been humping the boonies the past three months. I'm the platoon sergeant for First Platoon of Alpha Company."

"You extend your tour to get out of the field then?"

"No. I actually extended my tour to get back into combat. When my tour is up with the 173rd, I get reassigned to gun jeeps down in Saigon."

"You see, that's what I mean. You Airborne guys are crazy motherfuckers. Near the end of my tour we were having trouble getting some of the men to go out on ambush. Just flat ass refusing orders and getting away with it. You know what I think the problem is?"

"No."

"It's the fucking niggers."

"What?" I asked. I had been taken completely off guard by his answer.

"The fucking niggers are getting too uppity. Think they something special. Got so you couldn't talk to them without getting shit back."

"Bill. Listen closely to me. I respect the fact that you are a grunt and that you survived a year in the Nam. I was really beginning to like you, but you're just a fucking leg. Half the men in my outfit are black. You call them a nigger and they would kill you without giving it a second thought. Me, I'm much nicer than them. We'll be landing in Japan in a few hours for fuel. When we get back on the aircraft, I don't want to see your sorry ass. I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth and if you don't like it, fuck you." I was beyond pissed. How could a guy who served with blacks in the field not respect them as men? Of course the man served in a unit of legs that had a high number of draftees. Still that was no reason to put a man down for the color of his skin.

I leaned my seat back as far as it would go and closed my eyes. After a while I was able to fall asleep. Bill changed seats in Japan, and I didn't have to talk with him again. The total flight time was something like sixteen hours, and by time the plane landed in Oakland, I was more tired than when it started out.

Landing in Oakland was a real emotional moment for me. I don't think that the realization of what was happening hit me until the coast came into sight. America! God how I loved her and missed her. It was partly my upbringing, but a larger part of it was a personal sense of pride in being a citizen of the best country in the world. Having had a long interest in history, I appreciated just how unique my country was. Where else in the world could a man protest a war and the men fighting it while living under their protection? Being in the military, I had an opportunity to serve with men from all over the country who felt the same way. Deep within each of us was a strong feeling of love for our country and its people. It didn't matter what nationality our forefathers claimed, we were all American patriots. Men facing death in the service of our country.

Of course there were protesters surrounding the Oakland base and carrying signs. It was fine with me. After all it was my sworn duty to uphold and protect the constitution of the United States. Many of those people protesting the military did not seem to understand that concept. The military did not initiate wars. It merely followed the civilian government's

policies, and it paid a dear price in doing so. It protected the citizen's freedoms, and if they wanted to piss on the military for that, it was our job to protect their right to do so.

I had mixed feelings about war protesters, draft dodgers, and the men who chose to try to ignore the whole thing. To some degree I thought it was good that, if they did not agree with the government's policies, they use peaceful protest as a means of change. On the other hand, if they broke the law in doing so, then they deserved whatever punishment the system chose to give them. Some of the lawless acts of protest, for which the demonstrators claimed a moral prerogative, were in fact crimes. I had to wonder what these moral people thought they were teaching the young people of our country. If you think it's okay, go ahead and break the law. It's no big deal.

As far as the draft dodgers, fuck 'em. They were worthless as soldiers. If there was anything Vietnam had taught me, it was that the draft did not provide good soldiers. Like poor Bill. The boy had been made to serve with men who did not want to be there and therefore did not belong there. If one of the men in my platoon had refused an order to go out on ambush, he would by definition choose to become a leg and be shipped out. We would not bother putting up with his shit or feeling sorry for him. If the country could not find enough volunteers to fight a war, then it should get out of the war business.

On the other hand, I had absolutely no use for draft dodgers. They were neither American patriots nor men. So many of them were like the National Guardsmen I trained with in advanced infantry training. Gutless boys who would go to college, get good jobs, and become the bosses of the men I served with. I had no doubt that they would get the last laugh. On the other hand, I thanked God I was not one of them. There were men dying for their country, and these sissies would bitch about paying taxes. At least if I died it would be with a pair of balls. Something those men would never even have the pleasure of knowing.

I left the Oakland complex in a taxi and headed for the bus terminal downtown. Once there I entered the men's rest room and used one of the stalls as a dressing room. I changed into a set of civvies I had brought with me eight months earlier and had last used just a month ago on my R&R in Taiwan. It was not that I really wanted to disguise myself as a civilian, but a desire to keep my dress uniform clean during my ride cross country. I preferred riding a bus to

flying even though I was anxious to get home. Watching the countryside and enjoying the immensity of the country had always been fun to me.

I boarded the Greyhound Bus and got a window seat. It was almost 8:00 PM. when I boarded, not quite dark but heading in that direction quickly. I was wide awake, but my body felt completely out of whack. I had eaten in the plane four hours earlier and was not hungry, even though I felt like maybe I should be. My stomach growled in protest to the meal. There was almost a twelve hour difference between the time in Oakland and the time in Vietnam. If I were at home the sun would just be coming up.

That thought made me stop and think. Where was home now? Was it where I was headed or where I was leaving? While in-country, we always fantasized about the real world, but right at this moment I would have difficulty differentiating which was which.

The bus was only half loaded when it pulled out of the terminal. The seat next to me was empty, and I was relaxing, sitting back and taking in the view. It got dark quickly, and the hum of the engine and the rocking of the bus lulled me into sleep. Not that I slept the whole night. Anyone passing back to the restroom in the back of the bus would cause me to awaken for an instant, just to recognize the person's passing, and then just as quickly I was again asleep.

The next morning I had a bad time for about an hour. The bus was passing through some desert country somewhere east of California. I was awake but still feeling somewhat disoriented by the whole trip. It was less than thirty-six hours since leaving the jungle of Vietnam, and my whole body was still on Vietnam time. That wasn't the worst of it. So was my mind.

As I watched the landscape, suddenly my mind began fucking with me. This was not a safe highway in the midst of a country at peace, but a war zone. My mind began picking out places where ambushes were likely. Choosing sites where the enemy would place their machine guns and mortars. Suddenly I was sure bullets would start flying and everyone in the bus would be dead. I looked around at the people riding the bus. They were talking, sleeping, staring out the window, all of them totally unaware of what was about to happen. Having no weapon made me feel totally naked. Even a knife would have been better than nothing. Sweat

began forming on my forehead. My heart began pounding, and my respirations increased. Suddenly I could not get enough air. The same thing had happened to me on my trip to Taiwan.

A part of my mind held a tenuous grip on reality as the rest of it continued to freak out. I fought for control of my sanity, refusing to give into the paranoia that was trying to seize control of my mind. Reality was difficult to define, and the sense of danger was equal to anything I had faced so far in my life. A part of me was glad there were no weapons available.

"Are you alright?"

I turned abruptly and eyed the man standing there in the aisle. He looked to be in his early thirties. His clothes were worn, and his face was dark from much time spent in the sun.

Just the sound of his voice began bringing me back from where my mind had been leading me. "Yeah. I'm alright. Just a little tired," I answered. I was really embarrassed, wondering what I had done to attract this man's attention.

"You got a cigarette?" he asked.

"Sure." I offered him my pack. He shook one out. Taking a lighter out of his pocket, he flicked it open using one hand. The flame appeared like magic as he gave the wheel a flick, causing the flint to spark and light the wick. The lighter was a zippo just like the one in my pocket. He handed the pack back, and I took one myself. I noticed that my hands were shaking ever so slightly, still not quite recovered from the nightmare I had been experiencing. The man quickly leaned over and held the lighter at the end of the cigarette. I took a couple of quick puffs, lighting the cigarette and drawing the smoke deep into my lungs. The man snapped the lid of the lighter down, extinguishing the flame. Instead of putting it away, he held it up as if showing it off. He turned it over in his hand. That side had the emblem of the One Hundred and First Airborne.

"Looks to me like you just got out," he said.

"No. Just home on some leave. I'm going back."

"I've been out of service for almost a year now. I spotted you when you got on the bus last night. You looked new to the world. I could tell just from the way you been holding yourself something's wrong. You want to talk?"

"No. I'm okay."

"I'm okay too, now. Take it easy, and if you want to talk later, I'm on this thing until Kansas City." The man moved off down the aisle and took a seat.

The whole incident left me kind of spooked. Reality was hard enough without letting your mind get out of control. I knew it was probably just a reaction to having been in combat, but it left me scared. What happens to a man whose mind doesn't hold onto that corner of sanity?

None of the men in the outfit had ever freaked out, but every one of them that I had known before Vietnam was different than the man I had left as yesterday. For one thing they had all killed and would do so again if given the opportunity. Killing was looked upon as a good idea under the circumstances. A man was given respect for such skills, but it changed a person. I knew that for a fact.

Spending time hunting humans and being hunted left scars in places no one could see. What had just happened was caused by one of those scars letting loose and bleeding into the mind for a short time. Not blood. Blood was only water mixed with some red blood cells and other body parts. It was no big thing. The first thing you did with a wound was stop the bleeding. Just stuff something in the wound and hold pressure until the bleeding stopped. How do you stop the bleeding if it's in the mind where nothing can get to it? I could only pray that there were not too many scars and that they would heal completely.

The taxi let me out in front of the house. It looked exactly the same as when I had left it in September of the previous year. The day was hot, but it was six in the evening and it would begin to cool down soon. Of course, the temperature and humidity were nothing compared with the conditions in the jungle.

The family car sat in the driveway. Dad would be home. I wondered who else. There was only one way to find out.

I was more than a little nervous. I had not written home for some time, having lost the ability to communicate to a world that no longer existed in my reality. Returning to that world brought both joy and trepidation. What if I was no longer welcome? Standing in the driveway, I would have felt better turning and walking away than knocking on that door.

Now I was sorry for not having called ahead to tell them I was on my way home. Three times I had deposited money into a pay phone and dialed the number. Each time I hung up at the sound of the first ring. I couldn't bring myself to do it. Weird but true. These were people I loved more than anything, but I was afraid to hear their voices, to hear their questions, to hurt them further.

My going into service had been difficult on them. I knew they loved me and worried about me. Yet I had done what I knew was necessary, causing them an unknown amount of grief. Once in-country I had changed. I buried my past away in my mind, seldom even taking an opportunity to sneak a peek at it. Survival was my top priority, my ticket home, and somewhere in the process, the jungle became my home and my friends became my family. I had seen and done things that changed my view of the world and my place in it. My language was that of the society in which I lived, and its customs and ways were mine. In many ways I was not the same person who had left home.

I rang the doorbell and stood there waiting nervously. The front door opened and through it I saw my mother, who looked like she had just seen a ghost.

"Yes?" she asked nervously, a tremor in her voice.

The woman standing the doorway looked like my mother and had my mother's voice but was also a lot thinner than the mother I had left eight months earlier.

"Mom?" I asked nervously.

"Louis?" Her face suddenly lit up, and the smile was definitely her's. "Mike! Mike! Louis is home. Hey everyone, Louis is home!" She swung the door wide, and I stepped into the living room.

"Hey, Son. Why didn't you call? When did you get in? You okay?" My father fired the questions one right after another, not giving me a chance to answer. I just stood there with a stupid smile on my face.

"Lou. How you doing?" my brother Frank asked on his way down the steps from our upstairs bedroom. "You missed supper, you know?" There was a big grin on his face as he offered me his hand. I shook it, glad to see the kid again, although he wasn't much of kid any longer.

"Sit down. You must be exhausted. You want something to eat? I got leftovers in the refrigerator."

"That sounds great, Mom," I said.

"When'd you get in?" my dad asked again.

"About an hour ago?"

"You mean you flew here from the coast in an hour?"

"Oh. I thought you meant into St. Louis. I got to California the day before yesterday. Been on a bus since then. I got into town about an hour ago."

"You mean you took a bus from California instead of flying?"

"I don't like flying," I said defensively.

"My son the Airborne soldier doesn't like flying. Will wonders never cease?" he replied with a smile on his face.

In the meantime my mother disappeared into the kitchen to get me some food. The front door opened, and my sister Pat walked through the door. Everyone's head turned in that direction. She entered looking around and suddenly stopped, looking at me in disbelief.

"You're letting all the cool air out," I said, using one of my mom's favorite lines.

"Louis. It's you. Isn't it? What are you doing home?" she asked as she ran over and hugged me.

"Hell, I was in the neighborhood and got hungry. Where else would I go? Steak 'n Shake?"

We all sat around and talked for the next few hours. It was an amazing homecoming in many ways. My family was always important to me, each member a special person in their own unique way. Somehow they knew what to ask and what not to ask, managing to make me feel welcomed without making me feel strange. They started acting as if I were away for a week instead of several months. It could not have been better if I had written the scene myself.

My mother heated up leftovers that to me were gourmet. A person grows up tasting food cooked in a certain way, and if he is lucky it tastes good. Forever after that, a man will compare other foods to that taste, never being quite satisfied. I loved my mother's cooking. Eating her food meant being home unlike anything else could.

Later, while she was in the kitchen cleaning up, I had an opportunity to talk with my father. Of all the people I had ever met, he was my hero. My father was as brave as any man I ever met. He was not the most educated, but he was certainly intelligent. When he spoke I listened, although I didn't always learn what he was trying to teach. He had been my scout leader when I was in Boy Scouts. He had taught me about discipline, honor, truthfulness, and just about any other quality a decent man could pass along to his son. Unfortunately I had learned some other things on my own, but that was certainly not his fault.

My family was not very demonstrative in its love for each other. There were not a lot of hugs and kisses and other outward signs of affection. There was no need for that as far as I was concerned. A smile, a cooked meal, a moment's conversation. These things too expressed love, and I was comfortable with that. I never questioned my parents' love of me, nor did I suspect that they ever doubted mine for them.

"What's wrong with mom?" I asked.

"Wrong?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing that I know of, except maybe worried about you. Why do you ask?"

"She's just lost so much weight. I thought maybe she has something wrong. I almost didn't recognize her when she came to the door."

This brought a smile to my dad's face. "She and I have taken up bicycling. We ride almost every day now after I get home from work. We belong to a cycling group and go on long rides on weekends. As you can see, it hasn't done anything for me, but your mom has lost quite a bit of weight. She is a good rider. I sometimes have trouble keeping up with her."

"Sure pop," I said with a smile. The old man was in terrific shape, although one might not guess it from the look of him. His body shape was that of a stout person, but I knew from experience he was built like a bull and had amazing strength and stamina. I hoped I would not inherit his shape, but from my experience in the jungle, I knew I had inherited both his strength and endurance.

The next morning after my father left for work, my mom and I had an opportunity to talk.

"You know I almost fainted when I opened the door last night?"

"I'm sorry, Mom, I know I should have called."

"You were standing there in that uniform, with all those decorations and stripes on your sleeves. All I saw at first was the uniform. I thought you were someone coming to tell me my son was dead." I could hear the tremor in her voice. I was ashamed to be causing her so much pain. "I did not recognize you. You were skinny before you left, but not nearly like now. You sick or something?"

I laughed. "I asked dad the same thing about you. No, I'm fine. I'm in as good shape physically as I'll ever be. Humping the boonies is just hard. Between the weight we carry and the fucking heat, it's just hard to keep weight on." I had no sooner gotten the words out of my mouth than a strange look crossed my mother's face.

"What?" I asked.

"Humping the boonies? What's that?"

"You know. Walking through the jungle with a hundred pounds strapped to your ass."

"Oh. I get it," she replied, a smile lighting her face.

We continued to talk when suddenly it hit me.

"Hey, Mom, I apologize for the language. I wasn't thinking."

I was brought up in a household where the word "darn" was barely acceptable.

"Fucking heat" and "ass" were not acceptable.

"It's okay, Son. Your dad warned me about it last night. It's not like I never heard or read about those words before, I just never thought I'd hear them from you. Now don't you worry about it. It's just so good to have you home. I don't care if you speak Hebrew or Swahili."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll try to watch my language."

"Good." It was the end of the subject. I knew it would be damn near impossible to be perfect. The men in the unit used the word "fuck" as an adjective, adverb, verb, noun, and pronoun at least once in every sentence. Without the word, none of our sentences would be complete and no one would have anything to say to one another. Our means of communication had sunk to a level just below the gutter, and even the monkeys probably got

tired hearing our blasphemous. I could only hope that God did not tune into the jungle channel too often; it was my only hope for salvation.

I did not see my brother Jim until the evening of the second day. Jim was a couple years older than me. Jim was now married and had a wife. He was a high school biology teacher. For that he had my admiration. He was not the brightest person I ever met, but what he lacked in brains he made up for in hard work and perseverance. Of the two of us, I was the smarter, but he was the most tenacious when it came to pursuing an education. It was not a quality to be made light of.

I was upstairs sitting on the floor drinking a soda when I heard his voice drifting up the stairs. A minute later he appeared at the door, smiling. We greeted like long lost friends. It was part of the ritual. We spent several minutes exchanging pleasantries before we got down to business.

"What's it like over there?" he asked.

"Not so bad," I replied.

"You get scared?"

"Yeah."

"How scared?"

"You remember all those scary movies dad took us to. Frankenstein, Wolfman, Dracula, Curse of the Mummy?"

"Yeah."

"You remember how I use to hide my eyes during the scary parts and sometimes have nightmares afterwards?"

"Yeah," he said smiling. "That scary, huh?"

"Jim, if I could put my hands over my eyes forever and never sleep again, I'd still be scared." I was smiling when I said it, but Jim knew I wasn't bullshitting either.

"I'm going to be drafted, you know?"

"Get your notice yet?"

"Not yet, but with my number it's going to happen any day now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I replied. I was sincere when I said that, since I neither wanted to see my brother go through what I was, nor did I think he would benefit from the military in any way, shape, or form.

"I am thinking about going to Canada if I get drafted," he stated.

I did not say anything.

"I want to know how you feel about that," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"No bullshit? Just the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"Yeah"

"Okay. I'll tell you. I think it would be easier on mom and dad. You have my support and blessing. You are my brother and I will help you in any way possible. Hell, I'd die defending your right to choose what is right for you. This being a free country and all, it isn't even a crime to leave it whenever you so desire."

"You mean, after all you've been through, you would not object?"

"Jim, there is no way I would wish upon you some of what I've seen and done."

"Thanks, Lou."

It was definitely a strange time. Jim and I never spoke of Vietnam after that. Jim was drafted into the army. He volunteered for Advanced Infantry Leadership Training and went to Vietnam as a Staff Sergeant (E-6), was posted in the field for the full year as an artillery forward observer on the Cambodian border, a shitty job. Was twice decorated for valor. The army likes hard work and perseverance.

The television's nightly news fed the American public a bleak story of the dead and dying. During the eight months in service, the only time I actually saw a reporter was when I was laid up in the hospital: Senator Edward Kennedy was on a fact-finding tour and had visited the hospital, and he was surrounded by members of the press. Other than that I never saw one.

From the footage, it was easy to discern that they were restricted to roads. They had footage of soldiers, usually Marines, moving through rice paddies in single file, carrying their

weapons. Just watching on TV, I wanted to yell, "Spread Out!" If they truly moved like that, one artillery shell was likely to kill several of them. My unit would never move like that through open country, and I had to wonder if the shots were staged, or if they were really that poorly led.

I would have loved to get those reporters out in the bush where the 173rd operated. Let them see an American unit operating in Charlie's back yard. I had a feeling it was not the kind of story they wanted to cover. They preferred to be where there were jets and gunships overhead, in open country, where Charlie and the NVA were too smart to initiate anything. To the folks back home, it looked much more dangerous than it appeared to be to me. Not that it was entirely safe. No place over there was. It was a matter of degree. The reporters always seemed to be surrounded by a battalion or two of the good guys. I was sure the generals would never allow them out where the Herd operated. Too many indians and not enough cavalry.

My car was still in operating condition. It was an eighteen year old, 1950 Ford that I had inherited from my grandfather. It still had the original engine, but only God knew how many miles it had on it. The speedometer read 130,000 but had been dead for several years. It burnt oil, and the only thing that kept it going was STP oil treatment. The thick additive cut down on the use of oil dramatically, and I figured the old girl still had some mileage left in her.

I got a real kick out of driving the old thing and was saddened to see that she was beginning to rust out along the bottom of the door panels. Other than that and a couple of rips in the overhead cover, she was in pretty good shape. Of course compared to the more modern car, she weighed a ton. With her little four cylinder engine she was slow off the starting line, but once up to speed ran just fine. With a three speed transmission and a radio, I was in heaven driving her.

I had been home for over two weeks. It was getting late at night, and I was restless. Around eleven, when everyone had gone to bed for the night, I decided to go for a little spin. Driving around, I spotted a bar and pulled into the parking lot. After a couple of rum and cokes, I started getting hungry and decided to stop by the Steak 'n Shake for a burger and some fries.

I was done eating, and the girl had already taken the tray away. I was sitting there smoking and listening to rock and roll on WIL. The drinks were making me feel mellow and a

little drowsy. By now it was around one in the morning, although I did not have a watch on so it was difficult to tell. I had both windows of the car down, and there was a cool breeze blowing through the car. Just as I decided to leave a car with what looked like three teenagers pulled up next to the car.

It looked like a brand new Mustang, although I was no expert on cars. It was clean and shiny, definitely someone's prize.

One of the guys got out of the car and stuck his head through the passenger side window.

"This piece of shit actually run?"

"Yeah," I said smiling. "Actually it runs better for its age than that thing you are riding in will in another fifteen years."

"Aren't you just the least bit embarrassed riding around in this thing?"

"Nope."

"I bet you don't get many chicks riding in this thing."

I laughed. "You got that right partner," I said hitting the start button.

"Going somewhere?"

"It's late. Time to be heading home." I put the car in gear and started pulling out.

"Get that piece of shit out of here, and if you come back I'll kick your ass," the guy yelled as I slowly pulled away. I had no idea what he was upset about. Just showing off to his friends probably, and if I had been a little wiser I would have just kept going. Instead I braked to a stop and raised my arm in a one finger salute. I pulled out and made a left on Natural Bridge Road. I was at the four way stop just down the block when I saw the Mustang shoot out of the Steak 'n Shake parking lot behind me. By time I was slowing at the next stop sign they pulled up next to me. The guy on the passenger side jumped out of the car as if to come after me. I was in the left lane of a one way street and simply made a left turn and pulled away. In my mirror I saw the passenger get back into the car, and the car peel out in my direction.

I had no idea what was taking place, but I was beginning to think these kids were pissed at me. After another stop sign where the Mustang pulled up behind me, I made a right. There was now a long stretch of double wide road ahead. Shortly after the turn the mustang ran up

on my tail at a high rate of speed and swung around to pass. They began to draw even when I hit my brakes, slowing to let them pass. An obscenity was thrown by one member of the other race team. If they thought I was going to try to race them in this old bucket of rust, they had another thing coming.

The Mustang pulled away quickly, accelerating down the road. A half mile further down there was another stop sign. There, one had a choice of going straight on towards the airport, or making a left. Their car got there way ahead of mine and pulled over to the side of the road. As I approached one of the guys walked out into the middle of the road carrying what looked like a crowbar. Another stood by the driver's door and had what appeared to be a baseball bat in his hands.

Now I was beginning to get the drift of this little scenario. The kids were out cruising for trouble and had managed to find me. Their intentions seemed quite clear to me and it did not make me happy. I had no intention of messing with these guys. The last thing in the world I wanted was to get my ass kicked by three civilians while on leave from Vietnam. How would I ever explain that to the guys?

Combat left me with few illusions of my abilities as a fighter. If I were armed with a rifle, I wouldn't hesitate to take the little assholes on. On the other hand, trying to take on three punks in hand-to-hand combat was a sucker's game. I had no chance of winning. All I wanted to do was go home and get some sleep. These guys seemed determined to prevent that.

They had chosen the ground and the weapons. I decided that left me with the choice of rules. Anyone stupid enough to stop for this group would have gotten what they deserved. I just barely slowed down as I passed close to the car on its right. The guy standing by the driver's door barely had time enough to climb over the hood as I passed close enough that he would have been crushed if he hadn't. The guy standing in the middle of the road dived out of the way as I made a left turn onto Woodson road. A minute later headlights flashed on high as the Mustang once again began pursuit.

By now I realized I was in serious shit. I knew it was wise to get excited about what was happening, but somehow I just couldn't get the old adrenaline flowing. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the lateness of the day, or just the fact that I was home. Any second now, we would

cruise by a cop and be stopped. The other car was approaching fast, so I took my foot off the gas and began slowing down. There was no way to outrun them and there were too many houses around to try anything fancy. More than anything I needed time to think, and that was difficult to do while driving at high speeds. They were just about to slam into my rear at a high rate of speed when I made a quick right onto Stansberry. I could hear their tires squeal as they overshot the turn. Looking in the mirror I saw the car sitting on someone's lawn.

It was too much to hope that they would have a change of heart after a close call, and they did not disappoint me. The headlights swayed back and forth as the driver fishtailed off the lawn and took off down the street in pursuit.

I was now in what I considered to be my own neighborhood. I knew the streets well and did not have to worry about either being passed or getting boxed in. I slowed down to a sedate 10 miles per hour and slowly meandered back and forth through the neighborhood in my car. The Mustang followed close behind, and as we approached a stop sign I could hear their hollered threats. It seemed they wanted to kick my ass. They called me every name in the book, even thinking to call me a coward for not stopping and letting them beat me to death.

Where are the cops when you need them? Any other night I would have passed three or four cars by now, but tonight, when I had every intention of turning myself in for drunk driving, there were none to be found. It would have been difficult feigning the blood test for alcohol, and since I had only two drinks over an hour and a half ago, I would probably test legal.

The boys continued to follow me, and I could almost hear their minds working as they promised each other to make meat out of me once they caught me. The streets were too narrow, with cars parked intermittently on either side, for them to pass. They honked their horns a few times, then stopped. One of them must have realized that attracting attention at that time of night was not a good idea.

I had plenty of gas and plenty of time on my hands, but I was also getting tired of the game. They were beginning to piss me off. The way I saw things, it was three against one only if I chose to leave my car. As long as I stayed in the car, it was one against one. Suddenly while tooling down Edmonson Road, I got an idea. Until now no one had gotten hurt. The guys following me had been scared once or twice already pursuing me, but enough time had passed

that they were more pissed than scared. It was time to change that and the way to do it came to me.

It only took two minutes to get onto Interstate 70. At that time of night there was only minimal traffic in either direction. From the airport, the interstate ran due west. The next exit was Lindbergh, and then nothing until St. Charles, Missouri about seven or eight miles down the road.

Getting on the Interstate was the tricky part. I wanted to keep the Mustang behind me if at all possible. Luckily, the driver stayed right on my tail and by the time he decided to pull around, both cars were doing about sixty miles an hour. As the speed climbed, so did the amount of adrenaline flowing through my veins. His headlights darted left, and I quickly cut my wheel over and blocked his passage. He almost nicked my rear end but managed to just miss. Then he went right with the same results.

I was relying on a few factors that were in my favor. Having driven a motorcycle in my youth, many times at high speeds, I felt comfortable with the wind blowing through the windows and the feeling of living close to the edge. Our cars were about the same size, but mine weighed a lot more and was made of sturdier materials than his more modern car. And lastly, just the fact that his car was new and fancy meant that he would be hesitant about putting nicks and dents in it. Daddy was probably not done paying for it, and Junior would be in deep shit if he got a scratch in the paint.

It was a good theory, but I could only hope that I was right. Lindbergh passed and now we were racing down the highway in the dark. There were cars passing, going in the opposite direction. With both our cars now up to the legal speed limit of seventy miles an hour, no one was coming up on us from behind and there were no tail lights to see on the road ahead. I straddled the center line, the better to discourage any sudden moves on his part.

After being cut off several times, the driver took on a new strategy. Getting a few feet behind my rear bumper he would suddenly accelerate and bump the back of my car. The first time he did it, I was so surprised I almost lost control of the car.

The St. Charles Bridge was up ahead about two miles. I could see the lights on the bridge that acted as navigation guides to river barges. There I would have to make another

decision. After the St. Charles exit, the next exit was in Wentzville about eight more miles down the road. Once St. Charles was in the mirror there were only small towns and cows before reaching Columbia, Missouri about two hours west.

What the hell, I decided. Now I was wide awake and I was beginning to get into the mood. In all probability the boys in the Mustang were city boys and the further we got from their hunting grounds, the less sure they would become of the whole matter. I had just made the decision, when through my rear view mirror I spotted the red flashing lights of a police car in the distance. Junior took the opportunity to again bang into the rear of my car. I was beginning to get pissed as the approach to the bridge appeared.

The police lights could be seen closing the distance quickly as we approached the middle of the bridge. I knew if I kept going straight they would catch us within another mile or two. Junior must have made the same decision and decided to take one last crack at the rear of my car.

Now every idiot who drives knows that the front of the car is in some ways much more vulnerable than the rear end. I had gone to demolition derbies where all the drivers drove around backwards trying to ram the front of other cars. One good smack and steam from the other man's radiator would billow out of the front of the car. It was time to teach Junior this important fact of automotive engineering.

We were three quarters of the way across the bridge when his headlights rose up, a sign he was once again accelerating. I waited. Just an instant before he hit, I tapped my brakes firmly, just once. Instead of hitting me at about ten miles an hour faster, the speed increased to around twenty miles an hour.

PUFF! Just like the magical dragon in the Peter, Paul, and Mary song, Junior's engine went PUFF. It looked like Junior's car had taken a hit from a Willy Peter artillery shell as smoke billowed everywhere. Somehow he was able to discern the exit ramp off the highway and was last seen heading down Fifth Street into St. Charles. I was already past the exit and pulled quickly to the right shoulder of the road. I got out, stretching my legs and walked around to the front of the car. I got out a cigarette and lit up, then climbed up onto the hood of my car and waited.

The police car crested the center of the bridge at about one hundred and twenty miles an hour. They spotted my car sitting on the side of the road and must have decided that I was their man, because they quickly slowed and pulled in behind my car. As soon as they stopped, I put both hands in the air. I did not want these guys getting nervous and shooting me. Just the irony of the situation would have killed me.

One officer held a flashlight on me as the other approached from the road side of the car. I just sat there with the cigarette dangling from my lip. The smoke was curling up into my eyes making them water.

"Get down off the car, turn around and put both hands on the car."

Hands ran quickly over my body as I was patted down for weapons.

"Turn around." The other cop came around to the front of the car and holstered his weapon. I could tell from their Smokey the Bear hats that they were state troopers.

"We had reports of two idiots racing along the highway. You one of them."

"Yes, Sir," I said giving up any chance of getting out of a ticket.

"Mind telling me exactly what took place."

I gave him my version of the story. By time I was done they were both smiling. It was a good story.

"So you did nothing to provoke the encounter."

"Just gave them the finger is all. I know it sounds stupid, but I have no idea who those fellows are and what they wanted with me."

"And just what would you have done if they had managed to get you stopped out here in the middle of nowhere."

"What do you see?" I asked scanning the area.

"Nothing."

"Right. I take two steps off the highway and it's too dark for anyone to see anything. I was raised in the country and spent many a night in the woods. You get them city boys out in the dark and they would be lost in twenty seconds. I would face all three of them in the dark, and the chances are I would win."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself about that. Let me see your driver's license."

I handed it over. The one with the flashlight studied it carefully. "This thing expired over a year ago," he said.

"Yes, Sir."

"You been drinking?"

"Yes, Sir. I had a couple of drinks around midnight but I am plenty sober now."

"Let's see. Reckless driving, driving under the influence, speeding, driving without a driver's license. I'd say you're having a really bad night, man."

I smiled. Nothing else to do.

"We'll see you in court in a couple of weeks and then let's see who's smiling."

"A couple of weeks? Can't we get this taken care of sooner?"

"You that anxious to go to jail?"

"No, Sir. I just won't be around in a couple of weeks. I'm home on leave from the military and have to leave town early next week."

"You got proof of that?"

I reached inside my jeans pockets and took out my wallet. I kept a copy of my orders there and now was glad I had. The need for a speedy trial would soon be apparent to these guys.

"Merrins, Louis R. Sergeant E-5. Special leave from the 173rd Airborne Brigade to CONUS.

What's CONUS?"

"Continental United States," I said translating the military abbreviation for the officer.

"You on leave from Vietnam?"

"Yes, Sir."

"According to these records, you are going back."

"Yes, Sir."

"How did you manage to get thirty days special leave?"

"I extended my tour for six months."

"What do you do over there?"

"I'm an Infantryman, Sir. When I left I was running a platoon."

He handed the paper back to me along with my license. "Which way did that other car head?"

"Down Fifth Street," I said pointing to the exit.

"You wait here until we get back." The car backed up quickly and headed into St. Charles. I wasn't sure if they had any chance of catching the other guys. It would depend on just how badly damaged their car was. Hell, they might be sitting just down the block with their car disabled. I crawled back up on the hood of my car and lit another cigarette. A half hour later I backed my car up until I could take the exit ramp off. I drove around looking for the cops but was unable to find them. They had my address off the license, although I could not remember if I saw them write it down. At the very least, they had my car license and could find me when they wanted to. I was getting very tired and now only wanted to get home and get some sleep. They could arrest me in the morning, I thought as I headed for home.

I did not bother telling my parents about the incident. The police never did get back with me, and so I assumed the matter was dropped for lack of evidence or as a gesture of goodwill on the officer's part. Either way, I was happy, although I would have loved to find out exactly who those boys who attacked me were. The following morning I took a look at the rear fender of the Ford. Except for a slight ding, it was impossible to tell anything had happened to it. Right then and there I decided that after the war, I would get it fixed up. Have the body worked on, maybe drop in a new engine, get it painted. Candy Apple Red.

It was a great leave, but before it was over I was itching to get back. My thoughts returned each day to the jungle, and I was worried about what might be happening in my absence. I hoped my parents did not sense this, but I would have been surprised if they didn't. I never really felt comfortable in the civilian culture, and that made me wonder if maybe the Army might be a career for me. Within a day of leaving home I had the answer to that riddle.

I flew into the Airport at Tacoma, Washington and took a bus to Fort Lewis. I reported into the transit barracks where the duty officer checked me off his manifest. I was informed that it would be four days before a flight would take me back to Vietnam. I was disappointed. Now that my visit with the family was over, I was anxious to get back, but I did not make an

issue of it. "Hurry up and wait" were the first four words in the Army's Manual of Operation. I found a bunk in the transit barracks and changed into fatigues.

Everything was going just fine until after dinner. I had run out of cigarettes and had to locate a PX on base to purchase some before it got dark. The transit barracks was adjacent to a large parade ground. A PFC I asked for directions informed me that the field was several acres, and the distance across it was almost a half mile. It was already 2015 hours, and the sun was beginning its journey over the horizon. The soldier informed me that the PX closed in fifteen minutes, so I would have to hustle in order to get there in time.

Hustle I did. I was three quarters of the way across the field when I spotted the PX. I was double timing it and within fifty feet of the road when a voice rang out.

"Hey, Sergeant!"

My first mistake was paying any attention to the voice. As far as I knew, no one at Fort Lewis knew who I was, and so they were not addressing me personally. The man who had issued the statement saw me turn towards him. As far as he was concerned, he had me.

"Yeah, you. Come here." I trotted on over, anxious to find out what he wanted so that I could get on with my mission.

"You want something, Sergeant?"

"Where's your cap?"

Shit. I had been in such a hurry I forgot to put one on before heading out for the PX. It had been a long time since I had lived under strict military rules and regulations.

"I'm sorry, Sarge. I forgot it. Listen, I'm just dropping into the PX for cigarettes. It'll take me all of two minutes to get them and head back to the barracks. I won't forget again. I promise."

"That's not how it works around here, Soldier. You turn your ass right around and get back to your barracks. Then you can get your precious cigarettes."

I did not have time to argue with the man, nor was I in the mood to discuss it with him. The barracks was too far away to get my cap and return in time. The Post Exchange wasn't more than fifty feet from where we were standing. I turned and jogged away. I heard his voice call out several times before I entered the PX.

Ten minutes later, I exited the PX. Inside I had purchased a hat to cover my trip back to the barracks. I did not need any hassles during my stay at Fort Lewis. Just in and out and back to where I belonged. Standing at the bottom of the steps was Staff Sergeant Warren with two of his MP friends. Luckily I spotted him first, but unfortunately he spotted me an instant after I started to turn.

"Sergeant!" his voice rang out again. Maybe I should have just run, but I refused to dignify this man's harassment with such action.

"You talking to me, Sergeant?"

"Yeah. Why don't you join me and my friends here?"

I stood there on the top step of the PX looking at the man. He outranked me, but just barely. His uniform was clean and neatly pressed, which meant he was stationed on base somewhere. His uniform had neither jump wings nor a combat infantryman's badge, which made him a leg REMF no matter how you cut the deck.

Sitting on the top step, I opened the pack of cigarettes while the sergeant and his two pals ascended the staircase.

"You deaf or something, Sergeant?"

"Nope, Sergeant, just tired," I replied lighting the cigarette. This prick had decided he was going to fuck with me and so I felt no obligation to make it easy on him. "You got a problem?"

"Yeah. You."

"What did I do wrong?"

"You know damn well what you did. You disobeyed a direct order from a senior non-commissioned officer. I don't know what army you belong to, but in this man's army you can't get away with that. Now get rid of that cigarette and follow me."

Now, I knew what he meant when he said to get rid of the cigarette. Anyone in the Army for more than twenty-four hours knew what he meant. Taking the cigarette from my mouth, I flicked it to the sidewalk below without putting it out, without stripping it, and without putting the butt in my pocket. Some of the guys who had stopped to listen to our exchange grinned and shook their heads in disbelief.

"You know better than that soldier. Get down these steps and pick that butt up."

"No Sergeant. I got the wrong MOS for that job. Why don't you get it, if that is your natural instinct?" I said. A couple of the guys standing around laughed, including one of the MPs standing behind the sergeant. "You men break it up and get moving," he said to the small gathering of men. Most of them were either Privates or PFCs, and when the sergeant made the suggestion, they scattered like a covey of quail flushed from the underbrush. I could tell the sergeant got a kick out of their reaction.

"Corporal. Bring this man along with me."

Once the Military Police were involved, it made no sense fighting the inevitable. The jeep pulled up in front of a headquarters building, and I was led into an office. Staff Sergeant Warren went into an office, and was in there for almost an hour. I had to figure the stockade was my next stop. It was really stupid. A year ago, I would have turned around without a moment's thought. Hell, I was in a barracks where half the men smoked and could have bought a pack from one of them. In the morning the PX would be open bright and early. Why had I made such a big deal over it?

Because I was no longer fit to serve in a peacetime army. The discipline in the field was tougher than anything I had ever faced in the States. The price you paid for lack of discipline there could very well be death, so that wasn't the answer. It was just that my tolerance for the bullshit had fallen off to zero. I was no longer willing to put up with the petty rules and regulations, enforced by officers and NCOs who would not know which end of the rifle the bullet came out of. It was fine for training me in my trade, but having practiced my profession at the highest level possible, I was no longer willing to join the ranks of such men as Staff Sergeant Warren.

Once my tour in Vietnam was over, I would be eligible for discharge. The stockades were beginning to fill up with combat veterans who could not adapt to civilian military discipline. I was determined not to become one of them.

The door to the office opened and an officer told the Military Police to escort the prisoner, me, into the office.

The office we entered was much larger than the one we had waited in. There was a large desk with a captain sitting behind it. The lieutenant who had summoned us into the office took a seat behind a table that was set off to one side, behind which Staff Sergeant Warren sat with a smile on his face.

I walked up in front of the desk, stood at attention, saluted the captain sitting behind the desk. "Sergeant Merrins, reporting as ordered Sir, Airborne." The captain returned my salute without any salutation. Leg officers hated the Airborne salutation.

"Sergeant Merrins, I am Captain Bennet, and am acting officer of the day for the base here at Fort Lewis. After talking with Staff Sergeant Warren, I have decided to bring you up on charges. I am informing you that under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, I am charging you with an Article 15 violation for failure to wear a proper uniform and for disobeying a direct order from a senior non-commissioned officer. How do you plead?"

I smiled and took my time before answering. "Not guilty, Sir."

"What?"

Again I took a minute before answering. "Not guilty, Sir."

"You mean to stand there and deny the charges set forth by Sergeant Warren?"

Again I paused as if in deep thought. I wasn't. I was just fucking with them, but it might be the only fun I would have for a long time, so I just stood there enjoying myself.

"Sergeant Merrins?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Yes, Sir, what?"

Again I paused. I smiled. I looked over at Staff Sergeant Warren. I looked back at the captain. "Huh?"

"Sergeant Merrins, you are already in trouble and if you continue this little charade you will be in a lot more. Now answer my question."

"Yes, Sir."

"Are you denying the charges brought against you by Staff Sergeant Warren?"

"Sure. He is lying, Sir. I don't know why, but I hope to find out." I was smiling ear to ear. So what if I was lying? I didn't owe these people anything. No hat? Big deal. Here I was

waiting to be transported into a combat zone, and these jerks were trying to give me an Article 15.

"I want you to understand the consequences of refusing the Article 15. The same charges will be brought against you in a general court martial, and if found guilty you could go to the stockade at Fort Leavenworth."

"Now let me get this straight, Sir. It is my word as an Airborne infantryman against that guy over there, Sergeant Warren? If I plead not guilty, I won't get sent back into combat, even though I extended my tour in Vietnam? Instead I will stand accused before a jury of officers on the charge of not wearing a cap to the PX? Will I get a lawyer to defend me, Sir?"

"Yes." I could tell that the captain was getting pissed.

"Since it is his word against mine, will I be able to call character witnesses in my defense?"

"Yes."

"Since I am a platoon sergeant without an officer, I will require Captain Carlson, my company commander, and First Sergeant Heard to attend my trial. They are pretty busy, but I am sure they will be happy to attend my court martial and give me a good recommendation, Sir."

Now the captain began to look worried. "In addition, I will require some of the men from the platoon as character witnesses. I also want the commanding general of the 82nd Airborne present, since I have a standing order from him to contact him if I ever need a good word. I think now is the time to take him up on his offer."

I smiled and shut up. "Sergeant Merrins you are dismissed. You wait outside in the office while I make some phone calls."

"Yes, Sir, Airborne!" I saluted, did a very military about face, and left the room. Sometimes I amazed myself with the shit that came out of my mouth. As I sat there smoking a cigarette. I suddenly laughed out loud. Both of the MPs smiled.

They weren't smiling as they escorted me back to the office of Captain Bennet. After putting up with another Airborne salute, the captain put me at parade rest.

"Sergeant Merrins, there has been a slight change in plans. Staff Sergeant Warren has agreed to drop the charges against you. I have decided that your presence on the base here at Fort Lewis is not in the best interest of the military. There is a flight to Vietnam leaving in three hours from McChord Air Force Base. The MPs will escort you back to your barracks where you will gather up your gear. Arrangements have been made for you to be transported by jeep to McChord. You take care, Sergeant."

"Airborne, Sir."

Three hours later the plane took off, and once more I left my homeland behind. I could make out the lights of Tacoma as we passed to the west. Once over water, my mind began looking forward in anticipation to joining my friends again. I was saddened at leaving my country and real family, but I looked forward to visiting my adopted homeland and other real family. The real world had become unreal in its own way, and I now looked forward to the simpler life of an infantryman. I was sure that the military would not be my life's calling, but I was not sure I would ever fit into the world I was leaving. It represented a problem that would need to be confronted sometime in the future, maybe. If things turned out all right. They seldom did you know. END