

#26 Guns – the rear, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – My last story – The end of time with 173rd Airborne Unit

After clearing Brigade Headquarters in Bien Hoi, Ron and I had to wait four hours for a transport down to Tans Son Nut Air Base. It was 1930 hours when the plane finally stopped and we exited. Both of us were dressed in new fatigues with all our rank and insignias sewn on. Everything we owned was in our duffel bags, which we were dragging along with us.

Our orders read that we were to report to Headquarters Company C, 52nd Infantry, 716th MP Battalion, Saigon. Having found Saigon, the rest would be easy. There was a large terminal with plenty of activity going on. I figured that was where we would find help. Leading the way with Ron bringing up the rear, I headed for the building.

I entered the terminal and held the door for Ron. His uniform was already soaked from the short walk across the tarmac. Even though it could not have been more than 100 yards, the temperature and humidity was already cooking us. The concrete apron was like a giant frying pan. Even though both Ron and I were field tough, the weight of the bags combined with the heat brought out the sweat in a hurry. Ron was maybe 125 pounds now that he was soaking wet. I smiled at him.

"Fuck you, Sarge," he said with a smile on his face. I guess mine was not the perfect poker face, and he had read my thoughts. Although I was only beginning to get to know Sergeant Kittle, we had some kind of mental thing going. I was about to answer when another voice rang out.

"Sergeant Kittle, Sergeant Merrins?" The soldier asking approached us with a clipboard in his hand. He was dressed in fatigues that were starched and ironed. His trousers were bloused in his highly shined boots, and upon his head was a shiny helmet liner. On the liner was stenciled a shield with facing hand axes, and under the shield was the legend "716th MP."

"I'm Sergeant Merrins, Sir, and that is Sergeant Kittle," I said.

"Good. I am Lieutenant Keller, and this is Corporal Lend. Battalion asked me to stop by and give you gentlemen a lift. The rest of the patrol is outside." The lieutenant turned and began walking toward the exit. Ron and I followed.

Just outside the door were two jeeps, parked in a no parking area, one in front of the other. The lieutenant stopped next to the nearest one. "Throw your bags in the back and climb into the back of the gun jeep," he said, indicating the second vehicle. I pitched my duffel bag into his jeep and headed back to the gun jeep.

There was nothing extraordinary about the jeep. Standard government issue. The men inside made no effort to get up or even acknowledge our existence. They were both dressed sharply with the same helmet liners worn by the MPs, the only difference being that neither wore the arm brassier with the MP emblem on their right shoulder. Unlike the MP jeep, this vehicle had neither a windshield nor a top.

On the passenger side, an M-60 machine gun was mounted on a steel post that had been welded to the frame. There was a belt of ammunition loaded into the gun with about a hundred rounds trailing onto the jeep floor. Looped over the back of both the driver's and the gunner's seats were crisscrossing belts of more ammo. Resting in the well next to each man was an M-16 rifle. Both rifles had bandoleers of ammunition looped around them that would go with the owner should he chose that particular weapon. Both men had forty-five caliber pistols strapped to their hips.

A quick inventory of the gear before entering the rear of the jeep was enough to tell me these guys were loaded for bear. An M-79 grenade launcher was located directly behind the driver. There were four cans of machine gun ammo stacked directly behind the jeep's occupants. In addition there was a can of M-79 ammo and two boxes with markings indicating they contained fragmentation grenades. Behind the gunner, a radio was mounted on the side of the jeep. The handset cord led to a bracket mounted on the dash between the driver and gunner.

"Grab some floor and don't touch anything," the driver said over his shoulder without turning around.

"Fuck you," Ron said with just a touch of menace in his voice.

The driver stepped out and turned around. Compared to Ron and I, who were not very blessed in the height department, this guy was large, and the gunner was extra-large. The gunner turned in the seat and was looking at us with a smile on his face.

"What did you say?"

Not wanting to see the start of another war, I interposed, using my best diplomacy. "He meant Fuck You, Sergeant. Didn't you Ron?"

"Yes. Fuck you, Sergeant."

Meanwhile Ron had jumped down off the back of the jeep and was walking over to the driver. Not wanting any trouble, I reached down and grabbed the handle of an ammo can. Something to use as a missile should the need arise.

Meanwhile Ron was standing toe to toe with the driver. Looking straight ahead, he was staring at the man's name tag.

"Sergeant Fisher? Huh." *Well said, Ron*, I was thinking.

"Listen runt, get back in the jeep."

"Fuck you. You fucking leg asshole."

It was evident that Ron had a silver tongue and a death wish. The boy definitely knew how to make friends.

"Ron. Will you get in the jeep and leave the leg motherfucker alone. I warned you about talking with assholes," I said in the interest of defusing the current situation. By now my heart was racing as the adrenaline flowed through my veins. "Sergeant Fisher, Ron and I don't mean to create no problems. Just been in the bush too long and ain't socialized just yet. We promise not to touch any of your toys. Lordy no. Might be too dangerous."

Ron laughed out loud and hopped back into the rear of the jeep. Sergeant Fisher did not look happy, but his gunner just continued to smile. Shaking his head in disgust, Fisher climbed behind the wheel and started the jeep. Lieutenant Keller was standing beside his jeep looking quizzically at us. He had to have heard the whole thing, but he had made no move to intervene, and from the look on his face I guessed he was not going to. The gunner turned around and faced forward. He waved his hand forward, indicating to the lieutenant that the gun jeep was ready to move out. The lieutenant's driver almost allowed the officers' butts to hit the seat before he took off. I grabbed the side of the jeep, expecting Sergeant Fisher to pop the clutch. He did not disappoint me. Ron was as prepared for the maneuver as I was and only grinned over at me in response.

I had been at Tans Son Nut before exiting and returning from special leave. It was still interesting to me. The air base was massive, with what seemed like miles of concrete runways, roads, and buildings. The radio on the jeep came alive.

"Base. This is Delta Oscar, over."

"Delta Oscar, this is Base. Over."

"Base. This is Oscar Delta. We are ten-fifteen our previous location. Will proceed ten-eight, checking twelve through twenty before proceeding to Hotel Capital. Over."

"Ten-Four Delta."

The gunner turned around in his seat. "That was the lieutenant calling headquarters. We are going to continue with our regular patrol and check the security posts along the way before taking you guys home to the Capitol. Should take about an hour. My name is Bill, Welcome to Saigon."

"I thought Saigon is the Capitol," said Ron.

Bill smiled. "I meant the Capitol Hotel. It's where the company is billeted. What outfit you guys from?"

I laughed. Bill's shoulder insignia showed he was from the First Air Cavalry, while Sergeant Fisher's indicated the First Infantry Division. I would have assumed these guys knew our insignia. It was part of the Airborne ego, the assumption that everyone knew who we were. Evidently that was not true.

From the scowl that appeared on his face, I figured Ron was choosing to be insulted. Before he could launch another verbal assault, I answered. "One Seventy Third Airborne."

"Fucking A," Bill replied. "I heard of you guys, never met anyone from the Herd before. Both you guys from the Herd?"

"Yeah," Ron said, smiling now. "Both from Company A. Sergeant Merrins was a Platoon Sergeant; I was in heavy weapons. Both been in the boonies for the past nine months."

"You ran a platoon, man?" asked Sergeant Fisher.

"Ran the platoon without an officer for three months. He had him an officer for the last month or so," Ron answered for me.

"Goddamn! Most anyone else in the guns ever ran was a squad. Right Bill?"

"Is it true you guys live in the jungle?"

"Fucking A," Ron replied, and launched into a description of life in the Herd. He had a knack for carrying a tale and, I could tell now, the ability to embellish facts without missing a beat. This did not bother me in the least because bullshitting was as much the nature of the infantryman as of the fisher or hunter. One became two, two became four, etc.

While this conversation continued, I took in our surroundings. We had been on the move for fifteen minutes, and only now were we approaching the entrance to the base. It was obvious because of the number of sandbags surrounding each hut and billet. The closer we got, the higher and thicker the sandbag walls had been stacked.

In February during the Tet Offensive, the gooks had actually gotten inside the fence before being stopped by security forces. Came very close to getting to the aircraft. The base's defenses, which radiated outwardly from the wire, grew more numerous the closer we got. The base was busy with many Vietnamese civilian employees walking on the sides of the streets, bustling about, heading to and from jobs on base. They each had a large I.D. card pinned to their clothes or hanging from a string around their neck.

At a couple hundred feet from the main entrance, we passed a security post that consisted of two main bunkers, one on either side of the road. Twenty feet beyond each bunker sat a tank. Our little convoy was waved through without slowing. Looking back as we passed the checkpoint, it was easy to spot the M-60 machine guns sticking through the firing ports of the bunker.

Between the fence at the security post and the second fence was an area that had been cleared and without a doubt was mined. Looking left and right it was possible to see the tall fighting towers surrounding the field space every hundred yards or so with their accompanying armored friends. Evidently the NVA had accomplished one of their main goals. There was maybe a division of men assigned to the security of the base. We sure as hell could have used some of those men and equipment out in the field. All that firepower sitting there, month after month. There was no way the enemy would launch another offensive like Tet. Their military victory, as the press referred to it, had nearly knocked them out of the war. The difference in the forces we came up against out in the field was significant, and the enemy was only

beginning to become as formidable as they had been before Tet. They had suffered huge losses and in the process had learned the price of facing American firepower out in the open.

Now that the threat was minimal the military had chosen to focus huge amounts of force in rear areas instead of projecting that power onto the enemy's ass. Ho Chi Minh must be getting a kick out of that.

The main gate was being inundated with masses of humanity. With the sun beginning to head down, all the Vietnamese were leaving the base and heading for home. After the relative monk's life of the jungle, this first exposure to the masses of the city was unnerving. It looked like a million people gathered in one place.

"You, okay?" Bill asked, eyeballing me. Although he was talking with Ron, he was sharp enough to see my nervousness.

"Yeah, just feel a little naked, know what I mean?"

Smiling, Bill reached for his M-16 and handed it over to me. I took it and immediately felt better. Without a thought I dropped the magazine out of the rifle and set it in my lap. I pulled back on the actuating rod and without comment caught the round in the air. Loading it back in the magazine, I broke open the breach and looked down the barrel. It was clean and shiny. The rest of rifle was clean except for a light layer of dust, to be expected sitting in a jeep. I closed the rifle and released the bolt, sitting it on an empty chamber. I reset the magazine. Picking up a bandoleer of ammunition I hung it across my chest. Now I was ready to enter the masses.

"That thing set on automatic?" Ron asked incredulously, even as my fingers were automatically setting the switch on safety.

"What?" Bill was asking.

"Let me see that other rifle," Ron snapped with a sneer in his voice. Bill reached down and passed Sergeant Fisher's rifle to Ron. Repeating the process, Ron disarmed the weapon. "Fucking amateurs. Goddamn it, Sarge, these fuckers don't know nothing." Ron was both shocked and pissed. It was easy to read the man. Bill was no longer smiling.

"You got a problem?" he asked.

"I ain't the one with a problem. You don't ride around in a jeep with a loaded rifle set on automatic," Ron replied.

"Well, I forgot to unload entering the base," Bill replied defensively, still not getting the point.

I shrugged and began scanning the crowd we were moving slowly past. A quick glance at Ron caused me a minute's concern. His face was all red, the veins on his forehead prominent. "Fucking leg," Ron said and then amazingly shut his mouth.

Bill was evidently too stupid to let the matter drop. "If you do not like the way I handle my rifle, just give it back."

"You're lucky I don't shove it up your ass and pull the trigger. I ain't giving you this thing back until we get to where we are going. Just shut your mouth and turn around."

Once Bill was facing forward, Ron looked at me and smiled. I just shook my head, indicating my own bewilderment. The other men were evidently experienced infantry. Like Ron and me, they were both Sergeants E-5. I knew from filling out the requests for transfer that anyone wanting into the guns had to have at least six months of combat experience. How could such men even consider riding around with loaded weapons, never mind without the safety on?

I had seen too many accidents, with good men dying for no reason other than that weapons have neither brains nor hearts. Weapons kill. It is what they are designed to do, and the M-16 was as lethal as any weapon ever made. I loved and hated the damn thing. Either these guys were cowboys, or they did not know what they were doing. They would need close looking after.

The lead jeep turned right on the road outside the air base. After giving it a little lead, our jeep followed. Ron lit up a cigarette, his eyes never ceasing to scan the scenery.

Within seconds of entering the street, the jeep was surrounded by mopeds, bicycles, small busses, and periodically a small car or two. Everything moved at a modest pace since the sheer number of vehicles did not allow any type of real speed. One thing I immediately noticed was that most motorists gave the gun jeep a wide berth. Whereas the local drivers did not seem to hesitate passing the lead jeep and getting right up alongside it, everyone passing the

gun jeep gave it a much wider berth, not coming to close. From where I was sitting, I watched Bill and Sergeant Fisher operate.

I could see a portion of Sergeant Fisher's face in the side mirror. Fully half the time, his eyes were scanning the mirror watching what was happening to his left rear. His head was rotating constantly from forward to the left, always searching. Bill's head moved constantly to the front and the right. There as an outside mirror mounted on his side also. Bill's body was twisted slightly to the right and his M-60 was angled slightly that way also, with the barrel facing skyward. His hand rested lightly on the stock of the machine gun at all times.

I wondered if the gun had a round in the chamber and if the safety was on or off. Not my problem as long as I stayed behind Bill. I made a mental note to stay behind Bill if the shit should hit.

Our jeep remained twenty or thirty yards behind the lead jeep. After about five minutes, Sergeant Fisher slowed and pulled over to the curb. The other jeep continued for another fifty yards before pulling up to a security post outside a building. The post was too far to get a good look at it or what it was guarding. I did see the lieutenant exit the jeep and enter the building.

"Need a break?" Sergeant Fisher asked. I looked at Ron and then answered, "No. Thirsty though."

Sergeant Fisher reached under his seat and tossed a canteen over his shoulder without even looking. Both he and Bill continued scanning the traffic that was beginning to thin dramatically. I took a drink of warm water and then passed it over to Ron. Taking the canteen back, I tapped Fisher on the shoulder and handed the canteen to him.

The shadows were very long. "Traffic seems to be slowing," I commented.

"Yeah. Curfew in about fifteen minutes," Bill said without consulting his watch. "This far out, it happens when the sun goes down. Further downtown, curfew is 2200 hours. Turns into a proverbial ghost town."

I saw the lieutenant exit the security post and hop in the jeep ten minutes later. Now the sidewalks and streets were almost empty, the last few occupants definitely in a hurry to get where they were going. "What happens if they don't make it inside in time?" Ron asked.

"Cahn Sats will stop them. Haul their ass in and keep them till morning. Fuck with them," answered Sergeant Fisher.

The lieutenant's jeep switched on its headlights and pulled away from the curb. Fisher started the jeep but waited a minute before pulling out. When the lead jeep was a good hundred yards down the road, we began to follow. Now the scenery was actually sort of spooky but ultimately cool at the same time.

The street lamps began to light up as the sunlight failed, and the streets we were now patrolling were completely empty except for our two jeeps. The feeling was eerie. Trying to adjust to this environment after the past few months of living in the jungle was difficult, to say the least.

Fisher did not turn on his headlights. With the streets lit up the way they were, it was certainly not necessary in order to see. He drove down the center of the street. Bill sat up a little straighter in the front seat behind the gun. Both men kept their heads swiveling as they scanned the buildings we passed. Ron and I were alert.

"See much action?" Ron asked.

"Naw," Sergeant Fisher replied. "For the most part we get involved with drunks and deserters before curfew. After dark, almost nothing happens. The civilian police and militia have the city battened down tight. Every once in awhile, there is a sniping incident or shots reported. Ain't seen a body in almost a month, and that one was dragged out of Hundred P Alley back down the road a piece."

"Hundred P Alley? What's that?"

"Small ass alley runs between a couple of major streets. It's about two hundred yards long. Has shops and hole-in-the-wall bars. Only Negroes go there. They say a white man would not last ten minutes there. Anyway, the patrol finds a body there about once a month," Bill said.

"Bunch of niggers killing each other," Sergeant Fisher added.

I did not say anything, and Ron did not seem bothered by the fact that the bloods were being spoken about in this manner. Many of the best men in the Herd were Negroes, and I did

not like the word “nigger.” On the other hand, these guys had been in the rear for a long time, and I knew racial tension was high in these areas.

"Niggers and Spics, may they rot in hell," Sergeant Fisher said, laughing.

Nothing will get your attention like the sound of a round being jacked into the chamber of an M-16 rifle. I flicked my arm out and pushed the muzzle of the rifle Ron was beginning to aim at Fisher's head skyward. "Problems?" I asked, looking Ron in the eyes.

Meanwhile, the world was swaying as the jeep quickly stopped and Sergeants Fisher and Bill exited the jeep, Bill grabbing the machine gun on the way out. They were looking around for the source of the action, the sound of the round being chambered having affected them like a firecracker going off in the ass.

"Cool it, guys," I said while maintaining eye contact with Ron. I had no idea what had set him off, but Ron was scary that way.

Ron was staring hard at Sergeant Fisher who had his .45 pistol out and was hardly paying any attention to Ron.

"You ever use that term around me again and it will be the last thing you ever say," Ron said. Only then did Sergeant Fisher understand that Ron was talking to him. I took this instant to notice that the lead jeep was sailing merrily on its way without a clue that they had lost their escort.

"What is your problem, man?" Fisher yelled. I was nervous because Ron had a loaded rifle, and from our previous experience, I could only guess that the pistol was loaded and ready to rock and roll. This was to say nothing of the M-60 that Bill was toting.

"Don't ever call a person a Spic around me," Ron said. "My foster parents are both Mexican."

Who would have thought it? I wondered. Ron was as white as they come. Had me fooled.

"Fucking leg didn't know that, Ron. Me either. Which makes me glad I don't use that particular phrase in a routine manner."

"Hey, man. I didn't mean anything personal by it," Sergeant Fisher replied.

"Let's go before the MPs notice we're missing," I said in an attempt to divert everyone from killing each other.

Sergeant Fisher turned and looked down the empty road. "Shit!" he yelled as he jumped behind the wheel and put the jeep in gear. Bill mounted up as quickly as he had dismounted, and within seconds we were hell bent on catching up with the other jeep.

Ron really had no choice but to let the whole thing pass. He quickly unloaded the rifle. I noticed the speed and confidence with which he handled the weapon. For someone who prided himself in being heavy weapons, he handled the M-16 like he was an infantryman.

The jeep picked up speed in its pursuit of our leader. Without a windshield, the warm breeze whipped by our heads, cooling us. It was very much like being on a motorcycle, something I had done a lot of in my youth. I had a feeling that I was going to like this job.

I had no idea where we were heading, but Sergeant Fisher seemed to. He must have been through this routine often enough that he at least had a general idea where the rest of the patrol was headed. We zipped around a corner, and there, almost a quarter mile down the road, was the other jeep, trucking along without any sign anything was amiss. Sergeant Fisher accelerated and within a few minutes had closed the gap to a point where he let up on the gas and we slowed down.

"Come this way often?" I asked.

"Sure. The lieutenant always takes the same route. Unless we receive a call, there is no way he loses us. The next post we are checking is right up ahead on the left."

"They didn't seem to miss us," Ron pointed out.

Sergeant Fisher laughed. "They have the combat instincts of a Barbie doll. Without us to cover their asses, they would be sitting ducks. Before the guns jeep was formed, they used to get sniped at all the time, mostly by our own guys in from the field having a little fun. Must have been anyway, because they never actually hit anyone. Now no one fucks with us."

"We must have tried to explain to their drivers a million times that they need to remain aware of us at all times, but what you saw happen just now is typical. If they were following us and had stopped, we would have stopped almost as soon as they did. Stupid fuckers didn't even know we were gone for a while."

"It gets worse when you have to go into an area that might be hot. Their first instinct is to pull out those silly ass pistols. They each have an M-16, but they draw their pistols, even if there is automatic weapons fire in the area," Fisher said while shaking his head sadly.

"Yeah," Bill chimed in. "You don't want them behind you because they are as likely to shoot you in the back by accident as to hurt the enemy. You don't want them out front because they have no clue about using cover and laying down fire support. They would be dead in a minute."

"Well, what do you do?" Ron asked.

"Park their ass on the side of the road and move forward without them. I would disarm them if I had a say in the matter. Besides, we really don't need them. Once there are shots fired, all the jeeps in adjacent areas move toward the area receiving fire. There are always two or three jeeps within a five minute drive after curfew when the streets are empty," Bill explained.

"Then there are the civilian police and the militia. These guys know what they are doing and have the balls to do it. When I first got here, the MPs told us they were useless. Referred to them as "white mice" because of their uniforms. Anyway it soon became clear that they are the ones who are actually in control of the city. They work the side streets and alleys. Sort of like ghosts in the night. They are always near but seldom seen. Same way with the militia. The city has thousands of them armed with old M-1 carbines. They mostly sit in darkened windows at night, guarding their homes and neighborhoods. They are the eyes and ears for the civilian police and the real reason the commies never were able to establish themselves in the city during Tet. Kept getting themselves killed trying to move around the city. This is the militia's jungle."

"There are some VC in the city, but here they are an endangered species. Most city folk are happy with the current set up here in the South and do not take kindly to the political opposition. Any VC actually present in the city act as spies rather than armed soldiers. Just too many people around taking care of business."

The DO's jeep pulled up beside another fixed security post situated outside of what looked like a small hotel. Instead of stopping, Sergeant Fisher pulled past and continued down

the street about a hundred meters. Then he made a big U-turn and pulled over to the left, but instead of stopping at the curb, he cut his wheels sharply and rode up over it onto the sidewalk then pulled the jeep up tight against the building, facing the security post.

As soon as the jeep stopped, Ron and I hopped out, carrying our weapons with us. Bill stayed in the jeep behind the gun, and Sergeant Fisher proceeded to exit by crawling out between the seats. He had not left enough room to exit his side.

It was a beautiful night. The temperature must have been around eighty, and there was a gentle breeze blowing. The city smelled different than the jungle. As we pulled out of Tans Son Nhut Air Base, the predominant smell had been of gas fumes from the crowded streets. Now, with no traffic present, that had changed to an aroma of woods and food cooking. My stomach growled.

Not having anything to eat, I chose instead to light up a cigarette. I took one out and showed it to Fisher.

"Sure," he said, "just slip into the alley before lighting up." Ron and I walked over to the alley. I stood next to the building and stuck my head around. It was lighted enough for me to see that no one was hiding there. After waiting a minute, I stepped out and started walking down a few feet. Looking back, I could see Ron staring around the corner, ready to back me up if necessary.

Convinced that everything was alright, I took up a position in one of the many shadows on the opposite side of the alley. Ron turned the corner and took up station there. Once he was in position, I proceeded to light up just as Bill came around the corner. I had cupped the lighter inside my hat before lighting up to reduce the flare of the fire. Bill squatted down next to me. He slid off his helmet and lit up, using the helmet it to shield his flame.

"Fisher's got the gun," Bill said by way of explanation, one that was not really called for. He spoke distinctly but in a quiet voice. "You and Ron move well. Almost like you have done this before. Like Sergeant Fisher said, there is a tremendous difference between the guns and the MPs. If you were a couple of new MPs or even experienced ones, you would have just wandered into the alley as if it were home. They have an incredible arrogance, as if nothing bad can happen to them. Tet did not seem to teach them a fucking thing.

"Well, maybe that is not true," Bill said correcting himself. "The older guys, the ones who were here during Tet, they treat us well. The NVA did a number on them, and they appreciate having us around. They learned that there is a tremendous difference between their training and ours, and that they are simply not trained for combat. Unfortunately, most of them are gone now. Tet took its toll. Couple that with normal rotation and most of the guys who were here then have left for the real world.

"The new MPs just do not get it. They act as if they are invincible. We spend most of our time babysitting them and keeping them out of trouble. Most of them are all right, but watch yourself. Some are real assholes who like to fuck with people."

"They give you guys shit?" I asked.

"Nah. We keep ourselves wired, and the captain keeps them off our ass. The platoon sergeant is great, and we got our shit together. Ask me, and I say they are mostly afraid of us. They don't understand us. Do not like our attitude, but are essentially afraid of us. We prefer to keep it that way."

"Hell of a way to run a war," I commented.

Bill laughed at that. Ron kept poking his head around the corner, watching after the jeep and Sergeant Fisher. "Your buddy seems to have a hair trigger," Bill said.

"I do not know Ron all that well. Same company, but different lifestyles. I would have to agree with you about his temperament though. Seems a might on the defensive side about things. Might want to pass it around about his foster parents though. Another thing you all might want to consider. Ron is gung-ho Airborne, Regular Army, and seems damn proud of it. Been in some deep shit over the past ten months. I would not fuck with him."

"Get your drift, Lou," Bill said. "What about you?"

"Well I'm a gung-ho Airborne, Regular Army motherfucker and damn proud of it," I said, smiling. This brought a smile to Bill's face although I could tell he was struggling to discern whether I was pulling his leg or not.

Ron slipped around the corner after dousing his cigarette. I stood and pointed to the vacant spot, and Bill took off. While checking back down the alley, I backed around the corner and headed for the jeep. Sergeant Fisher already had the engine running, and when Bill and I

hit our seats, Sergeant Fisher took off. The duty officer's jeep was itself just pulling away from the curb.

Riding in the back of the jeep was both exhilarating and tiring. It was not designed to ride like a luxury car. In fact, its ride was more related to that of a tractor, and not a very good one at that. Hard on the ass, hard on the joints, hard on the soul. Trying to talk with the wind whistling past was a trial, and yet with me and Ron squatting directly behind Sergeant Fisher and Bill, we were able to talk reasonably well.

The next hour and a half was like a mystical, magical tour of Saigon. If we had our way, Ron and I would have just spent the night cruising with the gun jeep.

Saigon was known as the Paris of the Orient. The closer we got to the center of the city, the more apparent the reason for this. Not that I had ever been to Paris, but from having seen pictures, it was easy to imagine a great and beautiful city on the continent. The streets were wide, well paved, and lit up by lamplight. They seemed to have been laid out with a purpose in mind, instead of the random way roads seemed to have developed where I came from. Some of the houses we passed were like mansions, at least the glimpses we got passing by. Most of them were surrounded by high stone or concrete walls, which were themselves topped with long runs of barbed wire, a necessity which took away from the beauty of these houses. Better to keep the unwashed masses out, was be my guess.

As we cruised along with the lights out, the city took on a quality of unreality where anything was possible. It was an easy city to fall in love with.

"That's it up ahead," Bill said. "The tall building on the right."

The building was eight stories high. Certainly no skyscraper, but in comparison to other buildings, it did stand out.

"The whole battalion's stationed there?" Ron asked.

"No way. The MPs have their own place about eight blocks south of here. I wouldn't want to be in this outfit if we had to live with them. God! What a horrible thought," Sergeant Fisher laughed.

The lieutenant's jeep disappeared down an alley next to the hotel. We followed down the driveway, which ran along the side of the hotel for a couple of hundred feet and then

opened into a gated compound in the back. Sergeant Fisher pulled up right next to the back door. There was a staff sergeant waiting there for us.

"Took you guys long enough," he said. I had no idea who he was addressing.

"Took them on a tour," said Bill.

Meanwhile Corporal Lend was dumping our duffel bags off the side of the jeep. Before we could even thank him and the lieutenant, Lend turned the jeep in a tight U-turn and headed back toward the street.

"Catch you later, alligator," Bill said as he and Sergeant Fisher followed suit in their jeep.

A new face said, "Well, gentlemen, no time to gawk. Grab your shit and follow me." He had stripes on his fatigues.

Ron and I hustled over and grabbed our bags. The sergeant held the back door open, and we entered. There was a short hallway before what appeared to be a lobby.

Sure enough there was a desk that in better days was used to register the guests.

"Drop that shit and let's get you guys some chow and something to drink. Feel like real food or want to go to the club?"

"Real food sounds good right now," Ron said. I was not about to disagree. My hunger was enough that the mention of food got me salivating.

"Follow me."

He led us over to a swinging door and then down another short hallway that opened up into a dining area. There were about twenty tables but only a couple of men sitting down eating. They looked up as we entered and acknowledged us with a nod of the head. They smiled when he followed us into the room.

"Sit here. I'll rustle up some food," he said. Then he headed through some swinging doors in the back of the dining hall. Ron and I pulled our chairs out from under the table and sat. The table already had a plate and utensils. The tablecloth was a deep red color.

The whole room was elegant. Something Ron and I were definitely not used too. Two nights before, we were eating out of plastic bags using plastic forks to shovel our meals into our mouths. Talk about a change of pace.

Before I even had a chance to express my thoughts, the sergeant returned with two waiters in tow. They were carrying serving trays with food on them already.

"Steak and potatoes all right? I had the guys begin cooking just as soon as I found out what time you would be here," the sergeant explained.

Five minutes later we were digging into our food while one of the waiters poured milk into our glasses.

"I'm Jerry Cook," the sergeant said. I had guessed the last name from his name tag already. It helps to be literate. "In charge of the guns. Ron, you will be working directly under me. Sergeant Merrins, you will be working with First Sergeant King."

"What?" I asked.

"You are the new company clerk, aren't you?"

Talk about being ambushed. Fucking Army. I extended my tour to get back into combat. Then I get put back into combat, and now my transfer comes, but instead of being on the gun jeeps, I get to be company clerk again.

I knew the Sergeant was not lying, but that did not make the news any easier to take.

Fuck them. They might just as well ship my ass to Long Binh tonight, I thought. I continued eating because I was still hungry. Both Ron and Sergeant Cook were eyeballing me. I think my initial reaction was easier on them than my silence.

Was I pissed? Do bears shit in the woods? It was one of those times in my life I was glad there was not a weapon handy. Something efficient like an M-16 or an M-60. Without a doubt I felt like killing something. Anything. Or for that matter, anyone. I had no friends. There was no right or wrong, and my god was vengeance.

Looking around the room, everything seemed unreal. Not sort of unreal, but really unreal. Everything and everyone appeared in ultra-sharp focus but at the same time as if they were not parts of my reality in any way.

I became aware of a hand on my shoulder and reacted instantly, without thinking. I turned sharply using my left arm to drive the hand off my shoulder. I swung around with my right hand and stopped the fork I was holding inches from Ron's face.

"Touch me again, motherfucker, and I'll kill you," I said. "You too," I said glancing over at Sergeant Cook. I stood up, turned, and marched out of the room. Exiting the way I had entered, I found my way out to the courtyard. I felt like cursing, crying, or killing.

There was an armored personnel carrier parked near the rear of the compound. I walked over to it, found some hand and foot holds, and climbed aboard. Sitting on top with my feet hanging over the side, I smoked me a couple of cigarettes while my mind finally slowed down and made contact with reality again.

It had been kind of scary there for a while. Like someone else was in control of me, someone very scary. I am not by nature a violent person, but I had learned those ways as necessary for my survival. What had happened in there with Ron and Sgt. Cook was totally out of character for me; at least I hoped it was.

I suspected that Sergeant Cook was looking for me and that I was in all kinds of deep shit. Having a man act that way must have been no picnic for him, and he was probably thinking he had a real crazy on his hands.

The back door of the hotel opened, and Ron stepped out onto the back porch. He stood there scanning the area. I took a puff from my cigarette, indicating my position to him. He lit up his own cigarette before moving over to the APC.

"How you get up there?"

"Ladder in the rear," I replied.

I was sitting with my feet dangling over the side. Ron sat beside me.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't know what happened. Didn't mean anything personal. It's not like me you know."

"Right. Unless you talk to the men in First Platoon. They say you are one mean motherfucker. The word out was not to mess with you. Now I can see why. Anyway I don't blame you for being pissed. Gave Sergeant Cook a start."

"He pissed?" I asked.

"I thought he was going to get a gun and hunt your ass down. Told him that was not a good idea. Anything happen to you, and I'd call up to First Platoon. He'd have a hundred men

hunting his ass. I think he got the message. Then he said something about another burnt out hero and left. Want to go in and finish dinner?"

"Naw. Couldn't eat right now. Go get some rest. I'm just going to sit here for a while. Get my shit together."

"Me too," Ron responded.

We sat there quietly for maybe a half hour before Ron got up and pissed off the side of the carrier. Then he moved to the center of the APC and lay down.

The city glowed around us. The APC was parked in shadows, and the heavens spread out above us. I was tired, so I closed my eyes and leaned back.

The city was beginning to wake up around us. I could hear an increase in traffic out in the street in front of the hotel. Ron sat there smoking a cigarette. I stood up and stretched.

I looked at my watch and was surprised to see that it was already 0630 hours. The sun would just be creeping over the horizon, but the hotel would block the view.

I worked a cigarette out of my pack and lit up. Flicking my head towards the hotel was enough to get Ron moving. We climbed down off the APC and entered the hotel once again. The lobby was relatively busy now with men moving about in a purposeful manner. Many of them seemed to be heading toward the dining hall, and I found no reason not to join them.

We didn't know anyone and had no idea where to report, so getting some food was a high priority. I spotted a sign indicating a men's room, and after taking care of business, Ron and I entered the dining area.

The room was about half full. Ron and I found an empty table and sat down, looking around. Against one wall was a buffet table setup with guys in white waiter outfits dishing out food to men who were moving down a line. Ron and I joined them, and by the time we received our food and returned to the table, a server was waiting with coffee and water.

The food was excellent. Of course this opinion was from a man who thought beans and weenies out of a C-ration can was tops.

"Well, look what the cat drug in," Sergeant Cook said, taking a seat. "I thought you boys would be back up country by now."

"That an option?"

"No, but it would not be unheard of. Couple of months ago one of our recruits went AWOL. Had the MPs looking for him, but he just wasn't to be found. A week later we get a call from his old outfit. They had been alerted to keep an eye out for him. Guess where we found him?"

"Out in the field, with his old outfit," Ron answered with certainty.

"Right. Just went back, gathered up the supplies he needed, hopped a ride out to the field without anyone at Division Headquarters knowing he was there. The battalion commander was visiting the company and spotted our man. They contacted us and asked us how bad we wanted him back. Not that bad. Anyway, I'm glad you two decided to stick around. Saves a lot of paperwork, and since the company has been without a clerk for two weeks, Sergeant King would go apeshit if he had to handle the paperwork without you," Cook said, smiling.

"That is not settled yet," Ron said, choosing to answer for me.

"Right," Cook answered. "Anyway, I want to get you guys settled in before the guns return. Captain Lloyd and I have some pressing business today. I'm sure he will want to get Sergeant Merrins' situation straightened out immediately. I have bunk assignments for you guys. Finish eating, then I'll show you to your rooms. Change, shower, and shave, and we'll meet with the captain."

My room was located on the fourth floor. I would share my room with three other men, a situation that I had not thought about before. Mine was a top bunk bed. The men who occupied the room were already gone by time we arrived. I stayed to get myself ready while Sergeant Cook showed Ron his room on the fifth floor where the guns lived.

The room came equipped with two bunk beds. The beds were messed up, and there were clothes and wet towels thrown around. There was a bathroom that had both a shower and a bathtub. The room itself was quite large with windows that opened outward. There was a ceiling fan rotating overhead that stirred the air vigorously. The morning air was still cool, and the breeze felt good. Having the top bunk might be a real advantage if you tried to sleep during the day, which the gun jeep crews would have to do.

I had no sooner changed than there was a knock on the door. I opened it.

"Didn't know the door was locked, Sarge," I said, letting Cook into the room.

"It's not. None of the doors have locks. If this place got hit we would not want men trapped in locked rooms. On the other hand, we have a rule about knocking. If no one answers, only senior NCOs or officers may enter, and then only after announcing themselves."

"Good rule," I commented.

"Follow me," Sergeant Cook ordered. I followed. We went down the stairs. There were elevators, but he chose not to use them. The third floor was given over to offices. There was a long corridor to the right. To the left there was a short hallway with one door on the right, one on the left, and another at the end of the hallway.

Sergeant Cook entered the one on the right. I followed.

Cook said, "First Sergeant King, this is the new company clerk, Sergeant Merrins." First Sergeant King scowled up at me. "About time. Been trying to keep the paperwork straight, but I'm afraid you have a lot of work ahead of you. Captain Lloyd wants to see you right away."

I did not comment, choosing to bite my tongue. I walked over to the door and knocked twice.

"Enter!" a voice commanded.

I entered the room with Sergeant Cook following. The man sitting behind the desk stood. I stopped in front of the desk, coming to attention and saluting. "Sergeant Merrins reporting for duty, Sir. Airborne."

"All the way," the Captain replied, returning my salute sharply. I could see the jump wings attached to his dress shirt. "Have a seat, Sergeant."

I was prepared to be hostile, and I think the captain knew it, but his being Airborne carried weight with me. I sat.

"I do not have a lot of time to deal with your problem this morning. There are more urgent matters requiring my attention. Sergeant Cook has already briefed me on your situation or at least how he sees it. I want to talk with you and will later. Right now I want you to relieve Sergeant King. After lunch, you and I will talk."

I stood and saluted. "Yes, Sir, Airborne."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Dismissed."

I turned and walked into the outer office. Sergeant King was already standing by the door.

"You straight with the captain?" he asked.

"For now," I answered.

"Good. I need to get ready. It's a mess," he said indicating the desk that was covered with various papers and forms. "I'd show you what I've done, but you'll find out soon enough. I did enough to get us paid and fed. Beyond that, Battalion will be on your ass about reports I have no idea about. Lots of luck." He turned and exited the office.

I walked over to the desk and sat down. My feelings were mixed. It would have been better to put my case to the captain right away, but the man was Airborne. Couple that with the fact that he handled me in both a correct and courteous manner, and it had not seemed to be the right time to raise a ruckus.

I began shuffling paperwork. I first checked the files, quickly shuffling through each drawer. The drawers were all labeled in correct military fashion. In each drawer were neatly labeled folders. In each folder were the necessary forms, correctly filed.

I thanked God that the man who had the job before me had been good at his job. The mess on the desk indicated that Sergeant King did not know what he was doing and that he had been too lazy to clean up the files. This meant my work would be ten times easier than if he had taken the time to misfile things. One thing the Army had was a very structured paperwork system. As long as everyone followed the rules, paperwork was easy to track. While the stack of paperwork seemed like a disaster, it was really no problem. I stuck my nose in the pile and got busy.

"Charlie Company, Sergeant Merrins speaking," I announced into the phone.

"This is Staff Sergeant Beatle at Battalion Headquarters, I have Lieutenant Colonel Haipslip on the line for Captain Lloyd."

"I will let the captain know," I said, putting down the receiver. I knocked on the door and let him know. Returning to the desk, I picked up the phone and listened. Once the two men were talking, I hung up the phone.

Sergeant Cook stuck his head out the door, got a glimpse of me, smiled, and ducked back inside. It was evident that he was checking to make sure I was not listening in on the conversation. It was alright with me. It was evidently a serious conversation. Neither the captain nor the sergeant knew me from Jack the Ripper, so their action in this case was appropriate. I even smiled, thinking I would have probably done the same thing under similar circumstances.

For the next hour, I made steady progress. I was good at this type of work and took to it like a duck to water. There was a knock on the door. I looked up.

"Captain Lloyd's office?" the MP standing at the door asked.

"Come in," I said, pointing at the door.

The corporal came into the room followed by a sergeant wearing handcuffs and another MP carrying a nightstick in his hand. The second MP had his hand on the prisoner's shoulder and roughly guided him to one of the chairs up against the wall. "Sit," he said pushing the sergeant into the seat.

The corporal knocked on the door, and, once told to, he entered, closing the door behind him. I sat there, looking at the prisoner. He looked back.

It seemed like a good time to take a break. I leaned back in my chair, took out a cigarette, and lit up.

"Can I have one of those?" the prisoner asked.

I really thought the MP was going to hit the prisoner. At the sound of his voice, he had reacted by stepping back and raising his nightstick. "I told you not to talk, asshole," he said.

The prisoner just looked up at him and smiled.

"I'll knock that smile right off your face, asshole," said the MP.

There were several problems I was having with this whole picture. The prisoner had on regular army fatigues. He was a Sergeant E-5. On his left shoulder was the patch of the First Air Cav, and above his name tag was the combat infantryman's patch.

"Private Wessely, unless that prisoner threatens you in any way, you have no right to treat him that way. You hit him without provocation, I will take that nightstick away from you,

shove it up your ass, and then beat you to death with that piss ass gun you have on your hip. Do I make myself clear?"

Private Wessely looked like he would love to club me to death right then and there, but rules are rules, and I outranked him. As long as he was responsible for the prisoner, he still had to behave properly, especially with a witness around.

Having had previous experience with MPs after my advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California, I was intimately familiar with their typical mentality. Part of that was admirable, but another part went against my way of thinking. To Private Wessely, the prisoner was dirt, to me a combat veteran.

I put down my cigarette, lit another, and handed it Sergeant Giribaldi. "Sergeant, you try anything and I swear to God I'll do the same thing to you I would do to Private Wessely."

Private Wessely scowled at me. He had a right to refuse to let me give the sergeant a cigarette, but he chose not to.

"Private Wessely, have a seat over by the door. The prisoner tries to escape, you have my permission to shoot his ass." This brought a smile to Private Wessely's face. Luckily, he did not draw his weapon in anticipation.

"What's up, Giribaldi?" I asked.

"Being court martialed."

"What'd you do?"

"Shot a kid."

"Killed a child," Wessely chimed in.

"Why?" I asked

"Had my jeep parked outside a security post. My gunner had run in to take a piss. Kid came up to the jeep and began messing around. Told him to move away. He did for a minute, then approached again. I began walking to him when he reached into the jeep. Shot him," Giribaldi said matter-of-factly.

"The kid was six years old," Wessely said. "A fucking six year old, and Sergeant Giribaldi guns him down."

Giribaldi shrugged.

"How long you been in country?"

"Sixteen months. Two more months, and I rotate home," he said.

I really didn't have anything more to say. Giribaldi was way past overdue to go home. I knew him. Not personally, but there were at least three men in First Platoon of Alpha Company who psychologically could have been his twin. Giribaldi did not show any remorse for what he had done, and why should he? He had no remorse. To him shooting that six year old made sense. Kid could have been reaching for a weapon, maybe a loose hand grenade, who knew. All it took was a perceived danger to trigger the sergeant. Not a real threat, just a perceived one. The killing was a reflex. Death to Giribaldi was only important if it involved himself or a friend.

Private Wessely, if he was lucky, would never understand this attitude. To him it was murder. Too me it was a tragedy. I felt sorry for the kid and his family, but I felt sorrier for Giribaldi. He had been robbed of his youth and his humanity. I hoped the men who were going to sit judgment on him could recognize the man's plight and treat him humanely. If it were up to me, he would get a ride first to the nearest psych unit, and then, once treated, another ride home. Sometimes it is easier to give your life for your country than it is to have to give up your soul.

The little incident last night flashed through my head. Me with a fork in my hand aiming right at Ron's throat. At that instant I could have very easily ripped his throat out without any thought of consequence. Then I would be sitting where Sergeant Giribaldi was.

When the sergeant was done with the cigarette, I walked over and retrieved the butt from him. He stepped on the ashes and sort of spread them around on the floor. A typical infantryman's gesture. It made me smile.

I buried my head back into the paperwork. The door to the office opened and Cpt. Lloyd walked through and exited out into the hallway. He was followed by Sergeant Cook and the corporal.

"Let's go," the corporal said, addressing Sergeant Giribaldi.

The sergeant stood. "Thanks for the cigarette," he said.

"You're welcome. Have a nice court-martial," I said. I say dumb things like that now and then.

He smiled and nodded. Then he turned and left.

I guess the captain was right. He did have a busy morning on his agenda.

It was 1100 hours when Staff Sergeant Beatle walked into the office.

"Where's First Sergeant King?" he asked.

"Across in his office, I guess."

"Who are you?"

"Sergeant Merrins." I replied.

"Yeah, I talked with you earlier this morning. You watching the desk for the first sergeant?"

"You could say that. They tell me I am the new company clerk. That matter is still under advisement."

"What's your MOS, Sarge?" Beatle asked.

"Eleven Bravo Four Papa," I answered.

"Great. Just great. First Sergeant King does not know shit about paperwork, and now they put an eleven bravo behind the desk. Fucking military."

I smiled. Could not agree with the man more.

Sergeant Beatle left and I heard him knock on the first sergeant's door. I lit a cigarette and put my feet up on the desk.

King entered the room with Beatle in tow.

"Merrins, you get any of the work done?" King asked.

"All done, Top," I said. Sergeant King turned, and I heard him close the door to his office.

Sergeant Beatle looked at me suspiciously. "Where?"

I opened the bottom drawer and pulled out the current reports. Sergeant Beatle pulled up a chair opposite mine and started going through them. "Good, good, ah at last, good, good, excellent." There was a smile on his face, and you would have thought he was studying pictures

of naked females from his reaction. Military bureaucrats love nothing more than properly filled out paperwork.

Other than Ron and I, there had been only one other transfer, and that was the company clerk who had filled out all the necessary paperwork for his hardship transfer back home. The daily reports were just duplicates that reflected no real change in the company's manpower. The rest were just various routine information requests.

"I'll tell you one thing, Sergeant Merrins. You are definitely not an eleven bravo."

"Well then I will tell you two things, Sergeant Beatle. I am an eleven bravo, and you better never forget that," I was not smiling when I said it.

"Okay. You can call yourself Yankee Doodle Dandy if you want. Just keep the paperwork straight and you and I can be friends forever."

"Fair enough," I said offering him my hand. We shook. "Now if you could show me how your telephone system works and help me find a directory I would appreciate it."

Staff Sergeant Beatle took an hour of his time getting me wired in with the various people I would need to contact on a regular basis. That would make my life more bearable if I needed to stay in this job for a while. I still had hopes of talking my way onto the jeeps, but someone had to know their way around the office. As much as I hated this type of work, I also knew how necessary it was to the efficient operating of the company.

It was 1500 when Captain Lloyd returned to the office. I stood up and saluted. "Airborne, Sir!" He returned my salute. "All the way, Sergeant. Come into my office."

The captain removed his jacket and loosened his tie. "Sit down and relax. You hungry?"

"A little, Sir. Didn't want to leave the office unattended. Top left at 1200 hours and never came back. Wasn't sure exactly what to do, Sir."

"Top's like that. Don't expect too much help from him. I am normally here, and if you want to take a break or eat, just let me know. If I am gone, you can just call down and order a meal up, which is exactly what I am going to do now. I'll show you how." He did.

With that taken care of, the captain got right down to business. "I can sympathize with your feelings. You extended your tour to get into the guns, which means you are exactly the kind of man for the job at hand. The Guns were formed as a quick reaction force after the Tet

Offensive. Seemed like a good idea at the time, but with the massive build-up of forces around the capital, our job has become different. Now we act more as security for the MPs against our own people, and that is the truth.

"One problem the unit has run into is the type of soldiers we are getting. By limiting it to only sergeants with combat experience, we seem to be getting more than our share of problems."

"That seems rather the opposite of what I would expect," I replied.

"My reaction exactly. We should be getting the cream of the crop, and in many ways we are, but only in the context of what the men who join the outfit really are, combat soldiers. If we were facing combat every day, these men are the ones I would want in my outfit. But we are not. Here in the city, they are out of their normal environment, and that is creating problems. Take you for example. Sergeant Cook told me about your little tiff down in the mess hall. After you left, Sergeant Little got in his face. Let Cook know what a good man you are and the consequences of messing with you. Neither Cook nor I have any reason to question Sergeant Little's statements, but from what Cook said, you both were acting a little strange."

"His name is Sergeant Kittle, Sir," I said.

"Right. Sorry. Anyway you had a chance to meet Girabaldi, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I liked Sergeant Girabaldi, still do for that matter, but it does not make what happened any easier. I could almost have seen it coming, if not from him, from any of several of my men. Are you like him?"

"No, Sir," I said.

"Sergeant Kittle says different. Told Cook you are one cold motherfucker. Thought he was dead meat there for a minute. Kittle says your own men were afraid of you. That true?"

"No, Sir. I think Ron might be exaggerating."

"Held a damn fork to his neck and you think he is exaggerating, huh. Anyway, Cook talked to the two men who picked you up at the airport. They think your Sergeant Kittle is a psycho. He threatened Sergeant Fisher twice in two hours. They thought about hosing him down with the machine gun there once. Does that sound familiar?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied.

"You and Sergeant Kittle are exactly what is wrong with this outfit. Too much combat. Too big of a change from what you are used to. In the jungle you function well, but in the city, you are as dangerous as anyone we send you out to protect us from. Sometimes I think we need another outfit to follow the guns around.

You and Kittle were on our list for transfer in October or November when your initial tour was over. I lost my clerk because his father died and he got a hardship transfer stateside. Anyway, Sergeant Cook remembered seeing in your file that you had been a company clerk. Since you and Kittle were in the same outfit and had volunteered at the same time, it did not seem fair to transfer just you and make Kittle wait.

It is harder to get clerks than it is to get qualified volunteers for the guns. I figured I was doing both of us a favor when I put through your transfer. Getting you out of the field and Sergeant King back into his office and out of my hair. You take care of the clerk job until November, and I promise to get you on a jeep. Deal?"

"Not the deal I was hoping for, Sir, but it's fair. All right."

"I want you to talk with Sergeant Kittle for me. Let him know what is happening and try to keep him cool. If you two want to buddy up on a jeep later, Sergeant Cook will see to it," the captain said.

Just then there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and in walked a couple of waiters from the dining hall, carrying trays with food, water, and coffee to go with the meal. They set the trays on the captain's desk. It was evident they did this on a regular basis.

"Dig in," the captain said.

We ate together for the first time. He asked me questions about the Herd. He had served himself with the 101st Airborne, and the bullshit flowed fast and furious for about an hour. The captain was easy to talk to, and I came away from that conversation satisfied that things would work out in the long run.

The captain was still working in his office at 1800 hours when the company's duty officer showed up. He relieved me, saying he would take care of answering the phones. I left and went back to my room.

Without thinking, I entered.

"Hey!"

"Who the fuck are you."

"You looking for someone?" It was the owner of the last voice I focused on.

"I'm bunking here," I said pointing to my duffel bag, which was now hanging empty from the end of my bunk bed. The bed was made up. Looking around, I could see the room was much cleaner than it had been this morning when I left. "Where's the rest of my stuff?"

"Kee must have put your stuff away. Didn't know who had moved in. They don't usually put NCOs in with enlisted men. Welcome to the company, Sarge, I'm Private First Class Thomas. I work in supply. That is PFC Hussey. He works in the armory, and Spec Four Buescher over there is the company driver." I nodded at each man as they were introduced.

"My name is Louis, or Lou, or Hey You," I said. "I'm sorry I forgot to knock before entering. Sergeant Cook warned me about that."

"It's okay, Sarge. You don't have to knock when entering your own room," Spec Four Buescher said.

"You have a first name?"

"Yeah. Tom," Buescher said.

"Well Tom, my name is Lou, and I would appreciate it if you addressed me that way," I said. Addressing all the men I said, "I know when I was a private, I would have been uncomfortable sharing a room with an NCO. Well, war is hell. In this room I would appreciate it if you just treated me as one of the guys. You stay out of my face and I'll stay out of yours."

"They run out of rooms down in the guns?" Hussey asked.

"For now I'm the new company clerk," I replied.

"Don't look like no clerk to me, Sarge. I mean Lou."

"Don't drink like one either," I said. "Where can I get a drink around here?"

"Downstairs in the club," Tom said.

"Which way do you go when you leave the hotel?"

"No. We have a club right downstairs in the hotel. You can get drinks as long as you are off duty. It opens at 1700 hours. Band starts playing at 2000 hours," Private Hussey said.

"You're shitting me, right?"

"Give me a sec and I'll go with you," Tom said.

"That's okay," I said. "I'll find my own way. Want to look up a buddy before I go down. I'll see you down there later."

I left the room and walked up to the fifth floor. At the top of the stairs was a desk with a security guard sitting.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?"

"Looking for my friend, Sergeant Kittle," I explained.

The guard ran his finger down the top page located on a clipboard. "Sergeant Kittle is out on patrol. He's riding with Sergeants Drago and Jones tonight. Won't be back till 0830 hours. Sorry, Sarge."

"Thanks anyway," I said and headed down the stairs.

They needed me, and so Ron got to go out on patrol. Talk about justice.

I was feeling more than a little disjointed by the whole situation. After being surrounded by people who were closer than family, I was alone in a very, very strange environment. There was no way I wanted to go back to the room I had to share with complete strangers. A good, stiff drink sounded okay right then.

It was not the best idea I had that day. The club was large and not very crowded when I arrived. I found a quiet table and ordered a cuba libre. It was a rum and coke with a piece of lime. One drink led to another. By the time the band started playing, I was more than a little drunk.

The band had four guys who played and a female singer. When they walked out onto the stage, I was disappointed. I had been hoping for good old American rock and roll. God knows what I was about to hear. I was getting ready to leave when the band started playing. There was no arguing about their ability to play. These guys were good.

They started with an instrumental that included a wild riff of drums. Half way through, I was glued to my seat, my mind drifting half a planet away to a different world. They followed that number with an equally upbeat rendition. I was not used to live performances, and they blew me away with their musical ability.

The girl performer moved on stage. She was wrapped in a shimmering silver dress that clung to her like paint. She had a beautiful Vietnamese face, an impression helped I am sure by the state of my drunkenness. The band struck up the first chords of a popular Nancy Sinatra song about boots being made for walking. I had only heard it once before and had really liked it.

The singer started crooning, and all thoughts of leaving left my mind. She had a beautiful voice without a hint of an accent. If I closed my eyes, I could not tell it was not an American singer belting out the tune.

The next hour and a half was spent listening and drinking. I slowed my drinking down considerably, not enough to get sober, but enough to keep from getting sick. At 2130 hours the band took a break, and I did too. I was about out of money, and with no one around whom I felt comfortable borrowing money from, heading home seemed like a good idea.

Weaving my way toward the entrance, I noticed a room off to my left. There was no door on the room. I could see soldiers inside, feeding coins into one armed bandits, the kind of slot machines they used in Las Vegas. Stumbling over, I spotted a machine not in use. Looking at the money slot I could see why. It took twenty-five cents to play. Not a lot, but more than the average soldier would be willing to spend for one spin of the old wheel.

Money was not an object to me since reaching in my pocket I came out with my last coin, a quarter. I am not by nature one who wastes money on games of chance, but I was leaving anyway and saw no reason for carrying that money all the way back to the room. I put the coin in the machine, grabbed the arm, and kissed my money good-bye. The first wheel stopped on jackpot. Then the second wheel stopped on jackpot. Now I started scanning the card to see if that would pay anything, when the third wheel stopped at jackpot.

The light at the top of the machine started flashing but no money came out. I was sure the machine owed me something and was getting ready to shake it when a hand came down on my shoulder. Even drunk that brought an instant response. I spun, knocking the arm off and preparing to launch myself at my attacker.

"Whoa, hold on, Sarge," a voice said to me. I stopped. There was a staff sergeant standing there. "You won, Troop," he said. "Here's your money."

I looked down and took the offered money. I counted it; there were fifty dollars there. I stuffed it in my pocket and headed out the door. The money did not take away the disappointment of the machine not paying out immediately. The thought of all those coins cascading out brought a smile to my face, which was followed by a frown because it hadn't happened that way.

I had never won anything before, mostly because I never bet. Right then and there, I decided never to play the slots again. They always won eventually. By never playing again, I would always be one up on the owners. Good for me.

Drunk and tired, I decided to call it a night. In the lobby I caught the elevator for the slow trip up to the fourth floor. There were two guys sleeping in the dimly lit room. After relieving myself, I managed to partially undress, removing my fatigue jacket, then climbed into the top bunk and passed out.

"Sergeant Merrins?" a voice whispered.

"Yes," I responded, opening my eyes. I was disoriented by my surroundings. There was a wall, some legs, a concrete floor, some overhead cover. It did not make sense. If I had not recognized Private Hussey's voice, I might have panicked. Lifting my hand upward, I touched the overhead cover and immediately recognized that it consisted of a bedspring covered by a mattress.

"You all right?" Tom Buescher asked, his voice quivering slightly.

"Sure, Tom," I said sliding out from under the bed. I was somewhat groggy from the drinking still, but not enough that it affected my perception of how ludicrous the situation was. I got to my feet, stumbled into the bathroom, and had a good piss while trying to figure out what had happened. I could hear the other men whispering in the next room.

The room was still dark when I entered it. No one had turned on a light, but it was not necessary. The combination of large windows and the glow from the lighted city outside cast enough luminance to see well enough.

I walked over to the bed and retrieved my fatigue jacket, grabbed my cigarettes, and lit up. I wandered over to where there was a chair and sat.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what happened, Sarge," PFC Thomas said. He sounded a might pissed. "You started yelling things like "get down", "they're coming", "kill the motherfuckers." You scared the shit out of me. I thought we were being attacked."

"If my hair ain't white in the morning, ain't never going to get white," said Private Hussey. This brought a nervous laughter from the other men.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me, I thought. Then I remembered a couple of lost nights out in the field. My men swore I did things that I had no memory of in the morning. And of course there was Taiwan, where I woke up on the floor every morning until I stopped trying to sleep in the bed at all.

"Sorry, guys," I said. "Must have had too much to drink last night. It won't happen again."

"No sweat," Tom said. "From what you were yelling, it was probably harder on you than us. What were you dreaming about?"

"I have no idea. Until you called my name, I was sound asleep. As a matter of fact, now that I have been up for a while, I feel wide awake. What time is it anyway?" I asked while looking down at my own watch.

"Its 4:40, Sarge. Don't need to get up until 0600 hours," Private Thomas answered, the fright gone from his voice and sleep creeping in.

"I suggest you guys get some rest. I think I'll stay up for a while," I answered.

The men settled down. It was peaceful again. Quiet. Not jungle quiet, but city quiet. Closing my eyes, I reviewed what had transpired and told myself not to let it happen again. Sort of planting a message inside my head in the hope my mind would remember it during the nights ahead.

I longed to go home, back to my friends in the field, but that life was behind me now. I knew that for sure. I wondered how Ron was doing and looked forward to seeing him in the morning.

END