

#20 A.W.O.L. – the rear for resupply, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – None

It is not like it was the first time I ever went AWOL. It was not. In fact, it was the second time. The first time had been for a period of two weeks, more or less, depending on how you viewed it. This time I was gone for only three hours, give or take a few minutes. Still, Captain was pissed, maybe because I had coerced five of my platoon members to join me, or maybe because I had stolen his jeep and not invited him to go along with us. Having him along would have changed everything, and I was glad I had not thought about it before we deserted. Of course, that is how it would read on my court-martial papers. Desertion in the face of the enemy.

I am getting way ahead of myself, and it is probably best to start the story at the beginning. It was a going to be another hot day in the jungle. Nothing new really. Hailey approached our position.

"Captain wants to see you."

I took off toward the tree that was serving as the company's command post. Wherever the captain chose to sleep for the night was the command post. Technically, when he moved, so did the CP. After all, we were in the middle of the jungle without a tent to call home.

"Sergeant Merrins," he said in way of salutation as I approached the group, which consisted of Captain Carlson and Lieutenants Holmes, Kelp, and Albert. Top was off somewhere, handling company business. Normally he would join our group. I had been acting platoon leader for almost two months now and felt comfortable meeting with the other platoon leaders. I suspected this situation would not continue too much longer. Sooner or later the company would get in a new lieutenant for First Platoon and I would no longer get invitations to this little powwow.

"The company will be moving out in approximately thirty minutes," he said with a smile. Must be flipping out, I thought.

"The choppers are ready to lift off. They will pick us up and take us to the big fire support base outside of Bong Song. There we will be issued new fatigues and weapons," the captain announced.

No wonder he was smiling. A trip to the rear was indeed a rare phenomenon for the company. Since returning to the field two months ago, the company had been inside a protected compound only once, and even then we had been required to dig in for the night. That had been at an Air Force airfield, and the company had landed at dusk and left again at first light. Now we were going "to the rear with the gear," and I could only hope it might be for a couple of days anyway.

The meeting was short and my squad leaders were waiting when I got back. We were used to moving out as soon as the morning briefing was over. All the men in the platoon had their gear packed and were ready to move out. While I had been in the field for over two months, some of the guys had not seen the rear area in three months. No one even speculated about being sent to the rear, indicating how conditioned we were to staying in the field.

The ride to the rear was uneventful. The strangest thing was how the chopper approached the base straight in and landed, putting both skids on the ground before discharging its occupants. Very civilized and not at all what the men were use to.

Once the whole company was on the ground, we received marching orders and moved off toward the bunkers that would serve as our home while in the rear. First Platoon was given responsibility for eight bunkers located along the perimeter of the fire support base. This meant four men to a bunker.

I was not disappointed in the decision. It would separate the men in the company from those stationed in the rear. With a little luck it would minimize the damage done. The men in the company had little in common with the men who served in the rear. If anything, we were more like the enemy we fought.

The accommodations we moved into suited us just fine. For the first time in months, we had shelter over our heads should the enemy choose to attack. Each bunker sat well in back of the defensive wire. In front of the wire were land mines. There were towers with spotlights spaced along the fence and a road that ran around the perimeter in back of the bunkers. From

outside the wire it would be impossible to see the road or what traffic was moving along it. Marching down the road, it was easy to tell from the track marks that armored, tracked vehicles used it on a regular basis. This meant tanks, APCs, and mobile artillery. When you put this equipment with all the helicopters stationed at the base, it tended to make one feel relatively secure. It would take a couple dozen divisions to take this particular base.

This was the way someone who lived in the jungle with only a couple of claymore mines between himself and the enemy looked at the situation. To these guys in the rear, they lived in constant danger, under primitive conditions, surrounded by hostile forces. It would make a grown man cry if it were not so funny. To us it smacked of home.

The captain had informed me that the company would be in the rear for at least three days. Today was set aside for receiving clean uniforms. The men would be shuttled to where they could shower. The NCO club and enlisted men's club would be available to the men after sixteen hundred hours. He required that we keep two men on each bunker at all times, but otherwise the men were free to roam. The base had a PX available, and they showed movies nightly at an amphitheater. He would get maps and arrange transportation for the men.

I held my own briefing. The squad leaders were to make sure that the men moved around base only in pairs. I did not want to see half a platoon moving around as a mob, too much chance of mischief. It was also not wise to have a man moving around by himself. If something happened and it came down to one man's word over another's, I wanted at least two of my guys coming up with the same story. Not that I expected any trouble, but the guys had been away from civilization for a long time. I reminded the men about military courtesy and warned them to remind their men to try to salute officers, even the leg officers.

Then I lied. "The captain has a special job for us. I want you men and SP-4 Wilburn to meet me up on the road in about thirty minutes. Bring your weapons and webbing." The guys looked both disappointed and interested at the same time. A mystery, mainly because I ended the conversation by turning and heading off down the road. I had already briefed Hailey that I would not be available for a period of time, without saying exactly where I was going or why.

I had dropped off my rucksack at the bunker I would call home for the next two nights. I headed up the road, to where the Battalion Headquarters was located. I wanted to check in

with SP-5 Goody and ask for a small favor. I kept my eyes peeled as I walked along the side of the road. Two jeeps passed going in the opposite direction with officers riding as passengers in each one. I made sure to salute each one, while giving them a hearty "fuck you" under my breath. Saluting made fun.

Within a hundred yards, a jeep heading in my direction pulled over to the side of the road, directly in front of me on the shoulder. I quickly hopped in and gave my destination. Without a word, the private who was driving headed down the road. I took the opportunity to ask the driver several pertinent questions regarding the layout of the base and some of its operational policies. Five minutes later I was dropped off at the entrance to the battalion area. I thanked the driver, and then he continued on his way down the road.

It was about ten hundred hours according to my watch. I headed directly for the tent marked Battalion Headquarters. Entering the tent was like turning back the clock to a period of time I really hated. The inside of the tent had been set-up just like it was at Pleiku. All the desks and filing cabinets in exactly the same position they had been in the day I left to go to the field. Only now the tent was located some sixty miles south of its last position. Spec. Five Goody had his head down working on some paperwork. I walked directly to his desk.

"Sergeant Merrins, reporting for duty Sergeant!" I said.

"Lou. How you doing? You coming back to work with us?" he asked.

"In your dreams, Motherfucker, in your dreams."

"Hey. You look like shit. Sort of smell like it too, now that I think about it." He was smiling. Goody had been a real prick when we first met. He could neither walk the walk nor talk the talk, not having a clue about how to handle infantrymen. Now at least he knew how to talk the talk.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" I recognized the voice immediately and turned, came to attention, and saluted Major Brown. The Major Brown. I had crossed paths with him, and he had not enjoyed our last meeting. As punishment he had shipped my ass to the field. He disliked me intensely, whereas I loved the stupid asshole.

"Looks like they have you humping the boonies, Sergeant. Quite a bit different from being a company clerk. You still all that interested in transferring to a leg outfit?" Neither his

tone of voice nor demeanor indicated that an answer was required. It was his way of putting me down in front of the other men. If I had any respect for him, it might have been embarrassing, but since I did not, it did not mean anything to me. I had other business to attend to.

"Excuse me, Sir." a voice said. I recognized that voice also. The major turned toward the voice. There was Captain Carlson. The captain saluted and the major returned his salute.

"I'll be with you in a minute Captain," the major said, turning his attention back to me.

"Sergeant Merrins is one of my men, Sir. If you have a problem with him, I would rather it go through me first, Sir."

"Well, Captain, I do have a problem with Sergeant Merrins. I do not consider him to be a very professional soldier. If you have any problems with him, I want to know about it."

"Sir. Sergeant Merrins is Platoon Sergeant and acting Platoon Leader of First Platoon. If I had any choice in the matter he would become its permanent platoon leader. I consider him a professional combat soldier and so do the men in his platoon. In our world, Sergeant Merrins is an excellent soldier. If he was a poor clerk, then moving him to the field was a wise decision, and you deserve the credit for that decision." Captain Carlson knew exactly why I had been sent to the field. I had explained the whole incident to him, only embellishing it slightly.

"Well Sergeant Merrins, it seems I may have underestimated your abilities. Carry on. Captain Carlson, let's go somewhere we can get comfortable." With that he and Captain Carlson left the tent. I was not worried about the captain getting in trouble. He was a line officer, which in the Airborne was sacred. The officers in the rear would do nothing to cause him any grief.

Goody had been watching the whole conversation with a look of amazement on his face.

"Christ, Lou. I see you haven't lost your touch for rubbing people the wrong way. That Captain Carlson has some balls stepping up to the major like that. I have heard nothing but good things about him from the men passing through battalion."

"Yeah. He's good and not only with the bullshit. He's the real thing when the shit goes down. I hope he stays with us at least until I rotate out."

"What you need?"

"Money," I replied.

"Follow me."

We left the tent and entered another one two doors down.

"Jack. This is Sergeant Merrins. He wishes to draw some money. Take care of him for me. A friend."

In the rear, that is all it took. A friend.

I collected a hundred dollars and left the tent feeling rich. In the field, a man could draw fifteen dollars a month. Since we never went to the rear, there was nowhere to spend it. I still took my money each month, just on principal. The rest of our pay was held in an account for each of us. I currently had something like twelve hundred dollars sitting in mine. If I should die, the money would be sent home to my parents, whose names were on my will.

I looked at my watch. Time was passing and there was only five minutes until I was to meet up with my men. Plenty of time really. I walked over to where the battalion's jeeps were parked. It was a real temptation to take the major's jeep, but that would be pushing my luck. The proper procedure would have been for me to sign the jeep out at the supply tent from Staff Sergeant Scott. He would have given me one, but then when things went wrong, he might get into trouble. Borrowing the jeep was more expeditious.

Military jeeps do not have ignition keys. I got in, stored my rifle down next to my right leg, started the jeep, backed up, and headed down the road.

Sergeants Fry, Kirby, Baskins and Fisher, along with SP-4 Wilburn were there on the side of the road waiting for me.

"Hop in guys," I said.

Six guys in a jeep is quite a feat. It was designed to hold only two uncomfortably. Four men could crowd into a jeep if two of them did not mind being really uncomfortable. Six men was like cramming the clowns at the circus into their little car. With weapons and webbing, loaded down with grenades and ammo, our bulk made the suspension drag. Once everyone felt secure, I took off down the road.

I knew from my discussion with the driver of the jeep who had given me the ride to Battalion Headquarters that if I just followed the outer road, we would eventually reach the main gate. Outside the gate, going right would get us to the village located outside the base. This trip was my way of rewarding the squad leaders for the good work they accomplished every day in the field. I knew there might be hell to pay when we got back. This was my main reason for not informing them of my plan in advance. Not only was I stealing the jeep and going AWOL, at this point I was also technically, kidnapping the whole leadership structure of first platoon.

The other guys in the jeep were excited. After months in the jungle, being inside a major fire support base was an uplifting experience for them. The fact that they were still dirty and smelly from the field did not even penetrate their minds, and I drove quickly in the hope of leaving our body odors behind. Anytime I slowed, the smell made my eyes begin to water.

"What's the deal, Lou?" Bobby asked. Being an old friend made him suspicious. Unlike some of the others who did not know me quite as well, Bobby knew I had a penchant for doing things not quite the way they were written in the military manuals. Like the time I advised one of his best friends to go AWOL, just a couple of weeks before the whole company was shipped overseas. He also knew about the time I was AWOL for two weeks because I disagreed with the captain's plans for my military career.

"Captain's given us a top secret mission," I replied.

"Bullshit."

I kept driving, and Bobby kept quiet. Bobby was sometimes a bit of an old maid about things, but was not beyond all hope. If I didn't think he would enjoy this little escapade, I would have left him behind.

"I swear to God, Bobby, the captain expressed a desire for something and we on our way to procure it for him."

Bobby and God were tight. His old man was a preacher. The fact that he lived in the wilderness in Alaska with only polar bears and penguins to preach to did not alter that fact. If I swore to God, Bobby had no choice to believe me.

"Fucking honky bullshit" Wilburn said quietly under his breath. He was sitting beside me on the passenger side. A neat trick considering he was outranked by everyone else in the jeep. I glanced over at him. He had this big, shit eating grin on his face. There was no denying that Burns had the ability to see through bullshit. It was one of the reasons we had become friends over the past couple of months.

The main reasons I invited him along were that he was in Joe Fisher's squad, he got along with Fish, and he was black. I was ready to party hearty and wanted everyone to feel comfortable. Joe was the only black squad leader, and I sometimes got the impression he felt uncomfortable being around so many whites all the time. Not that there was any prejudice, it was just that Joe seemed more relaxed when there were other blacks around.

Wilburn and I had not hit it off well when I had rejoined the company. We had a confrontation of sorts. Since then we had built up the beginnings of a close friendship. Burns had an attitude problem and a big mouth. He also was capable of making some very astute observations and was never hesitant about expressing his opinions. I think I shocked him by paying attention to what he had to say. Once I got used to his attitude and learned to counter it with a good old fashion, in your face and up your ass attitude of my own, we began to communicate well. Burns had learned how to keep his mouth shut and do his job when the situation called for it, and he had turned out to be a good grunt.

I slowed as we approached the gate but kept going while looking straight ahead. I had been told that the MPs on duty at the gate did not stop everyone to check their papers when exiting the gate. They only stopped you if they were suspicious. How they could ever be suspicious of a jeep overcrowded with combat soldiers, armed to the teeth, I'll never know. There was the sound of a whistle and then an MP waving the jeep over to the side of the road.

I pulled over to where the MP had pointed. I immediately got out a cigarette and lit up.

"Where you heading Sarge?"

"Down the road to Bong Song," I replied.

"You know that you're not suppose to take weapons into town?"

"No Sir," I replied.

"I don't suppose you have a pass?"

"No Sir."

"Maybe some paperwork on the Jeep?" the lieutenant asked hopefully.

"Forgot it. Left it laying on the counter of the supply tent" I replied.

"You have any ID?"

I slipped my dog tags from around my head and handed it to him. He had a clipboard and wrote down my name, rank and serial number off them. Then he circled around to the front of the jeep and wrote down the identification markings painted there.

"Third Batt, One Seventy Third, right?"

"Yes Sir."

"I'll have to call this in you know?"

"Yes sir."

"I won't ask you where you are going or what you plan to do, but I would like to know if you plan to come back today? I got a sneaking suspicion someone is going to ask."

"Yes sir. It will only take a couple of hours to accomplish our mission, Sir."

"I'd tell you to have a nice day, but from your looks, I don't think I need to worry about that. Don't do anything stupid in town, okay?"

"Yes, Sir. I promise."

"Yes, Sir. Not only will he promise, but he'll swear to God for you if you want," said Bobby. The rest of the men laughed. The lieutenant smiled. He stepped back and saluted. We returned his salute and gave him our "Airborne!" salutation. I put the jeep in gear and took off down the road.

"Wonder why he didn't just make us turn around and head back?" Fred asked.

"Yeah, right," Burns replied. "Stop a jeep loaded down with six very heavily armed airborne grunts heading for town. Good idea, Sarge."

"What would you have done if he refused to let up pass?" Fred asked.

I just laughed and kept on driving. There was no way I would have let some REMF lieutenant stop my mission. The best he could have hoped for was a pair of tire marks across his back.

The road outside the base had houses starting within two hundred meters of the wire. It was hard to tell exactly where the village began but it seemed to stretch out before us for some distance. Like every village located outside a military base, there would be establishments willing to take care of whatever needs the men could possibly have. I spotted exactly what I was looking for.

I pulled in front of a house that had a sign out front that read "PHOTOS."

"What's this place?" Bobby asked.

"What does the sign say, Bobby? You can read can't you?" I said.

I got out of the jeep and walked into the shop. It was dark inside, and my eyes took a moment to adjust. Wilburn followed me into the shop.

There was a Vietnamese man standing behind a counter. I could see from the look on his face that he was not happy to see us. This was strange, since most of his business would be from GIs getting their pictures taken to send home to Mom and Dad. Pictures from the Nam. The fact that the owner appeared nervous made me nervous. The town was supposedly secure, since the men stationed at the base were allowed to come into town during daylight hours. I had spotted quite a few GIs walking around. I was tempted to search the place, just to make sure we hadn't walked into something illegal, but then decided not to. People had a right to privacy, and I wasn't a cop or something. Still I would stay alert. Glancing over at Burns, I could see he was tense also.

"You open for business?"

The man behind the counter remained motionless.

"You take picture?" I asked, mimicking aiming a camera at the man and clicking my fingers.

Finally he smiled and shook his head, yes.

"You come" he said waving me to follow him. He disappeared behind a curtain that led to the back of his shop. I moved the curtain aside carefully, using the barrel of my M-16. The man was standing beside a large camera on a tripod. There were lights and panels scattered about the room. In the center was a chair. I moved cautiously into the room.

"No, Papa San. Not just me. Come." I said, signaling him to follow. He appeared hesitant but followed me out of the room. I led the man outside. The other men were out of the jeep, leaning up against it. Most were smoking, beginning to get bored.

"You done?" Fred asked.

"Yeah. Let's get the hell out of here Sarge. I'm mighty thirsty, and there is a bar right down the road." Joe said.

"You guys hold on. I want a picture of all us together."

I turned to Papa San and motioned with my arms that I wanted the whole group included in the picture. The man was sharp and immediately got the message.

"You wait." he said and disappeared inside his shop. A minute later he returned with the camera and tripod slung across his shoulder. "You come." he said. Like a gaggle of geese, we took off after Papa San. There was an alleyway located alongside his shop. On one side was his business and on the other side, a house. He walked down the alley, past the house. There was a fence with a gate in it. He opened the gate and entered. We followed.

We entered a garden located in the back of the house. It was well tended, the grass cut short and all the vegetation cultivated just so. I could see that someone had spent a lot of time working to get everything just so. Of all its features, it was the grass that impressed me the most. It had been ages since I had seen grass that was mowed and raked. The image of home came to mind for just an instant, sort of a flash from another lifetime. I smiled.

Papa San was busy setting up the camera. As soon as he was done, he turned to confront the group. Looking at us, he just sort of shook his head, like he did not know exactly what he was suppose to do. "You stand," he said, pointing to an area.

I moved over to where he had pointed.

"Get in a line," I said to the men.

Papa San moved behind the camera looking at the group from behind the lens. "Smile," he said, and I could hear the click of the camera. We started to move away. It was time to get on to other things. Papa San said "You stand," again pointing to the spot where we had been standing.

What the hell? I got the men back into a line of sorts. Papa San was looking through the lens while we all stood there with big smiles on our faces, waiting for him to take the damn picture. He moved from behind the picture and walked over to the group. He pointed to Fred. "You kneel," he said, pointing. Fred moved over to where he had pointed and got down on one knee. He placed the butt of his rifle on the ground sort of leaning on it. A pose I had seen him in a hundred times before, resting during a brief stop during a march.

Papa San really got into his work. Moving everyone around, setting up the shot just so. It sort of tickled me that he got so into it. I just wanted a picture of the group in order to cover my ass with the captain. Finally Papa San seemed pleased with the results of his orchestrations and got back behind the camera. Smiling like hyenas we waited, and waited, and waited. Papa san moved his head from behind the lens and walked over to Bobby. He reached up and took Bobby's steel pot off his head and handed it to him.

Papa San took up his position again. By now my face was beginning to hurt from all the smiling we had been doing. "No smile", Papa san said. Then we waited. It was several minutes before the old man finally clicked off the picture. I wondered what he had been waiting for. When he came out from behind the camera, he had a big smile on his face.

"How soon?" I asked pointing at my watch.

"Two hour."

"Seven copies" I said holding up seven fingers. Papa San seemed to understand and bobbed his head up and down.

"How much?" I said rubbing my thumb and forefinger together to indicate money.

"Seven pictures, fourteen hundred pea," Papa San said.

"Bullshit. One thousand pea" Dan Kirby said. Dan did not like Vietnamese and his tone of voice left no room for argument. The Vietnamese man suddenly got nervous again and quickly nodded his head in agreement.

"Good deal, Papa San," I said pulling my wad of money from my pocket. I peeled off ten dollars in military script for him.

We were not supposed to use military script, or funny money, as we called it, outside the base. The military establishment expected us to change it into Vietnamese currency before

spending money in town. Under the circumstances, it had not seemed the wise thing for me to do when I received my pay. Getting military script would help placate the shop owner, since he could sell it on the black market for twice its face value. Dan, who was a line doggie from the get go, probably did not realize what had taken place, making him happy that we had shorted the blood sucking gook, which is the way he looked at Vietnamese businessmen.

Everyone piled into the jeep, and within a minute we were unloading again in front of a Vietnamese bar. Like any other self-respecting bar located outside the perimeter of a major military base, it would provide any service a man was willing to pay for.

I entered first, followed immediately by Burns. The drinking establishment was less than one fourth full. Most of the men sitting around were NCOs, and all of them were white. Maybe Burns did not notice this, but he was a very astute observer, so I doubted it. From my time in the rear, I knew that mixed company would not be welcomed, but I had no intention of moving on. It was time to settle down and get some serious business taken care of. A staff sergeant, who was sitting by himself, was eyeing Burns with a malevolent eye, so I decided to set down the new house rules.

"Mama San," I said addressing the young lady standing behind the bar, "free drinks for everyone." That got everyone's attention. All the other men from the platoon were now standing inside the door of the bar. "Free drinks for everyone," I repeated. "Everyone from Alpha Company, Third Battalion, of the One Seventy Third."

I moved over to the bar along with the rest of the men from the platoon. Once there I turned and faced the room not saying anything. Just smiling and watching.

One at a time, everyone threw some money on the table and headed for the door. They knew they were no longer welcomed. They might not like it, but there it was. There were several other bars within walking distance, so I felt no sorrow for them. They probably drank at this bar several times a week. Missing one afternoon would not heal their livers.

Some of them might get drunk and think about coming back. By then we would be gone. If not, it was their problem, not ours. We came in peace.

The next two hours were spent celebrating life. Between the rum and coke and the very excellent inhalant Burns was able to procure for us, I got well lubricated. Some of the bar girls,

as was their wont, invited us to view their living quarters. Most of us, being young, drunk, and Airborne, were compelled to refuse their advances. At least that is the way I remember it. Of course, Bobby was having none of it. Being both a teetotaler and a virgin, it was a wonder he had any fun at all. Bobby did have fun. I don't know if he understood how smashed he got, but in the end he was laughing and having a good time.

Getting Bobby high took just a little subtly. Sitting around a table with five guys who were smoking primo weed would make it impossible for even the Pope not to get stoned. Especially since, without any prior planning or conspiring, every man at the table turned to talk to Bobby at the exact instant they exhaled the smoke held in their lungs for a prolonged period. Within minutes Bobby was high as a kite.

When I get high, I get the giggles. Someone listening would think it was some high school girl getting her first glance at a man's dick. Bobby got both gregarious and talkative. He started talking about life in the wilderness of Alaska, slowly beginning to weave more and more imagination into his story as he went along. The more he lied, the harder I laughed, and the harder I laughed, the more the other guys joined in.

Everyone got the munchies, and Mama San was more than happy to send some of the girls out to secure food for us. A two hour reality check was just what the doctor had ordered. It cleared the cobwebs and cleaned the pipes that were getting rusted from lack of use. The whole affair costed forty dollars, a lot in Vietnamese dollars, but well worth the expense. I could only guess what a similar party back in the states would have cost. Back home, we would have been guilty of a dozen misdemeanors and a half dozen felonies. Of course, if found guilty they would never think of sentencing us to months in the free fire zone we were going back to in a couple of days. The courts did not allow cruel and unusual punishments. The Constitution protected our rights back in the real world.

Our two hours ended. I was already driving past the photo shop when I remembered the pictures. Making a U-turn, I pulled up in front of the photo shop and hopped out. "I'll be right back."

Papa San was standing behind the counter. There was a pile of seven envelopes sitting on top of the counter. I grabbed the top one and opened it. I slid out the top picture and

looked at it. Papa San was leaning over the counter and glanced at it too. Everyone was standing in a line, grinning for the camera. It was a good picture. I shoved it back in the envelope and began to pick up the other envelopes.

Papa san shocked me by putting his hand down on top of the pile. "Look!" he said pointing at the envelope in my hand.

"Good picture, Papa San," I said, again reaching for the stack.

"Look!"

I flipped open the envelope and pulled out the contents. I slipped the top photo aside. I looked at the other picture, and my heart stopped.

There are cultures in this world that do not allow pictures to be taken of its members, for fear the camera would somehow steal their souls. Superstition. Voodoo. Bullshit. And at that instant I knew they were right. My hands began to shake and I literally dropped the picture onto the counter and averted my eyes. I swallowed hard and took some deep breaths before looking back at the picture. My heart sped up and my legs got weak.

I walked over to the door. "Hey, guys. Come here."

"What's wrong, Sarge?" Bobby asked. There was concern in his voice, and suddenly the group was really tense.

"Nothing's wrong. I got something I want you to see."

Old Papa San was standing there smiling. In place of the photo I had left sitting on the counter, there was now a larger one of the same photo that had affected me so deeply. He knew what he had accomplished and he was watching the faces of the men as they viewed the picture for the first time. I really did not expect them to react the same way I had, but to a man, they did.

"Jesus Christ," "Motherfucker," "I'll be damned," "Holy shit," and from Bobby the most profound statement, "God Damn, Lou."

The old man had done it. He had captured our souls. I was sure Vietnam would produce several million photographs before the war was over, and here was the best picture that had been, or ever would be, taken. Papa San was standing there smiling, shaking his head

up and down. There were tears forming in his eyes as each man stared at the picture in front of them.

I do not know what they saw. There was no way that I would ever dare try to discuss it with them for fear my heart would break. The camera did not lie. It caught everything. The old man had hit the button at the same instant our spirits exposed themselves to the known world and he had caught those spirits. Exposed them for the world to see.

At that instant the old man had said "No smile," all the men in the picture had fallen into the pose that most defined who and what they were. Not what they had been or what they might become if they lived, but what they were at that precise moment in time.

Bobby's crooked smile, the funny one he wore in the midst of combat. There, frozen for everyone to see, was the expression that none of us would ever forget. The baby face, locked in a smile that meant death to our enemies.

Fred, kneeling on one knee, using his rifle to keep his body upright. The look of exhaustion written on his face. A boy of nineteen, looking old and exhausted, both body and soul lost, beyond redemption.

Joe Fisher, with a scowl on his face. Left hand curled in a tight fist, right hand gripping the M-16, with his finger resting on the trigger. His toughness showing through, threatening anyone who might approach.

Dan Kirby with a sneer. Meanness and cruelty peeking through his handsome face. It was there for all to see. The same look that would be more appropriate on Attila the Hun, or Jack the Ripper. I loved Dan, but there was the side of him that sometimes made me nervous.

Wilburn, staring at the camera in distrust. A psychiatrist looking at the picture might see the madness emanating from his soul. We could. It wasn't there two months ago, and it was not always there, but in the picture, there was madness present.

And there was a sixth person present in the picture. Me? I did not think so. Facts belied the truth. The sixth image had to have been added by some wizard or enemy agent.

"He really caught you, Lou," Bobby said with a tremor in his voice.

Maybe it was me. If it was, I had changed in ways not very flattering to my self image. In the picture my eyes were empty. It was the stare of a man who had seen too much and withdrawn from a reality too bleak to face. Surely it was not me.

The men in the picture were the dirtiest, meanest, most vicious collection of thugs and bandits I had ever seen. Uniforms torn and dirty. Weapons held in a way that made them appear to be strange appendages, more body part than separate instruments of war. Ammunition strung from the body like ornaments. No one posed. Being bored, waiting for the old man to get done, everyone had become themselves.

Looking at the picture, I knew it to be true. It was how I saw the other men every day but was so used to seeing them that I had grown insensitive to the fact. The camera had frozen that reality for an instant, and the proof lay before us. We stood around silently, staring at the picture.

"Lou, you got any money left?" Dan Kirby asked.

"Yeah," I said digging out about forty five dollars I had left. I put it on the counter.

"You take," Dan said to the old man. "I'll pay you back later, Lou."

Meanwhile the other guys had dug through their pockets, throwing down whatever they had left. It was old and faded, having been carried for a long time in the field. I knew that the old man did not mind in the least. I gathered up the envelopes and passed them out to the men, keeping two for myself.

Outside, the sun beat down. The day was hot, already past ninety degrees, heading past one hundred soon. I stepped through the door and welcomed the sun's warmth. The sad mood that had been descending upon me left, and once again the effects of the booze and pot took over. I started the jeep, and once everyone had clambered aboard, we took off back toward the base.

The same lieutenant who had seen us out the gate now waved us through. I gave him a salute as we flew by and could see the smile on his face as he returned the salute. The timing of our return to the Battalion area could not have been planned any better. It was a perfect landing, coinciding with the arrival of Captain Carlson and Major Brown.

"Fucked," is the apt description Wilburn gave to the situation.

"Attenhut!" I ordered. The men quickly got semi-straightened out and came to attention. "Airborne, Sir!" I yelled.

"Sergeant Merrins, get your men lined up," said Captain Carlson.

Luckily I did not have to issue any orders as the men quickly complied with Captain's request. In an instant, we were standing in a perfect line, at attention. From his tone of voice and his body language, I could tell the old man was really pissed. Major Brown, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Over two hours ago, Major Brown received a call from the front gate that a heavily armed, rather despicable group of soldiers had just headed into town. The officer reporting stated that the person who seemed to be in charge was one Sergeant Merrins, Louis R. The leader of the group stated they were on a mission and were allowed to leave. I want to know what is happening."

I was trying to formulate an answer. Somewhere in the back of my mind was a good response. I knew what I was suppose to say, I just could not think what it was right that moment. Sergeant Fry bought some time for me, by giggling.

"Sergeant Fry. Do you find this little discussion funny?"

"No, Sir." Bobby said. By turning my head slightly and my eyeballs a lot, I could see Bobby. His voice said one thing, his face another.

Captain Carlson really liked Bobby Fry. Hell, he liked all of us, except maybe Wilburn whom he did not know all that well. The way Bobby was acting was so out of character for him, the captain seemed concerned.

"Are you drunk, Sergeant Fry?" the captain asked, much as a father would ask a son.

"No, Sir." Bobby answered in a hurt tone of voice. "I don't drink, Sir."

"Well, are you high?"

"No, Sir!" Bobby replied in all honesty.

This was too much for Dan Kirby. He started laughing to bust a gut. Bobby might not know how fucked up he was, but the rest of us did. Not only that, but the rest of us were more messed up than Bobby. Once Dan lost his composure, there was no hope for the rest of us. We

all started laughing so hard that Major Brown had to worry about whether we would all die of epilepsy before he had a chance to court martial us.

To someone watching the group from a distance, we must have looked like the Three Stooges, only doubled. The captain just stood there, looking stern, while we tried to get our act together. It took a while, but the captain was a patient man, having already awaited our reappearance for the past two hours. Finally, we were standing back at attention. I felt stupid, because I had this big smile on my face that refused to go away. The reason our trip into town was necessary had also occurred to me, so I was ready when the captain once again asked for an explanation.

"It was my fault, Sir" My exact words, except they came from Wilburn's mouth before I had an opportunity to say them. Spec. Four Wilburn had taken a step forward out of line.

"Your fault, Wilburn?" the captain asked, and not very politely, I might add.

"Yes, Sir. I made them." Now everyone was staring at Wilburn. Of all the men in the group, Wilburn was the drunkest, if that was humanly possible. Not only were we interested in his explanation, but the sheer drama of whether he could maintain an upright position fascinated us all.

"How did you make them?"

"I got me a gun, Sir."

"I can see that, Son. Why did you do that?"

"I went crazy, Sir. I got needs. I knew if I didn't get me no pussy soon I would die." Fred Baskins laughed first, but only just. Once again our conversation with the captain was postponed until we got done spasming out. The only one besides the captain and Major Brown who was not laughing was Spec. Four Wilburn. He did not seem to think it all that funny.

"Spec. Four Wilburn."

"Yes, Sir."

"Get your ass back in line. I am glad to see you are all having such a good time, but if I do not get an acceptable answer, and I mean right now, you will all wake up in the stockade in the morning."

This statement brought an appropriate giggle from me and the other men. To an infantryman, the stockade would only be a vacation. Whether the captain was so pissed he did not think about what he was saying or had completely lost his mind, I did not know. The one thing I did know was that none of us was going to the stockade.

"I am responsible for taking the men into town, Sir," I said.

"I know that, Sergeant Merrins. Can you tell me why?"

"I went to get something you wanted, Sir." I extended my hand with one of the envelopes in it. He stepped forward and took the envelope. He opened it and looked at the pictures inside. The anger left his face as he stared at one picture longer than the other. Without a word he handed the pictures to Major Brown. Even the major's demeanor changed. It was a hell of a picture.

"About two weeks ago we were sitting around talking when you came by, Sir, remember? You said you wished you had a camera so you could get a picture of us. Remember, Sir?"

"Yes, I do remember, Sergeant Merrins."

"Well, I saw an opportunity to get that picture for you, Sir."

"Somehow I do not think that going AWOL, stealing a jeep, and getting drunk and stoned were all that necessary just to get a picture for me. Gentlemen, let me be perfectly clear about this. If this ever happens again you will wind up as privates serving time at Long Binh. If there was some other way of punishing you without affecting the morale or the functioning of the company I would. If you were not among the best group of soldiers this army will ever see, I would gladly turn you over to Major Brown. Now get your collective asses out of here. Except for you, Sergeant Merrins."

The other men all looked at me. I dismissed them with a flick of my eyes. It was a trick every infantryman used. No words were necessary, just the eye contact told them that everything was alright. The last thing I wanted was a display of loyalty that might be misinterpreted by the officers present.

They staggered off toward the platoon's position on the perimeter. I watched in silence as they reached the road and began heading the wrong way. Suddenly they stopped, seemed to argue, and then headed off in the right direction.

I laughed. Turning I saw that both Captain Carlson and Major Brown were smiling from having witnessed the same scene.

"They'll find their way home, Sir."

The captain's face got serious again. "I hope you realize the seriousness of what you did, Sergeant?" I knew that his formal way of talking to me was predicated on the fact that Major Brown was present. Still, it did not sit well with me. Until now I had been feeling good about things, now I got pissed.

"No Sir."

"What do you mean, 'no sir'?"

"I did what I had to do, Sir. Those men have spent months in the field and they earned what happened today. I am not sorry for what I did. So I borrowed a fucking jeep for a couple of hours, big deal. So we got a little drunk and had a good time. Nobody gives us shit, and if we didn't take what little we did, we wouldn't have gotten anything. You want my stripes, take them, they don't mean a damn thing to me. I like you sir, you're a good officer, but sometimes you don't know jackshit about anything."

I turned and walked away. Fuck them.

I put the picture we took that day in my rucksack and carried it with me until the weather broke the paper and chemicals down and the picture disappeared. Somehow I did not think any of the men sent the picture home. It wasn't something we would want our families to see. It was too private.

END