

Chapter One

The First Air Cavalry Division Base Camp at An Khe, South Vietnam

Late October 1967

The bright morning sun, along with the sweating brows and wet fatigue shirts worn by the troopers, gave testimony to the hot, humid conditions that were in play for the GI's at work on their details at the division base camp. Memories of living a normal, sweat-free existence all but evaporated from the thought process of those involved. Sweating bullets, no doubt easier than dodging them, brought into question; were the trade off's worth it? The trade off's being, to be in the relative safety of the "rear," with few afforded comforts available, plus details, versus the "bush," with no details, and certainly even less comforts. The choices were questionable at best.

'Camp Radcliff' was home to the United States Army's First Air Cavalry Division at An Khe, South Vietnam, in the Central Highlands, from 1965 to 1969. Named after a Major Donald Radcliff, a helicopter pilot with the famed First Battalion of the Ninth Cavalry, of The First Air Cavalry Division, the base camp became a major hub of

operational activity during the war.

In August of 1965, while flying his U-H 1 B helicopter gunship, in support of a United States Marine operation in the Quang Tin Province of South Vietnam, the 37-year old Major was fatally wounded by a barrage of enemy gunfire after he selflessly inserted his helicopter between a troop-carrying helicopter and a heavily armed enemy gun position. The Major posthumously received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his selfless act of courage, which resulted in the saving of many American lives.

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With a population of nearly 17,000, the installation, virtually a city unto itself came alive at sunrise with activity of every kind imaginable. The base camp, comprised of many of the functions of any operating city government, to include, medical services, military police, graves registration, personnel, Post-Exchanges, postal, food and administration services, provided the necessary provisions.

The infantry and artillery units of the 1st Air Cavalry worked in concert with a large number of support units that ranged from aviation, engineers, supply, medical, to food and administration services. 'Camp Radcliff' a unique place carved out of the rugged jungle terrain of central Vietnam, served a vital role in the war effort.

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Hanging outside of a large tent, the home of the Second Squad of the Chinese Bandits Reconnaissance Platoon, a group of colorful and energetic young paratroopers

took advantage of some down time, having just completed their morning details. Young men are known to engage in plenty of colorful banter and horseplay, and this group of characters was no different. Having just finished off a run of slow blues licks on his guitar, Johnny Richards, a hot young musician from Chicago, looked up at his Squad Leader, Sergeant Frank, and asked,

“Sarge, we running another recon patrol today or are we gonna do a search and destroy? I mean, for Christ sake, we just got back from reconning the valley.”

Johnny was just another draftee caught up in Uncle Sam’s war machine of the 1960s. Pulled off of the streets of Chicago, the young musician, not unlike many other spirited and adventurous young men, volunteered to be a paratrooper while in basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Paratroopers are also known as “the army airborne.”

Sergeant Frank, a good ol’ Southern boy, hailed from the hills of North Carolina, literally. Growing up in North Carolina, Sergeant Frank spent many a day and night in the woods hunting and fishing. The great outdoors were more than a second home to him; they were home. The environment he grew up in proved to be more than beneficial to both him and the platoon.

In reply to Johnny’s question, Frank spit out a mouthful of chew while he sharpened his Bowie knife, and said, “What you think? You know it’s gonna be one or the other, what’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference? You kidding me? I mean, on a search and destroy; at least we got a whole lot of help. You know, Frank, I mean on a recon, it’s really hairy. I mean like especially on the lurps. (Long range reconnaissance patrols) It’s just us against

who knows what? I mean I'm tired of this bullshit. Up and down these Goddamn hills, ambushing, heat, rain and leeches, all this John Wayne bullshit, and to think I volunteered for this.

I mean, look at me! I'm soaked; like I'm in a constant state of sweating. Man, we deserve us a break, you know, a rest. I'll tell you what. I'll be one happy son of a bitch when this tour is over. I mean, I'd sure like to stay in one place for a while, you know, have a bed to sleep in, not some wet stinking foxhole." He concluded his complaint when he strummed a loud and dissident chord on his guitar, only to be drowned out by the sound of an incoming chopper

An old cliché has it that "Home is where you hang your hat," but if you hung it in one of the infantry units, you wouldn't have hung it long. No, see, instead you'd have hung it out in the bush, the field, the badlands, Indian country; not base camp. There was no roof over your head, no fan to cool the sweat off of your brow and no damn air conditioning, because electricity was for sissies. You'd have killed for a hot meal, a shower or some ice. This was the life of the grunt. Welcome to Vietnam.

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A U H-1 chopper, a Huey, sometimes called a slick, or what most people back in the world called them, a helicopter, descended out of the cool, clean air into the hot, humid air of the LZ, (Landing Zone) of the First Battalion, Eighth Cavalry, Airborne. Dust and debris filled the air as a result of a windstorm brought on by the thrust of the chopper blades that pounded the earth when it touched down.

In the deafening noise of the rotor blades and turbine engine, four young,

frightened looking soldiers carefully jumped off of the chopper, as they tried to shoulder their duffle bags and hold onto their army issue soft covers, military name for hats. When the chopper climbed up and banked left off of the LZ, the four young troops stood in place, cleared the dust and debris from their eyes and visually surveyed their new surroundings. Eyes wide open and anxious as the day was long, the four frightened young replacements were greeted by a young specialist personnel clerk.

“Right this way gentlemen, and bring all you got with you. Any questions?”

“Yeah, where we going?” Asked a new Private. Moving in to read the nametag on the replacements chest, the clerk answered, “To the recon platoon. Ya’ll are going to be recondos.”

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While Sergeant Frank and Johnny argued the finer points of being in the recon platoon, the headquarters personnel clerk interrupted them. He’d brought with him, two, of the four new replacements who’d just disembarked the bird. The new guys, or the bodies, as Sergeant Donner so passionately requested, finally arrived.

Many of the men in the immediate area made mention of the arrival of the new men. One smart-ass trooper yelled out “Cherry,” almost with contempt, loud enough for the new men to hear. The replacements soon realized their status amongst the troops. Cherry was a well-used adjective in the war zone, not too flattering, but appropriate

. Addressing Sergeant Frank, the young specialist said, Sergeant, I’ve got two new men that Sergeant Donner said were to be assigned to second squad.”

“It’s about time. How many guys did the platoon get?” asked Sergeant Frank.

“Recon platoon got a total of four. First and Third Squad got one each. Ya’ll did real good, though. Ya’ll got two.”

“We’ve been short of bodies for over a month now with all the wounded, the malaria, guys on R&R and the KIA’s (killed in action) I’m telling you, it’s been tough.”

The young specialist empathized, “Yeah, I know what you mean. Division is trying to get more replacements but it seems every outfit in Nam wants fresh meat.”

“Well better late than never, Sergeant Donner is really getting stressed out because we never got enough men. He’ll be happy to hear about this. Did you all tell him yet?”

“Yeah, he knows. He sent me here with these two guys for your squad.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Sorry, man, we just got back from the valley yesterday. We ain’t slept in days.”

“No problem Sergeant. Oh, by the way, rumor has it ya’ll be going back out, maybe today. Sergeant Donner is getting briefed right now.”

“Give me a break. Man, we could use some rest.”

“Sorry Sergeant, but on the upside First Sergeant said we’ll be getting even more bodies real soon. Thank God for the draft. We’re even understaffed at headquarters. Well, I’ve got to go back and type up some shit for the old man.”

“Oh, well, we’ll do what we can do. Thanks, man. I think.”

“You bet, Sergeant.”

“Alright, you two. Listen up! Ya’ll learn real soon that Camp Radcliff here serves

as more of a stop-off point than a home base. Us grunts in recon and other infantry outfits don't have no home. See, we stop off here to process into the unit and get our equipment. Between patrols and operations we'll stop off here to re-supply and shower. Once in a while we'll stop off to process for a much-needed R&R (rest and relaxation) and provided all goes well, you know, ya'll don't get yourselves killed or wounded, this is where you or me, will stop off to process to go back to the "world." See, like I said. It ain't nothing but a stop-off point."

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Addressing the squad, Sergeant Frank said, "Listen up! Hey, listen up! We got two new replacements here, a Privates Rooney and a Private King. Ya'll give 'em a helping hand and treat 'em right. Make 'em feel at home."

The squad members and the two new privates sized each other up. The new guys looked young. "Remember ya'll were new to the platoon at one time yourself. Adjust! Personally, I don't like hearing that cherry bullshit. Make these guys feel at home. That's an order!"

In short order, with a bit of prodding by Sergeant Frank, Rooney and King became part of the family; they needed each other. Sergeant Frank then showed the guys around.

"Let's get you guys squared away. These are your bunks, your beds, okay? These things here, mold and all, are your footlockers. I want you to unpack and square your shit away. Your tour here will be twelve months if everything goes right, you know, like I'd said before, you don't go get yourselves killed or wounded, okay?"

“Yes Sergeant.”

“If you’re lucky you may even get to sleep in them sometimes. Ya’ll got lucky ‘cause we got a few extra places, you know, vacancies. Got a few in the hospital. Don’t worry. They were only slightly wounded. With any luck they’ll be back sometime soon and we can get a couple more cots in here that’ll be your own. In the meantime, ya’ll make yourselves at home. Any questions?”

“What did you mean, Sergeant, when you said maybe we could use the cots sometimes?” asks Private Rooney, a wisecracking kid from Jersey.

“Well, me and Johnny here was just talking about how much time we just lay around here and sleep. We never have anything to do. Right, Johnny?”

Johnny, playing away on his guitar stopped, put the guitar pick in his mouth and said, “Yeah, the Sergeant and me we was just talking about the great accommodations we got here in base camp.” pointing to the cots on the dirt floor that were shrouded in mosquito nets.

“We get to sleep in these here bunks, I like to call ‘em bunks. You know, sounds better than cots. Anyways, we sleep in ‘em about one night a month, sometimes not even that often. But hey, these tents, they might smell musty, and it may be ungodly hot in here, but if it rains, you’ll probably get wet.”

“Why’s that?” Asked Rooney.

“Cause the tents, all of ‘em, have a bunch of holes in ‘em. That’s why. Man, you can’t beat it with a stick.”

“Johnny, here complains a lot, but he’s right about what he just said.” Continuing,

Sergeant Frank added, "So, ya'll got here just in time, we'll be going back out, and soon, rumor has it."

"That's great!" Complained the disgruntled guitarist.

"See what I mean?"

Johnny continued on with his bitching. "Like I was saying Sarge, we don't get no damn rest. It's either the bush or details. Know what I mean?"

"What details?"

"Now I know you've lost your mind, or you have one lousy memory." Addressing the new replacements, Johnny gave a rundown of the mornings events. "See, we was on detail all morning. Sergeant Frank here seems to have forgotten what it's like. He don't do 'em anymore 'cause he's an NCO."

"You got that right!"

"Yeah, I know. Anyways, let me give you an idea of what to look forward to. See, we call it rear guard duty. What that is basically, is details, details, and more details. The army never stops messi'n with ya. Trust me. This morning, the privates, like ya'll are, did the latrine detail." The two replacements already knew what that entailed. Private Rooney said,

"Sounds pretty lousy. The name alone stinks."

"And then some. Ya'll get the chance to do it, trust me. I know, I've done it a bunch of times. See, what you do is, burn crap. You pull these half-barrels out from under the latrine, then you pour aviation fuel in 'em and light 'em up. Man, does that shit stink."

The Sergeant, harkening back to his days as a private, agreed. “You got that right. I mean, that shit makes the whole damn area smell. Like Doc says, the smell permeates the landscape.”

“Yeah, whatever that means. Anyways, a less challenging detail, and I know ya’ll know this one, policing up the place, you know, cleaning up the area.”

“Oh, for sure. In basic, AIT (advanced infantry training) and jump school, we did a lot of policing.” Said Rooney.

“Well, there’s another one I know you guys did in basic.”

“What’s that?” The private asked.

“KP. (Kitchen police) Unbelievable, you know. It ain’t bad enough you get shot at in the field, then when you get back to camp, they put your ass on KP. Bastards. I ain’t sure if I’d rather be back here, or out getting shot at by Charlie. Any way you cut it, it stinks. You know what I mean?”

Johnny, a twenty-year-old, cocky, wisecracking city kid from the streets of the south side of Chicago, like Sergeant Frank, volunteered to go airborne.

“Aw, shut up and quit your complaining. You volunteered to go airborne and for the recon platoon, too. What the hell did you expect?” Asked the sergeant. “What made you go airborne anyways?”

Cocky, and not lacking in self-confidence, Johnny answered, “Those damn recruiters from Fort Campbell. Bastards got me, you know, with all that airborne crap. That’s why I went airborne. They was strac. (An army term for together) and I bought in.”

The proud paratrooper that he was, the Sergeant answered with an energetic “Airborne! I hear ya. I fell for the same thing.”

“Yeah, those recruiters are good. The one guy told this story about how his lightning fast reflexes due to his airborne training enabled him to avoid an accident with an on coming car on some two lane highway outside of Fort Campbell. He swore, you know, insisted that without that training, he wouldn’t have been able to avoid hitting the car. I bought in right then and there. I mean, like tragedy was averted. That’s cool.”

“They got you, hook, line and sinker.”

“Yeah, I guess. I had another reason, too. I like to fly, you know. I mean, I ain’t got no money, so I can’t buy me an airline ticket. I damn sure ain’t smart enough to fly one, so jumping out of one is all I got left, you dig? Think about it. Fly for free, and jump. That’s pretty cool. I’ll tell you something else, you gotta be fast if you wanna airborne, and I’m the fastest.”

“You sure do brag a lot, Johnny.”

“No brag, just fact. See, back on the block, I was a golden gloves champ. I got me some lightning fast reflexes, plus the fastest hands in the boxing camp. So, as long as I was in a fix, you know, being drafted and all and not knowing how to do anything other than play guitar and box, I volunteered. I mean, if you’re going to fight, fight with the best.”

“I agree, Johnny. Ain’t nothing like popping the silk (parachuting) and like you say, we get to do it for free. My mother says my brothers and me are the adventurous type. We’re all airborne. One of my brothers is in the 173rd airborne, and my little brother

is in jump school right now.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that. Yo mama got some crazy kids. As a matter of fact, your whole family’s nuts.”

“Yeah, we are. Don’t you forget it.”

Chapter Two

“I knew you was crazy. Being here would make anybody crazy. If I didn’t have this here guitar to play, I’d go crazy too.”

“Give me a break, you’d go crazy? You’re the biggest nut cake we got in recon.”

“I ain’t crazy, just depressed. You know what I mean?”

Johnny, when not complaining, played his guitar, and on that particular morning, he’d been in a serious funk because his buddy, Dale, an outstanding soldier and friend, shipped home, back to the “world.” Johnny explained to the new guys, what happened to Dale.

“Dale got sick out in the bush. The night of the ambush, they shipped him home. After the firefight, he got a bad temperature. Must’ve been malaria. Man, the jungle stinks. Know what I mean?”

“Johnny, Dale got sent home because,” stopping Sergeant Frank in mid-sentence,

Johnny said,

“We all know why Sarge. Let’s just drop it, okay?”

“Okay, Johnny. Forget it.”

Dale’s loss to the platoon upset Johnny to no end and he didn’t know if he’d ever see his buddy again. In all likelihood, he reasoned after Dale’s treatment in the hospital, he’d be sent back to the “world”, back to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “At least he wasn’t dead,” he said to himself. Resting his guitar against a tent rope, Johnny took a break.

“Man, my fingers feel like hamburger. I think I’ll give ‘em a rest.”

“I’ve got to admit it Johnny, you may be nuts, but you sure can play that guitar.”

“I sure can.”

“Conceited bastard.”

“Eat me, lifer. By the way, man, I mean Sarge, you told the new guys about humping we do, yet?”

“No, not yet. Since you’ve been doing most of the talking, why don’t you?”

“Well, I do got a question. I mean, ever notice how when we’re humping up some damn hill, we never seem to reach the top? Good Lord, it’s just one plateau after another. I mean, just when I think we’ve got to be to the top of this bad boy, and damn, it’s just another plateau, know what I mean?”

“There’s a simple answer for that Johnny. Know what it is?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what it is. I did something bad in my past life and God’s punishing the hell out of me now for whatever I did. You know, like that ancient Greek

cat, some sissy or something who pushed a rock up a hill or some shit.”

“Where did you hear that one?”

“In school, stupid. You never heard that story man? Just what kind of country ass school did you go to anyways? What, they only teach you how to make moonshine or shoe a horse or what?”

“Kiss my country-ass, dumb ass. The guy who pushed the rock up the hill wasn’t no sissy. He was named Sisyphus, stupid. So who’s the dumb ass?”

“Yeah, well, I was close. I made my point. Besides, he could’ve been a sissy, okay?”

“Knowing you, you probably did do something bad, but that ain’t the reason. It’s simpler than that.”

“Oh yeah? What is it, Einstein?”

“It’s because the hills and mountains around here are big, you know, high. That’s all.”

No shit! I didn’t notice. Gimme a break.”

“No, for real, I mean some of these hills and mountains we work top out between three to five thousand feet high. That’s why it seems like we never get to the top. Hell, some are even higher. Along the border north of here, there’s one that tops out at ten thousand. It’s a long way up there, that’s all.”

“You’re telling me. I mean, humping all that shit we carry don’t make it any easier. You guys will see.”

“Like I said, you volunteered, so shut up.”

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Johnny and Sergeant Frank had a great relationship but each had an aggressive personality. Sergeant Frank, a natural born soldier and, only eighteen years old, with an innate ability to navigate any terrain. A spunky country boy, not strapping, but slight of frame, possessed an infectious boyish smile that belied his true nature. Tough as old shoe leather and moody as any opera diva who ever graced a stage, it would've been at one's own peril to tangle with him.

Proficient with a knife, firearm or any lethal weapon known to man, he could and would literally cut out your heart and hand it to you before your dead ass hit the ground. If need be, he could shoot the balls off a mosquito at a hundred yards. As a youth, he'd been an avid hunter, tracker and fisherman and he found hunting and tracking the enemy to be a natural undertaking.

During his adolescence he once knocked another young man off of his bicycle with a bow and arrow at fifty yards, the arrow piercing young man's arm. Frank took exception to the unfortunate kid coming to his house to tattle, a decision he was to regret. Frank wasn't mean, just downright ornery at times, with a bad temper.

Johnny and Frank mixed it up on more than one occasion with no serious injuries reported. Johnny was always careful not to take any disagreement too far and never forgot a remark that Frank made. “Good shot, my ass; I tried to kill ‘Im.” The remark followed Johnny's compliment on the excellent shot with his bow and arrow.

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The sweating Private King, after days in transit, longed to freshen up, and asked?
“Where do we shower Sergeant Frank?”

Johnny jumped all over the question. “Shower? Forget about it!”

The remark caught Sergeant Frank’s ear and he let it be known in testimony, “Oh, yeah, showers. Let me tell you guys a little story about showers. See, Johnny here smells pretty good today, but damn, he smelled so bad yesterday before he took a shower that we made him sleep outside of the tent last night in spite of the fact that he claims he smells good even when he smells bad.”

Looking at the new men, Johnny said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold it right there. Don’t believe that bullshit. I’m all about being clean. See, we was out in the field thirty-three days or so straight without a hot meal or a shower and when we got back to base camp here I did the KP detail and wasn’t afforded the luxury of a hot shower like some of the privileged were. I waited until this morning to get a ride down to the showers. Besides, it’s true that even when I smell bad, I do smell good, right?”

The squad laughed at Johnny’s banter and then to Johnny’s dismay, Frank continued with another story about how bad Johnny smelled one day. “You say that even when you smell bad, you smell good? What about that time outside the village in Plei Ku?”

“Oh man, don’t bring up that shit. That ain’t necessary.”

“Exactly. Don’t bring up that shit, but since you did by talking shit about how good you smell, I’ve got to tell these new guys about it, you know, the shit. See, we was over in the Plei Ku area just outside this village and we were all funky, dirty and wet. Our

equipment was all wet from all of the rain and so we thought we'd take some time to dry it out. The sun was blazing hot and we was in a pretty secure area, or so we thought, when we laid out most of our equipment to dry it out. You know, ponchos and poncho liners, web gear, socks and all. I'd just ordered Johnny to make the rounds to all of the positions and make sure that all the guys kept their weapon close by in case of whatever, you know, if somehow we were to get hit, even if it was considered kind of a safe place.

After doing so, Johnny here laid down to relax and dry his feet and equipment. No sooner did he lay down than we started taking sniper fire. There wasn't no place to take cover where Johnny was laying, so he grabbed his weapon and ran to this big ditch about twenty yards from his position."

The guys laughed again. Johnny then said, "Go to hell. This shit ain't funny. Ya'll a sick bunch of bastards."

Continuing, a laughing Sergeant Frank said, "Johnny, you know, the good smelling Johnny here, well he jumped into the ditch to take cover. He spun around to see where the fire was coming from but immediately smelled something funny."

Laughing to the point of tears in his eyes Frank delivered the punch line.

"Shit, yeah, shit. The ditch was the village latrine. Man, you should have seen him. His fatigues were rolled up to his knees, no socks or boots, barefooted, and he just jumped into about two feet of shit. Talk about smelling good. Then he got pissed off and unloaded a magazine into the area the sniper fire was coming from. Swearing like a crazed mad man, there he was screaming like an idiot and shooting at who knows what."

Johnny took exception to the sergeant's description of his shooting. "Who knows

what, my ass! That dink sniper stopped shooting right after I unloaded all those rounds into the tree line. Shot his ass up, that's what I did."

Still laughing, Frank said,

"Bullshit, that tree line was a half a mile away."

In protest, Johnny said,

"Half a mile my ass! Hell, the dink was right on my ass in that tree line."

"Whatever you say Johnny. Like I was saying, see, the real reason the sniper stopped shooting was because he was laughing too hard to shoot after watching Johnny jump in that shit."

"Eat me."

"Hell, and that ain't all; I mean, I've got another Johnny story."

"Come on, Sarge, give me a break. What you gonna tell these guys now?"

"About the time you got stuck in that rice paddy up north, remember?"

"Hell, yes, I remember and that wasn't funny either."

Listening intently, Rooney, looked at King, and said, "If you don't mind Johnny, I think we'd both like to hear it...it sounds kind of interesting.

"Yeah, actually any story about me is pretty cool .Go ahead, Sarge, fill 'em in on the details, but try to get it right."

"You bet I will. See, we were air assaulting into a hot LZ, you know, where we put the choppers down to drop off the troops, see. Anyways, the pilots didn't want to stick around too long, so we jumped off the choppers, you know, a little higher off the

ground than usual. I mean the choppers were taking a lot of rounds. You could hear them hitting the bird, so the door gunners and crew chief were yelling for us to get off. So, we did.

We jumped about eight to ten feet to the ground, and the ground was a rice paddy. Well, the problem with that is that you don't go onto the ground, you go into the ground. See, with all that weight you carry, you just plain sink. It's bad enough when you just step into it, but from ten feet, forget it. Well anyways, Johnny here was carrying the radio for the squad at the time, so on top of all his equipment, he weighed in another thirty pounds with the radio."

"Hold it, Sarge, let me take from here. I remember it all quite well. See, I jumped onto the LZ, or like Sarge here said, a rice paddy. Well, guess what? I went another few feet into the ground, and I'm only five foot eight any damn way. Goddamn, I mean, I got stuck. Couldn't move at all and I was getting shot at. I'm dead serious. You believe that shit? I mean, not only on a hot LZ, but I couldn't move. I was like in quicksand or some kind of shit. Unbelievable."

Trying not to laugh, Sergeant Frank composed himself and added, "Man, look here, Johnny's right. It wasn't funny, not one bit. Before me and Dale got to him, a dud mortar round fell just a few feet from him."

The Sergeant looked at Rooney and King, and explained, "See, a dud round is a dud. It don't go off. I guess the ground was too wet or soft or it was just a bad round. Anyways, it just went thud when it fell into the paddy. The thing is, if it would've exploded, it wouldn't have done any real damage anyways."

Johnny acted shocked by Sergeant Frank's remark, "What the hell you mean no damage? I mean like I couldn't move, you dig? Besides, man, my head was like a damn bowling pin sitting out there."

"Exactly. If it hit your big hard head, it would have been a wasted round anyways. Like I said, it wouldn't have caused any real damage."

Johnny played along and answered with, "Oh, yeah, it could have fucked the radio up."

Tyrone, better known as Big Tee, agreed with Johnny. Big Tee, a tall and lanky Specialist Fourth Class, served previously with both the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions before landing in the Air Cavalry.

"He's right, Sarge. I heard all about it when I got back from my R&R to Bangkok, and it's my understanding that it could've done a number on the radio if it would've exploded. That would've been a problem."

Sergeant Frank confessed he'd made the wrong observation. "Hey, I apologize, Johnny. You're right. It could have bounced off your big hard head and ruined the radio. I'm sorry, man."

Both Rooney and King appreciated the sick humor of the guys. After laughing at the comments, King then asked how they finally extracted Johnny from the paddy.

"So Sarge, how did you get him out of there, anyway?"

"We grabbed his arms and pulled like hell to get his skinny ass unstuck. It was like something grabbed hold of his feet and wasn't letting go." Agreeing, Johnny reaffirmed Sergeant Frank's story,

“You got that right, Sarge. My ass wasn’t going nowhere.”

“Well, we finally managed to pull him out, but the thing is, not only was he getting shot at, we were too. Damn, at that point I wasn’t sure he was worth saving. I thought long and hard about pulling him out. Should’ve just snatched the radio, and left ‘em.”

“Gosh, gee whiz, sniff, sniff.” Johnny wiped his eyes as if to cry. I’m so happy you thought better of it, Sarge, and saved me. Thank you; thank you so much. I was just wondering if the reason you stayed to pull me out was that you realized that if you didn’t, you all would have been in a world of shit without my expert marksmanship. I guess without me, it would have been curtains for you all. I was just wondering.”

“The truth is, Johnny, we needed the radio, and the extra rifle. I guess it wasn’t too funny then, but it’s kind of funny now when I think about it.”

“I agree Sarge. It wasn’t too funny.”

Chapter Three

“Man, when I get home I swear I’m gonna sleep a year straight. It’s been two hours on and two hours off of guard duty ever since I’ve been in country. Not only do we smell funky most of the time, we don’t get any damn sleep either.” Said Specialist Fourth Class Glen, the quiet and well-mannered twenty-year old barrel-chested Native American boy from Wisconsin and avid bow hunter.

The banter continued, and the guys continued telling yarns, to the delight of the new men.

“Glen here, he drinks a lot. He just passes out. Outside that is.”

“Embarrassed by Johnny’s remarks, Glen responded shyly, “Come on, man. You know, I just got a little drunk.”

“A little! You kidding me? And by the way, he may be quiet, but he’s a wrestling champ. You know, a state wrestling champ; so watch out. Don’t let his quietness fool you. He can kick ass, right, Glen?”

Sergeant Frank laughed and said, “Oh we get some sleep around here, in and out of the tent. It’s out there in the field we don’t get any.”

Private King laughed and said, “Sounds great.”

“Yeah, great all right. Besides, sleep’s over rated,” quipped Johnny.

“So are showers.” Said Sergeant Frank. “Now look, like I was just telling Johnny here, I’m going to tell you guys the same thing. You all wanted to be paratroopers.

Remember ya’ll

volunteered for this duty, so welcome to our world.”

“Sergeant Frank. You guys kill a lot of gooks?” asked Private Rooney.

“What the hell did you just ask me?”

“You know, a lot of VC, gooks. You guys kill a lot of ‘em?”

Private King, the pleasant farm boy from Iowa, tried to clarify Rooney’s question but the Sergeant was not appeased. He was pissed. “Let’s get this straight right now, guys. You will refer to him, him being the enemy, as Charles, not Charlie, not gooks or dinks, but Charles, got it?”

Sergeant Frank, easy to get along with, was less than magnanimous when something rubbed him the wrong way. “Actually, until you have your first encounter with him, you will refer to him as Victor Charles, is that clear?”

In concert, both privates snapped a sharp, crisp and loud, “Yes, Sergeant Frank!”

“Now, let me tell you why.” In typical drill Sergeant form, the five foot six Sergeant did his best to go nose to nose with the two, coming up a bit short, he bobbed

and weaved between them while he loudly communicated his message.

“Listen up! He knows a lot more about this place than either one of you do right now and possibly ever will. At this point in your tour ya’ll ain’t earned the right to call anyone a gook. In my squad, if you want to stay alive you best learn to respect your enemy. You don’t have to love him, God knows I don’t, but you will respect him, and that respect will start by addressing the enemy as Victor Charles. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Have either of you got any more dumb-ass questions?”

“No, sir.”

“What?” screamed Sergeant Frank when he pointed at the three stripes on his arm.

“I mean no Sergeant!

“Then I guess it’s safe to say that you understood what I just told both of you, right?”

In concert, both men sounded off, “Yes, Sergeant!”

“Good. You all got it, and don’t you forget it. I want to get you guys home alive and that’s gonna take a little bit of help from ya’ll. You will need to understand your surroundings, to listen to those who have experience, to keep your weapons clean and to respect your enemy. These things will help you get back home alive. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sergeant! Airborne!”

“Airborne!”

Johnny jumped into the scolding, but in his own style. “You best pay attention to Sergeant Frank here. He knows his shit. I mean, the man survived The Dominican Republic with the 82nd airborne so he already got some combat experience before he ever stepped foot in Vietnam. I’ll tell ya’ll something else; he’s a distant relative of Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett or some redneck backwoodsman. So, ya’ll pay attention and with any luck you’ll make it home alive. You dig?”

“Ah, yes sir, or I mean, Specialist.” Said King. Rooney nodded in the affirmative. Johnny added,

“Unfortunately that means being here for the whole year, unless you get your ass medevaced home. Look here, either way beats the alternative, know what I mean? And yeah, we do kill a few Victor Charles every now and then.”

To emphasize Johnny’s point the sergeant snapped out an energetic, “Airborne!” he paused, looked at Johnny and said,

“And by the way, it’s Davy Crockett. And who the hell you calling a backwoods man anyway?”

Johnny, never at a loss for words, blurted out. “You or Davy, take your pick.”

Frank, not particularly amused, spit out a mouthful of chew, just missing the toes of Johnny’s boots. Amused more than anything, Johnny said, “Damn, you’re a good shot at everything!”

“And don’t you forget it.”

Unfazed, Johnny continued on about the advantages of being an airborne trooper. “Being a paratrooper can be kind of tough, you know, especially over here in Vietnam,

but it's got its good points too."

"You mean the extra \$55 a month jump pay we make?" asked Private King.

"Yeah, that and that clicking sound I hear whenever I walk through an airport."

"What clicking sound?"

"Should I tell him?" Johnny asked. Sergeant Frank just smiled and nodded, so the ever-modest Johnny laid the bullshit on him.

"Cameras, man . You know, people taking my picture 'cause I look so good in my bloused jump boots, my glider patch hat tilted down like this." Pulling his hat over his eye for effect, he added "And those silver wings upon my chest. We're talk'in strac Jack. I mean look'in good, Hollywood!"

The sergeant agreed, and said, "Good thing he ain't conceited. He's got a good point though. We do look good."

Johnny quipped, "Some better than others."

#

Third Squad Leader, Sergeant Brown, approached Sergeant Frank and engaged him in a short conversation. When the visiting sergeant turned to walk away, Sergeant Frank turned to the new squad members and said, "You guys may have a good chance to know exactly what we're talking about here, and real soon. Word has it that we'll probably be going out again, like I thought." Looking at Johnny, the Sergeant said,

"Just like you'd hoped for. Right?"

"Yeah, right, can't wait? Hey, thanks Brown," Johnny said as Sergeant Brown

walked away. The sergeant turned and gave Johnny the finger. Sergeant Frank added, “Anyways, we don’t have the details yet but it looks like we’ll be going out soon, so be advised.”

Obviously a bit shaken by Sergeant Frank’s dressing down to his last remark, Rooney timidly asked,

“Sergeant Frank, I’m curious, you know, I hope you don’t mind my asking but have any of you guys, you know, the one’s not in the hospital, been wounded yet? Any Purple Hearts or anything like that? I mean I’m just asking, you know, I’m curious. I hope you don’t mind my asking.”

“No, Private, that’s fine, and yes, we’ve suffered casualties. We call them WIAs, that’s wounded in action. Obviously, the guys that ain’t sick, the guys in the hospital, got ‘em a few Purple Hearts. Dale got one, Big Tee got one, and some other guys from the other squads got a few. I got one up in Tuy Hoa.”

“Really? What Happened?”

“I’ll tell ya’ll about it sometime. Johnny remembers, right Johnny?”

“Do I ever. We all almost got one that day. Actually, we all almost got killed. I’ll tell ya about it later. Don’t want to scare ya’ll before your first mission.”

“It’s heads up out there, okay?”

“Yes Sergeant.”

“Alright then. So, anyways, to finish answering your question, we got six, KIAs so far. That’s killed in action. That’s why I want you all to pay attention and all. We don’t want to lose anymore.”

“Rooney took the remarks to heart, and replied,

“Yes, Sergeant Frank. I’d like to get back home, believe me.”

Johnny, reflected on what the sergeant just said and once more made his point, “Like I said, listen to Sarge here and your chances of getting home alive definitely will be better.”

“How about you Johnny? Have you got a Purple Heart? Or ever been wounded or shot?”

“Are you kidding? I got my shit together, and besides that I’m too fast for Charlie to hit. I mean it ain’t from lack of trying; he just can’t catch up to me, I’m too fast, you know, like faster than a speeding bullet.”

With that, Johnny picked up his guitar and started to play “Detroit City.” Sergeant Frank then asked Johnny, “Don’t the words to that song talk about wanting to go home?”

“Damn sure do, Sarge.”

“What would you do at home that you can’t do here?”

“Get real, my man! Back on the block I’d either be out playing with the band, with a Chick or at least getting into some action, you know, drinking some beer or in a fight or something. I mean come on man I haven’t even mentioned anything about the food. Look here, after we’d go out and do some brews, we’d stop and have a Chicago dog or some Chicago pizza. You gotta be putting me on, what would I do I can’t do here. No, man, I’d be doing something cool, not camping out in some Godforsaken jungle waiting to kill gooks.”

Johnny Looked at both of the two new squad members, emphasizing his seniority status, said, “See? I’ve earned the right to call ‘em gooks. You all will, too, someday.”

Coming from the hills of North Carolina, the sergeant was intrigued with Johnny’s description of the food he talked about. So he inquired by asking, “What’s with this Chicago dog, Chicago pizza bullshit anyways? I mean a hot dog is a hot dog; a pizza is a pizza for Christ’s sake. You don’t hear me saying I want a North Carolina dog or a Fayetteville pizza. What’s this all about?”

“Oh, no, man, no way. See, you don’t understand ‘cause you ain’t from Chicago. A Chicago dog ain’t no regular kind of dog. It’s a Chicago dog. You know, a beef hot dog; that’s why they’re famous. Same thing with the pizza. They’re like famous for being good. You know, they’re just better.”

“I ain’t buying it, Johnny, I mean a dog’s a dog and a pizza is a pizza.”

“See, I knew you wouldn’t understand. Ya’ll southern ridge runners probably eat raccoon or alligator pizza or some shit, and real dog hot dog, that’s why.”

“We ain’t got no alligators in North Carolina, dumb ass.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I know you all got raccoons. I’ve seen ‘em. Who the hell wants to eat that?”

“Kiss my country ass, city boy.”

After laughing off Sergeant Frank’s remarks, Johnny went on with his griping, “Anyways I should have gone to Canada. I’m sick of this war bullshit, know what I mean?”

Frank, shocked, asked, “Canada? What the hell would somebody like you want to

go to Canada for? They get more snow in Canada than Chicago, plus it gets really cold up there.”

“I ain’t afraid of no damn snow. We get that shit all the time in Chicago. And what? It don’t get cold in Chicago, country boy? Besides, at least it ain’t no two hundred hot ass degrees and raining on your ass all night and day like it does here in the jungle.”

Private Rooney, who’d been listening intently, brought news from the world about the subject being discussed. “Guys are going to Canada, for real, you know, to get out of the draft. They know that they’re gonna send their ass to Vietnam so to beat the draft, they go to Canada.”

Johnny knew a little about what was going on back in the world, but the thought that some guys were avoided serving in Vietnam didn’t set well with him.

“Bastards.”

Big Tee said, “Make up your damn mind, Johnny. If you should have gone to Canada, why can’t these other guys do it? What you’re saying don’t make no sense to me.”

“I don’t know, man, I’m confused. This whole thing’s fucked up.”

Big Tee expressed his thoughts,

“I don’t know, man, Canada might not be that bad. This place is bullshit. Think I’d rather be in Canada dealing with snow than here dealing with Charlie. When I enlisted in sixty-one, wasn’t no damn Vietnam in the picture, know what I’m trying to say? I mean, I joined the army right out of high school ‘cause there weren’t no damn jobs for me, you know, I mean, good jobs.”

“Really? Like what kind of job?”

“Johnny, Louisiana ain’t Chicago. I’m a Negro. Wasn’t no opportunity there, so I left. But I’ll tell you what. I damn sure wouldn’t have re-upped if I knew we was coming here.”

“I can dig that.”

Big Tee suffered no inhibitions when it came to saying what was on his mind. It may have been that quality, speaking his mind, that kept him out of favor of his superiors.

Rooney wanted to know the reason why Johnny earlier mentioned the possibility of getting into a fight if he were back home, so he asked, “What’s up with this getting into a fight business?”

Sergeant Frank then said, “Oh, like he says, ‘back on the block’ he used to be a golden gloves boxer so he likes to fight. I mean, look at that face. Can’t you tell? Looks all beat to shit to me, and he told me no one ever laid a glove on him. I told you all before, he’s crazy.”

Big Tee added to the levity when he agreed with the Sergeant and said, “I guess that do explain that nose, man. I didn’t really want to say anything, you know, but now I understand. That honker’s been busted, right?”

“No, man, come on. Like I told Sergeant Frank, no one ever laid a glove on me.”

“You ain’t no heavyweight, you know. What weight you fought at man? Lightweight?”

“That’s right ... you know I’m a lean, mean fightin’ machine.”

“Right! Look, I’m sorry, brother, but I’m gonna have to agree with the sergeant here. You are crazy. Nothing personal you understand?”

“Crazy? I’ll tell you what’s crazy Tee. These country boys like the Sarge here, you know, not back on the block, but back on the farm, wrestling a damn horse to the ground and tying it up, you know all that rodeo bullshit. That’s crazy! Not little ole Johnny Richards and an occasional fisticuff now and then. Besides, man, I’m still pretty. Like I said, no one’s ever laid a glove on me.”

Frank jumped right back in by setting the record straight regarding the rodeo statement.

“Not a horse, asshole, a calf. Nobody wrestles a horse to the ground and ties it up, stupid. You don’t know shit about the rodeo, and besides you are ugly. You sure a calf never kicked you in the face?”

“Excuse me, but it still sounds weird to me rodeo boy. Besides, I still am good looking. Just ask any of these guys. Right?”

“Yeah, you’re gorgeous all right. Kiss me,” said the smart-ass talking Big Tee. A collective hoot from the guys seemed to quiet Johnny, if only temporarily when Rooney, pointing to Johnny’s guitar, asks, “Hey, man, we saw you playing with that guitar when we just got here, right?”

Johnny nodded in the affirmative, “That ain’t all he plays with.” Shouted Glen, provoking a smattering of jeers and laughs. Sergeant Frank did his best to give the blue remark made by Glen some credibility.

“No, look here, it ain’t like it sounded. What trooper Glen there meant to say was

Johnny also plays washtub bass, right Glen?"

Glen laughed and played along.

"Of course, Sergeant Frank. That's what I meant to say."

"Yeah, you see Johnny here ain't just a guitar player, he's an accomplished washtub player, right Johnny?"

"I'm accomplished at everything I do."

Private King hesitantly asked Johnny, "I'm almost afraid to ask but what is a washtub bass?"

"Well, let Sergeant Frank here explain it since he brought it up. Go ahead, Sarge, but try to get this story right."

"Well, we just got back from an operation that morning and the division was having a USO show that day right here on the helicopter landing pad, where you guys just got off the chopper."

Big Tee put in his two cents worth then bitterly added, "It don't make no damn sense. Know what I mean? I mean they have these damn shows and usually the only guys who get to see them are the guys who stay here in base camp. One Goddamn time we saw a show. One damn time after all that time we spend in the field. All that Bob Hope show shit, we ain't never seen any of it. We finally got to see one, one damn show. You'd think the pricks would bring them shows in when we here, know what I mean?"

Johnny agreed, but offered a caveat, "The man is right about all that he said, but the best thing about the one show that we did get to see, and that my friend Big Tee here forgot to mention, was the fact that I was the main attraction."

The guys loved Johnny and his humbleness, noted by Big Tee's remark, "Johnny, you sure one humble cat, know what I'm saying?"

"Well, I am, but I just want to make sure these guys get the truth, know what I mean?"

"So anyways, Sarge, continue."

"Gee thanks, Johnny."

"Don't mention it, Sarge. Go ahead."

"Thanks, specialist. So like I was saying, they were having this USO show, and so we all marched on down to the field. The show starred that cowboy guy from TV, what's his name?"

One of the troopers shouted out, "James Drury."

"Yeah, that's it, The Virginian. He brought a couple of dancing chicks with him and a couple of guys who sang and played guitar. They were called "The South Hollywood Buffalo Hunters" or something like that. It was a pretty good show."

Rooney, like King, listened intently, then asked, "I thought Johnny said he was the main attraction, Sarge?"

"No, he wasn't. I don't even remember if he was there. Were you there, Johnny?"

Johnny didn't let that go by without a challenge.

"I knew the Sergeant here couldn't get it right, He can't seem to get any story right. So it looks like it's up to me to tell it like it happened. See, Sarge here has been shooting guns his whole life and all that noise not only made him half deaf; he's not, ya

know, too bright. All that noise has rattled his brain. He can't remember shit. Look, here's what happened. The star of the show asked for a volunteer to play this washtub bass with these two singing guys. Naturally, the platoon here, realizing what a talent I am, offered me up. I mean, these guys was all yelling out my name."

Both Big Tee and Sergeant Frank shook their heads in disbelief. Laughing, Big Tee, said, "Humble? Remember the thing I said about him being humble? Yeah, he sure is humble."

"Well, I have a duty to my fellow troopers and so I volunteered to go up. Lord knows I didn't want to, but once again, duty called, and so I went."

Sergeant Frank, rubbed the sweat from his forehead and cried, "Jesus."

"Well, being the great musician I am, not only did I make those two singing guys sound great by playing my ass off, I made those two dancing girls look good too. Not bad, eh? Like I said, I was the main attraction."

"Well what did James Drury do in the show if you were the main attraction?"

Asked Rooney

"Hell, I have no idea. Was he there, Frank? All I know is I was cooking on that bass and the chicks were like pushing their titties into my arm and the GIs were going nuts, I swear."

Sergeant Frank relented the fact that Johnny stole the show.

"Actually, Johnny here is telling it like it was. He really did play that bass pretty good and the two dancing girls were really playing it up with him. The guys went nuts, you know, when those two chicks pushed their tits into his arms."

The two privates were amused by the story and the seemingly endless banter between the squad members. Rooney, intrigued by Johnny's boxing history, then asked,

“When you box ain't you afraid of injuring your hands? You know, like maybe breaking them? I know a buddy of mine back home punched out a guy after school one day but he busted his hand in the fight. How would you manage to play your guitar if you broke your hand?”

“Never happen. Know why?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Cause these hands are made of steel, just like that cat with a cape, you know, the guy that flies, what's his name? That's why. Next question.”

The guys whooped it up. Sergeant Frank then interrupted the banter to take care of some business.

“All right, Superman. That's enough of this bullshit. These two replacements here need to go to the armory and draw their weapons. King, go get yourself an M-79 grenade launcher and a 45 pistol. Rooney, you get yourself an M-16. The rest of you, and that goes for you, too, Superman, start putting your gear together 'cause we'll be moving out soon and it won't be to Canada.”

Not one to let a good line go without due notice, Johnny put his stamp of approval on Sergeant Franks remark. “Sarge, that was funny; you know, the Canada thing. At my expense, but it was funny... Jerk!”

Somewhat miffed, Sergeant Frank called out to Johnny, “Johnny, would you come here please? The rest of you men, go get your equipment and come back here

ASAP!”

Soon after the men moved out to gather their equipment, Sergeant Frank collared Johnny and sternly warned him, “Man, Johnny, you can’t talk to me like that, you understand? Show me more respect in front of the men, especially the new guys. I’m a Sergeant and you are a Specialist. I out rank you, okay?”

Johnny, slung his arm around Sergeant Franks shoulder and said, “You know I love ya Frank, but old habits are hard to break. I just remember when you was a regular Spec Four like me, and hey, I made sure they didn’t see the one finger salute I just gave you.”

“Well I ain’t a Spec Four anymore. Like I said, I’m a Sergeant in the United States Army so show me a little more respect. Got it?”

Johnny nodded in agreement. Both men knew that he resented being told what to do, by anybody, but it was even more difficult taking orders from an old buddy.

“All right, man, I mean, Sergeant Frank. I’ll try, I promise.”

“You mean it? I mean for real? I need you to help me out, man.”

“I said I would. Give me a break.”

“No, you didn’t. You said you’d try.”

“Okay, I promise. I’ll try.”

“You know you’re driving me nuts, right? Look, I’ll settle for you trying, okay?”

