

## #21 Weapon – the rear, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – None

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My platoon and I arrived at the edge of the firing range and climbed down from the deuce and a half, taking our equipment with us. The truck had to head back to pick up another platoon. It had taken about five minutes to drive to this spot, and so a round trip would take about fifteen minutes. Just enough time for the men to get new weapons.

I was wrong. Once again SSgt. Scott proved his worth to the Army. There were two long tables set up with several men at each. SSgt. Scott greeted me as soon as my feet were on the ground.

"Sgt. Merrins," he addressed me formally. In front of the other men in the platoon this was both appropriate and appreciated.

"Yes, Sergeant Scott," I replied.

"Have your men turn in their weapons at the right table. They will pick up their weapons at the left table."

The men quickly dispensed of their other equipment, throwing their rucksacks down and heading for the tables in a loose squad formation. First Squad took the lead and the others fell in without any need to issue orders. I started to follow when SSgt. Scott spoke.

"I have your weapon all picked out, Lou," he said as soon as the other men had moved out of earshot. I followed him over to the right table. Without comment I dropped the clip from my M-16 and quickly opened the chamber. Twisting the rifle in my hand I checked to make sure there was no shell seated before handing it over to the sergeant.

Scott accepted the weapon. He looked into the chamber to confirm what we both already knew. Releasing the bolt, it slid home with that familiar sound one could never forget. He broke the weapon open and removed the firing bolt. Holding the weapon up he peered down the chamber.

"Pitted," he said, indicating I should look down the barrel also.

"Hell, I know that," I said, choosing not to look.

SSgt. Scott quickly broke the rifle down. "Cleaned, oiled, ready for business. I wouldn't have expected otherwise, Sarge. It does my heart good to see a weapon well taken care of. Except for the nicks and wear and tear, it's in excellent condition." His compliments were really unnecessary, but they still felt good. It took away some of the anxiety I was feeling.

I knew every one of the men in the company was feeling the same way. I had humped that rifle for the better part of seven months. Every scratch and nick represented my doing. It felt as familiar to me as my hands. Watching the sergeant reassemble it and then put it in a rack with the other turned in weapons made me feel sad.

We walked over to the next table. There was a rack with new weapons stored there. M-16s mostly, but also M-79 grenade launchers and M-60 machine guns.

SSgt. Scott walked over to the rack and picked up an M-16 that had a white piece of tape on the stock. My last name was printed on the tape.

"I picked it out special for you," SSgt. Scott said. "Went through a bunch until I found one that felt right to me." He slid the bolt back and inspected the chamber. Sure it was empty, he handed it over to me. Flipping it on its side, I checked the chamber to ensure it was empty and then released the bolt, seating it.

SSgt. Scott and I knew it was similar in every way to every other M-16 produced by the Colt firearms people. Yet it meant something that Jim had chosen one special weapon for me. I would have done the same for him. It was bullshit of sorts, but it was also very real. A weapon had to feel right to its owner and SSgt. Scott was trying to instill that feel to this rifle. I appreciated his effort.

I disassembled it. It did not come apart as easily as my weapon had, but of course this was because it was new. The collar around the barrel guards was especially difficult to remove. Once it was disassembled I inspected each part. My eyes moved slowly over each part as my fingers explored its shape. There were no flaws in the pieces, but they neither looked nor felt right. My fingers felt the newness of the metal. My eyes could not find the familiar landmarks of the old rifle.

The barrel was too perfect. My eyes could make out the sharp edges of the lands and grooves machined inside the barrel. The metal was shiny, but not the shine a few hundred rifle

rounds would impart. The steel was smooth with no pitting from friction and heat. This weapon would have been fired before leaving the factory, but it had not begun its work life yet.

The outer surface of the barrel was black. Mine had started out that way a million years ago. When I had turned it in, there was a hint of shiny steel left from all the wear and weathering that had taken place. Without thought, the inspection completed, my hands reassembled the rifle. Reaching into my pants pocket I pulled out an ammo clip. I slid the magazine into the rifle, smacking the bottom to ensure it was properly seated. I gave it an extra tug, not quite trusting the rifle to grab it properly. END