

## Foreword

For those of us who went to Vietnam it became more than just a rite of passage. It was a coming of age event. Others never lived long enough to take any of the lessons home with them from that passage. It was a faraway time and place, and in the way of all wars, one that separated boys from their homes, families and their very souls. The Vietnam war, though, stole more than the youth of these young warriors, fresh from the streets of America; it took them on a journey that for most became a nightmare or, at the very least, a surreal dream.

Friendships with our fellow soldiers became substitute families. We fought and died for each other, not for some vague ideology or the flag of our country or a patriotic ideal for politicians to make rhetoric about at a Fourth of July parade. Nor was it about “killing commies” or stopping the “Domino Effect.” Some of these young men were just out of high school and our bonding became the deepest and most meaningful relationships of our lives. There will never be anyone more ingrained in our memories and in our hearts than those with whom we fought side by side during our “*tour of duty*.”

Duke Barrett takes the sacred elements of the “*Nam Experience*” and weaves them into a synthesis that is the true, fundamental foundation of any authentic story about the war in Vietnam, be it a memoir or a work of fiction, and makes it a meaningful background to his novel. His story is about those young men who were with us, and whose loss took such a heavy spiritual toll on each and every veteran. We did not have time to grieve or mourn and shed tears. We could not afford to show any emotions... “*It don’t mean nothing!*”

I believe that some veterans who read this story may actually find some personal healing while others who are not veterans may find some understanding. This story is an adventure but be prepared for an emotional and inspirational journey as well. But then, when you wake up maybe all that you just read was just a dream!

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# Prologue

## **A Place called Happy Valley The Republic of South Vietnam, Early October 1967**

THE TROOPER GRIPPED THE knife tightly, raised his arms high above his head and waited to sink the blade of his weapon into, to take the life of, whoever dared walk down the trail that was his charge. Moments after he'd positioned himself into the raised crevice that ran alongside the enemy trail, he pondered his situation.

Visited by a brief moment of irony, an old song ran through his head. "Please, Mr. Custer," a comedic hit tune from 1960 that ironically referenced a Cavalryman of the Indian wars who'd questioned his presence in the Little Bighorn. Johnny, too, a Cavalryman, wondered what the hell he was doing there, not at Custer's Last Stand in the Montana territories, but instead, thousands of miles from home in a place called "Happy Valley." Man, he thought, I should be back in the "world" drinking a cold beer, playing guitar; this shit don't make no sense.

On that hot and humid evening, concealed in a sea of mosquito-laden elephant grass, Johnny Richards, a member of an advanced reconnaissance patrol, prayed the sweat that poured from his brow would not betray his painted, camouflaged face and expose to an ever-present enemy his white skin in the bright moonlight.

In moments of anxious wait, his teeth chattered, mosquitoes feasted on exposed skin and the twenty-year-old paratrooper's worst fears were realized. The dreaded silhouette of an enemy soldier approached his position. Fear and adrenaline boiled, his wet hands shook nervously, his soul then committed to the attack.

Fortunately, his excellent vision, not unlike the deadly Cobra snake, detected an irregularity. In an agonizing second before striking, the coiled paratrooper hesitated, frozen in motion. Aided by the bright moonlight, relief poured like whiskey at an Irish wake from his nervous soul when he determined that the silhouette, a large silhouette, was not that of the enemy, but of his buddy Dale, another member of the advanced reconnaissance patrol that evening.

"Jesus Christ! Man, I mean what the... I mean, what? I almost cut you like a stuck pig. Donner told me to take out the next dink that comes down this trail; quietly, you know, stick 'em. Man, you all should've let me know you were gonna be coming back down this trail. What the hell happened?"

"Sorry, man; didn't have a choice. We got the hell out of there before they spotted us. Donner and Frank are right behind me. Listen up, man, there's a whole bunch of VC (Viet Cong) right up this trail. I mean a bunch! We were in position to take 'em out when we realized there's too many of 'em for us to hit 'em, so we hauled ass up this trail before they saw us. But hey, thanks for not sticking me. Check it out! I mean, they've got guard towers up there, man. Two of 'em. Sergeant Frank wanted to take the guards out but Donner thinks we better talk to battalion first to see what they want us to do. He needs to get the right grid coordinates first, though, if we're going to drop some artillery on their ass."

Sergeant Donner and Frank, only footsteps behind, breathed and sweated heavily when they caught up with Dale. The heavy perspiration that ran from Donner's face dripped onto his map when he checked the grid coordinates. In a quiet but firm voice Sergeant Donner said, "Listen up, we're going to pull back to the platoon and I'm going to call in and see if battalion wants to drop some artillery on their asses. Oh, and Johnny; good job, son. We came up this trail or they would have seen us; had no choice. I'm happy to see that you were alert."

Johnny became even more aware of the situation up ahead. His comment to Sergeant Donner spoke volumes. "Man, there must be a whole lot of gooks up there."

"That's affirmative, Johnny. There's a bunch of 'em."

THE FOUR MEN MOVED back to join the main body of the reconnaissance platoon who were less than fifty yards back down the trail. The cover of darkness, coupled with the aid of the moonlight, worked to their advantage; the illumination helped the four rendezvous with the platoon. Within seconds of the link up, Johnny heard distant but distinct sounds. Blessed with the sensitive ear of a musician, he identified the sounds. "Shh, quiet, listen up. I hear 'em. You all hear that sound? Like a rubber ball bouncing on a tin roof? That boing sound is them; we got VC."

The enemy soldiers approached from the rear and without uttering another sound, Johnny, Sergeant Frank and Dale silently positioned themselves on the trail to ambush the unsuspecting VC soldiers who closed fast. Settled into the prone position, both Johnny and Sergeant Frank readied their M-16s while Dale knelt directly behind them at the ready, all weapons pointed directly down the trail. Sergeant Donner, in the process of making a call to battalion, just put the handset of his radio to his ear when all hell broke loose. Like the sound of branches of a large oak tree cracking under the strain of a heavy coat of ice, the sounds of semi-automatic fire broke the silence. Crack! Crack! Crack! immediately followed by bursts of fully automatic fire, became the last sounds the unsuspecting VC soldiers ever heard. The barrage of M-16 fire rained in on the squad of Viet Cong and felled them as if they were no more than a line of dominoes.

"We got 'em! I think we got 'em all!" shouted Sergeant Frank. No sooner said than an enemy hand grenade exploded nearby, wounding a couple of platoon members. In a mere instant, heavy automatic weapons fire opened up on the scattered platoon. A squad leader waiting with the main body of the platoon, startled by the gunfire, shouted, "They're coming! They're coming!"

Visions of crazed Oriental men charging with swords and guns,

prompted by a bugler's call, caused platoon Sergeant Donner to issue the order, "Everyone back to the river (the staging ground for the patrol) now! Let's move, people!"

With the platoon in retreat to the river, Sergeant Brill stood over each and every wounded enemy soldier and methodically filled them full of even more lead from an M-60 machine gun he just requisitioned from a platoon machine gunner, yelling "I'll kill every one of the bastards," to make sure not a one of them survived.

"Sergeant, I want you to move out now. Let's go!" screamed Donner, his voice all but drowned out by the volume of the firing machine gun. Brill, a crusty old Korean War vet who'd survived the infamous battle of Pork Chop Hill in July of 1953 of said war, relished combat. He stopped and glared at the young platoon sergeant.

In the many years Brill soldiered, he failed to hold onto any achieved rank. Busted more times than a rock-n-roll drummer's sticks, three stripes (buck sergeant) would be the pinnacle of his violent and troubled career. He lived, drank and fought with a fury, and in spite of his personal flaws, the country owed him and his type a serious debt of gratitude. "I just want to make sure they don't bother us anymore, Sergeant. That's all." Brill then moved out as ordered.

IN THE MIDST OF the firefight, the medic rushed in to aid the wounded men. He brought the two men back to the staging area where he dressed their wounds, and only then did it become apparent that both were in need of serious medical attention. In the face of chaos and confusion, it became evident that the medic possessed a clear head and a healthy pair of balls.

At the site of the regrouping, the medic alerted Donner of the seriousness of the wounds sustained by the two men. Donner immediately ordered his radio operator to call in a medevac (air ambulance) helicopter to evacuate the wounded.

"Medevac 8, Chinese Bandit. Over."

"This is Medevac 8. Over."

"Need pick-up ASAP (As soon as possible.) Say again, ASAP. We have two, say again, two WIA (wounded in action) at coordinates Lima

Zulu one-four-niner-two-niner-one. Bandit. Over.”

“Roger that, Bandit. Approximate Echo Tango Alpha, ETA (estimated time of arrival) ten minutes. Medevac 8. Over.”

“Roger that eight. Bandit. Out.”

Separated by only a few feet from the radio and its operator, Donner got the message. “Medevac’s on the way, Sarge. ETA, ten minutes.”

Sergeant Donner acknowledged the information. “I want a secure perimeter right here. Sergeant Brill, get your squad and all available bodies to secure an LZ (Landing Zone) right now!” Brill and the men did as ordered and secured the LZ for the impending arrival of the ship.

The medevac helicopter arrived, having exceeded its own ETA, to evacuate the two wounded men; the full extent of their injuries had not yet been determined. Immediately following its arrival, in a not too heroic way, almost cowardly, two other ever so slightly wounded men managed to finagle their way onto the chopper. The wounds sustained by the two were questionable; not everyone was a hero.

After the chopper lifted off of the LZ, Donner said, “Listen up! Secure your positions, secure the perimeter. Every man will be on one hundred percent alert tonight; no exceptions! Battalion wants us to attack in the morning, but be prepared to be hit tonight. Squad leaders, you know what to do.”

Johnny and company waited in position the rest of that evening for an attack that never materialized. The tension filled night was followed by a morning, which brought a new lease on life. The now seemingly peaceful, dew-heavy valley, so violent and chaotic only hours before, greeted the soldiers with a calm and quiet welcomed by all.

AT THE BREAK OF DAWN, Sergeant Frank and Johnny were ordered by Sergeant Donner to scout out the areas that only hours ago were contested.

“Bandit, I don’t see a thing. No enemy personnel, nothing. Over.”

“Bow Hunter. Say nothing, no movement. Over.”

“That’s affirmative, Bandit. Over.”

“Can you see the guard towers? Over.”

“That’s affirmative, Bandit. No movement, no personnel. Got some

freshly-dug fighting positions, some extinguished fires for cooking, no personnel. Say again, no personnel. Over.”

“Roger that, Bow Hunter. Bandit out.”

Sergeant Frank handed the radio handset to Johnny, rolled over, and rested his back up against a tree. “Aw, damn I’m thirsty,” said the sergeant, sucking his canteen dry. His throat was parched, in spite of the wet environment.

“Must be your nerves, Sarge, ya know? That shit will make ya thirsty.”

“You got that right.”

“Hey, it looks like they moved out. Guess they didn’t know how many of us there were. You know what I mean?”

“You got it, Johnny. Either that or we cut their head off in that ambush last night. Ain’t sure. One thing I do know for sure, I’m thirsty.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Hey, guess you can call the rest of the platoon up now, huh, Frank? I wanna get rid of this radio. I’ve already put my time in carrying this damn thing. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I’m calling Donner right now.”

THE DECIMATED REMAINS of the nine VC soldiers killed only hours ago were cautiously approached by the platoon. “Got a live one here! Somebody give me a hand,” shouted out the medic. Both Johnny and Sergeant Frank rushed to aid Bill, who tried his level best to keep the enemy soldier alive.

Looking at the mangled corpses, an amazed Johnny said, “Unbelievable, Doc. I mean look at the veins, the muscle tissue and shit. How the hell does this stuff, you know, the arms and legs and all, stay on their bodies? It’s like all this stringy stuff is holding ’em on. Know what I mean?”

“Ligaments and tendons.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Brain matter, strewn about like seeds from a tree blown in the wind, made quite the impression on all present. The most amazing thing witnessed, of the nine felled enemy soldiers who lay there frozen with

open eyes fixed on the heavens or whatever awaited them, was that one managed to survive. The soldier somehow lived through the barrage of M-16 fire that shredded the bodies of his now dead comrades. Miraculously, life hadn't yet fully escaped his body; he was alive, barely.

"Doc, I mean, talk about tough. How the hell could he still be alive?"

"I don't know, Johnny, but look, he's smiling. That's unbelievable.

Give me a hand. I want to get this guy to a hospital. To survive this, I'd say he's earned a chance to live." Then Bill all but ordered the platoon sergeant to bring in a medevac chopper for the wounded enemy soldier.

"Sergeant, I want a medevac ASAP! I'm going to try to save this guy."

"You know, Doc, you treat these gooks like your own family, and you know what? I like that. I mean, in this bullshit war not too many people are nice like you are, man. You're all right with me, Doc."

"Well, I only hope one day if I'm in their shoes they'll do the same for me. I mean, I am a medic, you know, and that's what we do."

"You mean their sandals, Doc, not their shoes."

The platoon sergeant called for the chopper, and it arrived in no time. When the wounded enemy soldier was carried to the awaiting chopper, Sergeant Frank addressed Sergeant Donner,

"Damn, Sarge, that chopper got here fast. I didn't think it would get here that quick."

"I'll tell you why it did, Sergeant Frank. When I called for the chopper, I could tell they wanted a live body for intelligence. They must have figured they could get some information from him. Why else would it get here that fast?"

HOWEVER, THINGS PLAYED OUT differently; the wounded soldier died en route to a medical facility.

"Bill, hey, I'm sorry, buddy. Your patient didn't make it. He died on the chopper shortly after we put him on it. I know you did your best to keep that guy alive, and it's been a tough day out here for you, buddy. I'm sorry, partner; it's tough on all of us."

Bill stared straight ahead and said, "I did what I could, you know. I hate to see anyone die, but..." He hesitated, gathered his thoughts, lit a cigarette and walked off.

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“ALL RIGHT, LET’S POLICE (clean) up this area right now, and I mean now! I want to get these bodies buried before we leave here.” Prone to perform in a state of perpetual panic, Sergeant Gonzalez led the burial detail. Only hours before, Gonzalez yelled out, “They’re coming, they’re coming!” The excitable sergeant led by example. He showed how he wanted the detail to be executed.

“Listen up! Watch me and I’ll show you what I want done.”

The sergeant picked up one of the stiff, dead enemy soldiers, and carried the corpse toward a ditch he deemed to be a proper burial site. In the process of carrying the man’s body to his final resting place, in his haste the sergeant tripped and stumbled into some sort of macabre dance of the dead while he tried in vain to regain his balance. An absolutely surreal sight, the soldiers watched in a mixture of horror and amusement when the sergeant and the corpse moved in an almost sick, illicit embrace before the off balanced, two left-footed sergeant spun and fell into the ditch on top of his dead dance partner. That move prompted one of the onlookers, specialist Glen, to say, “Hey, look, Sergeant Gonzalez is dancing with the gook. He sure can cut a rug.”

Glen’s remark drew a laugh from others on the detail. They’d developed a rather sick sense of humor, an absolute necessity to cope in this environment, for sure. The men completed the grisly task of the detail by tossing the bodies in a most unceremonious way, into the ditch. Hideously, the stiff, lifeless bodies bounced, eyes wide open all the while as if not to miss a thing, to witness their own demise. They were then covered with foliage, dirt and debris, and left to decay.

“DAMN, WE LOST EVEN MORE men on this recon. This crap just doesn’t get any easier,” complained the platoon sergeant to Specialist Fourth Class Cadell, the radio operator. “I mean, we lost Robinson on the first day to malaria and then four more in the firefight. Give me a break! Battalion doesn’t seem to understand that I need bodies. I’m losing two of my most experienced NCOs (non-commissioned officers) when we get back off this mission.”

“Who’s going, Sarge?”

“Gonzales and Brill. They’re both rotating back to the world.”

“Lucky dogs.”

WITH THE MISSION COMPLETED, the platoon moved out of the valley, and climbed back to the mountaintop they only recently descended from. Those within earshot heard the stress in Donner’s voice, when he pled his case to his superiors. “Sir, we’re always undermanned. We just lost five men and I’m losing two of my NCOs. Get me some replacements, some bodies, please; say again, bodies. Over.”