



Dedication

To Al Hansen, a wonderful guy, and a dedicated pilot who never saw his only son.....

It is hoped that the events described in this book will help his son understand what his dad faced in the Vietnam conflict, and why his dad fulfilled his obligation as he did.

Forward

Flying was a dream of many young men from their very early days. Facing military service in the Vietnam era, some chose to fly. The Army had a great need for helicopter pilots although those who applied did not give much thought to the reasons why.

They might have briefly considered this question when they realized that it took two hundred hours of flight training to become a qualified Army aviator. Compare this to a few hours learning to drive a car.....

While Sikorsky's invention was groundbreaking, all right, the trainees found very quickly that the most stable configuration of a helicopter in flight is inverted. If the controls are left unattended for a brief period of time, like the blink of an eye, the helicopter will immediately assume that "most stable configuration".

Learning to fly a helicopter is like balancing on a large rubber ball. No direction is off limits - you can move forward, backward, left, right, up, down or rotate left or right, all with a feather touch. This is why it requires both hands and both feet to manipulate the controls, and the mental focus to pull off this seemingly impossible feat.

And because of the newness of the helicopter's introduction to the military, its use in combat was at the very steepest part of the learning curve. Of course the training instructors never let on that this might be the case when the trainees reached their combat units, but there were hints along the way.

The first of these was that many different models of helicopters were used in training. And variations of those models. It would seem, even with brief contemplation, that maybe the manufacturers had little idea of the design that would best accomplish the intended mission of these strange creations. The second might have been the complicated systems required to power all the flight surfaces of the helicopter. Some referred to the helicopter as a variety of parts all flying in close formation to support the pilot. And it was interesting, if a student happened to notice, that on the combat ships, the identification number of the helicopter was painted on the vertical stabilizer at the extreme aft of the ship.

It became apparent, after witnessing several crash sites, that maybe the reason for this was that the vertical stabilizer was the most likely part of the aircraft to survive destruction. That made it much easier for the Army to tell which ship had been lost. The large number of moving parts actually assisted the disintegration of the ship when an accident occurred. It was felt by some that this was intentional. It was done purposefully so the Army couldn't be accused of cluttering up the jungle environment with large pieces of broken aircraft. The smaller pieces remaining after a crash were quickly lost to sight, and hopefully just as soon forgotten by those who flew over the same area at a later time.

One section of the flight manual was devoted entirely to "emergency procedures". Since it was a written document, it was assumed by the students that the writers knew their subject very well. Perhaps this wasn't the case at all. Everyone knows that the Army requires a complete manual on everything it buys, and all possibilities must be covered in that manual. It became apparent to many pilots that the instruction manual was lacking a bit. The procedure for handling any single emergency was detailed thoroughly, but there was no section that covered multiple malfunctions. And it was found in practice that when one system in a machine with as many moving parts as the helicopter failed, it was very likely that something else would fail, too. Add to this the complication of how the aircraft was loaded or configured with armament, and sometimes the procedures as written were found wanting.

The most stable configuration of a helicopter in upright flight was without the engine running. This state, called engine failure in the instruction manual, called for quick reaction on the part of the pilot to stabilize the aircraft's attitude, and enter what was called autorotation. Then he at least felt like he was in control for the remainder of the flight, or the rest of his life, both of which often ended at the same time.

This emergency was practiced constantly. The Army did not issue parachutes to helicopter pilots or crew. In the event that the engine failed, the entire crew rode the crippled ship to the ground, or autorotated. It was actually possible to land a helicopter without any engine power. But, as can be imagined, it was a one-shot deal.

When the engine ceased to run, the pilot had to make some quick decisions on possible landing areas, control

settings, and readying the crew for the inevitable meeting with the ground. This procedure was complicated by Mother Nature - wind, weather, terrain, vegetation. The other factors were altitude, airspeed, attitude of the aircraft, load, and, of course in combat, enemy situation and location. The lower the altitude, the quicker these conditions had to be evaluated and a decision made. Even at a reasonable height above the ground there wasn't a lot of time for discussion in the cockpit about possible actions, and it was a rare time indeed when the crew or passengers had any input into the decision at all - except maybe an expression of abject terror.

Autorotations were practiced frequently in training, but the caveat here was that training was NEVER done with a loaded ship. So, especially in a combat situation, a pilot could never expect the ship to react as it had in training. This was particularly true of armed aircraft, commonly termed gunships, whose primary job was to provide armed support for the troop ships (slicks), or the infantry on the ground.

The early armed ships were operated so far outside the safety envelope that if the training guidelines were used, they would never have attempted a take off in the combat environment of Vietnam. Needless to say, there was a lot of on-the-job-learning that new pilots to these units had to assimilate. Just to get a heavily loaded, ready-for-combat C model Huey airborne took some finesse on the controls. These ships were so heavily loaded that they could not hover, and take-offs were accomplished only by bouncing the ship along the take-off path until it began to fly. These conditions did not apply to the Cobras which replaced the C models, as the Cobras had enough power to lift their loads. Regardless of the aircraft, the job had to be done, and the young pilots simply found ways to do it.

It's often heard that these young pilots exhibited all kinds of heroics in the face of extreme situations. But I believe that this behavior was often misinterpreted. Just flying these overloaded aircraft took so much attention and focus that often the pilot was disregarding events that were occurring outside the ship. Things like weather, hazardous terrain or enemy fire were secondary to the immediate and critical need of flying the ship under him. If the pilot lost focus, it wasn't a question if something bad was going to happen. It was merely when and how bad.

The tale you are about to read is the story of one of those pilots, and those with whom he flew. The events described in this book are as true as they can be remembered. All the names have been changed to protect both the innocent and the guilty, except for one. His name appears on the dedication page.

Why was this book written? From the veterans I've met, they all have an intensity to their stories when they tell them. But it wasn't often that those who fought in Vietnam shared their stories when they returned home. The social climate in the United States had turned against them. I want their sons and daughters to know that soldier mothers and fathers served proudly, even in the face of death. I want their children to know that no matter how each soldier felt personally about the war, that they were dedicated Americans. When their country called, they stepped forward to be counted.

V for Valor by Loren Gee

Copyright: TXu-589-208

Dedication
Forward

Before Enlistment

1	WSU and ROTC.....	1
2	Recruiting Sergeant.....	10
3	Entrance Physical at Spokane.....	13
4	Flight Physical at Fort Lewis.....	18
5	Hunting with the Father-in-law.....	22
6	First Friend Leaving.....	29

Basic Training

7	George and the Hijack Plan.....	34
8	Smokeys and Blondie.....	41
9	Dreaming of Nurses.....	50
10	On the Rifle Range.....	63
11	Hand-to-hand Combat.....	67
12	First Army Payday.....	73
13	Drill Corporal Banner.....	77
14	"Hit and Run".....	80
15	Basic Training Ends.....	83
16	First Leave.....	88

Flight Training

17	Primary Flight -- Ground School.....	94
18	Learning to Fly a Helicopter.....	98
19	Autorotations and Winter Weather...109	
20	Christmas Leave and Divorce.....	117
21	The Hangover Cure.....	122
22	Straighten Up and Fly.....	131
23	Wreck of the VW.....	136
24	Pistol in the Window.....	145
25	Good Times on the Florida Coast.....	149
26	Al's Reputation Grows.....	160
27	Gun Training with Al.....	165
28	Full-fledged Army Pilots.....	172
29	Joining the ARA at Fort Sill.....	177
30	First Death in the 4/77th.....	195
31	Private Leighton.....	200

32 Saint Christopher Medal.....208

The Vietnam Police Action

33 Incoming.....213
34 The Purpose of War.....229
35 First Battle Casualty.....247
36 Ship Lost in the Bowling Alley.....272
37 Friendly Fire Incident.....284
38 Transfer to C Battery.....300
39 "Death on Call".....311
40 First C Battery Loss.....320
41 First Engine Failure.....332
42 Forty-eight Hours Straight.....348
43 Morals versus Standard
 Operating Procedures.....371
44 Hamburger Hill.....383
45 Sleeping in the Ashau.....406
46 Night Battle for Fire Support
 Base Currahee.....415
47 RPG's at Camp Evans.....427
48 Vung Tau and Cobra Transition.....438
49 Fire in the Cockpit.....448
50 The Premonition.....462
51 First R&R to Sydney, Australia.....472
52 Missing in Action.....486
53 Command and Control North.....492
54 Nose to Nose with a .50.....499
55 A Night in Saigon.....507
56 Crash Near the DMZ.....514
57 Flag at the Bridge.....522
58 Pot Limit Poker.....541
59 New Pilot on the Plane.....548
60 Mayday for the Little Bird.....555
61 Night on the Bunker Line.....562
62 Shot Down on the Red Line.....569
63 Second R&R in Sydney.....582
64 Collision at Sally POL.....589
65 Visitor in the Dark Hootch.....602
66 Freedom Bird.....605

Glossary - will sure help with
 terms if you read it.....610

Sittin' around the CUB watchin' girls go by, sippin' a Coke was the way a lot of time was spent in the long, spring afternoons at WSU in 1967. The CUB, the student union building, was of the wide open construction concept. You could see both entry doors from the tables in the central area -- the place to watch all the action. The booths were low so the view was unobstructed. Ken and Dallas sat on one side with Keith and Roger on the other. The chipped ice rattled in the cup as Keith tipped it to his lips. The CUB was almost deserted this early in the afternoon.

"Sure, it's too late to join ROTC now, you meathead," Keith was saying. "But what do you think you're gonna do....be a grunt for two years?"

Roger laughed. "Well, what would you suggest? Go join the Marine Corps?"

"Naw. Only a fool would join that outfit."

"Look, have you ever thought of flyin'?" Ken asked.

"Flying?! That takes some know-how doesn't it? I mean, just anybody can't walk in and say they want to fly can they?" Roger swirled the ice in his cup as he spoke.

It was Dallas who had remained very quiet throughout most of the conversation. "Don't think it takes anything that special," he said. "See, I'm taking flying instruction right now through ROTC. Well, the flight physical is pretty tough, but if you can make it through that, it shouldn't be all that rough."

"You guys are crazy if you think I can qualify for the flight program!" Roger was beginning to grow a little angry at the others. He was the only one that was not in the ROTC program at the eastern Washington college. And graduation was nearing. That meant the nice safe, II-S student deferment from the draft would be running out shortly. It was possible to get a continued deferment from the draft for graduate school, but lately it seemed that those were harder to come by. Top grades were a must, and, well, not just everyone had those.....

"Personally, I think armor is the only way to go," Keith was saying. "The chances are pretty good that I'll get a ticket to Germany, anyway."

"That's only because you've been rubbin' up against the brass at Fort Lewis, dude!" Ken observed sharply. "Anyone

could get a trip to Germany if he was makin' it with a general's daughter. Kee-rist!!"

"You a little jealous, gravel cruncher?" Keith retorted.

Silence fell over the group, but Dallas wasn't one to let an argument slip away that easily. He didn't like Keith much, anyway. When Keith reached the rank of XO (Executive Officer) of the special ROTC Ranger unit at the college, he had often rubbed the others' noses in it as much as he thought he could get away with. This especially rankled Dallas. By the same token, Keith was jealous of Dallas since he had started the flight program.

"I hear they're sending more armor to Vietnam," Dallas's quiet observation had a stinging effect on Keith. His face began to color as he fidgeted in the booth.

"Well, I gotta hit the books." Keith stretched and stood up. It was pretty obvious to the others at the table that Dallas's comment had pretty well found the mark. As Keith left the table, Ken chuckled softly.

"I don't think that SOB would last two minutes in a tough show," he said flatly.

"How do we know any of us could?" Dallas was always pushin' the others with his gibes. "When it comes right down to it, we'd probably all wet our pants and run."

"Yeah, maybe so," Ken yawned. "But I wouldn't mind havin' him behind my infantry outfit in that iron monster. Might give ya' a little more peace of mind knowin' he's there than some other ninety-day wonder."

"Maybe you're right. I just don't like his attitude." Dallas lit a cigarette, and hunched forward over the table. "Have you ever watched him closely out on maneuvers? I mean, when things are startin' to go to hell in a hand-basket? His voice goes up about seven octaves, and he starts ridin' everyone's tail. That's only in practice, my man. Can you imagine his leadership when the real lead's cuttin' the air?" Dallas leaned back in the booth. His large shoulders and tanned face seemed distant as he blew a long cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

Ken adjusted his glasses and swirled the ice in his cup. "I'm certainly not sold on the potential of armor in Vietnam."

Dallas laughed. "Since when have you ever been sold on the value of armor? You were infantry before you came back to school, and you'll always be infantry. I think it's in

your blood. Do you have a family history of infantry heroes?"

It was Ken's turn to laugh. "No, not really. My old man sells shoes in Seattle...."

"Can you tell me more about that flight physical?" Roger's question was dead serious.

"There isn't a whole lot to tell, man," Dallas observed. "Let's see. They are very strict on the eyes. Gotta have the 20-20, and no color blindness. Think they're touchy on blood pressure, too. Other than that, the rest of the pieces just have to match the all-American average. Why, are you interested, Roger?"

"Well, when it comes down to it, I think I'd rather fly than walk."

Ken broke in, "You need to talk to the recruiting sergeant about it. I can set up an appointment for you...."

"Well, I'd at least like to talk to someone about it."

"That's the way I did it, Roger." Dallas crushed out his cigarette. "And I think it's a helluva lot better to fly than to walk!" With that he nudged Ken in the ribs and got up from the table. "See, that's one thing Ken and I have never agreed on. But I'm makin' my own choice on this one. I'll catch you guys later. I'm headin' home to clean up the apartment. I've gotta get ready for a date tonight."

"You really should talk to the recruiting sergeant about it. I'd love to try those whirly-birds..." Ken removed his glasses. "But without these I couldn't tell you if that pink thing comin' through the door is a femme fatale or a guy playin' the pink panther." Roger's head turned.

"Better put your glasses back on, Ken. That is worth lookin' at."

"You in any hurry to leave?" Ken was fishing in the pocket of his jacket.

"No, not really. Why? Are you lookin' for another lesson in how not to win at chess?" In all the times Roger and Ken had met over a chess board, Roger had never been able to come out the victor. Since Roger had first met Ken the year before, chess had become one of their favorite pastimes. Ken was a whiz at the game. Roger often chided Ken that it was all the military training he had received. Ken always laughed that off. Sure, he had spent a few years in the "brown shoe" Army, but that was not where he developed his love for the game of chess. That had come in high school. He had never aspired to be a great athlete. Nor did he excel in the studies, either. However, chess was

something that he could grasp, and he played very well. None of the others realized that he had been an outstanding chess player in high school. Qualifying for the regional matches had been easy for Ken, but the difficulty was financing the trips to them. Money was not easy to come by in the Doan household. Shoe salesmen are not noted for their affluence. That had been the lure of the military. There someone with Ken's background could compete on even footing with everyone else. And compete he did. Rising to the rank of sergeant was not difficult. But Ken wanted to become an officer. He wanted his own unit to control -- to lead. He had managed to get the Army to foot most of the bill for his education by promising to return for seven years after graduating from college. Questions about this process never got very far with Ken. No one was very sure about how this had come about, but Ken was very serious about his military career.

"Is your mind on the game at all?" Ken was obviously winning. He had even allowed his queen to be taken very early in the game.

"I don't know. Guess all this talk about the military and Vietnam is gettin' to me." Roger let out a sigh. "I just don't know how I'm gonna handle it yet. Whether to let 'em draft me for two years, or make a bigger investment to get a better job -- like flying, provided I can qualify. What happens if I put my name on the line, and find out I can't qualify? Does that mean I'm going to have to spend two more years in the Army, or whatever, just because I had a dream I could fly?"

"Hey, take it easy. Let me talk to Sergeant Hane about it, huh? Then you'll know what the options are. I might even see him this afternoon. You gonna be around home tonight?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see what Janet's plans are." Roger's wife had never said anything one way or the other about his upcoming military obligation. Their agreement had been that she would finish school while he was in the military. Though they had talked around the subject, there were only vague references to the military and how he was going to meet his obligation.

"I'll give you a call tonight if I can get ahold of Sergeant Hane. OK?" Ken was serious.

"Yeah. That'll be all right. I should be studying tonight, anyway." Roger tipped his cup up high to drain the last of the ice. Why did it have to be such a tough

decision? It seemed just a few months ago that everything was so well planned. But that was much longer than a couple months ago. When had it been? When he had moved in with Keith? Yeah, that was probably it. All that ROTC talk. Well, not so much the talk about ROTC, but the talk about the military. It sounded like a real challenge. But then marriage, and second thoughts. Well, at least Janet wasn't pregnant. That had been a worry for awhile. 'Course a kid might have meant another deferment. But how long could that last? It seemed that deferments from the draft were coming harder and harder. First it was easy to avoid the draft. All you had to do was stay in school. But now, well, reinstatement wasn't so easy if you kept doing poorly in school. The school authorities were saying it was because of the increasing enrollment. But was that really it? It looked like now that just about everyone was going to have to do some military time no matter whether he was married with six kids or whatever! Maybe it was about time that Roger sat down and did some serious planning.

"I concede." Roger's tone was flat.

"Look kid. Don't worry about it. You don't have to decide tonight, you know." Ken quietly removed the chess pieces from the board, and returned it to his pocket. Roger's mind was far from the chess board, and it just wasn't any fun to play when there was no competition.

How long had Ken known Roger? Just over a year? Roger had moved in with Keith in the middle of Roger's junior year. They lived in a house which had been divided into several apartments. Wasn't much of a house. The grey exterior was entirely devoid of paint. Keith and Roger lived in the basement. A tiny kitchen, small bedroom, small living room with homemade furniture. The most prominent feature in the living room was the oil stove. During the cold winters in Pullman, the temperature often dropped to below zero. It was too expensive to heat the whole apartment, so the door between the kitchen and living room was closed in the cold weather. One night when Ken had eaten there, he had been unable to find the ketchup. When he asked about it, Keith responded it was in the frig. Ken thought that was a funny place to keep ketchup, until Roger pointed out that if it was left in the cupboard it would freeze.....

Ken lived in a dorm on the south side of campus. One of the new, high-rise men's residence halls. Men's residence hall, indeed. More like little boxes stacked on

top of the other. And the food in the cafeteria. Well, at least they were told it was wholesome. Usually the food was hot, and about the same fare to which Ken had become accustomed in the service. Conditions would improve substantially for him when he returned to the military as an officer. He was about due for graduation, too, and he was looking forward to returning to uniform.

Ken collected his books from the floor under the table. His plans for that Friday night? He should give Sherry a call. He had been dating her pretty steadily for a couple months now. No, not that it looked to be that serious. She was a decent date, all right, but he just wasn't into settling down. He had his time to do in Vietnam, too.

"Gotta run, Roger. I will try to call Hane tonight."

"No rush, big dog. I got a lot of thinkin' to do."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But it won't do any good to get all upset over it. You've still got a while before graduation."

"Oh yeah. Lots of time. When is graduation? The seventh? I'll probably get my draft notice on the eighth..."

"Well, better than on the sixth! I'll let you know what Hane says." The air felt warm on his face as Ken pushed through the heavy glass doors of the CUB. A lot of students were now heading toward the CUB as the early afternoon classes let out. Ken first started down the hill toward his dorm, but changed his mind. He headed east toward Johnson Hall. He might just catch Sergeant Hane...

Roger finished his cigarette, and closed his notebook. He didn't feel like studying. Suddenly the CUB seemed empty even though the booths and tables were filling with students. He picked up his and the others' cups from the table as he left. As he dropped them into the trash can, he hesitated. Could drop by the rec area downstairs. Might be someone shooting pool that he knew. Should study, though. Finals weren't that far off. With a sigh, he decided on the library. Still had a little research to do for his last term paper.

Roger was at his desk when Janet arrived home from work. "How's the studying?" she asked.

"OK. How was your day?" Roger stretched and stood up.

Janet tossed her purse on the table. "Oh, I don't know. Not that great, I guess. That dimwit Ted brought in about forty pages of tables for me to type, and, as usual, he has to have them done by Tuesday morning."

"That gives you all day Monday to do them."

"Yes, I know, but if anything goes wrong, then I won't get them done." Janet walked into the bedroom, and began changing her clothes. Roger leaned against the door frame, and watched her. He wanted to make love to her as he watched her slip off her skirt. "Think I'll see if I can't go in early tomorrow and get started on them." Janet pulled on a pair of shorts. She kissed Roger as she brushed by him in the doorway. "Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes." Janet opened the refrigerator door. "Want a beer?"

Roger finished lighting his cigarette. "Yeah, sounds good. I don't really like this heat."

"Do you have any plans for the weekend?" Janet was hustling in the kitchen now. Hamburger started to sizzle in the frying pan.

Roger picked up the ashtray from his desk, and moved to the kitchen doorway. There wasn't room for two in the tiny kitchen. Janet opened a can of Coors, and after taking a long drink, handed the can to Roger. A fleck of beer foam clung to her lips. She turned to the sink and began washing vegetables. "I'm sorry about tomorrow. It's just that I know if I don't get those tables started, something will come up Monday, and Ted will be in stitches."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that I've got my studies caught up pretty well..."

"And what have you got in mind? You know we don't have much to spend. So where did you think we might go?"

"Never mind. It wasn't that important anyway."

"Well, how about Saturday afternoon or Sunday?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Don mentioned something about a carnival down in Lewiston."

"Really!?" Janet was interested in this news. "That does sound like fun." She moved closer to Roger, kissing him as she took the beer from his hand. It wouldn't cost that much, Janet thought. Besides, it had been a while since they'd really gotten out together. They would probably share a ride with Don and Sheila, Don's wife. She took another long drink, and turned to the stove to stir the hamburger. Both Don and Sheila were nice. She liked them both, and so did Roger. Don and Roger had been close in the fraternity before Roger and Janet were married. Their best times were shared on the football field during intramural competition. While Don had played a lot of football in high

school, Roger had played none. But he did all right at the game. Many evenings after the games, Don, Sheila, Roger and Janet had gotten together. Sometimes they had gone out for a beer, but more often had picked up a six-pack and driven into the countryside around Pullman, where they had talked, and shared the lingering sunsets. Janet missed those times.

Since she and Roger had married, she had spent all her time working as a secretary in the Veterinary Medicine Department. She had worked the entire summer between Roger's junior and senior years so they could marry, and he could finish school. They had occasionally talked about his military obligation. While he was in the service, she would finish college. She only had two years to go. That way Roger could support her while she was finishing up, just as she was supporting him now.

"Yes, I'd like to go to the carnival in Lewiston," she said. "How about setting the table?"

As they finished supper, Janet began clearing the dishes from the table. "What is Don going to do about the service?"

"He doesn't have to worry. He's got bad knees from football in high school. Think he's had them operated on. He has a huge scar on his right knee."

"I never noticed it before." Janet finished clearing the table and was running the dish water.

"You don't have to look very hard to see it. It's a baddy."

Janet put the dishes in to soak, and joined Roger on the couch. "Why don't you have something like that to keep you out of the service?"

Roger shifted uncomfortably on the couch. Why did those particular words bother him? It would seem nearly an eternity later when he would think of those words again.... He got up and walked to the window. The sun was setting over the western hills of Pullman. Not a cloud to change the golden hue of the sunset. "I guess it's something that you just have to face sometime. Are you willing to put it on the line for something you believe in? I don't really know why, Janet. You can call it a moral obligation, or facing up to a challenge of manhood, like an ancient rite, whatever. But you can't avoid it. It's something you feel on the inside."

"Why don't you apply for graduate school?"

"Aw c'mon. You know we don't have the bread for that!! Besides, my grades might not cut it."

Roger turned to face her on the couch. He could see it was going to be a tough discussion. But how did she really feel about it? That was the big question? Should he pursue it now, or let it go? "Would you try to avoid it, if it was your choice?" He knew as soon as he asked it, that it was a hopeless question. How could she ever consider an answer to that question? She would never have to face the draft.

How had he faced registration for the draft? It was in high school. In fact, he had a problem with it even then. It seemed that they normally announced it during study hall. Those males with birth dates between such-and-such a date and such-and-such a date need to go to the office. Well, he had missed that particular study hall or it hadn't been announced, and he had been late. The principal of the school did not take it lightly, and ever since then Roger had sensed that the draft and his military obligation was not a laughing matter. The principal had been irritated that Roger had not taken the initiative to contact the office about his eighteenth birthday. "I should make an example of you," the principal had said. But he let it drop. Evidently the principal had to explain to the draft board why this particular student had been tardy, but he made no effort to hang Roger out to dry.

Janet didn't even try to answer the question. "It's your decision all the way," was all she said.

2: Recruiting Sergeant

It was less than a week later when Roger found himself sitting in Sergeant Hane's office. "After you take the entrance physical in Spokane, you'll be scheduled for the Warrant Officer Candidate exam. If you pass that, you're on your way to becoming a pilot!" Sergeant Hane was obviously pleased that he had someone interested in the Army Flight Program. Short and stocky, and in very good shape, Sergeant Hane was an excellent choice for a recruiter. He was very pleasant throughout the interview, and answered Roger's few questions with no-nonsense answers.

"And if I don't make it through flight school? Then what's my obligation?"

"You're only on a two-year program if you wash out. You'll have the remainder of that two-year obligation to serve if you wash out for any reason."

As Roger walked out of the recruiter's office, Ken was still waiting for him. "Well, how'd it go, youngster?"

"Sounds awfully easy."

"When do you take the test?"

"Sergeant Hane will let me know. He said it should take only a few days to find out."

"I sure wish I was in your shoes," Ken was saying. "I can't even begin to qualify for flight duty."

"Ha! That's a bunch of BS, turkey! I know how much you love the infantry! That is about the most standard story around the ROTC gang!"

Ken laughed. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. But I would like to think that I could qualify for the flight program."

"My, my. Part of your body lettin' you down at the ripe old age of, what, twenty-six?" Roger took a playful swing at Ken and ran ahead up the street.

Ken caught up easily. Ken was not a natural athlete, by the standard definition, but he was in top physical condition. Rock hard, the drill sergeants probably had said when he was going through basic training. In the field, Ken never seemed to tire. After eight hours of hard going, he looked about ready to start all over. And he didn't seem to sweat. Roger could always remember the gatherings at the apartment with Ken, Keith and Dallas. Sometimes there were others, too. Then the stories about the night exercises, or whatever, were told. That had been Keith's failing. His

night vision was very bad, and the others loved to tell stories of his problems during night maneuvers. Ken made out very well at night, according to the others. After the beer had been passed around a couple times, the words came more freely, and the old stories surfaced. Roger had noticed a certain comradeship among the ROTC members. But it wasn't just that. These guys belonged to an elite ROTC unit, called the Rangers. They wore black berets, and were a cut above the ROTC regulars. They had more field training, and their training was more intensive.

But not everyone shared their enthusiasm for military training. There was even a faction on campus that was protesting America's participation in the Indo-China war. Commonly called hippies, they were referred to as long-haired, anti-American, scaredy-cats by the ROTC gang. No one took them very seriously, except when they staged a sit-in the night of the military ball at the CUB. This was the ROTC's formal dance. It was a formal affair -- long gowns, and spit and polish. Seems the hippies filled the main entrance to the CUB. This left the guests with two options: step over, around and through the bodies in the main entrance, or enter by another door. There was no violence that night, but certainly a lot of hard feelings on both sides.

The draft faced each and every young man on the campus. And until the test was faced -- the dehumanizing entrance physical -- you didn't know if you were in or out. Some even planned their schooling to continue their deferments. Others consulted their family doctors to see if they could avoid the draft. And there were lots of stories about political connections. But one thing that many found amazing was that some of the top athletes at the school couldn't pass the entrance physical. Something as simple as a perforated ear drum could class you 4-F, not suitable for military service. They didn't take flat feet in WW II, but that wasn't good enough for Vietnam. Had to be a little more serious than that to keep you out.

Like President John Kennedy had said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Sure, and look what it did for him. The standard joke on campus in 1964 ran something like, let's go to Dallas and have a parade, if you were second in command. But it had been terrible news the day John Kennedy was shot. Even the servers in the food line at the cafeteria were crying. You could have heard a pin drop in the cafeteria

except for the low, scratchy voice of the radio, covering the details and latest updates to the assassination. Didn't John Kennedy serve his country admirably? Survived life in the Pacific on a PT boat. Even got it shot out from under him. Think that added something to his stature when he ran for president?

But other than the draft, the war was far away. There weren't a great many combat troops in Vietnam yet. And it wasn't a constant stream of combat footage on the TV either, though it made the news frequently.

Parents back home were concerned, too. It showed in their letters, and phone calls. Ken never said much about his folks. Keith's parents were very proud that he was going to serve as an officer. And no one was sure whether Dallas had any parents. He was from Bremerton. Someone suggested that his Dad worked in the shipyard, but no one ever verified that.

A week later, Sergeant Hane called to notify Roger of the date for his entrance physical. Then it was off to Spokane for the day. Janet didn't want to go.

"Aw, c'mon. We can go up for the afternoon together," Roger said over a cup of coffee.

"Look," she said. "I just don't want to go, all right?"

"Yeah, OK. I'll probably be back early, anyway." Roger let the screen door close firmly behind him. As he cranked the big Chrysler, he looked in the rear view mirror for the blue smoke. Startin' to burn some oil. Maybe it's time to start lookin' for a new one. But there wasn't that much cash in the house or in the bank.

Spokane

It was a beautiful spring day. The sun was bright as Roger swung north from Pullman. As the miles slipped by, he thought back to high school and his childhood. He was raised in the country. Hunting and fishing and a love for the outdoors was something he learned early in life. His dad had taught him a great deal about life in the woods. Roger had always loved the feel of a gun in his hands. One of the proudest moments had been when his dad had purchased Roger's deer rifle. It had been a second-hand Savage. But it was a lever action, and it felt smooth and powerful in his hands. The oiled stock smelled of linseed. Metal swivel points were added to the stock to accommodate the leather sling.

Roger could remember hunting the steep ground in the foothills of the Olympics on the frosty fall mornings. The logged off areas, called clearcuts, provided an abundance of food for deer and elk in the fall. But even more exciting to Roger was hunting the virgin timber in the afternoon. Here, beneath the canopy of fir and hemlock, the moss was quiet underfoot. On a still day, a hunter could hear his own breathing. And so could the deer.

But it wasn't all pleasure with no hardship. It often rained hard in the fall. A steady rain. Mists formed in the timber, and things often weren't what they appeared to be. A broken limb on a windfall often took on the shape of a buck's antlers. Rain gear would keep you dry, buy it was also noisy. Every move emitted the crinkle and scrape of the rain gear against the twigs and brush on the forest floor. It was better to hunt in long underwear, wool, and keep warm by moving. The wool underwear became heavy when it got wet, but it retained body heat even when it was soaked. Roger soon became used to the outdoors in the rain. The hardest part was the first few minutes, when the first drop of water found its way down underneath his shirt collar, and ran down his back. And the first brush against a red huckleberry bush, which soaked a single spot on his blue jeans. This usually sent shivers down his spine. After a half-hour in the rain, and wet brush, the wetness became a part of him. Then he no longer avoided the brush to keep from getting wet. And the mind focused on the purpose of the day. Listening for the slightest sound out

of the ordinary. And watching for movement of any kind. Sometimes it was the excited chirping of a wren that would give away a deer's location. Or the chattering of a Douglas squirrel. Other times, it was simply the movement caught out of the corner of an eye or a deer's ear as it listened ahead, and behind.

Roger could still remember his father standing in the rain in his old and faded yellow felt hat that he always wore deer hunting. As daylight began to break, the drops of water would bead on his dad's red and black checked wool coat. There were a few whispered words of directions and meeting places, and then each hunter would go his own way. Usually one would work his way up one side of the clearcut, and the other would take the other side. As the colors of the leaves began to emerge with the strengthening light, the heavy mists hanging over the clearcut would become visible.

"Be sure of your target, now," his dad had cautioned. "Anyone can hunt, but not everyone can become a hunter. The important thing is to identify your target, make a good shot, and kill the animal as cleanly as possible."

The orange dirt clung to Roger's boots as he climbed his side of the clearcut. He stopped often to catch his breath. After especially steep spots, his breath would hang in the air before him as he tried to look ahead into the darkness and vegetation.

There it was! Some movement in the patch of young alder off to his right. Easy now... It wasn't in a hurry. Try to gain a little higher ground on the left. Get a better view from there. As Roger skirted a large stump, a grouse suddenly flushed. The bird was nearly under his feet when it broke cover. The sudden thrashing of its wings took him completely by surprise. He felt as though he'd jumped ten feet straight up. Had the deer heard it? Suddenly he heard his dad whistle. One long blast. He had seen something. As Roger broke over the crest of the ridge he was climbing, he glimpsed a deer's tail disappearing over the hill and into the timber near the top of the clearcut. Well, at least he got to see one, even if it was only the rear end!

When he joined his dad near the top of the clearcut, the older man was looking at the ground. As Roger reached him, his dad pointed to the ground with the end of his rifle barrel. There in the damp earth were fresh deer tracks. The tracks led out of the clearcut, across the cat road in which they were standing, and entered the green timber.

They quietly followed the tracks into the timber and looked below them. It was much darker here than in the clearcut, and it took a moment for Roger's eyes to adjust. Not a single word was spoken as they moved cautiously into the timber. They moved quietly as they sought vantage points to see into the timber below them. Finally Roger's dad waved and signaled that they should return to the clearcut. As they reached the cat trail, Roger felt his muscles relax. He hadn't realized he was so tense.

"They dropped down into the timber," his dad said. "There is a road that cuts across this patch of timber about a half mile down the hill. You go ahead down through the timber, and I'll go back down through the clearcut to bring the rig around the road. I'll meet you down there on the road. Give me a few minutes before you start down. That way, if you push 'em onto the road, maybe I can get a shot. Watch yourself. It's steep and that moss is slippery on the rocks." With that, his dad turned and disappeared into the rising mist from the clearcut. Roger entered the edge of the timber again. The ground dropped steeply from where he stood. Off to his left, a finger ridge angled away from the edge of the clearcut. Roger decided to follow the ridge. Into the timber about a hundred yards, he encountered a large patch of salal where the timber opened briefly. A trail seemed to lead into the middle of the salal. It quickly disappeared, and Roger decided to drop down off the ridge. Below, the timber seemed to thin out somewhat. He could make out vine maples with their colorful fall foliage.

Was that some movement below him? Crouching next to a large Douglas fir, Roger watched. Yes. It was a large doe. She was feeding on a vine maple about forty yards below him. No, she wasn't even aware he was there. Roger raised his rifle and sighted at the deer. Does weren't legal. Had to be bucks with visible antlers. Suddenly there was a crash in the salal not fifteen feet away. Head down, the buck charged right past Roger, heading toward the doe feeding below. Roger didn't even have time to raise his rifle before the buck passed him. Roger jumped to a large windfall to get a better view, but his boot slipped on the mossy surface of the log. By the time he reached his feet, both the buck and the doe had disappeared into the timber.

Roger dropped down the hill in the direction the deer had taken. It wasn't long before he reached the road. His dad was nowhere in sight. Roger followed the road back toward the clearcut. Rounding a bend, he saw his dad

looking carefully at the cut bank above the road. As Roger approached, he could already see what his dad was studying.

"Well, they were sure in a hurry when they dropped over the bank." His dad's voice sounded strangely loud after the quiet of the timber. "I probably should have been up this road further, and I might have seen 'em."

"Should I have waited longer before I came down through the timber?" Roger was concerned that he had acted too quickly at the top of the ridge.

"No...", his dad chuckled. "That's just a part of hunting. You never know if you're in the right place, at the right time. How about a cup of coffee?" They walked on down to the pick-up and opened the thermos.

As they shared a sandwich, Roger told about the buck on the ridge.

"You just never know about those crazy deer," his dad explained. "You might think you've seen everything after twenty years of hunting, and then you see something different. Who could guess what spooked that buck. He might have smelled you, or heard you, or he might have been spooked by his own shadow. They have good reason to be jumpy this time of year..."

"Boy, it sure scared me. I mean that buck was almost on top of me before I could even get my gun up."

"Yeah, and you hate to shoot them going the other way. You usually manage to mess them up in a bad way if you hit them at all."

The physical at Spokane was no big deal. Blood pressure, urine, chest x-ray, the usual. A seemingly qualified doctor asked you if there was any reason you thought you shouldn't qualify for military service. The guy looked a little tired, Roger thought. Wonder how he'd respond if I said that potential bullet holes might be considered a health hazard, Roger thought, and then dismissed the idea. It wasn't this harried doctor's war. He was just doin' his job.

There was also a dumb general induction test that asked questions supposedly used to establish some type of psychological profile. At first, Roger tried to analyze the questions to determine what kind of response they were looking for, but he quickly tired of this game. He decided to answer them as straightforward as possible, and let the chips fall where they may.

He also took the WOC Exam (Warrant Officer Candidate) the same day. This one took about three hours. It was full of basic flying terms, control patterns that had to be marked to get the airplane to do various maneuvers, and spatial tests with visualized paper folding and geometric shapes. Roger felt pretty confident about this one.

Back in Pullman, life around the Hunter household returned to the pattern of studying, classes, and part-time work. Janet said nothing more about Roger's decision to fly. Roger did spend more time with Ken. Chess was a good diversion from school, and he and Ken played often.

The day came when Sergeant Hane called with the news that Roger had passed the WOC exam. Now, the next big hurdle -- the Class A flight physical.

"We need to set a date for it as soon as we can," Hane explained on the phone.

"Is it given in Spokane?"

"No, you have to take it at Fort Lewis, near Tacoma."

"Yeah, I know where that is. I grew up pretty close to Fort Lewis. Can I arrange to take it during Spring Vacation? We were planning to be over there anyway to visit my folks."

"That would be great. If you can tell me when you can report, I'll get the paperwork ready for you."

Roger checked the calendar on his desk, and relayed the dates to Sergeant Hane.

"I'll have the forms ready for you on Monday. Is that OK?"

"Yeah. I can swing by after classes. I'm out pretty early on Monday. Will you be in your office then?"

"I'll make sure I am, Roger."

4: Flight Physical at

Fort Lewis

Spring vacation seemed to arrive without warning. Roger and Janet packed the car and headed west. They were planning to stay with Roger's folks. He had not told them about his plans to fly. It was crossing the Vantage bridge over the Columbia River that Janet first raised the subject.

"How long is this physical or whatever, going to take?"

"I think it's probably about half a day. Hane said to have someone drive me up there because they dilate your eyes, or something, and it takes 'em a while to get back to normal."

"Can you tell me why you want to fly?"

"Sure. That part's not too difficult at all. If you had your choice to serve in the infantry or fly, which would you rather do? I don't think there's any way I can duck the draft. So, I think I'd like to fly. It's something I've always dreamed of. Ever since I was a little kid. I used to build model airplanes like crazy. Never did think I could make it this close, though. And I still don't know if I can pass that physical, but I'm gonna try."

Janet still found it difficult to understand why Roger was voluntarily entering the military. She had been very patient when they were dating, and he went on field exercises with the Ranger ROTC group from the college. She even went on one with Roger where they acted as civilians during the exercise. But then it was a game, and now it seemed to be more serious. It would mean a separation, and she wasn't sure she was ready for that. "How do you feel about the military in general? I mean, about going to Vietnam?"

"Well, right or wrong, someone decided that we need to fight in Southeast Asia. A lot of my friends have already received their draft notices. It's just a matter of time until I get mine. I've already passed the basic induction physical, so it looks like I'll be going one way or the other."

"Yes, I know, Roger, but why do you have to go at all?"

"Boy, that's kind of a silly question! I already told you. They're drafting everybody."

"Yes, I know," Janet said as she lit a cigarette. "But you seem to take it as a challenge."

"OK, maybe so. Look, I guess I do. My dad never served in World War II. He was blind in one eye. Got hurt in a logging accident. But his brother went. He was a waist gunner on a bomber in Italy. I guess I just feel a moral obligation to go. We have a whole lot of things going for us in this country, and it takes something to pay for that, you know. It didn't come without someone willing to work for it. Look at WW II. What would have happened if we had just stood by and never committed ourselves to that war? This one seems about the same thing. As long as there are people, there are going to be wars. It's just that this one is kind of personal because the government is asking lots of us to help out. And I do consider it a challenge. If I have to go, I might as well prepare myself the best I can. And to me, that means qualifying for the flight program, if I can."

It was clear to Roger that the explanation did not satisfy Janet, but she let the subject drop.

Both Janet and Roger's mother went to Fort Lewis with him. The guard at the gate to the fort provided a map, and gave them directions to the proper building. The buildings were all numbered. When they found the right one, all three entered. When Roger checked with the receptionist, it seemed like any other medical facility he had been in. But as he filled out the forms, he noticed he was nervous. Nervous? Maybe excited. Besides, that receptionist was one good-looker.

"You can go in now. First door on the right." As Roger passed her desk, it was difficult not to notice the receptionist's long, slender legs, and her very tight skirt.

Why do they always have receptionists like that in hospitals and doctors' offices, Roger wondered. As he entered the room, a doctor met him. "Strip to the waist, please," he asked. The doctor pulled a blood pressure cuff from the cabinet, and proceeded to strap it to Roger's arm. The doctor took the reading several times. Then he removed the stethoscope from his ears, and asked, "Are you nervous?"

"Well, some, yeah, I guess," Roger answered.

Then the doctor turned and followed Roger's gaze. The receptionist was visible through the open door of the examining room. As she bent over to reach a filing cabinet, the doctor turned to Roger. "I think maybe I understand the problem." He laughed. "Let's try this again a little later, eh?"

Color blindness tests followed. Then there were lots of forms -- family history, health history, childhood diseases, etc., etc. Roger was led to a darkened room where his eyes were dilated, and carefully examined by another doctor. As the rest of the tests were completed, the blood pressure test was taken again. "You're fine this time," the doctor laughed.

"When will I know how I did?"

"It will take us a while to put it all together, but we'll notify your recruiting sergeant as soon as we can."

"Thanks," Roger put his shirt on, and returned to the waiting area.

"You got my dark glasses, Janet?" Roger asked.

"Right here. Do your eyes hurt?"

"Not now, but the expert said to wear 'em in the sunshine, at least for a couple of hours."

"Boy, you look kind of spacy," Janet remarked.

"Just temporary, Sweetie!"

"Did they tell you how you did?" Roger's mother appeared very concerned. Both she and Roger's dad weren't too excited when he told them about his decision to enter the Army. In fact, his mother had become quite upset over the whole thing. Roger explained that he would be drafted, and have to serve anyway. They seemed then to accept his decision to try to enter the flight program.

"Helicopters, huh?" Roger's dad had said.

"Yeah, I know," Roger answered. "You didn't even think I had the coordination to drive a stick shift, did you?" Roger's dad only grinned broadly. There had been a question or two after Roger had wrecked the family car on a date just after he had gotten his license. The questions concerned Roger's ability to drive...

"Well, if you can't fly 'em, maybe you can work on 'em," his dad said. Together the two of them rebuilt the engine in Roger's first car. It was the same one Roger and Janet now drove. Roger's dad wasn't sure his son would pass the flight physical, and was trying to point out alternatives to his son.

The visit with Roger's parents turned out well. They did not know Janet all that well, and became more closely acquainted during the week. Roger and Janet had married the previous fall, and though Roger's parents had attended the wedding, they had no chance to spend time with Janet. Janet played cribbage, which warmed Roger's dad's heart. One of his first loves was cribbage. Janet even managed to beat

him a game or two, which made it all the more fun for him. She was also a good pinochle player, and the four of them played long into the evening on more than one occasion.

The week didn't last near long enough for either Roger or Janet, and by the time they left, the flight physical was ancient history. Janet settled back into the seat and was soon asleep as Roger headed the big Chrysler up toward Snoqualmie Pass. Roger lit a smoke, adjusted himself in the seat to get more comfortable, and reflected on the week's events as they climbed steadily into the Cascade mountains. The clouds hung low, with just a trace of drizzle as they neared the summit. So long, Western Washington, Roger thought as they started down the long eastern slope. Near Lake Kachess, the clouds parted, and the long slanting rays of the failing sunlight turned the hills to a golden hue. Roger looked at Janet. She was sound asleep. She wore a white blouse and tight blue jeans. Her shoes were off, and she looked totally relaxed.

5: Hunting with the Father-in-law

Things had not gone all that easily for them. The decision to marry had not been a joyful one. There was a chance Janet might be pregnant. Maybe it was the excitement, because it was their first encounter. Maybe it was a lot of things, but the possibility was there, just the same.

Roger hadn't hit it off very well with Janet's dad. George was not anxious to see his daughter marry. George had his own logging outfit in Idaho, and was used to having things pretty much his own way. Here was Roger, a young kid still wet behind the ears who had nothing, and who wanted to take his daughter away. George was dead set against it. His wife, Mary, was much warmer to Roger. Mary and Roger hit it off pretty well from the beginning. Of course she was worried about their only daughter being married to some stranger from Western Washington. Roger was not only the son of a logger, but he had spent some of his twenty years in the business end of logging already.

Roger and Janet's first trip to Idaho had been during deer season, and George was anxious to see if his prospective son-in-law could handle a gun. George loaded his own ammunition, and was very proud of his ability to shoot what he was aiming at. Getting time off for him was no problem, either, when his daughter came to visit for a week. The first morning Roger and Janet stayed at the Week's household, George rolled Roger out at three in the morning to go deer hunting.

As Roger's feet hit the floor, he knew it was going to be a tough day. His back felt like a board from the drive the day before. The smell of coffee reached him from the kitchen, as he pulled on his jeans and wool shirt. In his stocking feet, he tiptoed through the living room to the kitchen. The kitchen wasn't large, not as large as Roger expected for a family of five. Janet had two brothers, both younger, who were still living at home. George noted right off that Roger couldn't afford out-of-state hunting fees, and so had provided his older son's license for Roger. Roger felt uneasy as he placed the offered wallet in his hip pocket. He didn't favor circumventing the law, but he didn't know how to change this situation. He couldn't afford the price of an out-of-state license, and it was too late for him to decline his future father-in-law's offer.

The coffee was hot, and he liked the feel of the heavy glass mug. Eggs, bacon, and toast quickly followed the coffee. The pear jelly was homemade, not too sweet, and tasted excellent. George didn't speak while he was preparing breakfast. Roger noticed that George was already shaved. Probably used to gettin' up this early, Roger thought. Anyone who logged for a living was used to getting up before dawn. Usually work started at first light, if Idaho logging was the same as it was in Washington.

The morning temperatures were already cold in Idaho. In the midst of the Rocky Mountains, it had a continental climate. That meant cold mornings in the fall. And fall came early, compared to the west coast of Washington. George finished breakfast first. Rising from the table he pointed to some coats hanging in the entry room off the kitchen. "Try one of those on. There's some stocking hats over there on the shelf, too." Then he pulled on his jacket, and stepped out the back door. Roger tried to horse down the rest of his coffee. It was too hot. "Damn!" he said, as the coffee burned his tongue. As he started to pick out a coat, he heard the pick-up's engine turn over. Roger quickly grabbed a coat that fit, pulled on a blue stocking hat, and hustled out to the truck. The cold air stung his nose and throat as he stepped into the frosty grass. George already had the truck running as Roger slid onto the seat next to him.

"Glad you could make it," George said flatly. Roger rubbed his hands briskly to see if he could restore some circulation in them. It was cold in Pullman, too, but nothing like this.

"How cold is it this morning?" Roger asked.

"Don't know, but would guess about ten below...," George's voice trailed off, as he twisted in the seat to back the truck out of the driveway. As soon as he started up the street, he turned the radio to a western station and settled back into the seat. The announcer was just beginning the weather report. Roger already expected the temperature before the DJ even said that it was a frosty, eleven below zero.

The trip on the highway was a short one, and before long they were into logging country. The pavement gave way to dirt when they turned off the highway. The first pink streaks of dawn were just beginning to reach over the hills to the east. As they crossed a cattle guard, George pulled

off on a wide spot in the road. Then producing a thermos of coffee from the pile of gear between them on the seat, offered Roger a cup. Roger readily accepted the coffee. It took a minute for the heat of the steaming liquid to work its way through the mug and into his fingers.

"Coffee's sure good," Roger mumbled.

"Best way to start a day I know of," George replied. Reaching into his shirt pocket, George produced a can of Skoal. After neatly opening it with one hand, he took a big chew of the finely cut tobacco. Then he carefully offered the open tin to Roger. Roger took a pinch and placed it in his lower lip. He had been around snuff, or snoose, as the loggers called it, ever since he could remember. His first experience with it hadn't been as bad as most of the stories about it, either. Well, it had given him the trots, but he hadn't gotten sick to his stomach. Since he had graduated from high school, he had dipped snoose off and on. Mostly in the summer, when he had first started working in the woods. Roger followed George's example, and rolled down his window to spit a stream of tobacco juice.

"Add a little rye whiskey to it, to make it good," George announced. With that, George put the pick-up in gear, and moved slowly back onto the dirt road. "The lower gun in the rack's your's." George spit out the window. "Shells are in the glove box."

When Roger didn't remove the rifle from the rack, George said, "Go ahead and load 'er up." That surprised Roger. The laws in the State of Washington didn't allow loaded guns in vehicles. But the Idaho laws were apparently different. Roger held the rifle between his knees as they drove slowly along the winding mountain road. The road itself was clear of snow, but nearly everything else was covered by several inches of the stuff.

As they rounded a corner, George suddenly slammed on the brakes. The stop was so quick and unexpected that Roger's forearm banged the dash sharply. Before Roger could recover, George had jerked his rifle from the rack above the seat and had jumped out of the pick-up. As Roger exited his side and rounded the front of the truck, George was already aiming at something down the hill. The sharp crack of George's rifle in the cold, crisp air broke the serenity of the open hills. Roger looked down the hill, across a small draw, and into the open timber on the opposite slope. There a big buck was staggering up the hill. As the buck continued to move away from them, George fired again.

There was no response from the deer to the second shot, but Roger could see a large red splotch on its neck. George fired two more shots as the deer slowly picked its way up through the timber, then turned and headed downhill along the opposite ridge.

As the deer entered a thicker patch of timber, George turned to Roger. "What are you waitin' for?!" he yelled. Roger raised his rifle. Unaccustomed as he was to using a rifle with a scope, he had difficulty finding the deer in the scope as it broke out of the patch of timber. Remembering what his dad had told him about animals after being hit once or twice, he centered the crosshairs of the scope on the deer's neck. His dad had said that many times after an animal is hit hard by a bullet, they are in shock, and it takes a killing shot to bring them down. The trigger felt cold against his finger as he squeezed off a shot. The deer staggered, but it didn't go down. He held the crosshairs in the same place on the buck and fired again. There was no response by the deer. Roger then changed his aiming point to just behind the deer's front shoulder, and slowly fired two more shots. The empty shells sounded like ringing bells as they bounced across the frozen road. George had emptied his gun, reloaded, and was firing again. Finally the deer dropped.

George jumped into the pickup, and after Roger followed suit, they backed up the road. Where the ridge crossed the road, George stopped the truck and jumped out with only his knife in hand. Roger took his rifle as he followed George down the ridge. The freezing air burned Roger's nostrils as the snow crunched underfoot. As they approached the deer's location, George swore loudly. Roger looked beyond George, and could see the deer was up again and moving down the ridge. George turned around. "Gimme the rifle," he said. Roger dug madly in his pocket for shells as he handed the rifle to George. When they left the truck, Roger had put only a few shells in his pocket. He produced one which George quickly loaded into the rifle. The deer was headed directly away from them. Again the rifle's blast echoed across the frozen hills. George reached back for another shell. Roger placed it into the hand like a nurse handing medical instruments to a doctor during an operation. George continued firing. After a couple shots, they moved closer to the deer. The buck reached a flat spot on the ridge. Standing in the snow, it faced off to the right. As George fired, Roger could see the splatter of red appear on the

snow behind the animal. The deer went down again, and this time it was down for good.

As they approached the deer, Roger picked a short, dead limb from one of the trees they passed. Upon reaching the deer, he reached out with the limb and touched its eye. There was no response. It was certainly dead now. But as Roger surveyed the animal with its beautiful brown hair, and dark, polished antlers, he felt ashamed that they couldn't have killed it quickly and mercifully. His only consolation was that it was likely that the deer had been in such severe shock since the impact of the first bullet, that it had felt nothing in the unfolding drama. It was acting purely on instinct, trying to avoid its pursuers at all cost.

As Roger continued to inspect the deer, he noted the first shot had been well placed. It had hit the deer in the neck about halfway between its head and front shoulders. The deer had been headed away from them, and George had been firing down on the animal on his first shot. The impact from that bullet split the deer's neck wide open for about eight inches. Its backbone was visible in the wound. Yes, that first shot should have killed it cleanly.

George handed the rifle to Roger and quietly gutted the deer. As Roger watched, he was impressed by George's quick, sure handling of the knife. George had cleaned quite a few deer in his time. That was obvious. As he completed the job, George wiped the knife and his hands with snow to clean the blood from them. Roger was surprised that George hadn't even rolled up his shirt sleeves, yet there wasn't a drop of blood on his shirt or his pants. Together, they pulled the deer up to the road and loaded it into the back of the pickup. It was truly a big deer by Roger's standards, but then he had never hunted mule deer before. The coast blacktails that he usually hunted would run much smaller than this animal.

Back in the truck, George opened the thermos he pulled from the pile of gear between them. After fumbling around, Roger found his mug. The hot, black coffee made his teeth hurt, but it was warm all the way down. George offered another chew of snoose which Roger accepted. After quietly sipping his coffee, George coughed, spit noisily out the window, and cleared his throat. "Let's head on down this road for a ways."

The way he said it, it might have been a question. But as the silence lengthened in the pickup, Roger chose not to answer. He still wasn't sure what his future father-in-law thought of him. He also thought George may have been embarrassed about the deer. It should have gone down on the first shot. But the fact that it didn't, and that it was so tough to bring down didn't add much to either's stature as a hunter.

About three miles further down the road, Roger spotted a buck running across a clearcut about 100 yards above them. The deer stood out clearly against the bright snow. "There's one," he said. George stopped the truck, and they both jumped out. The deer had reached the timber. Roger picked it up, standing behind some trees. As he brought the scope on the animal, he could see that it was standing directly behind a tree. The head, with antlers, was visible on one side of the tree. As he moved the scope to the other side of the tree, he could just make out the hairline behind the buck's front shoulder. "Got him," Roger said softly.

"So do I," George was directly behind him.

Roger knelt down, aimed, and squeezed the shot carefully. A second shot exploded a split second behind his. The deer dropped instantly. Roger scrambled up the bank above the road and up the hill toward the deer. Following the shots, the deer had dropped out of sight. As Roger reached the spot where the deer had been standing, he was surprised to see it lying still in the snow. George was only a couple steps behind Roger. Roger approached the animal, and touched its eye with his rifle barrel. There was no response. It must have died instantly. As they rolled it over, George spoke. "Must have blasted his heart."

George already had his knife in hand, and gutting the buck took only a couple minutes. As he removed the lungs, the thick blood gushed from the lung cavity. "Heart shot, all right. There isn't even enough to save for sandwiches. That fella was dead before he hit the ground."

"Didn't you shoot, too?"

George didn't even look up. "Yeah, but he was dropping before my shot even reached him."

Roger felt uneasy. Their first deer had been so difficult to kill. Now this one was down, and dead, with a single shot. It had been a lucky shot. Anyone who had hunted much had to know that. Sure, he had seen the hairline on the front shoulder when he fired, but who would

have guessed that it would have produced a heart shot -- an instant kill? Certainly not him. A lung shot was his goal. Not an instant kill, by any means, but a sure kill. A buck hit in the lungs sometimes covered as much as a hundred yards, but then it died quickly. It never crawled off to die a lingering death. And they were always easily tracked by the thick blood trail left from a lung shot. As George cleaned his hands with snow, Roger took the deer by the antlers and started down the slope. The deer nearly slid down the hill by itself on the crusty snow. Loading it into the pickup was simple. George dropped the tailgate, backed the truck up to the bank, and together they slid the deer into the box alongside the earlier buck. Roger was happy to see that the first buck was nearly half-again as large as the one he had killed. At least he hadn't killed the bigger deer.

When they reached the house with two deer, Janet's younger brothers were impressed. Of course the questions came quickly. Roger kept quiet, and let George answer all the questions. As the two deer were being skinned, though, it was apparent that the larger buck had been tough to bring down. There were too many holes for a clean kill. The older of Janet's brothers picked up on that quickly. However, George was very noncommittal about the story, and Roger didn't feel it was his place to fill in the details.

Later that evening, Janet cornered Roger. "Did you two have a good time together? I can't believe you got two deer!"

"Yeah. This Idaho country has more deer than you can shake a stick at," Roger answered.

"I'm sure glad you got to hunt with dad."

Roger wasn't sure he felt the same way. George was certainly polite, but that warm feeling between two men out hunting just wasn't there. The whole time Roger felt as if he was being judged, and he was very guarded with his conversation. I suppose it must be like this with all prospective father-in-laws, he thought. But it's like he doesn't want to know anything about me. Like I'll go away like a bad dream. But Roger was afraid to voice his feelings to Janet.

6: First Friend Leaving

Roger's last year of college passed quickly. He still played softball with his old fraternity buddies, and maybe an occasional game of handball. But the evenings of drinking and carousing were definitely out. He and Janet got together with Don and Sheila frequently. But at the end of the first semester, Don quietly told Roger that he was quitting school. "Sheila's pregnant, and I just don't think we can cut it financially," he said.

"Hey, now wait just a minute. Have you thought about applying for a student loan or something?"

"Come on, Roger, you need decent grades for that sort of thing. I've been reinstated twice. I don't care what my major is, I don't think they'd be too anxious about givin' me a loan."

"Well, what are your plans when you quit?"

"Think I'll head back to Longview, and go to work in the mill."

Roger was afraid to criticize Don's decision, because most likely it was already, unalterably, made. It would only make Don feel worse about something he couldn't change. "Well, a kid will probably keep you out of the draft."

"I can hope, man. Besides, I think I'm ready to get a family started. My Dad was even younger than I am now when he got married."

Yeah, but he probably didn't have an opportunity to go to college, either, thought Roger. That evening with the four of them ended quietly. It would probably be the last time that Roger would see either Don or Sheila for a long time, Roger thought, and it saddened him to think about it.

Shortly before the semester ended, Roger had a visit from Ken. Roger was studying at his desk when there was a knock at the door of the apartment. Janet was gone for the evening. Roger was working on a term paper, and Janet had gone out to let him work alone.

Roger flicked on the porch light as he opened the door. There stood Ken.

"Hi guy! Did you think I was going to run off and leave without at least a good-bye?" Ken's broad smile flashed in the dim light on the porch.

"Boy, you sure coulda fooled me!" Roger was truly surprised.

"Well, I finally got the last of my grades. See, there was a question about one class. If that son-of-a-gun had flunked me, I would have really had problems!" Ken pulled open the screen door, and bounced into the apartment.

"I didn't realize you had a problem with grades."

"Well, normally I haven't, but this philosophy class was a bitch." Ken pulled a package from beneath his arm. Opening the grocery bag, he produced a six-pack of Michelob. "Nothin's too good for the celebration of my graduation!"

"Wow, you aren't kidding. You want a fancy mug with ice...?"

Ken halted in the motion of removing a beer from the six-pack. "Ice? Glasses? Now, I thought you were a beer drinker."

"Yeah, OK," Roger lit a cigarette from the pack on his desk, and held the match out to Ken as he also reached for a smoke. Ken inhaled deeply, and blew a long, blue cloud of smoke into the darkened room. Then he removed the tops on two beers with a church key from his pocket, and handed one bottle to Roger.

"How about some of that good western music?" Ken kicked off his shoes and settled on the couch.

Roger placed an ashtray on the arm of the couch for Ken, and took a long drink of beer. "Should be right here close, my man. What's the word on orders? Do you have some already?"

"You bet. And they look like good ones. I'm off to infantry school at Benning."

"So, what does that mean?" Roger picked Ken's favorite album from the twenty or so albums on the shelf and turned on the stereo. Soon Johnny Cash's voice filled the apartment.

"It means that I'm going to jump school."

"Is that good?"

"Ha! Ha! Your ignorance is showing, sir!"

"Well, c'mon, Ken, I never have pretended to understand all that military BS you guys are talkin' about. I don't have the foggiest idea what that means."

"That means that I'll be jump-qualified, troop. That I can fly sometimes, instead of walkin'."

"Somehow, I think that you came over here with somethin' more on your mind than tellin' me you're goin' to jump school. Am I right?" Roger took a long drag on his cigarette. The only light in the room was the small lamp

over Roger's desk. The sun had long since set, and a few stars were showing in the western sky. Cash's music warmed them both, along with the beer. His gravelly voice carried them along with him to Folsom Prison.

As the song faded away, Ken cleared his throat. "No. Not really, I guess. Well, it's just that I'm leavin', and I was wonderin' if you might have some second thoughts about joinin' the Army." Ken's soft voice was serious. Roger looked at him, but Ken was looking the other way. Laid back on the couch, it was impossible to tell what Ken was looking at. In the deep shadow of the room, the flame from his Zippo flashed brightly as he lit another cigarette. "I didn't want you to think I was runnin' out on you."

"Come on, Ken!" Roger's voice was sharp. "Why would I think that? It wasn't your decision. It was mine all the way. I mean, I really appreciate your help and advice along the way, but it still was up to me, you know."

"Look. I'll tell you honestly. I'm not going to jump school. I've already been there. My orders are for the Republic of Vietnam."

"You mean right from here?"

"Well, no. I get a thirty-day leave enroute."

"And then what?"

"I report to the jump off station in California."

"Whew.... All of a sudden it seems a lot closer than it did a few days ago, huh?"

"Yeah. And you know what, you get to thinking about a lot of things when you're about to ship over." There was a long pause in the conversation as Johnny finished his last song on the record. Roger got up to turn the album over. As long as he'd known Ken, Ken always had a love for western music. Roger wasn't that fond of it, but then he wasn't real choosy about what he'd listen to, either. Johnny Cash was one of Ken's favorites. Roger didn't have any records that he could call his own. All those in the rack now belonged to Janet. Why she had ever purchased a Johnny Cash album, Roger couldn't begin to guess. Probably her dad had given it to her. That would fit. In any case, it was by far Ken's favorite. Whenever Ken came over, they would listen to Johnny from the time he arrived until he left.

"Want another beer?" Ken was standing above Roger. It startled Roger. He hadn't even heard Ken leave the couch.

"Sure. If we run short on that fancy brand of yours, I think there's some cheap stuff on the bottom shelf in the frig."

"Hey, now. This is a celebration tonight. I bought the best I could find." Ken snuffed out his cigarette. "How's Janet taking your decision?"

The question took Roger by surprise. Ken could tell by his expression that it might be something that Roger would rather not talk about. Immediately he felt badly. He hadn't come over tonight to ruin Roger's evening. Ken opened two more beers, and put the remaining two in the frig. What a tiny kitchen, he thought. Probably couldn't be two people in here and open the refrigerator door at the same time. As he entered the living room, Roger was settled back on the couch. "I didn't mean to stick my nose into where it doesn't belong," Ken offered as he handed Roger a beer.

"No, no, it's all right. I guess you can tell that's a bit touchy around here, maybe...?"

"Yeah. I realized that after I said it. Guess I've never been one that's noted for tiptoeing around sensitive subjects."

"Well, you can believe it if you want, and if you don't, I don't care, but that's one of the things that makes you a nice guy to be around, Ken. I always know exactly where I stand with you." Roger took a long pull on his beer. "So what will be your assignment in Vietnam?"

"Ha! Ha! That's easy. I'll be a platoon leader."

"You intend on making the Army your career, don't you Ken?"

"Affirmative. Made that decision a long time ago."

"So you need some combat experience, right?"

"Also affirmative. Besides, combat is where the promotions are. You don't move up if you're stuck in a stateside unit."

"Since you were in the Army before you came back to school, I thought maybe they'd send you to Germany."

"Well, they might have considered doin' that, but my first choice was RVN (Republic of Vietnam)."

"I can understand that. Are you afraid of gettin' hit?"

"Were you afraid when you took your first ride on a bicycle?"

"Yeah, and I suppose I'll be scared spitless when I take my first ride in a helicopter, too!"

"See? It's just a matter of perspective. How long did it take you to get comfortable on a bicycle? A week? Two weeks? Some of us were slow learners....."

Their conversation lasted well after ten o'clock. When Janet came home, they were on about their twentieth replay of the Johnny Cash album. Empty beer bottles and cans littered the living room. Janet was cool toward Ken. She always had been. Maybe it was his military bearing, but they never seemed to hit it off very well.

"Hello, Ken. Looks like you've been here a while. You boys run us out of beer yet?" Janet slipped out of her jacket and hung it on a chair. "Did you get much done on your term paper?" The question was pointedly directed at Roger.

"Yeah, quite a bit. Still got another week or so, anyway."

"Janet, there might be another beer in the icebox."

"Thanks, Ken. That sounds good. The movie wasn't that great."

After the three of them polished off the last of the beer, Ken stumbled to the front door.

"Havin' a little trouble navigatin' there, pardner," Roger offered as he leaned forward on the couch.

"I don't even see you on your feet yet, troop."

"Can you make it home OK?"

"It'll take more than beer to keep me from gettin' home." Ken's broad smile seemed to fill the entire door of the tiny apartment. "G'night, Janet. Take good care of the troop for me, will ya'?" Roger and Ken shook hands warmly. Then he was gone.

7: George and the Hijack Plan

The days raced by during Roger's last semester at WSU. It was as if someone was running the movie projector at high speed. Not too many extra-curricular activities. The grades came easily. He even made the Honor Role. And then it was graduation. Both Roger's and Janet's folks were there for the big event. George was still distant to both Roger and Roger's folks. He was an alumni of WSU, and he still had many acquaintances on campus. This made it easy for him to miss most of the difficult family situations.

Three days after graduation, Janet drove Roger to Spokane to catch an airplane to Portland. This was to be the first leg of his journey to Louisiana, and Basic Training.

But first, there was the swearing-in ceremony. After Roger was made an official member of the armed services serving his country in a time of need, he was handed a set of orders and travel tickets. Only one other was sworn in at the same time. George Johnson. Now George was stocky, heavy-set, and had a very easy smile. They were driven to the airport together by a clerk from the recruiting center in Spokane. As they got into the car together, George smiled and offered his hand. "Hi. I'm George. Who were you?"

Roger couldn't help but grin at the pun. "Roger," he answered, and shook hands with George.

"Looks like we're in this one together, at least for a while, huh?"

"Yeah, looks that way," Roger looked out the window of the green Army sedan as he lit a cigarette. "Where you from, George?"

"Idaho. Raised over near Coeur d'Alene."

"That right?"

"Yeah, sure is. Decided to see some of the world. Guess Dad got tired of me hanging around the house.... What's your excuse?"

"Ha! Do you need an excuse? Looked like a chance for me to fly, I guess."

George was visibly amused. "That right? You know, you don't have to join the Army to learn how to fly. I even took flying lessons in Coeur d'Alene."

"Really!?" Roger was impressed. He wondered how many of the others that were joining the Army flight training

program had previous flying experience. You don't suppose I'm the only one, he thought. "What did you fly?"

"Not much, that's for sure," George laughed. "It was an old Cessna tail dragger. Always wanted to try one with tricycle gear, but the guy I learned from only had the one plane."

"I suppose your training will come in handy when we get to flight school...?"

"I doubt that! From what I hear, flyin' helicopters is an entirely different world. I rode in 'em a couple times when I was workin' for the Forest Service in the summers. Seems to keep a guy pretty busy. Ya' hafta use both hands and feet at the same time. Not like an airplane. An airplane will sort of fly itself if you take your hands off the controls. Not so with a helicopter. Like ridin' a wily bronc. Take your hands off and relax for a second, and that sucker will buck you sky high!" George seemed like he was about thirty years old as he was telling Roger about airplanes and helicopters. Then he leaned forward and briskly rubbed his hands together. "'Course in combat it's probably a lot different..." George faced squarely forward in the seat. His voice trailed off as he appeared to be concentrating on something directly ahead of them. "I do enjoy flyin', though. Somethin' about being above the world, and lookin' down on the countryside. Dad always figured it was foolishness. But then maybe he was just a little old-fashioned. Raised too close to the earth. See, he farms a little piece of ground not too far from Spokane. Raises cows. I'm not certain I want to do that the rest of my life, either. Never could get along with cows. 'Bout as tough as gettin' along with those crazy horses. Both of 'em don't have much brains. If horses' brains were gunpowder, they wouldn't have enough snoose to blow their nose."

They both laughed at this revelation. When they got to the airport, the clerk accompanied them to the reservation counter. "Suppose he thinks we're gonna make a break for it," George whispered to Roger as they checked their luggage.

"Maybe they get paid more if they have to run us down," Roger returned. George snickered at this. The clerk and the ticket agent were having a discussion as George and Roger continued to look at each other and giggle. A companionship was already starting to grow between them. It was clear that neither one knew much about the military or its ways. But it also seemed clear that they might be

willing to learn it together, provided they could still laugh a little -- at others as well as themselves.

The Army clerk came up to them. "Looks like you guys get a good trip to Portland. They've got a deadhead going that way. You'll be the only passengers."

George whispered to Roger as they picked up their suitcases, "See, I told you they thought we were up to something. Now they've gone and put us on our own plane. Do you suppose they'll have stewardesses on it?"

Roger could only manage a grin and a suppressed laugh. "Wonder if this is how they do it for condemned men? Give 'em their own plane, full of stews?" George broke out laughing. The clerk stopped, and turned to face them. His puzzled face broke them both up, and they laughed even harder.

George managed to control his laughter. Drying his eyes, he turned to the clerk. "See, we're scared to death of flying, so we have to joke about it before each flight." That did it. Roger was laughing so hard that he couldn't catch his breath.

"All right, wise guys. Let's get to your plane, OK?" The clerk seemed a bit agitated.

As they started down toward their aircraft, George pulled Roger off to the side. "Do you suppose we hurt his feelings?" George sobbed. Roger's knees buckled as he laughed until his ribs hurt.

Soon they were aboard their plane. The stewardesses even seated them in first class. But the pressurization in the cabin was lousy, and it was hard to make conversation. Soon George had them in stitches with his earthy humor. At least it made the flight to Portland seem a lot shorter. Roger was glad when the plane's wheels finally touched down at the Portland International Airport. His ears hurt from the pressure problems in the cabin.

As they walked up the concourse to the registration and ticketing area, Roger slung his small suitcase over his shoulder. "Boy, am I glad to be off that noisy prop job. That is about the worst flight I've ever had in an airplane." Not that he had flown that much. This was about the fourth time he had ever been in an airliner.

"Yeah. Think we'll get a jet next. Portland to Dallas is too far for one of them propeller jobs," George answered as he studied their tickets. "We need to look for Braniff, Roger. Which way?"

"Right over there, my man. See their symbol?"

On the flight to Dallas, both Roger and George slept. George dreamed of the crystal clear mountain streams in northern Idaho. He also dreamed of chasing cows with a helicopter. Now, this was fun, he thought, as his dream carried him over high mountain range lands in the Rocky Mountains. He would rise higher and higher, until the cows were tiny specks on the mountain meadows. Then he would nose over into a screaming dive, pulling out at the last second. This maneuver would spook the cows so bad that their tails would stand on end, and their eyes would roll back in their heads. George's dream lasted nearly all the way to Dallas. He awoke as the seat belt light and no smoking signs blinked on.

He shook Roger gently. "Time to wake up, compadre," he yawned.

Roger turned slowly in his seat as he roused himself. "We there already?"

"Not quite, but it's gettin' close." George was searching for their tickets again. "Let's see....Trans Texas Airlines next. Ever heard of them?"

"Hey, you're the one with all the flying experience," Roger stretched and arched his back. "This could get to be a long day, you know."

"Wow! We must be lost," George was looking out the window.

"What?"

"Take a look out that window! There ain't a hill in sight. And there ain't nothin' but houses under us! We can't land here!" George's voice had raised in pitch as his head filled the tiny window.

Roger pushed next to him trying to see out the window. "Boy, you are full of so much crap," he said as he strained against his seatbelt.

"Yeah, I know," George answered, "But the Army will have something to do with helpin' me get rid of a bunch of it!"

As they exited the plane at Dallas International, the hot, humid air seemed to press against them. Entering the terminal was like entering a large shower room. Moisture even dripped from the ceiling occasionally. "You know, Roger, we might even learn to like it here," George observed.

"I think I could like a shower and a shave one heck of a lot better. They must have a head around here someplace. How much time until we have to catch our next plane?"

"A head? You mean a restroom?"

"Yeah, George, a head's a restroom."

George stopped, and pulled his ticket from his bag.

"Let's see....two hours according to my watch. 'Course I guess that's in a different time zone, too. Wonder if these tickets are local time, or Mountain time?"

"Where do you come up with these crazy ideas? They'd have to be local time, wouldn't they?"

"Well, did you ever wonder why the Army uses a 24-hour clock? Just for times like these. See, ya' been on a plane all night, and you change time zones four or five times. Now how are you going to know when ya' should eat breakfast? Zap! Twenty-four hour clock tells you right on! Speakin' of breakfast, I'm gettin' kinda hungry. That meal on the plane wasn't enough to get me by for more'n a couple hours."

"Hey, let's find a head first. I really need to wash up."

"Yeah, OK. That does sound good to me, too."

As they entered a men's room, George whistled softly.

"Did you ever see so many sinks in a row at one time, Roger? There must be over two dozen."

As they stood at the sinks, shirtless, trying to shave, George stared giggling again. "Do you suppose the Army even knows where we are right now?"

Roger swished his razor in the sink. "Do you think they really care?"

"I think this is a test. See, they send us on this crazy airplane ride to see if we can find our way to where we're supposed to be going. If we can, then we've passed our first test on our way to becoming officer material."

"Officer material?"

"Sure. Gotta be an officer to fly. That's true no matter what branch of the service you're in."

"George, where do you keep comin' up with all these service-related facts?"

"Hey, when I found out this is where I'm gonna spend a few of my young and good-lookin' years, I started askin' a lot of questions. That's why they make us Warrant Officers when we finish the course. Ya' gotta have bars of some kind to be a pilot. Even if you're only flying helicopters. Always thought it might be kind of nice to be an officer. Ever been saluted before?"

"Honest to God, not once in my life."

"Thought so. Going to have to work on your attitude. To be an officer, you hafta learn to think like one. That

means you hafta get used to bein' saluted. Think you can handle that?"

"C'mon. Let's see if we can find Trans Texas, or whatever it is," Roger wiped his razor on a paper towel, and returned it to his plastic shaving kit.

Trans Texas Airlines had a nickname, they soon found. It was called "Tree Top Airlines" by the locals. As they approached DeRidder, Louisiana, the pilot rolled the old DC-3 into a steep bank as he made his approach. There was a single stewardess on the plane. She was older than the ones they had encountered on the bigger airliners, and no alcohol was served. There were also a couple other young men on the plane that looked as if they might be headed for the same destination as Roger and George.

"Think we might start a conspiracy?" George said as he nodded toward the other probable recruits. "We could probably take over this plane easy. Wonder if it'll make it to Cuba?"

Even though he was dog tired, the humor was not lost on Roger. He managed a grin. That was enough to keep George going. "Think you can land it, if I can take it away from the pilot, that is...? Hmmm..., not any alcohol on board, so can't make a Molotov cocktail. Have to think quickly here, agent 007. Need a weapon..." George's fantasy lasted until they had taxied up to the terminal, such as it was. As they exited the plane, George stopped, turned, and studied the plane for a moment. "Well, we coulda done it, I think. Just couldn't find the weapon."

Again the heat and humidity. "Wonder if it's like this all the time here? I feel like I've been wearing these clothes for a week," Roger studied his rumpled shirt. George's was untucked and flapping behind him as they were met by a heavy-set black man with a cigar and chauffeur's cap.

"You all headin' for Fort Polk?" He offered the question easily, and Roger wondered how many times he'd asked that question. He stowed their suitcases on top of what passed for a limousine. It was an old Ford station wagon. Only the writing on its side advertised that it was the limousine service. But it was air conditioned. The limou carried Roger and George, and two others who looked like recruits, out of DeRidder toward Fort Polk.

George was leaning back in the seat. His shirt was unbuttoned, and his white t-shirt was stained with sweat. His eyes were closed, but he was far from asleep. "Knew we

missed our chance on that airplane, pardner," he mused. Then he rolled his head toward Roger with a wide grin. Roger had to chuckle. Here they were, a couple thousand miles away from home, not really knowing what they were getting into, but whatever it was, some of George's humor was certain to tag along. It was, in fact, humor of this sort that was to sustain Roger and his new acquaintances through the coming months. They found that when they could no longer laugh, it was time to begin worrying about their sanity....

Arriving late in the afternoon, they were checked in, and assigned bunks in a two-story wooden barracks. George took the bottom bunk, and Roger the one above him. They were assigned foot lockers with locks and keys. They were cautioned to store their valuables in the foot locker. The next day more recruits arrived. By then Roger's and George's civilian clothes had been replaced by Army green fatigues. And more recruits arrived the following day. The barracks were almost full. And they were given their first Army discipline. Learning to stand in formation was their first lesson, and lines to do things became an everyday occurrence. They found out that the place they were staying was called the Reception Station. Here incoming recruits were assembled until they were ready to start the "official" basic training (BCT). The "C" stood for combat, but the first days were far from combat. In fact, all of basic training seemed to lack the feel of combat. It was lots of sweat, and discipline.

From the Reception Station, they saw other recruits already in basic, marching by in formation. Some were carrying rifles and packs, but most were just marching. But they all seemed in a hurry to get somewhere. While in the Reception Station, there was work to be done. Each day they fell out in a rag-tag formation to receive their work assignments. And they all got the renowned Army haircut -- an all-over butch, as George called it. With their green fatigues, no hair, and Army style baseball caps (in green, of course), it was hard to tell one new recruit from another. And they were issued dog tags.

"I don't care what you do with these here dog tags," the corporal in charge said, "but don't you ever be without them. I mean, at NO time will you take these off. In bed, in the shower, in the latrine,...wherever. Be sure yo' keep 'em on."

That first evening with the dog tags sounded like a convention of tinkerbelles as they rolled in for the night. "Jesus," George mumbled as the lights went out in the barracks. "It's a good thing there's nobody in here with a long, curly moustache, and a hook for a hand. He'd go nuts with all these tinkerbelles flittin' around, huh?"

Roger grinned as he lay on his back in his bunk. He still had paint on his fingers from stenciling names on

duffel bags all day. It made his fingers feel sticky. That and the heat and sweat made him wish for some back-home weather and a long hot shower. His mind began to wander, and he thought of Janet. Wonder how's she making out now, he thought. She had decided to stay at school, and work at her job through the summer. With that, and what Roger could send her, she should have enough to pay for a full year of school. Boy, it sure would be nice to be rolling into bed next to her right now, Roger thought. Though he was exhausted, it took Roger a time to drift off to sleep. This was the best part of the day for him. This was about the only time it was quiet, and he could be alone with his thoughts. He was not that fond of community living, preferring to spend some of his time alone. He had done that since he was a kid. It seemed that his dad had time to show him the fundamentals of hunting and fishing, but never did have the time to share many of those experiences with him. Roger spent much of his time after school and on weekends alone in the woods. Fishing along the stream that ran near the house, hunting along the creek, or sneaking along the backwaters and sloughs of the river.

Quiet movement and keen observation paid off for Roger on these hunting trips. He wasn't the best of shots with a shotgun or a rifle, but he could usually get close enough to ducks with a good stalk that he could nearly always scratch down a couple. Alone he had watched the salmon spawning in the streams, and one day duck hunting had come upon an otter doing battle with a large salmon in a small stream off the river. Roger stood quietly in the current of the stream as the otter fought to pull the salmon ashore not thirty feet away. The splashing of the spawning salmon had covered the sound of Roger's approach, so the otter hadn't noticed him. Finally managing to drag the salmon onto the bank, the otter released his grip, and seemed to take a long breath. Not much different than me, thought Roger, after a tough pull. Roger waited until the otter began feeding before he retreated as quietly as he could. The twelve gauge shotgun in his hands was not meant for killing otters. Today it was ducks, and there was no reason to spoil that otter's dinner. He had had to work hard for it. Maybe he even has a family to feed, thought Roger. He detoured a long way around where the otter was feeding, and joined the creek far above to search for ducks. A sudden crashing of the garbage can in the barracks was the rise-and-shine call. Sure did ruin a good dream. Oh well, just another day....

Time in the Reception Station was not measured in terms of days. It was measured by how fast the barracks filled, and how fast groups were loaded into trucks with their gear to move over to the "official" BCT area. There they were assigned to a "real" company, complete with flag, company commander, and drill sergeants, or corporals, depending on the circumstances.

Many of those joining Roger and George in the Reception Station were signed up to start flight school after basic training. Most all of these had a year or two of college. The rest of the recruits ranged in education from college to almost none. Many were from the West Coast of the US. Most of the college recruits didn't mind the hard work, but the harassment which had started with those running the Reception Station was a little tougher to take. One thing the recruits found out quickly was the enlisted personnel in charge of them could tell who was going where. The prefix to each recruit's service number started with two letters. The rest was all numbers. The numbers didn't mean much, but the two letters sure did. NG stood for National Guard, US for draftees, who would have a two-year active obligation, and RA stood for Regular Army -- a four-year active obligation. Those with an RA service number were considered just short of crazy by many enlisted personnel.

As the group fell out of the barracks one morning for work detail, it was a PFC (Private First Class) that they faced -- a one-striper. "Everyone's service number that starts with an NG fall out over to my left. Everyone that has a US in their service number, fall out over here to my right. The rest of you are assholes, and you can stay right where you are. I'll be back for you in a few minutes."

The other two groups were given their instructions, and marched off to their jobs. The PFC then turned back to the remaining group. "All right, give me a quick ten." With the instruction, some of the group fell into the "front leaning rest position", which meant you assumed the position to begin doing push-ups. Some of these began doing ten push-ups. The rest of the group looked around them, and when they realized what the command meant, they also began doing push-ups. After everyone finished their ten, the group resumed the position of attention. "Now, when I give you an order, you're to do it all together," the PFC commanded. "Let's try it again. Give me a quick ten."

It was obvious that this runt of a PFC was thoroughly enjoying his power over the new recruits. After the group's

third try at "doing it together", a sergeant happened by, and broke up the PFC's fun. The rest of the group received its work details in short order, and headed out.

Finally the day came when the big trucks rolled in, and loaded up everyone's gear. "Well, fella RA'er, are you ready for the big time?" George asked Roger.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

"Hope we end up in the same bunch. 'Course I don't know if I can stand you, being so serious all the time."

As the group tumbled from the barracks and fell into formation, they noticed a real drill sergeant standing before the group. Black as night, with a short, black moustache, he eyed the troops sternly. His Smokey Bear hat didn't even twitch as he barked out orders, bringing the group to attention, and getting everyone loaded onto the trucks. The trucks were huge semi's, with large trailers. The trailers had low, wooden sides with benches on the inside. There was no cover over the whole affair.

"Glad it ain't rainin'," George mumbled as they shoved their duffel bags into the trailer and climbed aboard.

Soon they arrived in their new company area. Then it was unload, and stand in formation next to their duffel bags. It was hot, and the sweat was running freely as they continued to stand in formation. The drill sergeant who had accompanied them on the trip from the Reception Area was still with them, standing in front of the formation. Questioning glances darted through the recruits, but there was no talking. At long last, an officer appeared before the group. He was a captain, Roger learned later from George's explanation of the ranks of the Army.

"Anyone wearing a bar of any kind on his collar or his hat or helmet is an officer. Watch them. They stand pretty close to God on a Basic Training post like Fort Polk. The rest are enlisted men. They wear stripes on their sleeves. The more stripes, the higher the rank. A one-striper is a private first class. Two stripes, that's a corporal. Three stripes, a buck sergeant, unless he wears a Smokey Bear hat. Then he's a drill sergeant,...and likely mean. If a three-striper has one rocker under his stripes, he's a platoon sergeant, and after that, I don't know."

"What if he doesn't have any stripes at all?"

"Well, then he's just a private, that's all. The very bottom, 'cept for us. We're just a little above the dirt around here."

George's description of the ranks seemed to make sense, especially when the captain addressed the group. There was some discussion of the group before them, and how well they'd done. There was some talk about AWOL (absent without leave). That is when someone decides to walk away without telling anyone else. Each troop was supposed to make sure his buddies didn't do it because it would go harder on everyone else in the company. That seemed to mean that it would go harder on the cadre, because it was hard to believe a few weeks later that they could go harder on the recruits. The captain left the troops in charge of a real drill sergeant. He was blonde, muscular frame, the real no-nonsense type. He divided the group into platoons. There were four platoons in the company, each with its own assigned drill sergeant. Actually, one was a corporal, but it didn't seem to make any difference. Each platoon was herded to its barracks.

When the first platoon arrived at its new home, they started packing away their gear. The first lesson in Army discipline occurred during this process. A new recruit wasn't allowed to store his gear just any way he wanted to. There was a specific way that everything had to be put away. T-shirts rolled this way. Clothes hung in the locker that way. Razor displayed here in the foot locker. And, of course, it took most of the day to get everyone in the barracks to do it the same way. By this time, the platoon was broken down into squads. Two upstairs, and two downstairs. A recruit platoon guide (platoon leader) was appointed. His name was Peterson. Recruit squad leaders were also appointed.

By this time in the training cycle, everyone had their last name sewed on every fatigue shirt they had. So it wasn't necessary to remember anyone's name. Except in the evening, when everyone had their shirts off. And to keep things in perspective, this is where the nicknames started. There was a Polish fellow in Roger's squad. His name started with a "K" and ended in "ski". That was enough, but nobody could pronounce his name. His nickname? Alphabit. It seemed to fit, and he didn't seem to mind, so it stuck. Then there was Gordon Weatherly Thomas, III. He became "King T", but was later shortened to "King". He slept above Roger. George ended up in the first squad on the other side of the main floor of the barracks from Roger. Nearly the entire First Platoon, to which Roger and George belonged, was white. The Second Platoon was mixed. The Third Platoon

was all black Texans, except for the platoon guide. He was the only white person in the platoon. The Fourth Platoon was all black, too, but pretty tame compared to the Texans. All of the First Platoon came from west of the Mississippi River. Most of the Second Platoon was from back east. The Fourth Platoon was mostly Southerners from everywhere but Texas.

This made it kind of neat for those in the First Platoon. First, nearly all of them had at least a high school education. Second, about three-fourths of them were headed for flight school. This gave all of them a lot in common, compared to the other platoons. But also, for the same reasons, they took more than their share of abuse from the drill cadre. The First Platoon recruits learned quickly that it wasn't to their best interest to ask too many questions. And they quickly learned that even one was too many. Unless they were asking their drill corporal, Corporal Banner. Banner was tall and slender. He didn't carry the macho of the other drill sergeants. He also listened to questions, and gave answers. But he wasn't to lead the platoon for the entire cycle. The recruits in the First Platoon genuinely liked Banner, and thought that he defended them on several occasions when they were being picked on by the other drill cadre. Maybe that's why he didn't last the the whole cycle with the First Platoon. But he was there for the first half, almost.

That first evening in the barracks was for getting acquainted, besides getting all the gear arranged. Roger met two other recruits from Washington State. Both were going on to flight school, and both were from Seattle.

"You both really from Seattle?"

"Sure," Huff answered. "I live up in Queen Anne, and Richard lives over on Mercer Island."

"We got one guy from Idaho, too. I came down with him from Spokane. I think he's in the second squad. Nice to know someone else is from the Northwest," Roger was pleased to find others from his part of the country.

"Nearly all the guys upstairs are from California. At least they speak English," Huff returned. Don Huff was the son of a school teacher. He was tall, and very muscular. He had an easy smile, and spoke slowly. Richard Hadley was nearly Don's opposite. Richard was short and stocky. He also looked like a football player, but was quick in conversation. Nearly everyone in the platoon smoked.

"Have one of mine," Richard offered as Roger fished in his pocket for a smoke. "Think they might help keep the bugs out of here tonight, too."

Lights out came before anyone was ready. Corporal Banner had announced that there would be an inspection the following morning. Banner had the only private room in the whole barracks. It was on the end of the main floor. At the other end of the barracks was the latrine. There was a latrine on the second floor also. Screen covered the windows. Heavy screen like mesh, and fine screen to keep out the mosquitoes. There were screen doors, too. On the end facing the company area, beside Banner's room, was a single door. The door on the side of the building near the latrine was a double door with a wide porch and wooden stairs. First Platoon's barracks was located at the edge of the company area, and just a short distance away was the cyclone fence that marked the perimeter of the fort.

Morning came too early, but at least Banner didn't beat on the garbage can to awaken the troops. He raised his voice as he ambled between the rows of double bunks. Banner was from New York. He didn't seem to care for Army harassment, but he was convinced that the recruits were here to learn something, and toughen themselves in the process.

The first squad leader, Jim Leslie, rolled out of bed, located his glasses and began waking his squad. "All right you guys, let's hit the floor. We've got ten minutes before formation." Jim seemed to be saying it as much to himself as to anyone else.

It took the entire platoon a little longer than the ten minutes that had been given to fall into formation. So, as is the Army way, if you can't get it right the first time, try it again. After what seemed the twentieth attempt, the lead drill sergeant, who had not made an appearance the day before, addressed the group. The air was heavy with moisture, and empty stomachs seemed more important than what Drill Sergeant James was saying. So, when he finished his little speech with a question, there was almost no response. He stood quietly for a moment, then asked the question again. This time a meager, "Yes, drill sergeant," drifted from the company.

"All right!!" he yelled. The company visibly stiffened. "If I can't hear you, then you ain't gonna get breakfast! Now drop down and give me twenty. Then we'll see if you're awake!" As the entire company dropped for push-ups, Roger caught Hadley's glance, and winked in

return. As the recruits pushed the world away, the other drill cadre circulated among them, harassing the loafers and those unfortunate enough to enter BCT carrying extra pounds.

Poor George. Even his sense of humor couldn't stop the sweat that was now beginning to drip from his chin.

George's body never could match his spirit. And blondie, with the Smokey Bear hat, noticed him. This was the worst thing in the world that could have happened. If you were noticed, that meant that you weren't doing things the same as everyone else. Therefore you must be doing them wrong. And blondie was the absolute worst to be noticed by. With everyone back at attention, blondie entered the ranks to stand before George. "Are you tired, troop?!" he blared.

"No, drill sergeant," George responded.

"I can't hear you!" blondie returned.

George screamed, "No, drill sergeant!"

"That's better. This platoon is the last one in line for breakfast," blondie turned to return to his post at the front of the company. Then he hesitated, and faced the First Platoon again. "Thirty more," he said flatly, "Just for the first herd." Then he addressed the entire company, and released the platoons for breakfast.

As the First Platoon finished its push-ups and joined the line at the mess hall, they noticed activity on the bars next to the door. Everyone had to do the overhead bars down and back before entering the mess hall. Some did them easily, but again, the heavy recruits were a liability. Blondie was there, too, making sure that each recruit did his turn. When it was George's turn, Blondie was watching every move. Overweight though he was, George's spirit showed through. It was clear he had done some hard work in his life. It wasn't easy for him, but he managed to make the length of the bars. It was on the last one that his grip slipped, but he managed to make the end. As he dropped to the ground to make way for the next recruit, blood dripped from the torn callous on his hand.

And so it went that first week. Lots of marching and drill. Lots of PT (physical training). Both Richard and Don suffered miserably from blisters that first week. The running in PT was in combat boots, and blisters were a common ailment for nearly everyone. But the Army doesn't consider blisters as a reason to miss anything. Unless they get infected. Then a recruit could go on sick call. But if it was only blisters, then 100 push-ups were required before he was allowed to go on sick call. Most of the trainees

didn't figure it was worth it, so they endured the blisters. The bars also contributed to blisters. 'Course they were only on the hands, and that didn't stop a recruit from doing anything. Stung like crazy on KP when the dish washing detail was drawn, but it wasn't fatal.

Toward the end of the first week, everyone in the platoon was looking forward to the weekend. But it wasn't to be. Peterson, the platoon guide, addressed the platoon on Friday evening. He had come from a meeting of the drill cadre and the recruit platoon guides. "They don't think we've done well enough. So, we get no PX privileges, and we get to prepare for an IG. That's for a general inspection. We've gotta clean the barracks and everything in it from top to bottom. We start first thing in the morning."

Then Corporal Banner rose, "Don't take it hard, troops. This is typical for the first weekend of basic. The Army doesn't want you to stay used to weekends. Wars don't take holidays, and they figure you need the training."

"You know, that Banner isn't such a bad sort," George whispered. "I wonder how he ever managed to get this job? I don't think he's cut out for a drill sergeant."

Huff answered softly, "You're right. But it sure is nice to have him around, eh?"

The whole platoon rolled in early that night. The lights were still on in the other platoons' barracks when the first called it a night.

Roger was suddenly awake. He had been dreaming about Janet. But then he noticed the bed was shaking. It took him only a couple seconds to identify the source. His bunk mate above him was masturbating. Roger rolled over, and tried to go back to sleep. The shaking stopped, and Roger thought again of home.

9: Dreaming of Nurses

But it was not Janet who Roger dreamed of that night. It was a cool Saturday night in Pullman when he and Rex had returned from their dates. They had met at Rex's apartment for a nightcap when Rex suggested that it was too early to turn in.

"What do you mean? I mean, I realize that our dates weren't that neat, but what's there to do in Pullman at two in the morning?" Roger was perplexed.

"Who said anything about Pullman?" Rex was draining the last of his beer. "Do you know what's happening tomorrow?"

Tomorrow is Sunday, Roger thought. What usually happens on Sunday? Sleep in, if you're suffering from a hangover. Or, hit the books early, and get a good start on the next week.

"C'mon, Roger, think a little. I can't believe you've forgotten her that quickly!" Rex jumped out of his chair, and tossed his beer can in a waste basket. "It was only two months ago that we were datin' 'em."

Roger's head spun. "You mean Becky and Sue?"

"Sure!" Rex was excited now.

"Holy cow, man, they're in Tacoma!"

"Sure they're in Tacoma. But we got my car. How long do you figure it would take to get there?"

"Are you serious?" Roger couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You want to head for Tacoma tonight? Well, this morning??"

"Sure. Their graduation ceremony from nurses' training is tomorrow at Tacoma General. Think we could make it?"

"Well, we might make it over there, but we gotta be back to classes on Monday."

"I think we can make it. Split the driving."

Roger was getting excited, too. It was a possibility. It was a long way, but if they left now... "OK, Rex. Let's hit it!" In a flash they were both out the door. As they jumped into Rex's '59 Chevy, Roger said, "Wait a minute." He ran back to Rex's apartment. In a minute he was back with the remaining four beers of the six-pack in his hand. "OK, I'm ready now. I assume you're driving the first leg, huh?"

Rex laughed. "Yeah, you're on. In fact, I'll drive all the way over, if you'll make the return trip!"

"In a pig's eye!!" The Chevy's engine roared as Rex bounced the car out of the driveway and headed down the street. The night was clear as they entered Pullman.

"Can you believe that!? Not a single gas station open in this town." Rex's enthusiasm for the trip was hard to take.

Roger took another sip of beer. "What did you expect? The only people living in this town are students, teachers, and farmers. The women students had to be in at one, everyone knows that the teachers will all be in church tomorrow praying that half of their wild students were killed over the weekend, and the farmers all have to get up early."

Rex was not to be denied this trip. "Let's head for Moscow, then. There'll have to be a station open there." And sure enough. There was.

After filling with gas in Moscow, Idaho, Rex pointed the car west. The lights of Pullman were soon in view again. Roger was sipping another beer.

"Hey, Roger, let's not get so smashed that you can't help with the driving."

Roger looked closely at Rex, "No second thoughts?...."

"Not on your life, wild man. We is gonna be in the big city of Tacoma by morning, whether you're ready or not!" Rex was sure of his destination. He watched Roger light a cigarette, and slump down in the seat. "Go ahead and catch some z's. When I get tired, I'll wake ya' up."

"Promise?"

"Honest to God. If I get too tired to handle it, I'll wake ya' up."

"OK. Just wanted to make sure you really meant for us to make this trip. I know your date shut you down tonight, but I wasn't sure that you wanted to go to Tacoma tonight. That's over three hundred miles. And one mountain pass. And just the two of us. No second thoughts now?"

"Look. I told you we were goin' to Tacoma tonight," Rex was serious. Roger watched his eyes as they entered the lights of Pullman. "See. Got ten less miles to go already," Rex grinned.

Roger could see that the trip was on for sure. He crawled over the seat, and curled up on the back seat. "Not what I'd call the greatest of accommodations back here. Think the bed's a little short."

"I'll call room service first thing in the morning, and see if we can't trade rooms." Rex rolled the radio up loud, and Roger dozed off.

Roger awoke with a start. There was no sound. He sat up quickly and looked around. The car appeared to be sitting in the middle of a wheat field. Rex was nowhere to be seen. Roger wondered what had happened. He couldn't see a road, fence or anything. Roger quickly checked himself in the moonlight. No blood, or sore spots that would have resulted from a wreck. He reached over the front seat to open the door. As he did, Rex sat bolt upright in the front seat and collided with Roger.

"Jesus! You scared me to death!" Rex gasped.

"Me?? Scared you!? Now that's funny. I'm still tryin' to get my heart started. Where are we, and why didn't you wake me up?"

"I tried."

"I can't believe that."

"Honest to God, I did. You were really sound asleep."

"Well, it's time to switch drivers. I'm ready to go. Where are we anyway?"

Rex climbed into the back seat as Roger jumped into the front. "I think we're almost into Othello."

Roger checked his watch. "You must have made pretty good time."

"Yeah. Nothin' on the road but those crazy jackrabbits."

Roger started the engine, and put the car in reverse. "Just one more question, Rex."

"Yeah?...."

"Where's the road?"

Laughter issued from the back seat. "Try following our tracks."

Roger turned the car around, and was soon back on the road. He checked his watch again. Could make Ellensburg before first light, easy, he thought. Let's see what this baby's got.

The road reached off into the night. The nearly full moon shone brightly on the open countryside. An occasional cloud obscured its light, but it was a beautiful night. No other traffic on the road. The flat, rolling country of the plateau finally gave way to the west, and the red Chevy began descending into the Columbia gorge. Here the mighty Columbia River flowed swiftly. The river shone brightly

under the bright moon above. It was about the calmest that Roger had ever seen the river. Suppose that's a sign, he thought. Usually the wind was blowing so hard here that it was sometimes difficult to keep a car in its own lane. Then they were across the bridge and climbing the long Vantage grade on the west side of the river. It was a twelve-mile hill. And it was steep, for a highway. Up ahead Roger saw the clearance lights of a semi. They had to gear way down to make the long pull. He checked ahead for headlights, and passed the big truck easily.

Roger pulled into a service station in Ellensburg. As he cut the engine, Rex woke up, stretched and rubbed his eyes. "Where we at?"

"Ellensburg. Why? Did you think I'd leave you in the middle of a wheat field, or something?"

Rex was fishing for his wallet. "How much bread you got?"

Roger got out of the car, straightened his back, and opened his wallet. "Looks like about seven bucks. How's yours?"

"You're not gonna like this. I'm broke, I think."

"Well, this'll cover the gas, anyway. Why, you hungry?"

"Are you kiddin'? I'm going back to sleep, as soon as I hit the john."

As Roger prepared to fill the gas tank, he noticed the cap was missing. Wonder if Rex ever had one, he thought. He went ahead and filled the tank anyway. As Roger entered the station to pay the pump jockey, Rex joined him.

"You know our gas cap's missing, Rex?" Roger asked.

"Really? I must have left it in Moscow."

Roger turned to the attendant, "Have you got a rag we can use?"

"Sure," responded the attendant as he closed the cash register. He produced a clean grease rag that Rex and Roger stuck in the gas tank opening.

The highway led west from Ellensburg into the mountains. The temperature dropped to freezing as the red Chevy climbed the first grade. Rex turned the heater on, and remained in the front seat. It wasn't long before he leaned against the window, and was fast asleep. Roger settled himself more comfortably in the seat, and lit a cigarette. Providing there weren't any problems on the pass, they should be rolling into Tacoma early in the

morning. But as they continued to rise, Roger got his first warning of the impending trip over the pass. Snowflakes!! And not just the tiny ones of no consequence. These were huge and coming fast. Hope it's just an isolated storm, Roger thought. Nearing Easton on the east side of the pass, the flakes were coming down heavily, and the road began to turn white.

As Roger checked the rear view mirror, he noticed that a pair of headlights were gaining on them rapidly. "Now there's one crazy son-of-a-gun," Roger mumbled. Better slow down and give him lots of room. Roger deaccelerated as the car behind pulled up close. Why don't you go ahead and go around, Roger thought, as the car remained behind them. Suddenly it sprouted flashing red lights.. "Well, it's a ... state bull," Roger said aloud. He slowed quickly, and edged onto the shoulder of the road. The flashing lights followed close behind. Just then, Rex awoke.

"What's the problem, Roger?"

"Don't know. A state bull is right behind us, and I don't have the foggiest idea why he would pull us over in this snow." Roger rolled down his window as the state patrolman approached the driver's window. "What's the problem, officer?"

"Can I see your driver's license, please?" His Smokey Bear hat was covered with a plastic shield, and he leaned into the driving snow.

"Sure," Roger said as he reached for his wallet.

As Roger produced his license, the patrolman studied it with his flashlight. "And can I see the car registration, please?" Roger turned to Rex. The expression on Rex's face indicated that things weren't all as they should be with the registration. Roger's heart sank. Rex slowly opened the glove box, and began sorting through the papers inside. Rex finally produced some papers which Roger handed to the patrolman.

"This car's registered in California...?"

Rex leaned toward the driver's window. "Yes, it is. I bought it down there while I was on vacation from school. See, my mother lives down there, and I went down to visit her during Thanksgiving vacation."

"Well, where are your license plates? Do you realize that this car doesn't have any plates on it?"

Well, no wonder, Roger thought. But it sure seemed funny that the patrolman would have spotted that in the

middle of a snowstorm. Maybe that guy at the service station in Ellensburg had called it in.

Rex entered into a long explanation that sounded to Roger like one of the best lines he had ever heard. But knowing Rex, he was sure that the whole thing was true. It came out even more confusing, though, when Rex tried to explain that his mother had been living in Washington, and had only recently moved to California. Like in the last couple months. Boy, if that patrolman doesn't run us in, it will be a big surprise to me, Roger thought. Finally the patrolman said he'd be right back, and returned to his car.

Roger looked at Rex. "I can't believe this, man." Then he grinned. "But knowing you, I really can." Rex smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

It seemed like they had been sitting there for nearly an eternity when the patrolman returned to the driver's window. As Roger rolled it down, the trooper handed him a small clipboard. "This is a citation for driving a car with no license plates," he said. Roger calmly handed the clipboard to Rex. As Rex took it, the patrolman protested. "It's for you, the driver," he said as he pointed at Roger.

"What?" Roger was stunned. "It's his car. I didn't even know it didn't have any license plates on it. Besides, he's trying to get plates for it. He told you that. It's just that he needs a refund from California before he can get it licensed here."

"Yes. I understand all that," the officer was patient with Roger's resistance. "But that doesn't change the situation that you were operating the vehicle, and it doesn't have valid plates on it."

Finally convinced, Roger signed the ticket. As the patrolman handed over the ticket, he explained that Roger could fight it. Roger glanced at the fine. Thirty-five bucks! Roger turned to Rex, "You know, this could get to be one expensive trip, partner."

"I'm really sorry about the ticket, man. I had no idea that this would happen. That stupid dealer in Cal. I told him I had to have Washington plates. He said no problem, that they'd be in the mail pronto."

"Oh well, it's done. Let's get on with it."

"Yeah. Hey, let me drive. I'm sure not gonna sleep now."

"OK," Roger got out of the car, and ran around to the passenger side. The snow was really coming down now. As he

slid in, he rubbed his hands briskly. "Let's get some heat in this snowbird, hey?"

"She'll warm up as soon as we're rolling," Rex watched the patrolman turn around and head back for Ellensburg. Roger curled up in the front seat.

After what seemed like only a few minutes, but actually was several hours later, Roger awoke with a start. Rex was standing outside the driver's door of the car, and the daylight was blinding. "You ready for me to take over?"

"I wish it was that simple." Rex looked like he had seen better days, all right, but Roger thought it was because he had been driving half the night. Rex then pointed to the front wheel. Roger slid out of the car. No snow, and what beautiful sunshine. Then he looked at the tire.

"Well, it's only flat on one side," he said. "Let's get out the spare. We can fix it in a jiff."

"Not quite so fast," Rex shifted uneasily. "Like I said, it's not quite that simple. See, I had a flat last night when I was pickin' up my date." Now the situation was clear to Roger.

"Where are we, anyway?"

"Right at the North Bend cutoff."

"So...where's the nearest service station?"

Rex pointed west, "Down that way. I think Issaquah's the nearest place."

Together, they rolled the spare tire up the bank to the edge of the freeway, and began thumbing a ride. After one or two cars, a station wagon pulled over. As they got in, they noticed that the driver had only one hand. A metal clamp substituted for the other one. They explained their predicament, and the driver laughed. "I've had a trip or two like that myself." He dropped them off at a service station about ten miles down the highway.

As they returned to the other side of the road to hitchhike back to the car, Roger turned to Rex, "I'm sure glad you had that quarter in your pocket. We wouldn't of had enough for the tire. Otherwise I wonder if that guy would of let us have it."

"Hey, I knew he'd give it to us. What would he want with that tire? He couldn't get anything for it."

They both looked up the road to see a white car slowing down to stop for them. Rex turned to Roger, "Now that's what I call luck. Another cop!" It was, and he was only too happy to take them to their car. And even though they

tried to hide the empty license plate holder by rolling the tire in front of it, he noticed. As he asked the obvious question, they both looked at one another and laughed. The lengthy explanation followed, along with showing him the ticket. Besides they were broke, and hungry, and just wanted to get to Tacoma. He let them go, but he left a few words of wisdom. He noted that the Tacoma cops might be a lot tougher on them than he was, and he mentioned that they could continue getting cited for the same offense until they got the problem rectified.

Five minutes later, it didn't seem to matter. Rex was sound asleep in the back seat, and Roger had the Chevy pointed again toward Tacoma.

It was a beautiful day on the coast. The sky was mostly blue, and it was calm. The trip into Tacoma didn't take long at all. As Roger took the Lakewood turnoff from the freeway, Rex awoke in the back seat. He looked around a couple times, then rubbed his eyes and hopped into the front seat. "Tacoma, huh?"

"Yup. And only a couple minutes to Becky's place."

"Does she live with just her Dad?" Rex was looking at himself in the rear view mirror. "I was just checkin' to see if I looked as bad as you," he grinned broadly. Roger rubbed his chin. Rex laughed. "My whiskers are probably as long as yours, but blonde ones don't show. Just gotta have the right genes!"

Finding the right street, Roger pulled into a driveway and shut down the Chev. Rex waited for him to move, but Roger just sat there, looking at the house.

Rex cleared his throat, but Roger still didn't move. "Is this the right house?"

Roger leaned over the steering wheel, and stretched his back. "Yeah, it's the right house, all right. But I just got to thinkin'. What if...well, they don't know we're comin', right? You don't suppose..."

Rex looked up. A heavy set gentleman with thinning gray hair was approaching the car. He had on an old print bathrobe with worn purple slippers. His approach was slow as he looked at the two young men in the car. Rex spoke softly to Roger, "Somebody's come to say good morning."

"Roger, is that you?" the gentleman spoke as he reached the passenger side of the car. Rex rolled his window down.

Roger leaned over Rex, "Sure is, Duke,...for better or for worse."

"Well, come on in," a large hand extended through the window. Rex noted that it looked like a hand that worked hard. It was heavy with callouses, but there was no dirt under the nails. "I'll bet you two could use some breakfast."

Rex followed the two of them into the house after everyone was introduced. It was a tiny kitchen with a small breakfast nook built against a large window. Roger was already seated. "Uh, where's the john?" Rex asked.

"Right down the hall on your left," Duke answered. "It might be occupied, though," Duke grinned, and flashed a wink at Roger. Rex was a little surprised by Duke's look, but the bathroom was empty. When he returned to the kitchen, there were two open Miller beers on the small table.

Roger smiled at his questioning look. "A little hair of the dog, my friend." Rex could already hear the sizzle of bacon frying on the stove. Duke was rustling in the refrigerator. It looked for all the world like he was cooking breakfast. Rex looked across the table at Roger, but Roger's gaze went right past him. And Roger's eyes were bright. Rex turned slowly. Leaning against the door frame in the hall was a bright pink robe. Above the open neck was a huge smile, large brown eyes, topped by long, curly black hair. She didn't move, just stood there looking at them both with that crazy smile.

Duke turned from the stove, "Well, aren't you gonna say hello, or doesn't anyone know each other...?"

"Hi, Becky," Rex said, but she didn't move.

"How do you like your eggs?" Duke asked.

"Over easy," Rex said as he looked from Becky to Roger, and back again.

"Didn't think we'd make it, did you?" Roger asked.

Becky rushed to the table and leaned over, giving Roger a big hug. "You crazy son-of-a-bitch!" was all she said as she slid in next to him at the table. The top of her robe had slipped open, and Rex couldn't help but look. Then she hugged Roger again, and let out a little squeal.

Duke brought a plate of eggs and bacon, complete with toast to the table. "Here, Rex, you might as well get started," he said with a chuckle. "Want a little tomato juice in that beer?"

"Huh? Oh no, this'll be fine, thank you." Roger and Becky had pulled apart, and Roger was smiling. Rex just sat there watching.

"Rex, there's seconds if that's not enough," Duke said as he crossed back to the stove.

"Uh, no, this'll be fine."

Roger looked over at Rex. "Well, you better eat it before it gets cold," he laughed. Roger squeezed Becky one more time as Duke set the second plate of eggs on the table. As Duke returned to the cupboard, Becky called his name.

"You knew they were coming didn't you?" she said accusingly.

"I honestly did not know they were coming," Duke said, but his look betrayed the response.

"You did too! I can't believe you didn't tell me!" Even though she tried to act upset, it was unconvincing to all. Rex and Roger dug into their food. The room was warm, the food great, and that beer was just enough to get them rejuvenated. Becky was happy to see them both. She had known both of them at Pullman, where they had double dated more than a few times. "I've got some shopping to do, but I'm sure I'll see you at graduation, huh?"

"Yes, I don't think there's even a chance that won't happen," Roger continued to smile. "You just take off, and do whatever you have to do, but...if he asks, tell him you've already got a date for graduation!" Becky slapped him smartly on the cheek, and Duke roared in laughter. Rex just sat there with his mouth open. Becky jumped up, and hurried from the kitchen. Tears came to Duke's eyes as he bent over holding his stomach.

Finally, Duke was able to control his laughter. "You best watch your step the rest of today, Roger," he squeaked. Roger grinned, and returned a wink.

After Becky left to do her shopping, Roger and Rex rolled into beds provided by Duke to catch some z's. It was nearly noon when Duke awakened them. They showered and dressed. The three of them headed out together for the graduation ceremonies. Roger's parents were there, and Duke enjoyed visiting with them. The ceremony was impressive. Each graduate was dressed in the all-white nurses uniform, and each received her cap as she rose to the podium. Sue was tall and slender with light brown hair. Becky had picked her up. She hadn't told her that Rex was in town, though. As they were entering the hall where the ceremony was to take place, Sue followed Becky's gaze and spotted Rex and Roger. She nearly tripped, she was so surprised.

Following the ceremony, Duke took the four of them out to dinner. Then they returned to Duke's house, where they

spent the evening talking and listening to records. It wasn't long before they kicked off their shoes and danced to some of their favorites. Becky and Roger loved to dance, and they had a good time of it. Rex was partial to the slow dances, but he and Sue talked quietly on the couch for a long time. Everyone knew the time had come and gone for Roger and Rex to leave, but they all tried to ignore it. Finally, they could wait no longer if the guys were going to make classes on Monday in Pullman.

Rex took the first turn at the wheel as they left Tacoma. Roger was asleep in minutes, once they hit the freeway. But the trip was not to be without incident. Roger was rudely awakened by a loud crash. Collecting himself on the floor of the car, he looked up to see Rex still sitting behind the wheel of the Chev holding his head in his hands. As Roger tried to collect his wits, he looked out the window into the glare of a flashlight. He attempted to open the passenger door, but it swung into the patrolman standing outside.

The voice in the dark asked sharply, "What happened?"

"Darned if I know," Roger answered. "I was asleep." Then he turned to Rex who was still holding his head. "Are you all right, Rex?" Roger reached out to Rex's shoulder. Just then Rex lifted his head, and turned to Roger. Roger couldn't see any blood in the light from the dash, flashlights and flashing red lights from the patrol cars.

"No, I'm OK. Just bumped the steering wheel," Rex shook his head.

The voice from outside the car again, "Will you please get out of the car?"

Roger slid out of the seat as the patrolman held the door. Roger looked around to see where they were. It looked like they were sitting on the shoulder of the road. What the heck did we hit, he thought. Then turning back, he could see the large concrete island behind the car. "Did we run over that?" he asked the patrolman.

"I'm afraid you did. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Just trying to wake up. See, I was asleep."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Only coffee. What time is it? Let's see, we must have left Tacoma nearly two hours ago. No. Wait a minute. A little over an hour ago."

The patrolman noticed that the car had no license plates. Again the story was repeated, but the cops weren't quite so forgiving. They pointed out that Rex would have to

get a temporary license to drive the car on to Pullman. But they also pointed out that he could get one not more than a mile away in North Bend. After a long discussion, the patrolmen were convinced that the car wasn't stolen, and the two young men weren't drunk.

As the lights of North Bend fell behind, Roger pushed the Chev up to sixty miles per hour and turned to Rex. "Can you tell me what really happened back there? Did you fall asleep, or what?"

"Honest to God, it was just like I told the officer. I...one of my contacts slipped, and I lost the road in the glare of the headlights of the oncoming car."

"I guess we were lucky we didn't hit him head on, huh?"

"Well, guess we tried our best. I tried to jump clear over that traffic island."

Roger drove over the pass. It snowed, sometimes heavily, but the road was clear all the way. When they arrived in Ellensburg, they gassed up and switched drivers.

The next time Roger awoke, it was broad daylight, and very bright. As he sat up, he looked out on a brilliant layer of white snow over the landscape. As he looked ahead there were no tracks on the road at all. They were the first ones to travel this way since the snowfall last night. It seemed that they were travelling awfully fast for the snowy conditions. As he leaned over and checked the speedometer, he noted that the needle was steady on sixty. "How come we're going so fast?" he asked Rex.

"Huh? Oh, we're on the downhill now. See that hill coming up?" Roger nodded as Rex continued. "Well, if we don't hit the bottom of it at about sixty-five, we'll never make it to the top with these bald tires."

He isn't kidding, Roger thought. And Rex wasn't kidding. They topped the hill at about ten miles per hour. Then it was down the other side, gathering speed again for the next hill.

"How long have we been doing this?" Roger asked.

"Ever since we got into these hills." Rex's eyes never left the road for an instant.

As they rolled into Colfax, there was only one more hill between them and Pullman. Winding up out of Colfax, it wasn't that steep, but in this snow, and there was more traffic on the road, it was likely to be very slippery. As Roger tried to figure out if there was an alternate route to Pullman, Rex continued to stare at the road ahead. As they

started up the grade, ahead they could see a sanding truck spreading sand on the road. Behind it was a line of cars.

"Boy, are we in luck," Roger said, pointing to the sanding truck.

"Yeah, we sure are," Rex's voice was flat. He was obviously very tired, but he didn't seem anxious for Roger to drive the few remaining miles. He was not looking to either side, only at the road and cars ahead.

As they approached the line of cars behind the sanding truck, Roger glanced up the hill to their right. A car was backing out of a driveway above the road. A quick look up the road, and Roger saw a semi truck and trailer rig coming down the hill. "Can you push a little faster, Rex? There's a car backing out of the driveway up ahead, and I don't think it can stop before it hits the road." Rex nursed the Chev forward, but they could both see it was going to be close. Just as they passed the driveway, the backing car slid out into the road. As the semi went by them, Roger turned to look, expecting a horrendous crash. But the semi driver took the only route he had. He steered the semi over the bank. Roger could see the willow trees whipping and the snow flying as the truck disappeared over the shoulder of the road.

The driver of the car appeared to be an elderly woman. She didn't even see the semi, turned the car toward Colfax and started down the hill. The truck came back into view as they rounded a curve further up the hill. The truck was lying on its side in a pile of snow and tangled willow trees. Roger watched as the driver jumped out of the cab and began waving his fist at the car as it disappeared down the hill toward Colfax.

"Boy, that was close," Roger turned around in his seat and looked at Rex. Rex mumbled something, but Roger was sure that Rex hadn't even guessed at the drama they had just passed.

The only other event to befall them was another flat tire as they entered the WSU campus in Pullman. When it happened, Rex pulled the car over to the side of the street. "This looks like the last stop on this trip," he said. They collected their clothes from the car, and headed for their respective homes.

Basic training wasn't so bad, as long as trainees didn't take it too personal. The drill sergeants were always looking for some excuse to jump on a trainee. It was best to melt into the group. The more each one looked like the average Joe, the less flak he took. The big Polish kid in Roger's squad was a good example of someone who stood out. He was tall, and very fair. And he was about as thin as a rail. His name contained so many letters that he was quickly nicknamed "Alphabit". He didn't seem to mind. Always quiet, and never complaining, Alphabit carried his fair share of the load, but the drill sergeants never missed a chance to give him a hard time.

The day before had been especially tough for Alphabit. The forced marches to the rifle range were long. And for those with tender feet, the blisters became almost unbearably painful. George had helped Alphabit with his blisters that night, but could only watch helplessly as Alphabit pulled on his boots in the morning. And it was another day at the range today.

"Hey, Alphabit. What say you report in for sick call with those feet today?" George had asked. Alphabit just looked at him, and shook his head. Strapping on their packs, the entire company fell out for breakfast formation. Breakfast was over quickly. By the time they formed up for the march to the range, it was already getting hot. And that humidity. It seemed to hover close to one hundred percent all the time. Their platoon was the last in line that day for the march, except for the road guards. The road guards wore bright red sashes, and stopped traffic at each crossroads on the way to the range while the company passed in formation. Well, it resembled a formation. There were two lines on each side of the road. The road guards were always from the platoon that was leading the company. So the two road guards trailing the formation on this particular day were from the Texas platoon of blacks.

As they headed out along one isolated stretch of road outside of camp, George and Roger fell in behind their squad leader, Jim Leslie.

"Hey, Jim," George huffed. "Roger and I are going to drop to the back of the squad in case any of ours have any trouble. OK?" It was standard procedure to take care of your own if any were having trouble maintaining the pace.

If anyone started dropping back, those in the rear would try to split up the laggard's gear, and keep him together with the rest of the platoon.

"That's fine," Leslie answered. With the response, George and Roger dropped back. Now they were not only at the rear of their platoon, but at the very rear of the company with only the road guards behind them.

"Keep your eye on Alphabit," George said. "His feet are in terrible shape."

"Think we could get him on the aid wagon?" Roger asked.

"I don't think.....he'd go for it. He's hurtin',...but he's really tough," George adjusted one of his pack straps. "We'll just have to watch. Maybe we can....take his gear for him." Both Roger and George were breathing deeply to keep up the pace. As their discussion about Alphabit continued, George and Roger kept dropping back slightly without realizing it. Suddenly, Roger took a severe blow on the side of his steel pot. For a second he saw stars, and then realized he was in a ditch next to the road. Dirt gritted in his teeth, and the salty taste of blood was in his mouth. As he jumped up, he saw the road guards racing up the road ahead of him. George stood on the shoulder of the road above him.

"What the hell happened?" Roger spit out the blood and dirt.

"That road guard clobbered you with his rifle," George said. "C'mon, let's catch up with him.....you OK?"

"You bet, man!" Roger stormed out of the ditch, and took off after the road guard. Stride for stride, George stuck right with him. "Who was that, anyway?"

"Roachy."

"What the hell does he think he's tryin' to do, anyway?"

George was puffing hard, "Don't know."

As they approached the rear of the column, they were about to catch the road guard. Just as they caught up to him, one of the drill sergeants looked back, and could see that things were not just right. "Hey! What's going on back there? If there's any funny business, you're all going to see extra duty!"

"Forget it for now," George hissed. "We'll catch up to him later. He's not gonna run away."

But the incident angered Roger. Why in the world would that road guard want to hurt him? Just out of meanness? Or

was it because Roger was white, and Roachy was black? Either way, he'd see if the incident couldn't be settled back in the company area with the boxing gloves. He'd like to see if Roachy could fight as well when an opponent was facing him. Roger's thoughts were distracted as Alphabit nearly fell. He and George pulled him up by his arms, and kept him stumbling along as they stripped him of his rifle and pack.

"Ain't that far now, Alphabit," George puffed.

When they reached the rifle range, the shade under the pine trees was a welcome sight. Roger and George dropped into the shade up against a tree. "Well, you ready, deadeye? Today we see if we can use those things," George gestured toward their stacked rifles.

Roger took a long pull from his canteen. "Think so. My dad used to have a cut-down Enfield that he used for deer hunting. It ain't the same as an M-14, but it had the same sights." He wiped the sweat from his face on the front of his fatigue shirt. "Guess we'll find out whether they're the same, huh, Johnson?"

The platoons took turns on the firing line. Those that weren't on the firing line were sorting brass, helping to set up lunch, or attending class at the small bleachers some distance away from the firing line proper. At these classes, proper shooting techniques were taught. Breathe, aim and squeeze.

When it was the First Platoon's turn on the firing line, Roger teamed with Alphabit. Learning to fire was done in teams of two. One lay on the ground with his rifle pointed down range. The other lay next to him so he could look across the rifle directly into the firer's eyes. It was the helper's job to make sure the firer didn't blink or jerk as he was firing.

As Roger and Alphabit moved into position, a large beetle crawled out from under Alphabit. Alphabit jumped up, and immediately caught hell from one of the drill sergeants on the line. Roger knew it would mean extra duty for the Pole, but he hoped that it wouldn't be duty that would require Alphabit to be on his feet.

"How's the feet, Alphabit?"

"Not too bad, today," Alphabit snuggled up to his rifle. The order to fire had been given. As Alphabit aimed down range at the target, the sweat began to drip from his eyebrow onto the stock of the rifle.

"Just relax and squeeze, Alphie. Let it surprise you when it goes off," Roger was surprised that he had remembered one of his dad's favorite lines when he was teaching Roger to shoot. But it wasn't to be. Alphabit shut his eyes, and jerked the trigger.

"Hey, Alphie. Honest to God, this thing won't hurt you. Just hold it snug, and let it do its thing." Roger squirmed into a more comfortable position on the hard sand. Alphabit's steel pot was so low on his forehead that Roger could scarcely see his eyes. The rifle bucked again. "That's better." Roger couldn't help but wonder what he would do if he and Alphabit were sharing the same foxhole in Vietnam. 'Course it probably didn't make much difference if a guy could shoot straight over there. From what he'd heard, it was mostly jungle, and you seldom saw the enemy.

Roger was relieved when he and Alphabit changed places. Shooting a rifle was not something that Alphie really took to. Roger noticed that Alphie even flinched when he was coaching. The rifle was heavier than Roger was used to, but that made it buck less. It only took a couple rounds before Roger was putting them on the target.

As the days passed, the trips to the rifle range became easier as the troops got into the rhythm of the training and their muscles toughened. Roger and George's platoon had a lot of spirit, and they helped each other out. After firing on the range, the rifles had to be cleaned. Then each recruit went to the arms room with his rifle to have it inspected before the cadre would accept it. There was no order here. As each finished, he lined up at the door of the arms room. Some were always sent back to do a better job. Alphabit was one of those. Some times he made as many as four trips to the arms room before they would accept his rifle. Others even offered to turn his rifle in for him, but Alphabit would have none of that. He was determined to become a good soldier, and that meant having a clean weapon.

11: Hand-to-hand Combat

Then came gas training. All it really meant was that another piece of equipment was added to the load that the recruits had to carry. But George Johnson always had another way of looking at it. "Hey! We go to the gas chambers. Think they'll let us carry rifles out there? No way! They don't take armed prisoners to the gas chamber, boys!"

And Johnson was right. No rifles to carry that day. Of course they had to have the classes first. After the instruction, they were introduced to their first "gas chamber". A small, square building that had no furniture of any kind in it. First they went through tear gas. The introduction was rather unique, though. The entire platoon was herded into the small building. They arranged themselves around the outer wall. Then a tear gas grenade was suddenly introduced with the yell, "gas!". The object was to get your mask on as soon as you could before you had to breathe the stuff. Even after they got outside, the gas clung to their clothes, and made their eyes water.

Then it was an introduction to "CS" gas. The recruits formed up in two's. One donned his mask, and the other went without. They then walked through a building loaded with CS gas. It was smart to take a deep breath before you entered, and hold it all the way through if you could. Roger's buddy, George didn't make it, and Roger thought he was going to vomit. George stared coughing and hacking, all the while Roger was trying to pull him through the building as fast as he could.

Bayonet training was also introduced. And this was followed by what was called bayonet combat training. A new Army toy, called the pugil stick, was brought out. It was a stick about the size of a heavy broom handle with large pads on each end. Then the recruits formed a circle. The drill sergeant would pick a couple recruits who would arm themselves with the pugil sticks, and proceed to try to beat each other's brains out.

You were declared the winner, if you could stay on your feet longer than your opponent. The game was made more interesting by pitting two recruits against two or three others. The only rule was that you couldn't grab the pugil stick by the end and use it like a baseball bat. While

group combat was fun, the one-on-one was the most challenging. And everyone got to do it.

When Roachy was picked by the drill sergeant for his turn, Roger quickly stepped forward to volunteer as his opponent.

"That's the way, Roger," George clapped his hands.

Sergeant Blondie didn't exactly understand what was up, but he knew something was important about this particular match. He brought the contestants to the center of the circle.

"OK, I don't know what you two got going on, but this will be a clean fight. If someone goes down, I want the other one to lay off. Got it?? There'll be hell to pay if you don't." Blondie then checked their protective gear, including their helmets and heavy gloves. Roachy and Roger stepped apart.

"Get him!" Blondie screamed, and the battle was on.

Roachy's first blow staggered Roger. He had partially blocked it with his stick, but Roachy was strong. As they parried, Roger noticed that Roachy was slow moving to his right. Roger faked left, and came in with a low shot at Roachy's left knee. It found its mark, and Roachy nearly fell. Roger pressed the attack, landing two good blows on Roachy's helmet, followed by a sharp jab in the stomach. The last blow took Roachy's wind, and he went down hard on his back.

Roger stepped over him, "What's the matter, Roachy? Can't you handle it face-to-face?!"

Blondie pushed Roger back, "Break it up! Break it up! That's enough..... Next combatants!" Roger returned to the edge of the circle.

George helped him pull off his gloves, "Nice goin'. I knew you could handle him."

"You were a lot more sure than I was, then," Roger puffed.

George smiled his huge grin. "Come on, Roger, you're a better soldier than you give yourself credit for!" George said as he pulled the helmet on.

That evening, George, Roger, Richard and Don sat on the back steps of the barracks as the last light of the day faded away. Richard took a long drag on his cigarette, "You know what we get to do tomorrow?" Richard was always in on the scuttlebutt for the next day's activities.

"Why don't you just tell us straight out this time, instead of making some big production out of it, huh?" Don was always on Richard. In fact, they both rode each other pretty hard, but they were inseparable. They had teamed together on the rifle range, in gas training, and they had almost killed each other during hand-to-hand combat training.

"I heard that we go to the grenade range tomorrow."

"Are you serious?" George's sparkling eyes widened noticeably. But he was like a little kid with every new subject. It seemed that he had never lost his childhood curiosity, and he thoroughly enjoyed anything new to learn. "Oh, wow! Grenades! You know, I always did like the Fourth of July! How big a bang do they make? Have you guys ever seen one go off? I mean, besides in the movies?" The others just shook their heads. Roger looked at Don. Don just leaned back, and rolled his eyes. Don could never accept George's curiosity as something at which to marvel. It just wasn't "cool" to be that curious about everything.

"I guess I shouldn't have said anything. You probably won't even sleep tonight, Johnson, with all that excitement coming up tomorrow."

George held out his hand in a fist, "How big are those things? Like a baseball? Or a softball? Do you have to throw them like they do in the movies, or can you throw 'em like a rock?"

"For cryin' out in the night...", Don got up to leave. "I've never seen the likes. I'm going to bed."

George turned to Richard, "How far do you think you can throw one? How far do you have to throw it? I mean, how far does it have to go before it won't get you?"

Richard flicked the burning end off his cigarette, and put the filter in his pocket. "George, why don't you ask the instructor all these questions tomorrow? By then you might even be able to think up a couple more. Tell you what. If you can ask him a question that he can't answer, I'll buy you a beer at the PX. OK?" With that, Richard also stood up, and wandered into the barracks.

"What's the matter with those guys? You'd think they weren't interested in anything."

"Come on, George, it's not that bad. Did you ever ask them about women? They can fill your ears full with their questions about women," Roger laughed at his friend's concern.

"Suppose we better turn in. The mosquitoes are about to overwhelm us." George reluctantly got to his feet, and stretched. As he looked in the direction of the setting sun, he paused for a long look. "Do you suppose that's the same sun that they were seein' in Idaho a couple hours ago? Oh, I guess they're still seein' it now." George's shoulders drooped, "Sure wish I was back there now, watchin' that sun going down..." Roger slapped George on the back, and started into the barracks.

Richard was right. They did get to go to the grenade range. But it wasn't near as much fun as they'd thought it might be. For one thing, they didn't get to watch the grenades explode. George was crushed. As they sat around under the ever present pine trees, George was grouching about the training. "How are we supposed to know what those things'll do if we don't even get to watch 'em go off?"

Don answered as he opened a can of C-rations, "It sure was for certain that those instructors could have cared less if they ever saw one go off. Mine was so jittery that I thought he was going to drop the darn thing before he got it out of the carton!"

"Yeah, mine was the same way," Roger put in as he drained the last bit of juice from a can of fruit cocktail.

"Hey, c'mon. I'm serious," Don fished for a cigarette. "He was really nervous. When we first got into the pit, or whatever they call it, he was sweatin' like a horse. I couldn't figure out why. He sure didn't have that much to do. He was busy pointing out how high the walls were, and if we dropped it, we were supposed to kick it into the grenade sump at the front of the pit. And then when he took the grenade out of that little round container it comes in. I mean, it's not that big to begin with. Then he was so darn nervous when he handed it to me, I really thought we were gonna drop it."

"I think I had the same instructor," Roger said. "But maybe you had him after me."

"Why? What the heck happened when you were in there?"

"Nothing happened. At least not when I was there, but I heard some of the troops had a little trouble throwing those things."

George was stirring the dirt with a little stick.

"Yeah, that's what I heard, too. Someone said that that little skinny guy from the Fourth Platoon couldn't even throw his out of the pit."

"You mean it didn't make it out!!?" Don was leaning forward as George related the story.

"Well, I guess it did make it out, all right, but not before it bounced around on the top of the wall a couple times."

"Whew! That would be scary. I think I'd rather have one dropped, than up above me bouncing around on the walls."

"You got a point there, judge. At least if it was on the ground, you could kick it down in the dump..."

"Sump, you dummy," George was indignant. "The sump was that ditch in the front of the pit. And if you'd looked down into it, you'd have noticed a small hole right in the center of it. The grenade is supposed to roll into that before it goes off. That way it just makes a big bang, but all the shrapnel is bottled up, so it don't do you any bodily harm."

"Was that thing heavier than you expected?" Don was sorting through the remnants of his C-rations.

"Was it ever," Richard snorted. "I could see how some of those momma's boys would have a hard time getting it out of the pit."

"Maybe that's why they never use foxholes that big in the real war," observed Don. "All the little wimps would get killed tryin' to throw their grenades!"

"Like Packer?"

"Yeah, like Packer," Don was now sorting through George's C-rations. "He is such a little wimp. I'll bet the instructor threw his for him."

"Do you think they'd do that?"

"Well, if it was you and him down in the pit, what would you do? Let the little pipsqueak kill both of you because he couldn't get the grenade out of the pit?" Don sneered.

George leaned back against a tree, "I hear he's going on to flight school with us."

"Gees, he probably has to. He isn't big enough to pack around an M-14."

"But he won't have an M-14 in Vietnam. They give you one of those plastic Mattel whatchijobbers."

"An M-16, dummy," George closed his eyes. "For as smart as you guys are, I don't give you a snowball's chance in hell of passing flight school if you don't start listening any better than you have been. Man, there is so much to learn if you'll just listen to what's going on around you."

"Yeah, like learn who you don't want to end up with in a foxhole in Vietnam. He's gotta be big enough to throw a grenade out of the pit. That's all I'm saying." With that, Don got up and walked over to the garbage can with his leftover C-rations.

"You know," Richard said, "I just figured out why we had grenade training today."

"Why's that?"

"'Cause tomorrow's payday. See, if anybody got blasted, they could fake the records so it'd look like he got killed the day after payday. Then they could split his paycheck with those who were in on it."

"Now there's a gruesome thought, ghoul."

"Well, it might be kind of gruesome, but I'm happy we're gettin' paid tomorrow. I can use some bread. Maybe they'll even let us have PX privileges tomorrow. I could go for a brew or two."

Don had rejoined the group. "Now that's what I call a real idea. I don't even know if I can remember what it tastes like."

Richard stood up. "That's because you've never been old enough to be able to buy it." Don took a playful swing at Richard. "But they'd probably make an exception here. They probably figure that if you're old enough to die on the grenade range, then you're old enough to drink beer!" Richard ducked away laughing as Don started after him.

12: First Army Payday

Friday was payday just as Richard predicted. As they lined up for pay outside one of the little-used buildings in the company area, there was idle chatter among the recruits about what they were going to do with all their money. George was ahead of Roger in the pay line. George removed his cap, entered the building, approached the pay officer's desk, came to attention, smartly saluted, and called out that he was reporting for pay. The pay officer counted out his pay in greenbacks. George saluted smartly, did an about-face, and turned to leave by the side door. Halfway between him and the exit door there was another desk manned by one of the drill sergeants. "Anything there for the Army Emergency Relief Fund, soldier?" the drill sergeant asked. George stopped, and added a couple bills to the box on the desk.

"Next," called out the drill sergeant helping the pay officer. Roger removed his cap, and entered the building. As he approached the pay officer's desk, he followed George's example. As the officer checked Roger's pay slip, Roger couldn't help but notice the officer's shiny brass. He wore crossed rifles on his lapels. These indicated that he was an infantry officer. If it had been crossed swords, he would have been an armor officer. It seemed to take the officer a long time to check Roger's voucher. The Drill Sergeant even leaned over the desk to confirm the officer's findings.

"I'm sorry, son," the pay officer said as he handed over two quarters. Roger was astounded. He had seen the other recruits leaving with a handful of bills, and here he had only two quarters lying on the desk. What had gone wrong? "I checked your voucher, son. It appears that you have an allotment for your wife, right?"

"Yes sir," Roger answered.

"With that, and the other charges, this is all you have coming."

Roger stepped back from the pay officer's desk and saluted smartly. As he passed the desk for the Army Emergency Relief Fund, he tossed the two quarters into the box. His breath came hard as he left the building. He had been looking forward to a cold beer. Now he couldn't even buy cigarettes.

Back in the barracks, everyone was talking passes and where they were going to go. George was checking out his khaki uniform. Khakis were required if a recruit was going to leave post on a pass. "Hey, Roger, you heading off post with the rest of us?"

Roger almost had to fight back the tears. How could he tell George that he honestly didn't have a cent? "Naw. Think I'll hang around here. I need to write a couple letters."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I really need to write my wife. And my folks."

George was checking the shine on his shoes. "I don't think I'm gonna go out and get blasted or anything, but I sure would like to spend a night away from this post." He looked directly at Roger. "You sure you don't wanta go? You feel OK? You look a little pale."

"Yeah, I feel fine. Just didn't sleep too well last night, I guess."

"Well, tell 'em hello for me, huh?" George slapped Roger on the shoulder as he left the barracks.

Roger lay back on his bunk, and stared at the bunk above. He pulled the copy of his pay voucher from his pocket and read it again and again. No matter which way he added the figures, it always came out the same. As he looked away from the voucher, John Larson was standing next to his bunk.

John was tall, but he had a solid frame. A Californian, John had an easy manner. He was not smiling. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Sure, go ahead, John. What brings you down this way? I didn't think you second-floor Californians had much to do with us first floor rats." John did not react at all to the jibe. Most of the recruits on the second floor were from California, and the troops on the first floor often kidded them about all sleeping together.

"Look, Roger, I heard what happened in the pay line. I know this is tough for you, but you can't live on nothin'." John reached out and tucked something into Roger's fatigue pocket. "Don't say anything, OK?" John cleared his throat. Roger couldn't help it. The hot tears ran down his cheeks, and he buried his face in his hands.

Gordon came up to them. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"It is none of your damn business," John returned.
"Now just get your tail out of here right now. Understand?"

Roger had never heard John use that tone of voice before. He tried to wipe the tears from his face. John turned back to Roger. "I hear you're a chess player. Why don't you drop on upstairs in a few minutes, and I'll see if I can't give you a lesson or two. Huh?"

Roger choked back more tears. "Look, ...I'll pay you back next ..."

"Forget it, Roger. Honest..," John was firm. "It could have been any of us. I'm serious about that chess game."

After John left, Roger felt the lump in his pocket. He had never taken charity before. He rolled over face down on his bunk. What the hell had happened? Fifty cents. That was really something for two weeks of hard physical work. He rolled over and sat up. Again he wiped his face. Finally he reached into his pocket. The bills were wadded tightly together. There was over forty dollars. He choked again.

"What's the matter with you?" It was Gordon again. "You got something wrong with you?" Gordon's swaggering manner turned Roger's stomach. Roger jumped off his bunk, and began stripping off his clothes. Gordon turned to his locker, "You goin' on pass with us? Man, we're gonna have a good time!"

Roger stripped to his shorts, grabbed his towel and soap, and headed for the shower. He just couldn't stand Gordon, the creep, right now. The hot water felt good on his face. He stayed in the shower a long time. He looked in the mirror as he dried. Even the red eyes don't show too bad now, he thought. He tried to put the pay voucher out of his mind. He dressed and went upstairs.

"Hey, here comes a fourth for pinochle!" John called out as Roger entered the second floor. "You can play pinochle, can't you?" John smiled at Roger.

"Sure can, dude," Roger gave a little wiggle of his hips, and snapped his fingers.

"We got a couple troops over here that says we can't even touch 'em in a game of pinochle. What do ya' say we give 'em a lesson?" John pulled up a footlocker, and spread a towel over it. "Hey, you guys, we're ready for the lesson you promised."

It was a rarity to find guys in the Army who wanted to play cards for anything but money, so Roger was surprised

when the subject didn't come up. James and Dudley squatted on the floor along with Roger, while John sat on his bunk. John produced a pad of paper and a pen. "Who's gonna keep score?" he looked around at the other players.

"I got it," Dudley said.

With only a short break for lunch, they played cards until late in the afternoon. As a game finished, John tossed his cards on the table. "Hey, we gotta make the PX before it closes, troops," he said.

Together, they all walked to the PX. There were a lot of recruits sitting around the PX, and there was a long line at the phone booths nearby. The tables outside were full with recruits drinking beer, playing cards, or just talking. John wouldn't let Roger pay for any beer. They sat outside on the hard ground, talking about home, girl friends, and cars until the shadows grew long. They finished the last of the beer and headed back to the company area. "Thanks for coming with us, Roger," John said.

"I don't know I can make it up to you, John, but I sure appreciate your..."

"Forget it, Roger. It was nice to split a beer with you."

The barracks were quiet when Roger rolled in that night. The events of the day tumbled over and over in his mind. He had never had much money, but he had always had enough to get by. He had never felt as helpless as he had today in the pay line. Nor had he ever experienced generosity such as that shown by his fellow recruits, either. But he didn't want them to think that he was so poor that he had to live off others' charity. Whether they were fellow recruits, or not.

Yes, he had written Janet today. After the episode at the pay line. But he hadn't said anything about it. Things would straighten out. His next pay voucher would show something positive on it. But what if it didn't? That was his greatest worry. He was supposed to be getting more money than the unmarried recruits because he was married and had a dependent. But it sure didn't show this payday.

It was now that he could understand why his father-in-law was so worried about Janet's marriage to Roger. It was clear that he couldn't support her on this pay. He couldn't even support himself! Things just had to change. And they would. They had to. With these thoughts, Roger finally drifted off to sleep.

13: Drill Corporal Banner

The next week, training was back to normal. George came back on Sunday afternoon with his batteries recharged. His full sense of humor was spread thickly on those around him. And even though his humor was sometimes resented, in general it was well accepted and helped buoy the spirits of the squad when things got tough.

Although blisters occasionally appeared, they were not the raw, bleeding type seen on the early marches. Even Alphabit's feet came to accept the demands made on them. Now when the company marched to classes on post, the drill sergeants called out the cadence using ditties and short verses that the company was proud to chant. Their bodies were responding to the physical training, and they were becoming tough, whether they wanted to or not. And there was a certain amount of pride in their unit during the marches through post.

When they passed other units, they were no longer the "new guys on the block", and they tried to show it in their crisp, military manner. Their uniforms no longer had the new shine to them. Bleached by the salt from their own bodies, they were now veterans of the tough marches, the rifle ranges, and the bayonet training courses. So far their unit had lost only one recruit to the recycling program. And they had picked up three that had been recycled back from other units.

The one recycle assigned to Roger's platoon was a young black kid named Davis. He was easy to be around, and kept up a constant banter to whomever would listen. It was his easygoing manner that probably had gotten him recycled. He simply felt no need to respond to discipline. And he drove his squad leader absolutely crazy. All the members of Davis' squad worked a little harder to make up for his sloppiness, but they couldn't cover everything. To make things worse, the First Platoon lost Corporal Banner. He was transferred elsewhere.

Everyone in the First Platoon suspected that this might happen. Banner was willing to stand up to the other drill sergeants for his troops if he thought the troops were right. The other drill sergeants didn't always view the world the same way that Banner did, and it was clear to members of the First Platoon that the other drill sergeants resented Banner, and what he could get from his troops.

While the other drill sergeants were busy making sure that their platoons were doing their jobs, Banner got the entire First Platoon together, and explained what was required. He seemed to consider each and every member of the platoon his equal, and gave them the respect of human beings. This was not a common trait among the other drill sergeants. Especially Blondie.

The crowning blow came with the announcement of the IG. This meant that there was going to be a special inspection of the troops, and all the equipment of the company, from rifles to barracks to each trooper's personal gear. Someone said that IG stood for a general inspection, that they were more or less annual affairs in the Army, and that an honest-to-goodness Army general would be giving the company the honor of his presence during the inspection. Since almost no one knew the ranks in the Army yet, it could have been a general that came through. But Banner explained, after the fact, that it was only a colonel.

Anyway, when the word about the inspection came out, Banner called the First Platoon together for one of the big meetings. Everyone got together on the first floor of the barracks in the evening, and he laid out the whole plan. Responsibilities were passed out all along the line, even for some of the personal gear. Since there were some who had aptitude along certain lines, their expertise was used where it would do the most good. Gordon, because of his small size, was assigned to clean the fans in the ceiling of the barracks. He was about the only one in the whole platoon, besides Packer, who could get into them to clean them. Packer was crestfallen when he found that he would have to work with Mr. Gordon Thomas, III, to clean the fans. Some were assigned to the kitchen detail, if they didn't have any other qualities that would contribute. Those with painting experience were assigned to painting the barracks. Those noted for their weapons prowess were assigned to cleaning all the rifles for the platoon.

Banner's ideas worked. Most of the other drill sergeants just handed out tasks to the various squads with no attempt to match skills to jobs. And it showed. The First Platoon moved through its list of tasks way ahead of the other platoons, and finished first easily. The chief drill sergeant, Mann, even assigned the First Platoon additional tasks, which they turned to with vigor. 'Course that took some explaining on Banner's part, when he told the platoon that because they were good, they were being

assigned extra duties. He did a good job for the platoon, though, and the platoon was anxious to return the faith he showed in them. Even Davis pitched in. It was doubtful that he ever did his share, but any contribution was an improvement.

The work was not in vain. When the company received its inspection, the First Platoon stood tall. And weekend passes were issued. Some of the other platoons were not so fortunate, and the drill sergeants held this against Banner.

The entire First Platoon was sorry to see Banner go. There was even word of a sendoff party for him, but unfortunately, this never materialized. He was there one day, and gone the next. It was nearly a week before his replacement arrived. Mann knew the First could handle that, but that was a source of embarrassment to the other drill sergeants, too.

Banner's replacement was a very dark black named Smith. Now Smith was a real drill sergeant. Not just a corporal like Banner. But it was apparent to Smith after the first couple days that the First was not an ordinary platoon. With that realization, an uneasy truce developed between himself and the platoon. He didn't give the platoon any malarkey, and the platoon returned the favor. As basic training continued, Smith became more and more a part of the First Platoon. His sense of humor began to show, and the truce was welded into a mutual respect. And Smith made sure that Blondie didn't fool with any of his troops, either.

14: "Hit and Run"

The First Platoon continued to evolve into soldiers. The classroom training was the toughest. Not from an academic standpoint. Important points were always covered at least a half dozen times, but staying awake in the heat and humidity was a real trick. Morning PT (physical training) followed by a large lunch always made the afternoons of classroom training a prime sleeping time. George was always trying to catch someone going to sleep before one of the drill sergeants spotted the offender. Then he would cough loudly, or choke, to wake the troop before the cadre could react. The Army had a good way of dealing with sleepers. They were made to stand for the rest of the presentation. George prided himself on the fact that he never had to stand up during any class throughout basic training.

One of the most interesting training courses was aptly termed by George, the "hit and run". Here large alleys about thirty yards wide were assigned to two recruits. Each had an M-14, and it was loaded with live ammo. After the troops were walked through the routine eight times or so, the cadre turned 'em loose on the course. The object of the whole exercise was to get one troop moving while the other was firing to cover his partner's advance. A cadre moved right along with the two of them, to be sure that muzzles were always pointed down range, and that one troop didn't shoot the other. An attempt was even made to get them to hustle down the alley. George said that was because all the yelling and shouting from behind would keep the two troops in line all the way to the end. The more rattled the recruits became, the more carefully they would listen to the drill sergeant.

As others of the company waited their turn, Richard dryly commented that this was the best range so far in training on which to lose a cadre. "I mean, look at it. How hard would it be for some troop to get upset by all the yelling, and turn around with his finger on the trigger?"

George pointed to the tower in the middle of the course. "Looks like somebody already did," he said, as he traced a line of holes in the tower with his finger.

"Think we could start a rumor over that one for some of those new recruits at the PX?" Huff was laughing.

"Hey! That's a good idea." The suggestion caught Mr. Richard Hadley's attention. "In fact, we could tell them Thomas did it."

George shook his head, "I'm sorry I mentioned it..."

"Hey, don't be so sad, George," Hadley laughed. "We can make a real story out of this!"

And so the story was born. Gordon Thomas, III, never had a chance. The story made the rounds of the PX gathering before anyone could stop it.

"Well, the splinters did look pretty fresh," Huff said.

"But I still don't think it was fair to Gordon," George swirled the last drink of beer in his can. "I'll bet that guy's never had an even break in his life."

"With an attitude like he's got, I can understand why," Hadley was searching his pockets for change. "Where did you say he was from?"

"I can't remember. Do you suppose he's going on to flight school with us?" Huff lay back on the ground.

"Flight school?? Are you kidding? I"

"Hey, cut it out, guys, OK? I've got a headache listening to you guys drag poor ol' Gordon over the coals." Leslie, the first squad's leader, wasn't going on to flight school, either. To him, flying helicopters was not the best thing anyone could set his sights on in the Army. "I suppose all of you think you're going to breeze right through flight school, and become aces with a chest full of medals. From what I hear, helicopter pilots have an average life span only slightly longer than a machine gunner in combat. Something under two minutes, I think." There was a long pause in the conversation. "So maybe Gordon's not as dumb as you make him out to be."

The conversation ebbed. Hadley spit, and stood up to leave. "Hope you're wrong....." Then he turned and walked away into the gathering dusk.

"Yeah. Me too," Huff said softly.

George turned over on his side toward the remaining members of the group. The expression on his face led the group to believe that they were about to hear one of the deepest, darkest secrets on the face of the earth. The group leaned forward collectively to hear the words of the master. Very softly, George divulged his wisdom, "Maybe you're right, Leslie. But can you imagine a better two minutes in your life? Like leadin' the Charge of the Light Brigade....."

"Like my boss in the woods used to say," Roger put in.
"Die happy. Die with a hard on."

15: Basic Training Ends

The last great obstacle to be conquered by the new soldiers was the infiltration course. There were so many rumors and stories that surrounded this training that no one knew what to believe. First of all, it was conducted at night. There was live machine gun fire overhead, but the height above the course of the live fire was a hotly disputed statistic. There was the story of the soldier who held up his rifle by the barrel, and had the stock shot off. There were also rumors about the boy named Billy that jumped, and died instantly from the machine gun fire. Then there were the pits surrounded by sandbags where large demolition charges were set off randomly as the recruits entered the course. The rumor went that Billy was startled when one of these artillery simulators exploded.

The whole range was something less than one hundred yards with the machine guns at the far end. The near end was a large trench with eight foot sides that were held in place by large logs. Down in the trench at night, the tracers from the machine guns looked very bright, and very close. When the order was given, it was up and over the wall. Then the object was to stay on your belly and low crawl all the way past the machine guns. Barbed wire was strung across the course at regular intervals, so upright movement was impossible.

Down in the trench, the tracers looked like they were right above ground level. George whispered something as he and Roger entered the trench, but it was impossible for Roger to hear what he said. When the order was given, Roger and Leslie rolled over the top of the trench together and began crawling toward the machine guns. An artillery simulator went off in a pit nearby. The flash and smoke were bad enough, but the noise made Roger jump. Then the barbed wire. The trick was to flip over on your back, and push yourself under it using your feet for propulsion. At the same time, you held your rifle up against the wire to keep it from catching on your fatigues. On your back, the sand worked its way into your collar, and into your pants. On your stomach, it also found its way into your pants. And once there, it acted like sandpaper against your knees and elbows as you wriggled your way toward the machine guns at the end of the course.

"C'mon, Leslie!" It was Peterson, the recruit in charge of the First Platoon. He was always full of encouragement. More of a textbook example than George, but both had about the same sense of humor. Roger looked ahead, and could see that Leslie had himself hung in the wire. As Roger crawled up to give him a hand, he could hear one of the drill sergeants screaming at them above the din. "What's he yelling about?" Peterson asked Roger as they approached Leslie.

"What? Can't hear a word!" Roger slid his rifle forward between Leslie and the wire. With a little work, he was able to free Leslie. Then he and Peterson followed Leslie through the wire. They were now nearing the machine guns. They were supposed to stay on their stomachs for the entire course, but it seemed they wouldn't be noticed in the dark and confusion.

Peterson pulled himself to his hands and knees first. As he began to scramble forward, drill sergeant Mann blocked his path between the machine gun pads. "What's this?" Mann asked over the din of the machine guns. Peterson dropped back on his stomach and continued to crawl. "I should send all three of you back through the course again for that stunt," Mann said gruffly. But even in the crazy light-dark flashes of the machine guns, Roger could see that he was smiling. The three of them scrambled forward and joined others from their platoon. It was over. The mighty infiltration course. The course had taken its toll. Small ragged patches of green-colored cloth hung on the wire in the morning. And most everyone's elbows and knees showed raw scrapes where the sand had done its job. But they had actually been under live fire. For some of the lucky recruits, the infiltration course was as close as they would ever come to live fire. For many of the others, this was only a taste of things to come.

The last couple weeks of basic training were an anticlimax. There was the bivouac. They camped out in pup tents for a couple nights. And there was "record fire", when what they hit on the range counted as a scorer tallied their hits. Some wore even the lowly marksman medals proudly. Maybe it was the first medal they had ever received...for anything. Davis, the young black in the First Platoon, had passed with a marksman score. That meant he wouldn't be recycled again, and he was overjoyed!

Then came the drilling for the graduation ceremony. All dressed in khaki, they looked like real soldiers as they

passed the reviewing stand. Then it was back to the barracks, and each man's gear was packed into his duffel bag as he prepared to ship out to his next duty station. Many of the troops were going on to AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) to learn to become better infantrymen. But the large majority of the First Platoon boarded buses for the trip to Texas,...and flight school. Good-byes were exchanged warmly between Leslie and Peterson, who both would continue infantry training, and those headed for flight school. Those two were out to make their mark in the infantry, and the others were going to miss their leadership.

As Larson, Hadley, Huff, Johnson and Hunter stood waiting for their bus to load in the dampness of the Louisiana evening, they discussed the chances of seeing their comrades again.

"You never know," Huff was saying. "Sometimes you'll meet people in the darndest places."

"That's right," Hadley agreed. "Take a look around you now. Half of us are from California, and half of us are from the boonies...!" By the time the bus pulled out, nearly everyone was asleep. It had been a long day, and from what the bus driver had said, it was a long trip to Texas.

The sleeping bodies and the damp air soon steamed the bus windows. Rain pounded on the roof of the bus, and headlights from passing cars were only flashes against the steamy windows. The lights from the instrument panel glowed dully, and reflected off the windshield. The gentle rocking of the bus was soon forgotten in fifty different dreams, as those in the bus dreamed of the training to come, or dreamed of home...

Suddenly George was awake. He turned to Roger, "Hunter, you awake?"

"Sure am. What's up?"

"I don't know what woke me up, but we sure ain't movin'." There was some activity at the front of the bus. Roger rubbed the steam off the window, and tried to look out. In the blackness of the rainy night, he could see nothing. George yelled up the aisle at someone who was standing, "What's goin' on?"

"Can you believe it? Somebody said we hit a horse!"

George turned to Roger, "Did you hear what I thought I heard?"

"Well, if he said something about a horse, then I guess I did."

George turned back to the aisle. "Are you serious? We hit a horse?" The guy who hollered back at George the first time turned around and held up both hands to show he didn't know. "I can understand hitting a whore at this time of night..." The troops nearest George burst out laughing. "But I can't imagine hitting a four-legged one. With a bus, yet." George turned again to Roger. "You know, Hunter, this is not a good omen. Do you know how many horses are hit by buses each year? And if you further restrict that to recruits who are going from basic training to flight school, I'll bet we're one in a million!!"

Roger lay back in his seat. It sure was nice to have the old George back. The one who didn't really seem to care what happened. No matter what the situation was, that George could always find a little humor in it.

George continued, "I thought buses were safe. I mean, if ya' can't avoid horses on these Louisiana roads, you wouldn't have a chance in New York. This guy would probably have a hundred pedestrians to his credit in the first week."

"And what would you know about New York?" The voice from the seat behind George and Roger was, who else, Huff. "Johnson, you've never been within a thousand miles of New York. What would you know about pedestrians in the big city?"

"I suppose you think someone has to see it in person to understand the situation, Huff. Out in Idaho, we find it very convenient to learn from others' experiences so ya' don't have to make all the mistakes yourself. 'Spose it's different where you come from?" A titter of laughter ran through the back of the bus. Soon the activity at the front of the bus quieted down.

George leaned back in his seat. "You still awake, Hunter?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

"Wonder how long this is gonna delay us? Hope we get there with the rest of the guys tomorrow."

"I wouldn't worry about it, George. We'll probably be rolling again any minute."

"You seem to forget for the time being that you're in the Army, my friend."

"Well, George, this isn't an Army bus. This is a private contractor's dream, and believe me, he isn't making money unless this big thing is rolling. I don't think it'll

take that long to get us back on the road." With that, Roger turned over on his side as far as the reclining seat would allow, and pulled his jacket around him.

16: First leave

The new day brought the Texas countryside and sunshine to the bus riders. Soon they were slowing to make a right-hand turn. A voice up ahead of Roger and George called out, "Hey, you guys. Take a look! We're coming to a gate of some kind."

George flopped over Roger to look out the window, "Hey, he's right. And look at that gate! There's helicopters on each side of it!"

"If you can move your carcass just a little, you big horse, I can probably see, too!"

"All right, all right, Roger, you can see, too!" But the gate had already passed. "Maybe you can see it on the way out. We won't be here long, I'll bet. We got a leave coming before we start training don't we?"

"Hey, guys! Look at all the helicopters!" Someone toward the front of the bus sounded excited.

Processing into Fort Wolters didn't take long, nor did it take long for the troops to scatter on leave, either. They had almost two weeks before they had to report for the next cycle. The number of helicopters was almost unbelievable. There seemed to be hundreds on the ground, and even more in the air.

Roger caught a bus into Dallas to see about a flight home. He had been told that as long as he was in uniform, that he could fly military standby. That meant a cheaper ticket, but it also meant that he could fly only if space was available. He knew George would be flying to Boise, but Roger was going to try for Spokane.

Flights to Washington weren't easy to come by. One plane loaded shortly after he arrived at Dallas International, but there were no seats available. Roger was sure that he had checked in before a couple of civilians that made the standby list, but he got no sympathy from the Braniff employee working the desk. The next flight left early in the morning. So, what to do with the evening? With no money, he didn't have much choice. It looked like a night to sleep on the benches in the air terminal.

As he looked for a place that was a little out of the way to spend the night, an Air Force sergeant spoke to him. "Got a while to wait?"

"Yeah. Next flight doesn't go out until morning."

"Tough luck. But I'm in the same boat. You play cards?"

Roger sat down and pushed his duffel bag under the bench. "Yeah, some. What you got in mind?" Roger didn't want to appear too interested. If the sergeant mentioned poker, Roger would have to pass. Besides not being great at the game, he didn't have any cash to play with.

"Ever play canasta?" the sergeant offered.

"Well, some, when I was a kid, but I don't remember much about the game."

"It's easy to learn," the sergeant launched into a discussion of the rules and the scoring. They played a couple hands while Roger got the hang of it. Then the sergeant produced a pad of paper and a pencil, and the game was underway. Roger couldn't believe his luck. Maybe I should have been playing poker tonight, he thought.

After a second game, the sergeant eyed him sharply. "Sure you've never played this game before?"

"Like I said, when I was a kid, but it's been a long time." After a third game, the sergeant picked up his cards in disgust. Without saying a word, he packed them away in his traveling bag, and pulled out a book. Roger was disappointed. He hadn't meant to beat him so badly. He knew it was only beginner's luck, but the sergeant hadn't taken it that way. Roger propped his feet on his duffel bag, and scrunched down on the plastic bench. It had a back rest, but it would take a young back to survive it for the night.

Roger awoke around midnight. The sergeant was still there, sleeping soundly. The cards were out again on the small table between them. It looked like he might have left them for Roger. Whether he did or not, Roger had to find a restroom. He wondered about leaving his bag. The airport was almost empty. About the only people he saw in the immediate vicinity were other servicemen. They were doing the same thing Roger and the Air Force sergeant were doing - waitin' out a flight. Roger left his bag while he hunted up a restroom. Returning, he found everything as he'd left it. The only change was the sergeant who had lifted his bag onto the bench for a pillow.

Roger looked closely at the sergeant while he smoked a cigarette. It appeared that the sergeant was older than he. Probably about ten years. From the small talk during the card game, he had been in the Air Force a lot longer than

Roger had been in the Army. Roger kept wondering why the sergeant was spending time like this. Seemed that he should be making enough money that he could at least afford a room somewhere. The Air Force can't pay any worse than the Army, can they? Maybe he's just trying to save money. Roger finally dismissed his line of thought, and shuffled the cards. He knew several kinds of solitaire. Looks like he had a good opportunity to brush up on them. The next time he wouldn't be caught without a book and a deck of cards. If a guy had to wait, he might as well do something with the time besides just sitting.

The flight to Spokane was uneventful. There was one stop in Denver, but that didn't take long. Roger slept most of the way. The weather in Spokane was clear when the airliner made its approach. Roger was looking forward to seeing Janet. He felt lucky that he had been able to make connections straight through to Spokane. Sometimes it was hard to get a flight into Eastern Washington. Now, if he had been trying to get to Seattle, that would have been easy. As he picked up his bag, he looked over the small terminal, but he couldn't see Janet anywhere. As he finished checking his luggage ticket with the baggage checker, he looked up. There, standing in the middle of the traffic aisle was Janet. She had been watching him get his luggage.

Roger dropped his bag, and ran to greet her. Her eyes were wide as she held out her arms. They hugged tightly. A long kiss followed.

"Hey, not so hard, big guy! You're gonna break my ribs! Janet stepped back as Roger released her. Then he pulled her to him, and squeezed her tightly again. "Let me catch my breath," she pushed away. "And in full uniform, yet."

"Come on, let's get out of here." Roger ran back to retrieve his bag. Then he noticed the looks on some of the people standing around. There must be something about a soldier and his wife reuniting in an airport. An older lady brushed a tear from her eye. Roger put his arm around Janet, and started for the center of the terminal.

"Where are we going?" Janet asked.

Roger stopped, and turned to face her. "What do you mean, where are we going? Where's the car?"

Janet laughed. Then she turned and pointed back past the baggage area. Roger laughed, too. "Maybe I should let you lead the way, huh?" Janet grabbed him by the arm, and

together they ran back toward the baggage area. The older lady was still watching as they passed her again. It was almost dark as they left the terminal.

"Have you still got the little car?"

"Yes. If I can remember where I parked it," Janet stopped and looked at Roger. "I can't really believe it's you."

"And just who were you waiting for? Want me to go back and see if they'll let me come in again?" Roger put his arm around her waist, and kissed her on the cheek as he pushed her toward the parking lot.

Janet fumbled with the key, as Roger walked around to the passenger side of the car. He looked up at the stars, and took a deep breath. "You can't believe how clean the air smells up here. And I think the stars are a lot brighter, too." Janet unlocked the passenger door. Roger tossed his bag into the back seat, and climbed in. Then he leaned over and kissed her.

"Hey, cut that out, or we're never going to get where we're going," Janet started the car. As she turned her head to back out of the parking stall, Roger caught her head and held it. He looked closely at her face. Her eyes were warm in the light from the fluorescent lights in the parking lot. A smile played at the corners of her mouth. Janet kissed him. Her tongue darted into his mouth. The car lurched suddenly. "My foot slipped off the clutch." They both laughed.

The dim headlights lit the wide street ahead. Roger leaned back in the seat, and put his arm around Janet's shoulders. "Wish I could tell ya' how much I've been looking forward to this. All that time in the South,....seems like a dream." He watched Janet's face as she drove into Spokane.

At the first stoplight, she turned to him, "You know you make me nervous watching me like that."

"If you knew how many nights I've thought about you, you'd understand. Phone calls and letters will never replace being with you, you know."

"I have a surprise for you." It was then that Roger noticed they were turning into the Spokane city center exit. "Mom and Dad sprung for a room for us..."

"Are you serious? You mean we're staying in the big city tonight?"

"Yes. And our room is only about ten minutes away." Roger was getting aroused. He squeezed Janet's shoulder.

She turned far enough toward him that he could see she was smiling. "Unless you want supper first..." Roger laughed.

They weren't far from city center when Janet pulled the Volkswagon into a motel. She didn't even stop at the office. "You mean you've already rented a room?" Roger was astounded.

"You're welcome to pay again, if you want," Janet laughed, "But I didn't think I was that good!"

As Roger climbed into bed next to Janet, she looked concerned. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"You don't have to wear those to bed, do you?" Janet pointed at his dog tags.

"Sorry. I forgot all about them." He took them off and put them on the nightstand. "We have to wear them all the time in training."

"How about in your suitcase? I really hate those things." Janet was serious.

Roger dropped them into his duffel bag, "That better?"

"That's fine," Janet turned away from him.

Roger climbed into bed, and slid against Janet. But the magic of the moment was lost. Roger could feel the change. They made love, but there was something missing.

The week passed quickly. The next day they had driven to Pullman, and stayed in Janet's new place. It was a small, frame house located several miles from Pullman proper. It was located in a cluster of houses that probably hadn't changed in twenty years. The houses were all small. Probably a town in the early days. Might even have had a grocery store and a gas station, thought Roger as he walked the town in the early morning. He had awakened early, and slipped out without waking Janet. These mornings were a peaceful time for Roger. Sometimes he jogged a mile or so. Other times he just watched the sun come up, and enjoyed the birds singing, or the early sun on the wheat. The air was clean, and the early sun made him feel alive. Fall was coming. He could feel it in the air. He missed the seasons in the South. They were there, all right, but it was different.

While they were together, Roger and Janet discussed their plans. When he had first left for basic training, Janet was to finish one semester in school. Then, when Roger began flight training, she was to join him in Texas. But time had passed since those discussions, and feelings had changed. Now Janet would like to continue in school.

Roger had to agree with her. He could see how important school was to her. Besides, there wasn't that much to offer in Texas. During Primary Flight Training, they couldn't live together. He would have to stay on post, and she would have to live off post by herself. If he got passes, they would have the weekends together, but that was about it.

17: Primary Flight -- Ground School

The first two weeks at Fort Wolters were a return to the harassment and classes that had been the standard fare in basic training. The pressure was on the Warrant Officer Candidates (WOCS), as they were now called, to perform or wash out. It seemed to be the Army's philosophy that if the WOCS could take the gaff, then they would make pilots. If not, then it was better to wash them out now, and save the taxpayers some money by not wasting the expensive training on them. There were few in Roger's class who were dropped. One of the most interesting people he met in Pre-Flight Training was a black named John Hussy. Now John was educated, and much different than the blacks Roger had experienced in basic training. He and John played many games of hearts with other WOCS, and Roger found that John was a very good card player. John spent several years in the Air Force, but when the opportunity to fly with the Army knocked on his door, he answered.

Besides the card games, Roger and John talked at length about the race problems that arose from time to time. "Well, it's like this," John once told Roger as they returned to the barracks late one evening. "Put a single black with a bunch of whiteys, and there's no problem. Maybe even two. But any more than two, and someone starts to draw the lines. That's when the trouble starts." They continued to walk under the Texas stars. "When there's three or more, they identify with their own, and draw back from the white guys." John relayed this with no emotion at all. It was just as if it was a fact that had been written into law somewhere along the line. And there was no way that anyone could get around it. "I've never had any problem when I've been alone, or with one or two other blacks. But put us in a group, and I start feeling uncomfortable because something is bound to happen."

Roger liked John, and hoped that they would end up together when the Pre-Flight section was moved to the "Hill". When the WOCS moved to the "Hill", that meant that their honest-to-goodness flight training had started. But it wasn't to be. Roger was assigned to the Yellow Hats in the 4th WOC Company, and John went to the 5th WOC -- the Orange Hats. After they moved to the hill, they lost touch with one another.

Roger was assigned a room with three other WOCS. Dennis Greavy was quiet. From Pennsylvania, his family was wealthy, but Dennis didn't spread it around. He was easy to get along with, and pulled his share. Ralph Hunn was from Massachusetts, or sometimes from New York state. He made it very clear that he hadn't been a city dweller. He had been raised in the country. Schooled in Arizona, Ralph was a college graduate. He had a thin face, and a broad smile. When he smiled, his front teeth looked huge beneath his blue eyes. Ralph had blonde hair, thin and straight, and a slender build. Matt Hunt rounded out the foursome. Matt was from New Jersey. Short and stocky, Matt was very outgoing. He was friendly, like a puppy, but some of the WOCS found him too loud and boisterous. Although everyone seemed to like him, he didn't form any close friendships.

The TAC Officers were the training cadre. All of them had flight experience, and nearly all of them had been to Vietnam. They were all short-timers in the Army, just serving out their time before their discharge. For this reason, most were not difficult to deal with. However, they took their training seriously. They knew what was ahead of the WOCS, and they did their best to get them to understand how important the training was. And one major part of that training was discipline. Inspections were made daily. Both the WOCS and their quarters were inspected thoroughly. Dead flies in the lamp or on the window sills were called dead aviators, and counted heavily in demerits. If the demerit tally was kept low enough, then the candidates were allowed weekend passes. This was especially important to the married WOCS who could then spend the weekend with their wives. Roger was the only married candidate in his room. Weekend passes weren't a big thing for either Greavy or Hunn, so demerits weren't as important to Roger's and his roommates as they were to other WOCS. Woe to the lone single WOC in a room full of married WOCS. Especially if he didn't pull his share. Room demerits were shared by all occupants of a room equally, so if one sloughed off, all suffered.

Fatigues were starched so stiffly that they had to be broken apart before they could be worn. Usually roommates took turns to take their fatigues to the laundry. On Roger's first trip to the laundry, he saw why there never had been any complaints to deliver laundry. The young Texas girl working behind the counter was a knockout. And, of course, she always wore tight cotton shirts that showed off

her charms to the WOCS's joy. Hunt even had the courage to ask her out. Some of the WOCS said that was why he didn't last in the program.

Next door to Roger's room in the barracks, or the hotel, as it came to be called, was a gang of devil-may-care aviators-to-be. One was from Tacoma. A very young WOC was Gerry Alexander. Well muscled and with a devilish sense of humor, Gerry was always pulling pranks. He made life interesting for his roommates, as well as his neighbors. With him was Al Hansen. Al was from Colorado, and he had a great sense of humor as well. Together Al and Gerry were always up to something. Al was married, and his wife lived off post in a trailer. Weekend passes were important to Al, but not to the extent that he could give up his fun-loving ways. It was Al's idea, one particular Saturday that the whole company had been restricted to post for demerits, to fall out in morning formation backwards. Of course, everyone's hat was turned backwards, too, so the TAC Officer facing the formation was looking at everyone's back, but was facing their caps. The TAC took it so well that everyone got a pass on Sunday.

Roger spent many of his weekends with Ralph, shooting pool. Neither of them had a car, which after the first couple weeks, WOCS were allowed to use when they were on pass. So instead of going into Fort Worth or Dallas with the others, they remained on post and shot pool in the day room in the hotel. Ralph was an excellent pool shot, and gave Roger many lessons in cue ball control. Roger bet on Ralph more than once in impromptu pool competition, and he was almost never disappointed. Ralph usually won, though sometimes he baited his opponent a couple games to get the stakes up.

As Roger became better friends with Al Hansen, he spent Saturday evenings at Al's trailer with Al and his wife, Sandi. Roger would bring the beer, and Sandi would cook spaghetti for the three of them. Some evenings they would play cards, but most of the time it was quiet conversation about the mountains back home, or experiences they had had while growing up.

The chow in the mess hall was Southern style cooking. Al, Roger, Andy Stone, and Leroy Decker had become acquainted during pre-flight, and often spent time together studying or talking. All of them were married. Leroy and Andy were from the South, and the four of them got along well together. One of their first mornings together at the

mess hall, they all sat at the same table. It seemed to Roger that both Leroy and Andy were watching him closely as Roger poured milk over what he thought was hot cereal. Roger added sugar, and began to eat his concoction. Leroy just shook his head as Andy whispered in his ear.

Andy could contain himself no longer. "Say, Yankee, have you ever heard of grits?"

As Roger swallowed, he looked at Andy. "Ever hear of what?"

"Grits, man grits. I say, have you ever heard of grits?"

"Well, yeah. I guess I've heard of them, but don't think I ever saw them."

Leroy was laughing quietly as Andy leaned over the table and looked in Roger's bowl. "I guess that's pretty obvious, Yank. See, nobody eats their grits in a bowl, much less with sugar and milk!" Roger looked at Andy's plate. Andy picked up his knife and fork. "Let me show you what I mean." Andy was cutting his eggs, and Roger noticed that Andy's grits were beneath his eggs. With a final flourish, Andy stirred eggs and grits into a yellow mixture. "This is how you eat grits, my boy," Andy said, and forked some into his mouth.

"Grits, huh?" Roger watched Andy for a moment, then turned back to his bowl. "Can't really say they're bad with milk and sugar, either."

Leroy turned to Andy, "No wonder we lost the war. I always heard those Northerners would eat anything, but this is the first time I've seen it!" Andy's laughter rang through the mess hall.

18: Learning to Fly a Helicopter

Following ground school, the WOCS were ready to begin actual flight training. The first block of training was termed Primary Flight, and the instructor pilots (IP's) were civilians. They were on contract with the Army to suffer the trials and tribulations of the untested student pilots. Most of the WOCS had no flight training at all, other than the instruction in ground school. The civilian IP's had to be ready for anything the students might do. This required intense concentration on the IP's part at all times. It always seemed that the student would pick the most unlikely moment to forget some essential point in the training.



Bell OH-13 at a stage field.

After the first few days of flying, it was clear to the students why civilian professionals were hired for the initial flight training. The students' antics would probably have driven most sane persons nuts. Apparently the rewards were high enough for the civilian IP's to pursue such a hazardous occupation.

Roger's first IP was a tall, slender Southerner named Mr. Sands. The WOCS always referred to their civilian instructors as Mr. so-and-so. The WOCS were broken into groups of from two to four per IP. Roger's group was training in the Bell OH-13 helicopters. There were several models, but the controls in all of them were nearly identical. While there were engine differences among the Bells, the easiest way to identify them was by the gas tanks. The G models had two gas tanks that looked for all the world like bombs. They rested on top of the fuselage behind the cockpit, or bubble, parallel to the length of the aircraft. The E models had a single gas tank that lay crosswise to the fuselage above and behind the cockpit.

There were dual controls in each aircraft. While some of the training helicopters held three persons, the Bells held only two. That meant a single student with a single instructor. The flight controls consisted of a cyclic stick which rose vertically out of the floor between each pilot's knees. It was topped with a plastic handle that held switches for the radio and intercom. The cyclic was controlled with the pilot's right hand with the right forearm resting on his leg. The cyclic controlled the tilt of the rotor disk of the helicopter. At a hover, if the pilot wanted to move right, he simply moved the cyclic in that direction, the rotor disk tilted to the right, and the rest of the aircraft followed.

The next control was the collective. It controlled the pitch of the rotor blades. It was located at the left side of each pilot's seat, and was operated with the left hand. At a hover, if the pilot wanted to go higher, he would pull up on the collective. This would increase the pitch in the rotor blades, and the aircraft would rise. The Bells had regular piston engines in them. The throttle for the engine was located on the collective. It was a twist-grip throttle, very similar to a motorcycle throttle with one notable exception -- it turned in the opposite direction to

produce the same results! Thus, the left hand had two tasks to perform at the same time -- pitch and throttle control.

The final flight control was the pedals. These controlled the pitch in the tail rotor blades. The pedals were operated by the pilot's feet. At a hover, if the pilot wanted to rotate the aircraft, he merely pushed the pedal for the direction he wanted to rotate. The left pedal turned the aircraft's nose to the left, and the right pedal turned the nose to the right.

One of the first points that the civilian IP's made sure the students learned was that helicopters are inherently unstable. In other words they had to be flown every second. There was no taking the hands or feet off the controls, unless there was a lot of space between the aircraft and the ground. At a hover close to the ground, there was never a reason important enough for the pilot to lose contact with any control!

Flight training was conducted at what were called stage fields. These were scattered out in all directions from the central helipad area of the main fort complex. Since not all of an IP's students could fly with him at the same time, one would fly out and the others would ride a bus to the stage field. Riding out on the bus provided the WOCS with time for conversation. Waiting for their turn at the stage field was also dead time. However, at the stage field, usually the time was used to study their flight books. Emergency procedures were an absolute must to commit to memory. Without a solid working knowledge of emergency procedures, a student could never hope to pursue a pilot's career. When an emergency occurred in an aircraft, there was never time to think about what to do -- it had to be done instantly, without thinking, or the chances of survival were drastically reduced. By going over and over the procedures, the students were able to memorize them in short order. How the aircraft felt during these maneuvers was yet to be experienced.

Another topic of concern was the preflight checklist. Here was a list of items several pages long that had to be checked prior to flying the aircraft. At first, the names of the items didn't make much sense, but with the ground school classes conducted half of each day, the students learned the terms quickly. They also learned the rudiments of flight. Airplanes were simple creatures compared to helicopters. One instructor's favorite line was that

helicopters were a close formation of whirling parts all moving in roughly the same direction at the same time.

The mark of the student aviators heading for the flight line was the gray flight suits that they wore for pilot instruction. This was the only time that this apparel was appropriate. The ground classes required starched, green fatigues. Each student was also issued a helmet and flight gloves. The flight gloves were made of thin leather, colored gray, with long cuffs that reached part way up the forearm. The flight uniform was designed to cover as much of the pilot's body as possible. The reason was almost every crash included a flash fire that would race through the aircraft. Any exposed skin would be burned severely. Pictures displayed on many of the walls showed those that had been foolish enough to roll their gloves down, or take them off entirely, and then have the misfortune to suffer an accident.

The job of the civilian IP's was to teach the WOCS to fly. They were also concerned with safety, but the students thought there was a dual purpose here. Proper safety procedures not only made the students safer, but also prolonged the lives of the IP's!

As Roger and Mr. Sands walked out to the aircraft on one of their first flights together, Mr. Sands explained his philosophy of the student-IP relationship. Safety was foremost. Do whatever you have to do, but avoid a collision with another aircraft or a stationary object on the ground. While the lecture sounded harsh, he was simply making his point, and stressing the importance of it.

The first trick was to understand the controls and their use. Mr. Sands patiently explained the controls and their functions as they flew out to the stage field together. Upon arriving at the stage field, he moved the helicopter over to a large, open hardstand. There he brought the bird to a hover about three feet above the ground.

"OK, now what I want you to do is put your feet on the pedals. I'll also be on the controls, so they might feel a little stiff. Notice how the pedals cause the aircraft to rotate about the rotor mast?" Mr. Sands first pushed one pedal and then the other. As he did so, the aircraft responded by first turning left, and then back to the right. "You try it."

Roger's hands were sweating as he put his feet on the pedals, and tried to imitate Mr. Sands movement of the

aircraft. Then Roger was introduced to the collective control. Pulling it up, and squeezing on a bit of throttle, made the aircraft rise. Pushing down on the collective brought the aircraft closer to the ground. Last was the cyclic, or the "joy stick" as Mr. Sands referred to it. Roger was amazed at how little movement was required to cause the helicopter to respond. It seemed that the cyclic barely moved, and the aircraft quickly began to move across the hardstand.

"Now that you understand the basics of the controls, I want you to get on them with me and take control of the aircraft," Mr. Sands words were serious, but given in a manner of one trying to show someone else how things should be done. Not of an adult to a child, or demeaning in any way. Roger grabbed the controls. "Easy now. I'll be on with you. You don't have to horse it at all. Just think what you want to do, and the aircraft will respond." Mr. Sands was very calm. Roger tried again, taking the controls very gently. "You've got it," Mr. Sands said.

"I've got it," Roger returned.

"You have it," Mr. Sands confirmed. This conversation took place every time control of the aircraft passed from one pilot to another. It was designed to avoid the problem of miscommunication that resulted in no one flying the aircraft. Roger took the controls, and attempted to maintain the three foot hover that Mr. Sands had established. It didn't last long. First, the aircraft would slide one way, then the other. Then it would be too close to the ground, then too high. About the easiest control to use was the foot pedals. Roger could almost always keep the aircraft pointed in the right direction, but it would be swooping one way and climbing or falling all at the same time. For what seemed like hours, Mr. Sands would take the controls and bring the aircraft under control, only to turn it over to Roger again. He also gave pointers to help Roger to anticipate where the problems would occur, and what to watch for. "Looking too close to the aircraft will almost always cause you to over control it. Look out farther. Pick a tree across the stage field, and use that as a visual guide. Don't watch the hardstand directly underneath us."

When Mr. Sands finally landed the helicopter and rolled the engine back to flight idle, Roger was relieved. "Run in and send out Alexander, will you?" Mr. Sands said. Roger unplugged his helmet, unbuckled his seat belt and shoulder

harness, and exited the aircraft. When he reached the ready room, Gerry was already coming out.

"What did you think?" Gerry was excited.

"Wow. It's not as easy as it looks," Roger answered tiredly. Roger entered the ready room, and looked around. The third member of their group was Ted Street. Roger found him, and sat down across the table.

"You look like you've been through it all today!" Ted's eyes were wide. "Look at the sweat! You're flight suit looks like a towel!"

"All right, all right. Give me a break. That's a little tougher than it looks. They got a Coke machine here?"

"Sure. Over there, next to the head. Got enough change?" Ted reached into his pocket.

"I got enough," Roger answered, and strode over to the pop machine.

When he returned, he joined Ted at the window where they watched Gerry's first antics with the helicopter. "He looks like he's doin' about the same as you, Roger," Ted chuckled. Easy for you to say, Roger thought, since you haven't tried it yet.

After Gerry's ride, he and Mr. Sands came into the ready room while the helicopter was being refueled. Sands carried his thermos with him, and poured a cup of coffee while he explained what the major problems were, and how the three students could correct them. "We'll try it again as soon as they get the ship refueled."

Ted got the flight back to the main heliport, while Roger and Gerry rode the bus back. "You seem a little down, Roger," Gerry said with a little concern in his voice.

Roger cleared his throat, and closed his instruction book, "Yeah,....I guess you're right. I'm not sure I'm cut out for this sort of work."

"Oh come on. How can you know that after one ride?"

"I just didn't think it would come this hard, I guess."

"And I suppose you think it was a piece of cake for me, huh?" Gerry answered shortly. "You can't learn it in one day, man! Just think how long it took the Wright brothers to get it straight!"

Roger had to agree with him. It was only the first day. But it was a lot tougher than he thought it would be. He seemed to always be reacting to the helicopter's moves, instead of anticipating them as Mr. Sands was trying to teach him. He could see that he wasn't as bad off as some

of the other students. It was pretty easy to tell how each was doing. They could all watch one another as they went through their paces out on the hardstand next to the ready room. Mr. Sands had seemed patient enough during the ride. But Roger knew that the IP's would wait only so long for a student who was having trouble. Most of the students would solo with ten to fifteen hours of instruction.

And two weeks later it began to happen. The first of the Yellow hats made his solo flight. Three takeoffs and landings. Proper hovering techniques. And most importantly, safety precautions with each and every maneuver. The WOCS in the ready room mobbed Johnson when he returned from the flight's first solo flight. And when the flight arrived back at the main heliport, Johnson was thrown into "Solo Pond" to commemorate the event. It was a happening that was to be repeated many times in the ensuing weeks. It seemed that after the first student soloed, the others redoubled their efforts to achieve that goal.

Johnson wore the new wings on his yellow hat proudly, as well he should have. He took a lot of teasing from the others, but it was all good-natured. Johnson was a natural. He had had flight training before, even though it was not in helicopters. Being in the air was no stranger to him than sitting in a car. He made that very clear to the others, and he encouraged them as much as he could. He wanted everyone in the flight to solo.

During the weeks that followed, others took their trips to the solo pond. Soon the hats with wings outnumbered those without wings. The frustration of those yet to solo sometimes showed, and there were some braggarts who didn't make it any easier for them. They were the few who had no compassion for their fellow WOCS. Sweat-soaked flight suits continued to return to the student halls in the evening, and were hung beside the yellow hats with no wings. Roger was the last of Mr. Sands students to solo. That evening, following the trip to the solo pond, Roger and Ralph entered their room to find Matt packing his gear.

"What's up?" Roger asked, still dripping.

Matt turned to face them. His eyes were red from crying. Ralph and Roger exchanged embarrassed glances.

"I'm gettin' recycled." It was a flat statement. Matt turned back to his packing. Roger didn't know what to say. He just stood in the middle of the room and dripped. Ralph opened the closet and began stowing his flight gear.

Matt began crying again while he packed. The room was very quiet. As Ralph stripped off his flight suit, he said, "Look at it this way, Matt. You'll be flying before long. And it just means that we'll be gettin' to Vietnam about two weeks ahead of you. Maybe we can even end the war before you get there."

Matt finished his packing. Drying his eyes, he sat down on his folded mattress. "Yeah, I suppose you're right, Ralph. It's ...it's just that I felt really close to you guys. I wanted to make it through together...", Matt rubbed his eyes again, then looked out the window.

"Hey, c'mon, Matt. Maybe they figure that the outfit you're gonna join needs you worse than we do. They need someone with a little experience to help them over the hump," Ralph was chewing on a toothpick.

"It's OK, you guys. I know what you're trying to do. And I appreciate it," Matt stood and shook their hands. Then he turned, shouldered his gear, and walked out of the room.

Dennis passed Matt in the hall just outside the room, and spoke to him. Then he walked into the room, "What's wrong with Matt? He didn't even speak"

Ralph tossed his toothpick into the trash can, "He's being sent back."

"You mean recycled?"

"That's right."

"Which class, company, whatever...is he going to?"
Dennis was dumbfounded.

"Don't know. But hope he lets us know. He was an OK guy for a roommate," Ralph began pulling books out of his locker. "It's gotta happen. Maybe he's lucky he's one of the first. Might give him a better chance of making it with someone else." Ralph turned to Roger, "You know, you better get out of those wet duds before you catch your death of cold."

Dennis looked around the room like he still couldn't believe what had happened. "He's really gone? Just like that? He didn't even say good-bye."

Roger shivered as he pulled off his wet flight suit, "You just weren't here soon enough. Good-byes like that one are tough, Dennis."

"Yeah. Guess I can understand that. Christ."

"Hey, Dennis, how about helping me with this time-distance stuff we're supposed to learn for class tomorrow?"

Ralph already had his books spread out on the study table. "We got a test in this stuff tomorrow."

"Yeah, OK," Dennis took another look around the room. Then he crossed to his locker. He turned to the others. "I still can't believe it. That's the first one, isn't it?"

The trio studied hard that night. There was very little of the normal teasing. A cloud had come down on their little world. As the sky grew dark outside, the only noise was the sound of turning pages, or some hushed conversation about the upcoming test. Roger lay on his cot reading, while Ralph and Dennis studied at the table.

Suddenly, a paper wad hit Roger in the head. As he looked up, he saw Al's head disappear from the doorway. "Hey, watch it. Missiles are not authorized in this study area," he called to the door. Al burst through the door landing on top of Roger on the bunk. They wrestled on the bunk for a moment before rolling over onto the floor. As they rolled around, they bumped the others' chairs at the study table.

"Look, you two. How about taking it outside?" Ralph sounded irritated. The two on the floor stopped simultaneously and looked at each other. Then they both looked at Ralph.

It was Al's shrill voice, "To the shower with him!!" They both grabbed Ralph, and drug him from his chair. Ralph only smiled, and went along with their little game. "How about a hand, Dennis," Al tugged at Ralph's arm. Exhausted by their efforts, Roger and Al gave up and sat on the floor breathing heavily. "What's the matter with you guys tonight?" Before anyone could answer, Al reached out with a playful slap on Roger's ear. The wrestling resumed. With a sudden lurch, the two of them rolled against the bunk bed. A muffled "ow" was heard, and the two separated. As they sat up, Al was holding his ear.

"What's wrong?" Roger said breathlessly. He looked closely at Al. "You're bleeding!"

Al dropped his hand from his ear. "You're right. Crap!"

"Boy, you are bleeding," Ralph crouched over Al, looking at his ear. "You're our first casualty. Dennis, see if we got any scissors in the desk, huh? I think we're gonna have to amputate his ear."

Al struggled to his feet. "Cool it, you guys. I'm gonna check it in the mirror." The others followed him down the hall to the latrine. When they reached the mirror,

curiosity attracted more onlookers. By this time, the blood had stained Al's T-shirt, and was smeared on his jaw.

"Looks like a stitch job to me."

"Where's all the blood coming from? Somebody left a trail down the hall!"

"It's Al's ear. Looks like he might lose it!"

"Anybody got a tourniquet?"

Roger grabbed Al's arm, "Let's get away from these ghouls, Al. I think we can fix it with a Band-Aid." Ralph helped, but neither he nor Roger could get a Band-Aid to stick and hold to Al's ear. The final solution was a paper towel held in place with some masking tape.

As the doctoring job was finishing, a TAC officer came into the room. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Attention!" All of the WOCS snapped briskly to their feet.

"Does somebody want to tell me what's going on here?" the TAC spoke to no one in particular.

"Al cut his ear, sir."

"Shaving?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"Let me see your ear, Hansen," the TAC removed the tape and paper towel from Al's ear. "HMMMMM, that is quite a cut. How'd you get it?"

"I was cleaning my razor, sir." The other WOCS in the room broke into laughter.

"I didn't hear anyone call at ease," the TAC's firm voice brought them abruptly back to attention. He turned again to Al. "I don't think it's gonna need stitches, but you better come with me." The TAC led Al from the room.

About an hour later, Al returned. His ear was covered with a dressing. Ralph looked up as Al came into the room, "Boy, did they give you a purple heart?" The others looked up.

"No, but he did take me down to the infirmary to have it checked."

"Did they put any stitches in it?"

"They can't sew ears, unless it's on a Teddy Bear!" They all broke into laughter. Then it was the TAC officer coming down the hall for lights out.

They were in their bunks in five minutes with everything put away, and the lights out. Dennis rolled over. "G'night you guys. I still can't believe it about Hunt. Who else hasn't soloed yet in our flight?" A couple names were raised, but silence drifted over the trio again.

The news would be all over the flight by the morning formation. And the following day, it would be forgotten. Only those who knew Matt Hunt closely would remember. And they would not remember often. There were too many other things to worry about....

19: Autorotations and Winter Weather

The next week was a busy one. Most of the students were now doing a lot of flying on their own. The first trip out to the stage field solo was a hairy experience. Roger was dropped off at the main heliport by the bus. He carefully preflighted his assigned helicopter. As he did so, all the horror stories told by the IP's raced through his mind. There was the one about the time the tail rotor pedals had been rigged backwards by maintenance personnel. Luckily, there was an IP in the aircraft. When he started to pick it up, it began to spin. Applying opposite pedal should have stopped the spin, but it only made it spin faster. The quick-thinking IP immediately chopped the throttle, and let the ship settle in. It was just lucky that they had managed to miss the nearby aircraft. Another story concerned the "Jesus nut". This was the large nut on top of the rotor mast that held the rotor blades to the mast. It had not been replaced. As the student, who was solo at the time, pulled pitch to take off, the rotor blades lifted neatly off the aircraft and took off down the flight line like a huge frisbee. It was estimated that the engine, with the load of the rotor blades removed, reached close to ten thousand rpm before it scattered itself all over the area. The rotor blades clipped a couple other aircraft on their wild trip down the flight line, but miraculously, no one was injured. The student was found still sitting in the helicopter with a smoking hole where the engine had been.

Roger preflighted the ship very carefully with all this in mind. He even checked twice, just to be sure that the "Jesus nut" was in place. It had been so named, because if it ever let go in flight, the pilot had about enough time to utter "Oh, Jesus," before he hit the ground. Completing his preflight and run-up checks, Roger called for takeoff clearance from the tower, and pulled the ship into the air. Since his preflight had taken so long, he was one of the last choppers leaving the main heliport. Heading out, he suddenly wondered if he could find the stage field. He had never paid that much attention before, because he had always been with an IP. Flying in what he thought was the right direction, he spotted some choppers converging on a stage field.

Each stage field operated on a different radio frequency. Roger dialed in the proper frequency for his

field, and entered the traffic pattern to land. As he brought the ship to a hover, he looked around with a sinking feeling. He was at the wrong stage field! This one had Hiller helicopters at it, not Bells! And was he getting some curious looks from those in the Hillers. As quickly as he could, he managed to take off and clear the traffic pattern.

Flying further out, he spotted another stage field. Carefully noting that these were Bells at this stage field, he called for landing instructions. The tower answered, just as it had before, and he made his approach. Completing his assigned maneuvers at the stage field, he brought the chopper into the hardstand area next to the tower. He was joined by Mr. Sands and Gerry. Over the sound of the engine, Mr. Sands asked Roger what had taken him so long to get to the stage field. Roger told him that he had a little trouble finding the field. Mr. Sands gave him a questioning glance, but asked no further questions. Roger was relieved to turn the aircraft over to them, and pick up a Coke in the ready room.

As Roger thought about it, he realized why the tower had made no big thing of missing him in the traffic pattern. They had never missed him. They had heard him call in, and had recorded his tail number as being present at the field, but they didn't know he was at the wrong field. He began to realize how easy it was to lose a helicopter, even in training. The large number of helicopters contributed to the problem, yes, but it would be easy for one to turn up missing.

That was exactly what happened that week. It was not someone from their flight, but a helicopter with two student pilots was posted as missing. The IP's and students were asked to keep their eyes open for it, and to call in any information. The aircraft had been missing two days when someone spotted it. It was underneath a power line in the corner of a field. The accident report that came out afterward described the cause as a power line strike. Evidently the students had not seen the power line, and had run into it. Power lines made helicopters do funny things, the worst of which was usually to cause them to stop flying. One of the students had survived the crash, but had died later. He was found next to the mangled wreckage. He had apparently been sitting in the field waiting for someone to rescue them. Hopefully he had been in shock from the accident, and had felt nothing. Dying quick was OK, but

slowly was not OK. The accident caused a reaction throughout the student population. It forced them to look at reality, and realize what they were doing was not without danger, even in a very secure part of the world.

Summer began to give way to fall, and the days grew shorter. Morning flying was chilly in the Bells. One of the greatest accomplishments of the student pilot was finding doors for his aircraft. There were never enough to go around. The first step on the preflight checklist became a door check. If there weren't two doors on the student's assigned aircraft, then he ran around to the other choppers until he found one with either a left or right door that he needed. Flying dual with a door missing wasn't quite as bad, because one pilot could spell the other while he warmed his hands. Solo did not afford this luxury, and the door hunt was made in deadly earnest.

Colds and flu made the rounds of the WOCS. Dennis Greavy came down with an especially bad case of the flu. He was grounded for over a week. When he came back from the hospital, he had lost nearly twenty pounds. He looked thin and gaunt, like an old man. He tired easily, and studying was difficult because he had to sleep so much. Roger and Ralph tried to do as much as they could to help Dennis with his studies. In the evenings, one or the other would help Dennis, while the other would handle the cleaning chores in the room. But it was not to be. Dennis came down with pneumonia. After he had missed another week of training, Ralph and Roger returned to the room one evening after supper to find Dennis' gear missing. A little later the TAC officer came in quietly, and explained that Dennis had been recycled. He said it softly, and with concern. Later, Ralph wondered if Dennis would be able to continue with the flight program.

The room seemed almost empty now, with both Matt and Dennis gone. One evening, another TAC made the evening rounds. He was much younger than the group's regular TAC officer, and somewhat of a braggart. When he stopped in Ralph's and Roger's room, he noticed the two empty bunks. "Lost a couple from this room, huh?" he asked.

Ralph looked up from his studies. "Yeah, guess we did."

"Well, you might as well get used to that now. You'll be seeing a lot more of that where you're going," the TAC officer leaned against the door frame. "In fact, about fifty percent was our loss rate overseas."

"Is that right?" Ralph asked flatly.

The TAC looked sharply at Ralph. "Yeah, that's right smartass. But you'll find out for yourself." With that, the TAC turned and walked off down the hall.

"You better hope he doesn't become our regular TAC, Ralph," Roger warned from his bunk.

"Why should I care? He isn't much older than us," Ralph slumped back in his chair.

"Maybe that's his problem. Maybe he was too young to do what he did."

"He still doesn't need to take it out on us," Ralph leaned over his books again. "Probably had someone give him a hard time when he came through here. Seems like what he went through would give him a little more compassion for fellow pilots, even if we aren't quite there yet."

"Probably can't shoot pool, either..." Roger teased Ralph.

"Probably can't," Ralph turned and grinned. "But if he restricts us this weekend, we might find out, huh?" Roger caught the gleam in Ralph's eye, and only smiled. It was almost assured that they would get enough demerits that they wouldn't be going on leave on the weekend.

Classes became more demanding. There were classes on proper behavior for an Army officer, classes on personal hygiene, and classes on etiquette, as well as classes on flying subjects. The WOCS learned to use the tools of their trade which included the small circular slide rules that were used for computing fuel consumption, time enroute, and wind factors. They learned the fundamentals of helicopter flight. Why their aircraft had a tail rotor, and what kept those rotating machines in the air.

Most of the weekends were now free for the WOCS. They had made it through the tough discipline of the first couple weeks. They still had to maintain clean rooms, and "strac" (straight and in proper military form) uniforms, but the standards were reduced. The WOCS had shown that they could cut it, and the concentration now was to learn as much about flying as they could.

As they passed from primary flight training into advanced primary flight, they shed their civilian instructors. Now their trainers were Army officers. Most of them were Warrant officers -- what most of the WOCS would become, but some were RLO's (real, live officers of lieutenant grade or higher). Each one was unique. There were good instructors, good pilots, good story-tellers, and

there were some bad instructors. Roger and Gerry got a Warrant for their IP. His name was Darling, and it fit. Very friendly, but very concerned that they learn to fly the right way. Mr. Darling (Warrant Officers were called "Mister") was tall, and had dark wavy hair. His build was that of an ex-football player. He was married, and his wife lived with him in Weatherford, a town just outside the fort.

One maneuver that students had to learn without fail was called an autorotation. This maneuver had to be performed anytime the helicopter lost power. Without power from the engine, a helicopter could still be landed, but the pilot had only one opportunity. Immediately upon a loss of power, the collective had to be lowered quickly. This took the pitch out of the rotor blades, and as the aircraft began to descend rapidly, the air rushing up through the blades would keep them spinning. Then, as the aircraft was guided to the ground, the collective could be pulled in to slow the rate of descent and allow the helicopter to be landed without damage to either the ship itself, or more importantly, the crew. To accomplish this maneuver took a lot of practice. And it was practiced a lot. During every dual instruction period, the IP's would allow the student to practice autorotations.

When autorotations were practiced at the stage field, the aircraft was actually allowed to complete the landing to a runway. Techniques even differed among the IP's, depending on their actual experiences, but they all taught the same basic procedure.

In cross-country flying, as soon as the power loss was noted, the student dropped the collective, or pitch as it was commonly called. Then it was necessary to trim the aircraft with the pedals due to the loss of engine torque. Finally it was important to find a place to land -- the ideal spot was large enough to get into without trees or power lines, and flat and smooth so a good touchdown could be made without turning the ship over. At the stagefield, the touchdown spot was already picked. Then it was only necessary to manipulate the controls to achieve a smooth landing.

Some instructors preferred the running landing, or coming into contact with the ground with some forward motion. Others preferred the "zero groundspeed" auto, where the forward motion of the ship was stopped, or almost stopped, before it touched down. Forward motion was checked by flaring the helicopter as it approached the ground.

Flaring meant pulling back on the cyclic stick and entering a nose-high attitude. A little pitch was pulled in at the same time to help stop the forward motion. Then, as the groundspeed approached zero, the helicopter was leveled using the cyclic, and the collective was pulled slowly to cushion the final touchdown. Darling preferred the zero groundspeed approach. His feeling was that if you were touching down on rough ground, then better not to be moving at all when you made contact, rather than sliding forward. He seemed to be afraid that sliding forward, the aircraft would tend to turn over. And there were a lot of moving parts to avoid if the darned thing turned over!

It was always best to land into the wind, too. This allowed a slower groundspeed approach than if a landing was attempted downwind. As the pilots progressed in skill, more and more hours were spent away from the stagefield and out over the Texas countryside. Landings were also practiced in what were called "confined areas". There were clearings that were marked with a painted tire to identify them from the air. The color of the tire indicated the difficulty of the area, or how tough it was to get in and out of it. The greater the difficulty, the more confined the area, and the less room there was to maneuver the helicopter. White tire areas were the easiest, yellow tire areas more difficult, and red tire areas were the most difficult. Red tire areas were to be attempted only when there was an IP in the aircraft.

It became SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for the IP to cut the throttle on the student anytime, and the student would attempt to set the aircraft up for an autorotation. This meant identifying his intended landing spot, and bringing the aircraft in as if he meant to land there. When the IP was satisfied that the student had everything under control, or that he had screwed things up bad enough, the IP would roll the throttle back on and take over the controls to make the recovery. Only at the stagefield were they supposed to take the aircraft all the way to the ground. However, there were special areas called "termination with power" areas. In these areas, the autorotation could be brought almost all the way to the ground. Then the aircraft would be recovered at a hover without touching the ground. At first, the IP would make the recoveries, but soon they were allowing their students to do it. Some of the initial recoveries were wild affairs, as the student rolled the throttle on too fast. Then the aircraft would start to spin

with the increased torque. The student would try to recover from the spin with the pedals by overcorrecting. This would start the ship to yawing in the opposite direction. In the meantime, the rpm would be jumping around erratically as the student rotated the twist-grip throttle and moved the collective up and down. The IP would usually step in about that time with a calm, "I've got it," and bring the ship back under control.

With steady practice, the student would improve day by day, and his confidence would build in his ability to handle the aircraft in both good and bad circumstances. The IP would know how confident the student was by the student's anticipation of problems, and completion of maneuvers. When the IP suddenly rolled off the throttle for a simulated engine failure, if the student reacted calmly by lowering the pitch and picking out a forced landing area, the IP gained confidence in the student.

As November gave way to December, the students were anxious to head home for the holidays. The weather did its part by becoming nasty, with rain squalls and high winds. The temperature continued to fall. If it was clear, it was well below freezing. If it was raining and blowing, then it was just above freezing. It was one of these rainy and blowing days when the clouds hung in low patches over the landscape that Roger took off solo to take the aircraft to a stagefield. He was unable to find a left door at the heliport, and his left hand was soon freezing cold. He tried to climb to normal cruising altitude, but the clouds were too low. Staying lower, he tried to skirt the worst of the clouds and still find his way to the stagefield. After about a half hour, his hand was so cold that he was losing feeling in his fingers. No matter which way he tried to maneuver around the clouds, it seemed that other low, ragged squalls got in the way. Finally he gave up, and returned to the main heliport. He noticed that there were a few other students that had also returned. They were out tying down the rotor blades on their aircraft. That made him feel a little better, but he still felt bad about not making it to the stagefield. Then as he approached the main hangar, he saw a couple students from his flight. "Hey, guys! What's up?"

"It's about time you got here! You're the last one from our flight. Everyone else is already back in." It was Gerry, his stick buddy (they both had the same IP). "Some

of the other flights weren't so lucky, from what we hear. They're still out looking for some of their people."

It took a while to find some of them. A couple of them had experienced icing conditions. That is when ice begins to form on the rotor blades. This condition will even cause fixed wing aircraft to crash from the ice build-up on the wings. It increases the weight of the aircraft, and it causes the wing to lose lift as the ice interferes with the air flow over the wings. In a helicopter it acts the same way, but with one additional worry. Sometimes, after some ice has built up on the rotor blade, it will be slung off by the centrifugal force of the rotating blades. This will cause the chopper to shake violently, and sometimes cause some other component in the structure to fail, resulting in a crash. This is probably what happened to the single student that was killed that day. At least, that is what the accident report said.

With two weeks before Christmas leave, the weather was even worse. Some days the entire fleet of helicopters was grounded. This meant long hours with little to do for the WOCS, and tempers sometimes wore thin. A slight letup in the weather came in the last week before leave, but it closed in even more rapidly than usual. The tally at the end of that week was two more students killed in crashes. The cause for both these deaths was listed as pilot error, even though it was in poor weather conditions. It was becoming more and more clear who was responsible for what in the aircraft. It was up to the pilot to make the choices, and he ultimately paid the price of his decisions, good or bad. It was a stiff lesson to learn so close to Christmas, 1967.

20: Christmas Leave and Divorce

Christmas leave began with a rush from the fort. Very few of the students were from the local area, and the roads were jammed with cars. The same problem existed at the commercial airports, as servicemen from all branches tried to catch flights home for the holidays. Military standby was again at the bottom of the list of passengers to make the commercial flights. When Roger reached Dallas International, there were more people there than he had ever seen. Even though the passengers seemed to mob the reservation desks, the clerks remained calm and friendly. Knowing a little more about the standby system, Roger was able to catch a flight into Portland. Connections were made with a flight to Spokane, and Roger looked forward to seeing Janet.

As the plane made its final approach into Spokane, Roger looked at the frozen countryside below. There was snow everywhere. The sun was just disappearing over the Cascade Mountains to the west, and the snow turned a flaming orange. Then the plane was on the ground. After picking up his luggage, Roger found an empty chair in the lounge, and settled down to wait for Janet. The clerk at baggage pick-up had said that the roads were not in good shape. The recent storm had left packed snow and ice almost everywhere, and travel was hazardous. Roger picked up a newspaper, and was reading about the storm to pass the time. Suddenly he looked up and saw Janet walking toward him across the lounge. He dropped the paper, and rushed to meet her. But it was a cool reception.

"I've got something to tell you," she said, and sat down in a chair next to Roger's duffel bag. Immediately, Roger began to think of all the things that could have gone wrong. The most serious was that the dog had died. Janet loved the dog she had found. She said that she wanted it for company while Roger was gone. It was a little poodle that was very friendly. Roger and the grey poodle had become friends when Roger had visited on his last leave. Janet had named the little fellow Patches. Being very small, he was easy to have around the house, and he seemed to mind very well. What else could it be? Janet looked so serious... The car? She could have wrecked the car,...or was it something else?

Roger waited as Janet seemed to be struggling with herself over how to begin. She looked Roger straight in the eye, and said, "I want a divorce." Roger looked like someone had punched him in the stomach.

"You what?" he answered.

"I want a divorce."

"I can't believe it. You never said anything about this in any of your letters. How come?"

"I, ... I just don't want to be married to a pilot." Janet turned away. "Look, I think the best thing would be for you to turn around and spend Christmas with your folks."

"Are you kidding? Don't you even want to talk about it?"

"Nope. My mind's made up. I knew you would take it pretty hard, but that's the way I feel."

Roger lit a cigarette. "I just can't believe what I'm hearing. I assume it's somebody else, huh? For crying out in the night, Janet. This just isn't like you."

"Look. I don't want to talk about it. Do you want to try to catch another plane back to the coast or what?"

"Catch a plane? Do you suppose we could talk this over? I mean, I don't know what I mean."

"Well, you've got to make up your mind. I'm going back to Pullman right now. If you want to come down there, I'll give you a ride. If you want to go back to the coast, then I'm leaving."

Roger let out a long sigh. She certainly did seem serious, but he wanted so badly to talk to her about her decision. "Yes, I want a ride to Pullman."

"Well, then, we'd better get going because the roads are terrible. It took me over two hours to get up here tonight. I thought you might want to come anyway, so I've got you a place to stay in Pullman. Jake said he'd put you up."

As they made their way south in the little green Volkswagon bug, Roger tried to find out what had changed Janet's mind about them. But she would have none of it. Finally, he turned to questions about school, and some of their friends. She warmed to these subjects a little more, and the conversation moved along more easily. It was a long trip to Pullman. It took them over three hours on the trip south. It was almost ten o'clock when the lights of Pullman came into sight. Janet turned off to the west. "I'm going home. You can drop me there, and keep the car while you're here." Directions to Jake's place followed. "He knows

you'll be coming, so I'm sure he'll have a bed for you." With that, Janet got out of the car, and walked into the house. Roger just sat there. He simply could not believe what had happened. It seemed like a bad dream. Maybe a "dear John" letter was bad, but it certainly couldn't have been any worse than this. The cold wind blew in through the open driver's door on the VW. Roger got out and walked around to the driver's side. The lights were on in the house now, and he was strongly tempted to try to talk some more. But what was there to say? Hadn't she said it all on the trip down? He got into the car, and backed out of the driveway.

When Roger arrived at Jake's, Jake was waiting. He was standing on the front porch in his stocking feet in the ten degree cold. He waved as Roger got out of the car. Roger called and waved back, then wrestled his duffel bag out of the back seat. Roger crossed the snow, and mounted the stairs to the front porch. As Roger approached, Jake held out his huge hand. "I figured I'd be seeing you tonight," Jake said as he held the door open for Roger.

"I don't know what to say, Jake. It's good to see you, but under the circumstances, I'd be just a little happier if I wasn't seeing you!"

"I know, I know. Come on in. It's a helluva lot warmer inside than it is out here. I've got some stew warming on the stove, brother." Roger kicked the snow from his shoes, and walked into the living room. On the north wall there was a fireplace with a good fire going. A narrow counter separated the kitchen from the living room. As Roger warmed his hands at the fire, Jake came around the counter with two glasses in his hands. "Here. This'll take the edge off the cold." He handed Roger one of the glasses.

Roger tipped the glass to his mouth. The aroma of peach brandy was strong as he took a sip. "Mmmmm. You always were high on hospitality, Jake."

Jake sat down in a chair close to the fire. "I know how you must feel, Roger, but I want to get things straight right away. I like both you and Janet. I don't know what's happened between you two, and I don't want to get involved in it. You're welcome to stay here your whole vacation if you want. But I don't really want to talk about you and Janet, OK?"

Roger looked at Jake. Roger's hands trembled as he took another sip of the brandy. "I don't know what's going

on either, Jake. It seems like a bad dream. There was never a hint in any of her letters..."

"Like I said. I don't want to get involved. I've got a date tonight, and I'll probably be out pretty late. Help yourself to anything in the house. I'll show you your room." After a quick tour of the house, Jake donned his vest and down coat, and left.

Roger dished up some stew, and sat down in front of the fire. As he ate, he tried to sort things out in his mind. It was all so sudden. Well, maybe it wasn't sudden to Janet. Or to Jake. But it was sure sudden to Roger. When the fire burned down, Roger added another log, and continued to go over and over the things Janet had written in her letters. Nowhere could he even recall a hint that things were not as he expected them to be. He looked at the large clock on the mantle above the fireplace. It was nearly two a.m. Where had all the time gone? Roger went into the room Jake had said was his. Roger undressed, and took a long, hot shower. When he returned to the bedroom, the floor felt icy under his feet. He lay down, and pulled the blankets tightly around him, but he couldn't go to sleep. Finally he could stand it no longer. He had to talk to Janet. Face to face. He had to find out if she really meant it. Roger dressed quickly, and went out to the car.

The cold air stung his nose and throat as he got into the VW. The engine caught quickly. As Roger tried to shift into reverse, the oil in the transmission was so thick from the cold that he couldn't change gears. He waited in the biting cold for the car to warm up. The night was clear as he drove out to Janet's place. When he arrived, there were no lights. The storm door to the back porch wasn't locked. Roger tried the back door. It was an old door. The kind with the large keyhole. He expected it to be locked, but it wasn't. Typical for this part of the country, he thought. The key for this door probably didn't even exist anymore.

He pushed open the door. The moon on the snow outside gave enough light for him to see clearly in the kitchen. He walked down the hall toward the bedroom. He stopped in the door to the bedroom. This room was much darker. A small window above the bed provided the only light. A thin curtain over the window cut the light even further. "Janet?" he asked. He heard someone move on the bed. Then there was a loud, metallic click.

"Roger, you need to get out of here now." It was Janet's voice. "I've got a gun, and if you don't leave now, I'm going to use it."

"Is it that twenty-two pistol we bought in Yakima?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you'd better be a pretty good shot because a twenty-two doesn't pack much of a punch... Look, Janet, go ahead and shoot if you want. I may be trespassing, or whatever, but I want to talk to you." Roger's eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness in the room. Now he could make out the bed, and the furniture in the room. He moved over to the bed and sat down on the foot of it. He couldn't see Janet's face, but he could tell that she was sitting up. For a long time they both just sat there watching each other like two alley cats sizing up one another before the fight.

Roger asked her about Patches, and Janet responded. There was some small talk about classes, her folks, and common friends in college. But it seemed there was no changing her mind about the divorce. Roger was freezing. His fingers were beginning to turn numb. The reality of Janet's decision was finally beginning to reach him. They talked about finances, and discussed the division of their few possessions. There were no tears, no laughter. Only quiet conversation.

Roger stood up. His knees were stiff from the cold. He slowly turned and left the house. Dawn was less than an hour away. A cold fog had settled around the house and the car. The door of the VW was frozen shut. Roger thumped it hard with the heel of his hand to break it loose. The engine noise rattled in his ears as it caught and steadied. A frozen mist had formed on the inside of the windshield. Roger groped under the seat for an ice scraper. There it was. Just where it always was. He scraped the windshield on the inside, then got out and scraped all the windows. The engine's exhaust formed a huge white cloud that merged with the icy fog. When he got in again, he carefully breathed through his nose, so his breath wouldn't frost the windshield again. Now Roger's fingers were so cold that he could barely feel the steering wheel or the gearshift. Slowly, he drove back to Jake's house.

21: The Hangover Cure

Roger returned to Fort Wolters earlier than most of the other WOCS. He had known the "hotel" would be open, and he couldn't see much reason in hanging around Pullman. He hoped that Janet would change her mind. That seemed rather doubtful, though. He caught a bus from Dallas out to Weatherford. He called Al from the bus station. Al was surprised to hear Roger's voice, and shocked to find that he was in Weatherford.

Al hung up the phone, and turned to his wife, Sherry. "That was Roger on the phone. He's in Weatherford. At the bus station."

"What's he doing back here now?"

"Don't know. He didn't say, except that he needs a ride out to the fort."

"Why don't you bring him over here? He probably hasn't eaten, Al. Did he sound upset?"

"Something was bothering him, all right, but he wasn't about to discuss it. Wonder what the heck went wrong up in Washington?"

The weather in Texas was about the same as that Roger had left in Spokane. It was bitter cold. A few dirty patches of snow clung to the ground in isolated spots. Roger stood by the window of the bus station. Soon he saw Al's red Thunderbird approaching. Roger shouldered his duffel bag, and stepped out to meet him.

Al got out of the car. His bright blue stocking hat set off his easy grin. "Back kind of early aren't you? Are you trying to get a head start on the rest of us?"

"I heard that they were setting up remedial courses for those that were staying close to the fort, and I didn't want you to have to take one all by yourself, Al!"

Al laughed as he opened the trunk of the car. "Remedial courses, huh? Sometimes I think all that rain in Washington must go straight to your brain."

As they drove toward Mineral Wells, Al was quiet. Roger knew he had to tell him something, but he wasn't sure how to tell Al. Finally, Al broke the silence. "I hear that Leroy and Andy are having a get together for New Year's. Would you like to come with us?"

"Yeah, I really would. Look, Al, I really appreciate you coming into Weatherford to get me..."

"That's fine. I know something happened while you were home on leave, Roger. It's your business, but if you want to share it, I'm ready to listen to the whole thing." Al looked at Roger. He was looking out the window. Al wasn't sure that Roger had heard what he said.

Roger turned toward him. "Hey! You're gonna pass the store, dummy! How do you expect me to buy the beer if you don't stop. Oh, I get it. You want me to walk back so it'll be chilled by the time I get to your place with it. Is that it?"

Al laughed hard. "You never change, do you? I think I got plenty of beer at the house. My folks were down for a few days, and my ol' man left the frig full, as usual. If we bought any more, we'd just have to sit it outside. Have you ever drunk beer after it's been frozen?"

Roger lit a cigarette, "Don't recall if I have. Why?"

"It tastes funny. At least I think so. Do you have another one of those? I must have left mine at the house." Roger lit another cigarette for Al, and handed it over.

Over supper, Roger told of the situation with his wife. "I don't know what's going on up there. But whatever it is, my being there didn't seem to help it any." Al and Sherry were both understanding, but they didn't automatically think badly of Janet. They talked of some of the hard times they had had. Basic training was when they were separated for a while, and it was not easy for them. They couldn't imagine being separated by half the country. Roger thought that was kind of funny, knowing that they would be facing a year's separation if Al went to Vietnam, but he didn't mention that. They were probably having enough trouble dealing with it without him contributing his two cents.

They played cards until late. Sherry drank a little wine, while Al and Roger worked on the beer in the ice box. It was Coors. That's what Al's dad always brought when he came down. When Al and Roger got pleasantly sloshed, they all called it a night. Sherry roused up some blankets for Roger to use on the couch.

That Friday was New Year's, and they drove into Fort Worth to join Andy and Leroy and their wives. The seven of them made quite a group when they hit Fort Worth.

"Anybody like seafood?" Andy asked. Al and Sherry were from Colorado, and they hadn't developed a taste for seafood. Roger was surprised that Andy asked. Roger didn't realize that the south coast of the US provided a wide

variety of seafood. Andy's wife, Jill, answered in the affirmative, followed quickly by Leroy and his wife, Sue. When Roger expressed his surprise, Andy quickly pointed out that was something he had noticed in all Westerners. "They all seem to think that they've got the market for anything and everything, and if it doesn't come from the West Coast, then it can't be much good!"

"Hey, Andy, it's not all that bad," Al returned.

"Yeah," Roger chimed in. "Suppose you-all have developed a fine culinary taste for Rocky Mountain oysters down here, too, huh?" That stopped Andy in mid-sentence.

"Rocky Mountain oysters?" he looked puzzled.

Roger leaned over, and winked at Al, who was doing his best to stifle the laughter that was building in his throat. Sherry held her hand over her mouth to suppress her merriment. The seven of them were packed into Andy's big Chevy. Al, Sherry, Roger and Jill were in the back seat, while Leroy and Sue were in the front with Andy behind the wheel.

Roger continued his story, while Al choked and gasped in the far corner of the back seat. "Yeah, now they are really some good eating. But they're kind of hard to get. You can't just go out to any old beach and pick them up, you know." Al could contain his laughter no longer.

Andy pulled over to the side of the road. "If somebody doesn't tell this here kid just exactly what's going on, we just aren't going on!" Andy, Sue, and Leroy leaned back over the front seat as Roger, Al, and Sherry exploded in laughter. Jill just sat there quietly, and raised her hands in an expression of absolute confusion.

Al managed to control his laughter. "OK, OK, I'll tell you, but only if you promise to keep on driving. I'm hungry, and this story will make me even more so." More laughter in the back seat. "See, Rocky Mountain oysters, well, they aren't really oysters," he broke up again.

"We can do without all the yuks and tears, mah boy," Andy said sternly.

"I'm trying my best," Al returned.

"That's what your wife told me about last night, too," Andy smirked. The rest of the car broke up. Sherry was laughing so hard that the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Al was once again in control. "Rocky Mountain oysters, like I tried to tell you before, are not really oysters. Not like the kind you find at the beach, anyway. But, see,

we raise a lot of cattle out west. And bulls don't make such good animals to handle, so..." With that, Jill understood what was coming, and lapsed into hysterics. Sherry joined her in short order.

Andy's threatening tone cut through the laughter, "If you women-folk in the back seat don't let Al finish his story..." Suddenly Sue and Leroy erupted in laughter. "Gosh dang it, I wish someone would tell me what's so all-fired funny about these western oysters!" Leroy leaned toward Andy, but he couldn't get the words out because he was laughing so hard.

With a concerted effort, Leroy finally blurted, "Andy, what do bulls have that steers don't, that are small and round and could be taken for oysters?" The whole car rocked with more laughter.

Andy still didn't seem clear on the whole thing. "You mean their testicles?"

"You got it," Leroy choked out. The next few miles were silent except for little bursts of giggles. Andy was very quiet. Roger caught his eye in the rear view mirror, and shook his head. Andy only scowled, but it was a good natured scowl.

"Here we are," Andy was back in control again as he pulled into a Zuider Zee restaurant. "This is the best this city has to offer in the way of true southern seafood."

As they tumbled out of the car, Al couldn't resist. "Are you going to ask about Rocky Mountain oysters, Andy?" Al tried to duck, but he wasn't quick enough. Andy's playful punch caught him squarely on his shoulder. If Andy hadn't caught him, Al would have fallen in the parking lot.

The waitress seated them at a large round table back in a corner of the restaurant. "Have you eaten here before?" Al asked Andy, referring to the back corner where they were sitting.

"This is where they seat the special folk. See how close we are to the kitchen? That way we get our food hot and fast!" The group began to check their menus.

Roger leaned over to Andy, pointing at an entry on the menu. "Does that mean what I think it does?" he asked.

"Oysters on the half shell? Yeah, that's exactly what it means."

"Does that mean they're cooked or baked, or what?"

"That means that they're on the half shell. That's it," Andy retorted, expecting another oyster joke.

"No, I'm serious. Are they cooked?" Roger asked seriously.

"Cooked?! No, they're not cooked. They're raw! If they was cooked, it would say that!"

"Oh, wow! I haven't seen any of those for a long time," Roger smacked his lips.

Al leaned over to them. "What are you talking about?"

"Ever eat raw oysters?" Andy asked.

"Raw oysters?" Al looked at Sherry, but she just shook her head. "No, I don't think I have."

"Well, you've sure missed something good. You wanta get a plate, Roger?"

Roger nodded in agreement, "You betcha, Andy. I haven't seen those in a long time, and I really love 'em. 'Course they might make 'em different down here in the South, I suppose."

"Yeah, likely you're right," Andy answered. "They're likely a lot better!"

The first platter of oysters didn't last long. Andy and Roger did their share, and Leroy helped some. Sherry and Al watched, fascinated as the others downed the slippery looking creatures.

"These sure are good. Must be real fresh," Roger smacked his lips as he downed another.

Andy thumped the table with his beer mug, "You better believe it, big fella! They just don't come any better than this!" With a flourish, Andy ordered another plate of oysters and another round of beer. A basket of breadsticks had also mysteriously appeared at the table. Al watched the others closely as they dove into the new plate of oysters. Roger caught a wink from Andy as he lifted his beer mug.

"Say, Al, have you ever tried one of these?" Andy asked innocently.

"No. Can't say that I have. What do they taste like?"

Roger returned Andy's wink. "We hate to eat them all right in front of you. You should try one before they're all gone." Al leaned over the table, and inspected the plate of oysters.

"You can go ahead and try one if you want," Andy said as he leaned back in his chair.

Al tentatively picked up his fork and began to worry one of the remaining oysters. "Do you chew them?" he asked.

Andy belched. "Ya' can if ya' want. I think most folks do chew them some." Andy's eyes caught Roger's, and he winked again. The trap was set. Anyone as squeamish as

Al was probably going to have a hard time getting his first raw oyster down. Andy set the hook, "Dinner's probably about here. We better finish 'em off."

Al stuck a small oyster with his fork and raised it above the plate. Andy reached over and deftly plucked another one from its shell. He raised it smartly with his fork and placed it in his mouth. Then he rolled it around in his mouth as he savored it. Al raised his fork, imitating Andy's motion. As he did, all movement at the table ceased. Al was center stage. All eyes were on the oyster as it rose to Al's lips. Sherry glanced at the others and realized what was happening. Her grip on Al's arm tightened, but it was too late. The oyster disappeared.

The first time anyone eats one, they are usually a little surprised. Raw oysters cause a slippery sensation, resembling an uncooked egg. And it is clear to the first-timer that they are about to swallow something that is raw. Not a very American thing to do, unless it's fruit or berries. Al's reaction was no different. His eyes widened slightly, and his jaw fell slack. Then he was able to swallow, but it was difficult.

Andy leaned forward in his chair. "Well, how do you like 'em?" Al couldn't speak. There was a very good chance that the oyster was going to come right back up. Al struggled with the sensation. He gulped his beer. The color drained from his face.....

"Al, are you OK?" Sherry's voice was loud in the silence of the group.

Al turned to her, and managed a sheepish grin, "Not too bad..."

Andy nearly fell off his chair as his laughter bounced across the table. "He did it!! He did it!" he screamed. Leroy only grinned broadly, but the others were afraid the show wasn't over yet. Al sat back in his chair, and took another slug of beer. He was still very pale. Andy stabbed the last oyster and popped it into his mouth. "Good, huh, Al?" he said around the oyster. That nearly did it. Al covered his mouth with his napkin and hunched forward. But he managed to control himself again.

Andy slurped his oyster noisily, "Ya' really do get to like 'em, but it takes a time or two," he said.

As the group finished dinner and sat back with their beer and coffee, Andy looked across at Al. "Think we should have another go at the oysters?" he asked. Al's stomach turned over, and he began to turn green again...

"Cut that out, Andy," Sherry said sharply. "You got him to try one, and that should be enough!"

"Well," Andy leaned forward like he was about to divulge a closely held secret. "Sherry, my friend, you need to hear the rest of the story. Oysters have a tremendous effect on men. I don't know if it works the same on women or not, but I don't think so. The way the legend goes, if you eat twelve raw oysters, you can do it twelve times in one night. Now, I don't know how you feel about that, but once for the one oyster Al ate tonight is at least a start!" Laughter engulfed the table, as Sherry's face turned a bright crimson.

The party moved on, but throughout the evening there were continued references to the mighty oyster and its mystic powers. New Year's came while the group sat at a table in a local pizza house drinking beer from large glass mugs. There was much whooping that gave way to a slightly off-key version of "Auld Lang Syne", and then the group's thoughts turned to home. The men in the party were pretty well inebriated by this time, but Andy wouldn't let any of the women behind the wheel of the Chevy. On the way back to Andy's place they sang songs and laughed.

The next morning at Andy's was a very different crowd. Andy's apartment was in an old building that had been converted to apartments. It had high ceilings, a large living room, a large kitchen with a long counter and a large sink, and two bedrooms. Andy and Jill slept in one bedroom, Leroy and Sue in the other, and Al, Sherry and Roger shared the living room. Andy was the first one up, with Roger second in line in the kitchen for a drink of water. Al got as far as sitting up on the couch that he and Sherry shared.

Andy turned to Roger in the kitchen. "You know, we've got to find something for these hangovers around here." He rummaged through the cupboards.

"Have you got any tomato juice?" Roger asked.

"No.....hmmmm. Uh, there is some tabasco sauce here, and, wait, there's some horseradish..."

"I think I smell something fishy," Roger commented.

"Could be. Think we could mix something up for Al?" Andy asked.

"I think that could be arranged. Got a shot glass, or a juice glass, or something small like that?" Roger's mind was racing in high gear now.

Leroy walked into the kitchen. "What are you guys up to now?" he said as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"We're just mixing up something to take the sting out of Al's hangover," Andy's eyes shone.

Leroy stopped in mid-stride as he spotted the jar of horseradish. "With that!?"

"Shhhhh! If Al's ol' lady hears you, she'll blow the whole thing!" Andy cautioned Leroy.

"She may just kill you guys, you know," Leroy said.

"Guess we're gonna just have to take that chance," Andy beamed as he held the shot glass up to the light to admire his masterpiece. Then he stepped smartly to the living room. Roger and Leroy hung back by the kitchen door to watch the action. Al was still sitting on the couch as Andy approached.

Andy offered the glass to Al, "Here. This'll cure your hangover."

"What is it?" Al asked slowly.

"Just a little home remedy to kill that hangover, Al. The rest of us already finished the batch, but we saved just a little for you," Andy held out the glass.

Al took the glass.

"You gotta put it down in one shot," Andy advised, and stepped back. Al leaned back on the couch and downed the contents of the shot glass. Then he leaned forward and started to hand the glass back to Andy. Suddenly his eyes flew open, wide! His mouth opened, and his face began to color. He couldn't breathe. He jumped to his feet, one hand on his throat. He stumbled toward the kitchen. Andy stepped out of his way, stumbled over a chair, and fell backward, laughing. Leroy and Roger cleared the way to the kitchen sink. Al hit the counter on the run, slid up onto it, and on his back, slid under the kitchen faucet. He fumbled with the handle for an instant, but soon had water gushing into his upturned mouth. Sherry was hot on his heels. She gasped as she entered the kitchen.

"What have you done to him??!!" she screamed. She rushed to Al at the sink. He was still having a hard time with his breathing. Leroy was laughing so hard that he slid down the wall with tears streaming down his face. Roger was doubled over the table with laughter. Andy's belly laughs still echoed from the living room.

When things finally settled down, everyone in the apartment was wide awake. Al's breathing had settled down, and although Sherry was quite upset over the whole episode, she was at least speaking to everyone again.

Suddenly Al sat up from where he had been lying on the couch. "Hey! You know what? My ear was plugged up this morning when I got up, but it's clear now!" This was a big event. Al always had trouble with one of his ears plugging up. He said that a doctor had told him that one of his Eustachian tubes was smaller than normal, and plugged up very easily. Al smoked, and this didn't help the situation much. He had even been grounded a couple times during flight school because of the problem. "Honest! It's clear," he said again. The others just laughed. But while the cure for the hangover had been planned only as a joke, it did clear Al's ear, and he was never again bothered by it. Andy suggested that Al write up the cure and send it in to the American Medical Journal so other pilots with the same problem could find relief.....

22: Straighten Up and Fly

Then it was back to Fort Wolters, and training. Al didn't forget the hangover cure quickly. Not that he was angry about it, but he planned revenge. Sherry didn't forget the incident, and the others never brought it up around her again.



Confined area practice at Ft. Wolters

Roger's first week of flying following the vacation didn't go so well. He was having problems with everything, and he wasn't sleeping well at night. His roommate, Ralph, noticed this right away. Late one night he caught Roger sitting at the table in the dark, smoking, long after lights out. Together, they talked about the situation for a long time. For Roger, it was better to get it out in the open. It also made Ralph feel better that he knew what was going on, but he felt bad that he couldn't do much to make Roger feel better about it.

On the last day of the week, Roger and his IP, Mister Darling, were returning to the stage field. They had flown in silence for some time. Darling keyed his mike, breaking into Roger's daydream. "Do you want to tell me what's bothering you? Or would you rather go up for a check ride on Monday?"

Roger was surprised. He knew his flying had been below standard, but he hadn't realized that it was that poor. "What do you mean? My flying hasn't been that bad this week, has it?"

"Well, other than you trying to kill both of us on almost every simulated forced landing, I guess not."

Roger looked at Darling, but Darling was looking straight ahead. "Has it been that bad?"

"Yes. It has. I thought it might straighten out in a couple days, but it doesn't look like it has. I think we need to talk about it. If you don't want to talk now, how about coming over to my place on Saturday evening. We can discuss it over a couple beers." Darling was watching Roger's reaction carefully. "Let me put it this way. Saturday evening is open at my house. It's up to you. If you want to talk about whatever's bothering you, then I think you should drop by. It'll all be off the record. But if I don't hear from you this weekend, then I'll have to start the paperwork on you next week."

Roger's stomach turned hard. He couldn't believe that the problem with his wife could make that much of a difference in his training. But it had. And Darling was trying to give him a break. It wasn't something that just any IP would have done, either. Some probably would have simply put him up for a check ride with no warning. Darling had given him a chance, ...but he had to hold up his end of the bargain.

Roger went out to see Darling on Saturday evening. He took a taxi out to his place. It was typical military

rental housing. Probably the same the world over, Roger thought. Darling answered Roger's knock. As Roger entered, he looked around for Darling's wife. Darling caught the look.

"She's gone for the evening," he said.

Roger was surprised. He looked at Darling. "How did you know..."

"Look, I'm going to tell you something about pilots," Darling tossed over his shoulder as he started for the kitchen, "that you'll probably discover sometime, anyway. When you start flying with them in combat, you get to know them pretty well. Not about their deep, dark secrets, but about their moods and feelings, and how they'll react to any given situation. You find out in a hurry that your life depends on these things. It's important to know when a fellow pilot is having a bad day, and that maybe a little extra effort on your part will keep you both out of a bad jam. But I didn't ask you over here tonight to tell you a bunch of war stories. I want to talk to you about your flying -- and what happened over vacation to change it so much. You were doing fine before, and now that you're back, you've lost your concentration. What is it?"

Together they sat in Darling's house, and talked until the wee small hours in the morning. Darling offered advice once or twice, but for the most part he just listened. Roger was nervous at first, but Darling's sincere concern and the beer helped overcome that. He told the whole story, beginning to end. As Darling drove Roger back to the fort that night, he was understanding, but he made it clear what he expected from Roger as well.

"I know it's gonna take a couple days, but you've got to get your head on straight when you're in the air. I just won't stand for any more foolishness," he said as they pulled up in front of the "hotel". "You might even consider talking to your TAC officer about the JAG (Army legal) people. Either way, I want you to bring your flying back up to standard. That's gonna take some work, because you're about a week behind now. I know you can do it, so let's work on it, huh?"

Roger thanked him for the evening, and got out of the car. As he walked up to his room, he felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He would have to buckle down and get with the program. But at least he knew where he stood. Darling had been very up-front about that.

Training continued the next week. Darling watching every move, and Roger doing a better job of things. Confined area practice continued. Roger's stick buddies were getting more solo time than he was. Darling continued to throw emergency situations at him in the air. Each trip aloft with Darling became a never-ending stream of emergencies -- simulated engine failures which necessitated autorotations, loss of tail rotor control, radio failures, instrument failures, and on-and-on. Slowly, the emergency procedures became automatic for Roger. This is what Darling was shooting for, and as Roger became more proficient, he saw more solo time. Often, during dual instruction, Darling would pick out the confined areas that he wanted Roger to practice. Then Roger would go out solo and practice getting into and out of them. The next day, Darling might take him back into the same areas, but would add emergency procedures as Roger was making the approach or the takeoff.

Practiced emergency procedures sometimes became the real thing, as Leroy discovered. Taking off from the stagefield solo, he lost power and had to set his bird down. He did an admirable job of it, landing in a brushy field without so much as scratching the chopper. The subsequent inspection uncovered the problem -- he had blown two spark plugs completely out of their cylinders. The safety flyers continued to be circulated to let others know of problems, and sometimes the proper procedure to follow in case this problem should happen to them.

The winter flying also brought problems unique to that time of year. The temperature dropped below freezing and stayed there for days at a time. The heliports became a solid sheet of ice. The students were also flying together. This helped out the comraderie, but also created problems when together they failed to watch what was going on outside the aircraft. Mid-air collisions were one of the most feared accidents because the survival rate was so low. And the traffic around the main heliport was congested during morning takeoff and late afternoon recovery.

One icy morning, Roger and Gerry were going through their preflight checks prior to takeoff. They had already done the walk-around inspection, and now were going through the engine checks with the ship running. One check called for a sharp roll-off of the throttle to make sure the freewheel clutch was working in the transmission. This disengagement of the rotor system from the engine allowed an autorotation to occur. If the freewheel didn't work, the

rotor blades quit turning when the engine died. And like the ditty said that was passed around school, "when the fan quits turning, the pilot starts to sweat". The freewheel check was called splitting the needles, as the engine tachometer and the rotor tachometer were both on the same rpm gauge. When the throttle was rolled off, the engine rpm dropped, but the rotor rpm dropped more slowly, thus separating the needles. As Gerry rolled off the throttle to check the freewheel operation, he neglected to counter the change in torque by putting in some right pedal. The helicopter was sitting on the ice, and with the sudden change in torque, spun over halfway around! Luckily there were no other aircraft parked next to them or they would have hit them for sure. Although both were shaken by the incident, they continued with the training mission..., but both were a little wiser when it came to handling aircraft on the ice.

23: Wreck of the VW

The big moment at Fort Wolters was graduation. Not only was everyone looking forward to it, there was a big party planned for the last day of flying by all the WOC's in the Yellow Hats. Sure, the official graduation was important, but it was more important to the pilots to know that they had passed one more step in their effort to be accepted as regular pilots, instead of trainees.

The beer bust took place in a little park down by the flight line at the old heliport. It looked as if it had seen a few parties -- maybe that's what its primary purpose was. There were only a few tables and a few trees, and very large garbage cans. It was at this party that Al's notoriety for always being close to accidents really came home to those who knew him well. Al liked to drink as much as the rest of the group. Pilots trained hard, drank hard, and, well, did just about everything full out. It didn't seem to be a pressure to do it while they could, but maybe that was a part of it. More realistically, it seemed to be a part of the club. Take a bunch of nineteen to twenty-five year-olds, put them in a training program that tells them they're the best, show them the long history of pilots and their crazy behavior, and what do you expect?

There was plenty of beer for everyone. Some used their heads, and didn't go overboard, but they were definitely in the minority! As everyone was standing around in groups discussing flying, military life, and "where do we go from here", someone was tossing out cans of beer to those ready for another one. This practice got a little out of hand, someone missed the toss, and the can caught Al squarely in the forehead! It knocked him down, but only bruised him. A round of applause was heard for Al -- he managed the fall without either spilling the beer he had in his hand, or dropping his cigarette!

As the party ended, the WOC's jumped into their cars and headed back for the "hotel". Al jumped into the back seat of little Mike's VW. Since the car had a sun roof, Al was standing up in it in short order, waving instructions to the other cars. Someone in the car ahead threw out an empty beer can which found its mark.... Yep! Al took another shot in the head! For some reason the passenger in the front seat of the VW had his door open slightly. When the beer can hit Al, he yelled out. Mike, who was driving,

thought something was wrong, so he hit the brakes. As the VW slowed sharply, Al tried to find something to grab onto to keep his balance. He grabbed at the car roof where the doors meet the top. This was fine on the driver's side, but as he did this on the passenger side, the passenger slammed the door on Al's fingers! How he did yell!! When the problem was finally understood by the passenger, he opened the door and let Al loose. The final straw came the next day in formation, when Al discovered that he had lost his hat in the confusion of the party, too.

The TAC officers were very lenient that night. Although lights out was more or less enforced, there were no threats of punishment or reprimands given. They heard later that this was not the same in all the WOC companies, so all of the Fourth WOC felt very lucky.

The official graduation came a couple days later at the NCO club. All the WOC's were proud that they were now accepted as a full member at the NCO club, if only for the night. Some of the instructors and IP's attended. With a few drinks, some of them loosened up, and told of some of their combat exploits. It was a good thing the party didn't last too long, or some of the WOC's might have changed their minds about flying after listening to some of the wild stories.

After the big party at the NCO club, the WOC's went their separate ways on leave before their next duty station. The choices were one of two. They could go to either Fort Hunter, located in Georgia, or Fort Rucker, located in southern Alabama. Fort Hunter was the "new" training area. Pictures of it showed the new accommodations, which looked spiffy. This was the showplace. Fort Rucker had the distinction of being there for a long time. It was the original training ground for advanced helicopter flight instruction. The buildings were old, and it didn't have any Cobra training. One Cobra helicopter paid a visit to Fort Wolters, and the students were impressed by its lines. It was a sleek ship, designed as a gun platform. This was a new approach by the Army. Up until now, helicopters used by the Army were designed for carrying troops. Those adapted for gunships, as gun platforms were called, were simply troop ships on which guns or rocket tubes were mounted. The First Air Cavalry was probably the first to innovate the transition of troop ships to gunships. This was the rumor, anyway. Rumors run heavily in the service, and stories about the Cav were told everywhere. IP's who wore the

distinctive horse head on their shoulder patches were considered a cut above the rest in terms of combat experiences. The Cav was noted as a "can do" outfit. And if the equipment wasn't designed to do the job, then the Cav would jury-rig their own to fit the need.

Roger had found that Ed Riley was driving up to the Northwest on his leave, and had made arrangements to share the driving of Ed's Volkswagon as far as Portland, Oregon. Ed was leaving his car there, and flying on to Alaska. They drove straight through to Portland without an overnight stop. Roger had called his folks, and his dad had said he would meet him at the airport there.

When Ed and Roger arrived, they were tired from the trip. Ed checked on reservations to Alaska, while Roger tried to locate his dad. It didn't take too long. There he was, all six-foot-two of him. Roger noted that his dad looked a little out of place in an air terminal. In fact, Roger couldn't recall whether his dad had ever flown. He doubted it. It was hard to realize the differences each faced as they grew up. Cars were primitive when his dad was growing up. And in the woods of the Skagit River country in northwestern Washington where his dad grew up, cars were not a necessity for everyday living. This came to be a point of conflict between them when Roger was growing up and wanted to use the car for dates when he was in high school.

It was great to see his dad, and they had fun talking on the drive up to Ethel, Washington. Roger's dad had picked him up in their Plymouth Fury. It was a nice machine to drive, but felt strange after the helicopters. For one thing, it felt odd to Roger to get in and simply turn a key to get the engine started.

Roger related the training experiences. The funny times, and the harder times. It was also clear that Roger and Janet were finished. Roger intended to visit her on his way back south to Fort Rucker. He still hoped that things could be patched up, but he really doubted that could happen now. When they got home, Roger's dad helped him shop for another car. Roger bought another VW bug with his folk's help. It was white. Roger wanted a car to use while he was on leave, but he also wanted to take it to Fort Rucker with him. He was tired of having to depend on someone else for transportation. Besides, he felt it would be nice to drive across the US, so he could see some of the country.

Roger drove up north, through Seattle and Everett to Mt. Vernon to visit his sister, Joanne, and her husband,

Ted. Ted ran a dairy farm south of Mt. Vernon. Joanne met her husband while they were going to school at Skagit Valley College. Roger tried to help around the farm, but he always felt a little out of place there. He wasn't used to farm machinery and diesel engines, and didn't really feel comfortable around Ted. He did disk a large field for Ted while he was there, and his sister cooked well. But Roger knew they didn't have much money. He always tried to work enough for his board, but he often felt that the jobs that he did probably wouldn't have been done if he hadn't been there. They weren't the essential kind that would keep something from operating. They were the fix-up, maintenance kind of jobs that could be put off indefinitely. While Roger was staying with his sister, he contacted an old friend. They'd met when they were just kids. It was one summer when Roger was staying at his grandmother's in Burlington. Jess lived just down the road from Roger's grandma.

Roger wondered whether Jess would want to see him, but he called anyway. "Hello. Is Jess there?"

The person on the other end of the phone was probably Jess's sister. She was older than Jess. "Yes, just a minute. He's here someplace."

After a moment, Jess came on the line. "Hello?"

"Hello, Jess. This is Roger. How ya' doing?"

"Fine. Where are you at?"

After the small talk, they agreed to get together that evening for a few beers. Roger picked up Jess in his newly acquired VW. After some discussion, they decided to head for Bellingham. The college was in session, and they thought they might find some action up there.

They stopped at a tavern in Bellingham that usually saw heavy traffic from the college students, but there was nothing going on. Things were a little uneasy between the two of them. Jess broke the news of his impending marriage. He told Roger that he was getting married the next week.

"Are you kidding?" Roger couldn't believe it. And then Roger felt bad about bringing him out with him that night. There had been other times when Roger and Jess shared nights out, going to local dances in the Burlington area, when Roger had come up to spend a little time with his sister or his grandma. They drank too many beers, and deciding to stop and eat when they got back to Burlington, they started south. As they left Bellingham, they decided to take Chuckanut Drive back to Burlington.

It was dark and raining lightly when they left Bellingham. Roger didn't know the road very well. As the lights of Bellingham disappeared, Roger turned to Jess, "Better buckle up, partner." Roger knew he'd had enough beer to affect his driving, but he didn't think it would be a problem. The headlights followed the crooked road in the rain.

As they entered a turn, it was much sharper than Roger had anticipated. The VW began to slide. Roger tried to hold the slide, and still make the curve. The tires shrieked just a little, and the little car shuddered as the tires broke loose. Suddenly a guardrail shot at them out of the darkness....then everything was still. Roger turned to Jess.

Jess held his head in his hands, "Ohhhhh...", he groaned. Roger jumped out of the car and ran around to the passenger side. But by the time he reached the passenger door, it was already open and Jess was gone. Roger yelled. No answer. Roger called out again, but only silence surrounded him. Roger raced back to the driver's side of the car. He felt under the seat and found the flashlight. Then back to the passenger side. As he flashed the light inside the car, he saw blood on the dash and drops on the floor. He wheeled around, and called out Jess's name again. Then he headed for the side of the road. There was a clump of trees there. He reached the trees. Far below, Roger could hear waves breaking against the rocky shoreline. Then he remembered. Chuckanut Drive was a narrow road that followed the coast south from Bellingham to Burlington. Most of the road was constructed along cliffs that rose straight from the bay far below. Roger couldn't bring himself to face the fact that Jess could have fallen over the cliff. Could he? As Roger searched among the trees and brush, he realized that the road widened as it came around the curve they had missed. He spotted a car parked facing the cliff in the dim light from his flashlight. He ran up to the driver's door, and banged on the window.

The steamed window of the car rolled down part way, and Roger asked the darkness if they would help him find his friend. The fellow in the car looked at him strangely as Roger related his request. Then Roger noticed that the guy had a girl with him. As she scrambled for her clothes, Roger tried to explain the situation to the fellow at the wheel. But the driver clearly didn't believe him. Finally the window rolled up, and Roger was left standing in the

dark. He turned away disgusted. As he walked back to the VW, not knowing what to do next, a car rounded the curve. Roger waved to it as its headlights illuminated him. The car slowed, and as it pulled alongside Roger, Jess suddenly came running into the headlights!

The car had three teenagers in it. As they tumbled out of the car, Roger grabbed Jess, and jerked him down on the shoulder of the road in the headlights.

"What happened!?" one of the teenagers asked excitedly.

"Car wreck," Roger answered tersely as he checked Jess. There was a bad cut above one ear, and a nasty gash in his eyebrow. "He hit the windshield. Can you take him into Burlington to the hospital?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess we can do that. Where's your car?" the teenage driver asked.

"Just around the bend. You'll see it when you start out. You'll take him straight to the hospital?"

"Yeah, no problem. Let's get him in the car."

As the car left, Roger felt relieved that Jess was on his way to medical care. He walked down to the VW. He looked over the damage with his flashlight. The front end was smashed in pretty good. The hood was open, both headlights were broken, and the windshield was smashed. Roger looked closely at the windshield. Jess had done that with his head. Roger got in, and looked at his watch. It wasn't even nine o'clock. Roger got out of the car again, and looked up and down the road. The rain had quit. Roger checked his watch again. Only a few minutes had passed, but it seemed like hours. Finally he decided he couldn't wait for someone else to come along.

He tried the ignition. The engine snapped abruptly to life. Roger tried the lights, but there weren't any. He checked the fuses. Two were burned out. Probably for the headlights, he thought. Well, he could use the flashlight. Couldn't be that far to Burlington. The taillights seemed to work, anyway. Roger put the car in reverse, and listened as he let the clutch out. No strange noises. Roger shifted into first, and drove out onto the road holding the flashlight in his left hand out the window. Slowly he continued down the winding road. At long last he could make out lights in the distance. Burlington, finally, he thought. But the lights were a long way off. They reflected off the lifting clouds. Roger pulled over for a minute, and warmed his left hand. It was beginning to numb, and he could scarcely feel the flashlight any longer.

Back on the road, Roger had gone only about another mile when he spotted a car coming in the distance. The road had dropped down off the hill, and into the flats now. Roger pulled over, expecting to wait until the car drove by before continuing. The oncoming car slowed as its lights played over the VW. Then it stopped just past the VW. As it backed up, Roger could make out the letters "WSP" on the license plate. It was a state patrolman. As the car drew alongside the VW, the driver's window rolled down. "Where are you headed?" a voice from inside asked.

Roger explained that he had been in an accident up on Chuckanut Drive, and that he had sent his friend along with some kids in another car. As Roger listened to his own story, it sounded unbelievable. Finally the trooper told him to pull over into a wide spot just ahead. The trooper followed, and Roger got into the patrol car. The trooper pulled out a pad, and began taking notes as Roger answered his questions. When the trooper asked for Roger's leave papers, Roger's heart sank. He didn't have any with him, which the trooper willingly accepted. The paperwork done, the patrolman took Roger back toward Burlington. He assured Roger that he would take him to the hospital to see Jess.

As they approached Burlington, there were flashing lights on the overpass at the north end of town. There had been another wreck here. The trooper pulled over. "This shouldn't take too long," he said as he got out of the car. Roger got out, too. As he stood there in the road surveying the scene, a young man with a scroungy beard approached him.

"Why didn't you dim your lights?" he demanded. Roger didn't know what to say. The young man moved closer. The angry voice repeated the question. Roger stepped back. He didn't know what the guy was talking about. As the young man made a move toward him, Roger retreated again. Then the trooper joined them, and calmed the guy down. When Roger and the patrolman were back in the car, the patrolman explained what happened.

There had been a car full of beer-drinking young men coming out of Burlington headed north, and they had missed the curve coming up on the overpass. The car had gone off the road, and rolled into a field. There were beer bottles everywhere from the road to the car, scattered across the field. The man who had approached Roger was the driver. He said that someone had failed to dim their lights as they met on the curve. That was what caused the wreck. The trooper just shook his head.

When they reached the hospital, Jess was just leaving the emergency room. His head was wrapped in bandages, but he was smiling. Roger really felt bad about the wreck and Jess's injuries. "I'm really sorry, Jess. Are you sure you're OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. A few stitches here and there is all."

The next day Roger was able to get his car into a repair shop to straighten the hood and fenders, and replace the windshield. But it would take them a couple days to paint it. While the work was being done, Roger stayed with his sister and brother-in-law, and helped on the farm. The day before he was to pick up the car, his dad called.

"Had a visitor today," he said on the phone. "it was the county sheriff. Apparently Janet has filed papers on you for divorce, and he was out here to serve the papers."

"What?" Roger was shocked at the news.

"Yes, and so your Mother called her friends to find out about a lawyer for you. I've got his name and number right here. You're supposed to call him tomorrow."

When Roger called the next day, the lawyer told him to get out of the state. Since he was in the service, it would go a lot easier for him if the papers weren't served on him while he was in the state. Roger picked up his car, and headed south to collect the rest of his belongings before heading for his next duty station at Fort Rucker. When he got home, he explained the whole situation to his folks. Then he tried to call Janet at WSU. She wasn't answering the phone, her brother told Roger. He was surprised to hear Janet's brother on the phone. Roger didn't know he was attending college at WSU. Janet's brother told Roger that Janet wouldn't be calling back.

After his initial anger, Roger was disappointed that he wouldn't be getting any of his stuff back that was still with Janet. In fact, he was so angry about it that he talked his dad into going over to Pullman with him. Roger called a friend to find out where Janet was living. She had moved into Pullman. Roger was determined to get his car back from her at least.

When they arrived in Pullman, Roger found Janet's place without difficulty. He also spotted the car parked on a street nearby. He again tried to call Janet to see if they couldn't come to some sort of agreement on his stuff. She was very cold on the phone, and finally hung up on him. After that, Roger made up his mind to take the car. He

didn't have a key for it, but VW's weren't that hard to hotwire. A trip to the local hardware store provided the necessary wires and clips. He tried it first on the VW he'd just purchased, so he'd know where to hook the wires. Even though Roger had never hotwired a car in his life, he found it wasn't that tough to do. It only took him a few minutes to get the car running. Then he turned it over to his dad who was going to take it back to the coast for him.

After Roger made sure his dad was on his way to the coast, he called Janet again. This time she asked him if he was in Pullman. He told her that he was in Moscow, Idaho, just across the state line from Pullman. He knew that she was again trying to serve him in the state. Then he told her about the car. He said for her not to report it as stolen because he had it. She began screaming and cursing on the phone. Roger turned in the phone booth, and quietly hung up. It was a hollow victory. He had won the battle, but he had lost something that he wanted very badly.

As he turned south on the highway to Lewiston, he reflected back on the events that had led up to this. Maybe their marriage hadn't been the greatest, but they hadn't given it much time, either. They had only lived together less than a year. What had gone so disastrously wrong? Roger thought about the support his parents had given him. And his dad driving back across the state with a VW that he couldn't start if he shut it off. Was life always going to be this complicated? Maybe it would be all right to get back into training. Maybe that would take his mind off all this. The lawyer had told him a whole list of things he had to do.... What a mess.

Roger stopped in Lewiston to get gas for the VW and a map of Idaho. When he checked it, he found that he could probably make Boise easily that evening. The climb up out of Lewiston was steep, but when he reached the plateau, the sun seemed to hang forever on the horizon. Lost in thought about the recent events, he drove on south. Soon he reached the top of Whitebird grade. It was well after dark now, and the warning signs in the headlights indicated a steep and winding downhill road. After the first couple switchbacks, Roger just couldn't believe how steep and winding it was. He pulled over, and got out of the car. The stars were clear in the mountain air. He climbed a short hill above the road and looked down into the yawning canyon...

At first, Roger thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. The lights were so far below him, that they looked almost like the stars above him. Then he could pick out headlights -- but they kept going back and forth, instead of heading in a constant direction. Finally he determined that the cars and trucks below were following the switchbacks of the road. And the switchbacks continued for miles. It was an eerie sight. Roger lit a cigarette and continued to watch the progress of the vehicles below. Finishing his smoke, he pinched off the lighted end and pocketed the butt. He hated to leave signs of his passage behind. Returning to the VW, he started down the grade. He couldn't get a station on the radio, so settled back and slowly followed the winding road.

When he reached Boise, Roger pulled into a motel. There was a young woman behind the desk as he entered the office.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi," she answered. She laid aside the magazine she'd been reading, and stood up behind the desk. "Need a room?"

"Yes, and a little information. Do you have a wake-up service?"

"No, but I can give you an alarm clock. Are you checking out early?"

"Yeah. I like to be on the road by daylight, if I can make it."

"That's pretty early," she said as she studied his face. "You in the service?"

"Yeah," Roger smiled. "Is it that obvious?"

"The hair. When it's that short, and someone's from out of town, it usually means that they're in the service." Her smile warmed Roger. "What branch are you in, the Army?"

"Yeah. I fly helicopters, or at least I'm learning to fly them."

"Where are you taking your training?" She seemed genuinely interested. Small talk about the Army and flight school followed. Roger found out she was from Boise, and was working two jobs. This job at the motel was her second one.

"Can you recommend a good place to eat...and maybe someplace with a little entertainment that isn't too hard to find?"

She laughed. "I can recommend a good restaurant, but this is Boise, after all," she said with a shake of her head. Her blonde curls danced as she laughed. "The streets almost roll up all by themselves here on Sunday night."

Roger took her advice on the restaurant. The food was good. He sat next to a family with young children. The kids were well mannered, but they were normal kids. Roger laughed with the parents at some of their antics. He headed straight back to the motel after supper, and called it a night. As he rolled into bed, he thought back on the events of the day. He wondered where his dad was spending the night. He wouldn't have driven all the way back across the mountains. Roger thought of Janet. It was certainly too bad they couldn't get it together. But maybe it was all for the best...

The trip on across the country was uneventful except for a moment of excitement in Little Rock, Arkansas. The hour was late -- nearly midnight -- but Roger was pressing hard to get to Fort Rucker. His plans to stop and see some sights along the way across the nation had been cast aside. He tired quickly of the long drive in the VW. He could average 500 miles a day if he stopped only for gas, and put in a ten-hour day. He had turned off the freeway looking for a gas station when he found himself in what appeared to be an all-black section of Little Rock. There had been some racial unrest in the country, but most of this was so far removed from the Pacific Northwest that Roger had paid little attention.

As he pulled up to a stop light in a run-down neighborhood, he noticed several young blacks about to cross the street. They began looking at Roger and his car. Roger caught the looks. It could mean trouble. Roger leaned over

so slightly forward in the seat to reach the catch on the glove box. He popped it open, and without taking his eyes from the street, reached in. The metal of the pistol felt cold to his touch. The blacks were now approaching the car, a couple in front, and a couple on each side. Roger slid the pistol out of the glove box, and dropped the loaded cylinder into it, quickly replacing the cylinder pin with a snap.

As the blacks reached the car, Roger rolled the window down. The nearest black made a derogatory comment as he neared the car. Roger carefully slid the pistol up over the edge of the door. It was pointed directly at the nearest black's chest. "Go ahead and keep coming if you want, but it's your life..." Roger said softly.

The black spotted the pistol. Stumbling backward, he raised his hands saying, "No trouble, man. No trouble."

Roger jammed the car in gear and took off down the street. He quickly returned the pistol to the glove box, but he was glad he had it with him. The sweat felt cold as it inched down his back. Roger shook off the feeling of panic, and continued driving until he found a well-lit service station. He noted that there were both blacks and whites there before he drove in.

The rest of the trip was monotonous, and he arrived at Fort Rucker late that night. Over the next couple of days, the WOC's continued to arrive. As they greeted one another, it was like high school or college all over again. There was the usual horseplay and jokes, as they unpacked their gear. Two of Roger's classmates were from Washington State. Aaron Knoll was built like an athlete. Large shoulders, topped with a square, handsome face. His short brown hair matched his deep, brown eyes. Aaron had a quiet manner except when he laughed. When Aaron laughed, he could be heard for blocks. Jim Wheatley arrived about the same time as Aaron. Jim asked if he could share Roger's room. Roger told him it was fine.

Both Jim and Aaron were from Eastern Washington. Aaron had been raised on a wheat ranch. Jim was from Yakima. Jim spoke little about his family. Both of them had been WOC's in Roger's sister company at Fort Wolters. He had seen them there a few times, but they had never become acquainted. Jim set to work immediately cleaning their room. Roger pitched in, and it wasn't long before it began to look as though it might have a chance to pass inspection. The barracks were old -- vintage World War II. But they had

been used by many flight classes before them, and they were in good shape, as far as inspections were concerned.

As the company formed up for the first time a couple days later, Roger looked for others from Fort Wolters. But there weren't many that he knew. It looked as if most of his company had gone on to Fort Hunter in Georgia.

They had a real sergeant here at Rucker. Their new company commander laid it on the line for them that very first day. He told them exactly what he expected, and what he didn't expect. Their platoon leaders were also sergeants. They made it clear that the harassment was gone. The WOC's were here to learn to fly, not polish brass and woodwork. That didn't mean that the barracks could get dirty -- only that they would have to stay reasonably clean. As the troops from each platoon gathered with their platoon sergeant, a group decision was made that they would pour on the coal to get their barracks in top shape for the first inspection. The CO (company commander) was so impressed that he let them have their first weekend off. The troops loved it!

25: Good Times on the Florida Coast

There was a great deal of racial unrest in the country as the future aviators started flight training at Fort Rucker. The percentage of blacks in the flight program was low, so little notice of the problem was taken on post. But when the students ventured off post, they were cautioned to watch for trouble and avoid it. Another hazard was Alabama's alcohol laws. Fort Rucker was located in a "dry" county. That meant that it was illegal to either purchase alcoholic beverages or have them in possession outside the post. This was a county-by-county law. The counties surrounding that occupied by the fort were all "wet". But it paid to know where you were, and where you were heading. It was definitely not advised to get picked up on an alcohol-related charge.

A definite plus was that, geographically, Fort Rucker was located in the extreme southern part of the State of Alabama. This meant that it was only a short drive to Florida and the Gulf Coast. And the Gulf Coast had a lot to offer in the way of entertainment. Not only was the state "wet", but it was a fantastic playground for a bunch of hot-shot pilots that had few cares and enough money to get around. There was also a Navy pilot training facility at Pensacola, Florida, which added to the variety of pilots looking for fun. Young women were not over-abundant, but they knew where the guys were, and those that were looking for a good time often came to the Florida coast.

Class time got right to the point. The instructors were nearly all NCO's (non-commissioned officers like sergeants and specialists) and they treated the WOC's with more respect than they were probably due. But it made for a very positive learning situation. The aircraft being studied were new to the WOC's. These were Hueys, UH-1D's, that were the backbone of the Army's air force. Other classes dealt with the instrumentation in the new cockpits. The first training was instrument flying. This was done in specially equipped Bell helicopters, similar to ones that some of the students trained in at Fort Wolters. Here the aircraft wasn't special, but learning to use the instruments was.

A "hood" was worn by the student during this training so that the student's vision was restricted to the instruments inside the cockpit. "Under the hood" became a

familiar term throughout the student company in short order. Although some students took to instrument flying more easily than others, it was a frustrating time for some. Flying under the hood around noon was sometimes difficult because the shadows of the rotor blades kept crossing the instrument panel like a strobe light. This sometimes disoriented the student, and made instrument flying a boring chore. While it was not that difficult to fly an aircraft on instruments (commonly called IFR, for Instrument Flight Rules), it was necessary to learn a good cross-check pattern so all the instruments were monitored continually. The flight instruments that recorded aircraft attitude, altitude, and airspeed were the most important, but those covering aircraft operation, like engine and rotor rpm, oil pressure, and navigation aids were also important. The IP's pressed the students hard to build a good pattern of cross check that continued throughout each flight. These usually lasted about an hour.

Other instrument training included the Link trainers. These simulated instrument flying without ever leaving the ground. They taught the students to never trust their sense of spatial orientation, or how things felt, but to trust the instruments ONLY!! Even if a pilot felt he was in a steep left-hand spiral, if the instruments said he was straight and level, then he was straight and level. And he'd better believe it!!

The Link trainers were primarily used to teach the students to use navigational aids, and the correct patterns to use when making approaches using navigational aids. The nav aids (navigational aids) were usually beacons that put out a radio signal on a given frequency. If the proper freq was dialed in, a pointer on the radio-magnetic compass pointed to the beacon. That way, by tuning in two or three beacons in quick succession, a pilot could determine his position on a map. These same beacons were also used to make approaches into airfields by flying time and distance headings from the beacon at specific altitudes. The altitudes were dictated by a specific chart for each airfield. Of course, these were all simulated in the Link trainers, and mistakes weren't nearly as disastrous as they were under real IFR conditions! A student's efforts in a Link were recorded on a piece of paper, so mistakes were clear for all to see. The first few days of this training, there were some real laughs as the students compared their Link graphics, as the recorder slips were called.

For Roger, the training schedule was compounded by letters to and from his lawyer in Washington, and the legal staff provided by the Army at the fort (JAG office, for Judge Advocate General staff). They were a great support, but each visit took time away from Roger's studies. Roger's roommate, Jim Wheatley, got used to Roger's erratic sleeping schedule. Some nights they shared experiences or studied together long after lights out, when Roger couldn't sleep.

Shortly after the student company arrived at Fort Rucker, Martin Luther King was killed. The CO called the company together on a Saturday morning to explain this and the effect it had on all the students at the fort. All passes were cancelled, which was a severe blow to the WOC's. Married personnel were allowed to continue living off post. The pass cancellation lasted only two weeks, so it wasn't like the end of the world, but it did put a crimp in the weekends.

With Roger's situation the way it was with his wife, he was ready to begin dating again if the opportunity presented itself. Jim didn't have a car, so he and Roger began travelling together to the Gulf Coast. They loved the warm water, and could spend nearly the whole day swimming in it. One warm Saturday, they followed a small shark for two hours as it searched for food among the shallow breakers along the shore near Panama City. It was also good exercise for them, and kept them in shape. Official physical training (PT) was largely dropped from their curriculum at Fort Rucker, but the students were expected to maintain themselves in reasonable physical condition.

Roger and Jim began to pal around with two other students quite a lot. Fred Betts was from Texas. A very striking young man with close cropped red hair, Fred was a good "up-front man" when meeting girls. He had a soft southern accent, and his freckles set off his good looks. Fred was engaged, so was willing to help out the others when meeting women, but usually left any resulting party early. Fred had his own car, a sweet-looking purple Mustang, which allowed him to do this without disrupting the others' fun.

Fred's sidekick, Rick Charger, was definitely single. A fair complexion, jet black hair, and a somewhat heavyset build belied Rick's easygoing manner, and fantastic sense of humor. No matter where the group went, it was Rick who kept them laughing with his antics. Rick was from Mississippi, had gone through training with Fred, and was Jim's stick buddy in instrument training. Rick had his own car, too, so

the foursome often traded cars when they toured the Gulf Coast. Their first weekend on the coast, Rick got sunburned so badly, that the flight surgeon grounded him! This was not an excusable sick call, and Rick was nervous until the flight surgeon allowed him to continue training.

Those conducting the training were often veterans of Vietnam. This brought the training a little closer to home for the students. They were hearing what they had to know from some who had been there, and usually seen their share of combat, and their words of wisdom were falling on eager ears.

After an especially rough week of IFR training, the foursome headed for the Gulf Coast on a Friday night. Arriving in Panama City, they horsed around on the beach until dark. Then touring the city, if it could be called a city, they found an amusement park that contained many of the carnival rides that Roger saw at fairs in the Northwest. The four of them had been drinking beer all evening, and were ready to try anything. Roger had always been deathly afraid of carnival rides, and had never ridden them as a kid. With the prodding of his peers, the four of them rode every ride in the carnival that night! They even made several trips on the roller coaster and the loop-the-loop before calling it quits.

When they left the park, they drove to a deserted spot on the beach, opened the trunk of Fred's car, pulled out blankets, and proceeded to sack out in the sand. The next morning was tough for all of them. The beer had taken its toll, and the bright sun on the white sand of the beach nearly blinded them! But Saturday wasn't to be wasted, so they headed west until they reached a beach outside of Pensacola that was used by many of the young people in the area. It was there that Jim and Roger met two young women from Alabama. They spent the day swimming with them in the surf, but when evening came, the women had to return home. Roger got a date with them for the next Saturday at the same place. Jim was surprised that a date was made, but was so happy about it that he sang in the back seat of Fred's car all the way back to Panama City!

The next weekend, Jim and Roger were back at the beach near Pensacola. And sure enough, Penny and her friend, Sheila, showed up! Once again they spent the afternoon in the surf. That evening, Penny suggested that they go into Pensacola to see some of the sights. There was a dance going on, and the four of them had a great time dancing to

the live band. Late in the evening, they said their good nights, and Jim and Roger returned to the beach for the night. As they did, they ran into some other students from their company at Rucker. The other students told them about a statue that stood on the beach near Pensacola. Apparently it had been erected to honor one of the early explorers of the area, but it was used as a landmark by the WOC's as a place to gather in the morning so they could all find one another.

That Sunday afternoon Jim called Sheila and made a date for the following weekend for he and Roger and the two girls. Sheila told him to be sure and bring some good clothes. When Jim asked why, Sheila only told him that he'd have to wait to find out. The meeting was set for the same spot on the beach where they had met the day before.

The following week of instrument training seemed to drag on forever for Jim and Roger. Although they applied themselves diligently to the training, their thoughts were on the beach at Pensacola. When the weekend finally arrived, they decided to drive down Saturday instead of Friday night. They were also the envy of some of the other WOC's who had had trouble competing with the Navy trainees in Pensacola. Once again they met the girls at the beach, and spent the day in the surf or on the sand. The four of them had a great time there, even though Penny seemed a little distant to Roger.

The girls invited Roger and Jim to their apartment complex to shower and get ready for the evening. This was a definite change, as they usually used the showers at the beach to get ready for a night out. The two of them used Sheila's apartment, while the girls used Penny's place.

"Boy, have you got any idea what's on for tonight?" Roger asked as he toweled his hair.

Jim's words were mumbled as he shaved his neck, "Sheila wouldn't say a thing about it. She just gave me a coy look, and said that we'd have to wait and see. Think they're gonna show us some sights in Pensacola, though, 'cause she said we'd have to be on our best behavior."

"Best behavior, huh? Wonder what that means? This is sure a nice apartment, huh? Did Sheila say what she does?"

"No, but then I guess I haven't asked, either. Why?"

"Well, I was just wondering. You know, a lot of Navy pilots live here," Roger said as he looked out the window.

"How do you know that?" Jim was washing the shaving soap from his face.

"From the stickers in the windows and on the bumpers of the cars, and their license plates. The plates are from all over, and a lot of the stickers say Navy and they have flight wings on them," Roger began taking his turn with the razor.

"How much money have you got?" Jim asked as he checked his wallet.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it's plenty. Why, did Sheila say something about how expensive this was gonna be?"

"No. I just got that feeling, I guess," Jim stood before the floor length mirror on the closet door. "This is as good as it gets. Hope it's good enough for tonight."

"Don't be crude, man. These are really nice girls. At least we get to see some of the local scene with some pretty sharp escorts. That's a plus in itself, don't ya' think?"

Jim turned from the mirror. "Yeah, you're right. They are nice. And they've been darn accommodating to us. I couldn't believe Sheila let us use her apartment!"

There was a knock on the door, and Jim moved to answer it. It was the girls.

"Ready to go? Or does it take you guys two hours to get ready for a simple date?"

"Roger's still shaving, but he's about ready. How'd you two get ready so quick? I'd offer you a drink, but I seem to have misplaced the liquor cabinet...", Jim feigned searching the living room.

"I can handle that," Sheila returned. "It's in the kitchen, under the sink."

"Under the sink?? Now that's probably the last place I would have looked," Jim said as he followed Sheila into the kitchen.

Penny walked to the open door of the bathroom, and called in, "Are you decent?"

"You talking to me?" Roger answered. "You mean right now, or all evening?"

Penny laughed. "Just for now," she said as she stepped into the door.

Roger turned, and sucked in his breath with a whistle, "Wow! Do you ever look sharp." Penny was dressed in a light blue blouse open at the throat. A white skirt finished the outfit. It set off her tan legs in a striking way. "Can I finish shaving, or are we in a hurry?"

Penny laughed, "Go ahead and finish. Gotta look tops for where we're going tonight."

"And just where is this place we're going tonight?" Roger asked as he splashed his face with water.

"First to dinner. That's not too special, but then we thought we'd take you to a couple places that you probably wouldn't visit if you were here on your own..., if you know what I mean."

"Hey, Roger," Jim yelled from the kitchen, "You want a drink?"

Roger leaned past Penny, "A beer, if you please. If not, I pass, OK?"

Penny looked at him, "Not much of a drinker?"

It was an easy question. Roger looked at Penny to see if it conveyed something more. "I'm not too comfortable with the hard stuff. If this evening is as special as you've suggested, then I better stay away from the hard stuff."

"That's fine with me," Penny turned and walked toward the kitchen.

Roger pulled on his shirt, and joined the others in the kitchen. Jim and Sheila were finishing their drink. Penny had a glass of wine in her hand. There was a beer and a frosted mug standing on the table. Jim pointed to the beer, "Just for you."

"Thank you."

The foursome ate a nice dinner at a nearby restaurant. They talked long over after-dinner drinks. About nine, they left in Roger's VW. The girls directed Roger into a part of Pensacola where he had never been before. Pulling into a parking lot, the girls cautioned Jim and Roger to be on their best behavior. Then they left the car, and walked around the corner of a brick building to the entrance of a bar. Neon advertising flashed in the windows. Roger looked closely, but the place didn't look so special from the outside. When they entered the bar, Roger looked around, a little surprised. There wasn't a white person in the place. Most of the conversation stopped as they walked along the bar.

"This way," Sheila nudged Jim ahead of her. Jim nodded to one of the customers at the bar, and received a nod in return. Well, it can't be all that bad if they at least acknowledge we're here, Roger thought.

They came to what was the entrance to another part of the building. It had wire screening, and a ticket desk much like a fair or carnival. A large one-way turnstile opened

into another room. Jim and Roger paid, and the four entered the room.

"Are they worried about getting ripped off?" Roger whispered to Penny. She raised her finger to her mouth to quiet him, and smiled. They entered a large room. They were about in the middle on one side. Small tables covered the floor in front of them. To the right, at the front of the room was a large bandstand. A large dance floor extended to the tables. Roger looked up. Large, old chandeliers hung from the ceiling. On both sides of the room, there were balconies which also had tables.

Roger looked around the room again, and glanced at Jim. They were about the only white people in the whole place. Jim just rolled his eyes slightly, and followed Sheila to a table on the floor. When they were seated, a black waitress approached. Roger continued to take in the place. It was like a scene from a book he had read on the Old South. The fancy wrought iron railing along the balconies was very decorative, and painted white. The tables and chairs were also white. The bandstand was large. It was not just an elevated stage, but a real bandstand that could hold probably thirty musicians, Roger estimated.

Roger leaned over to Jim. "Whatever happens, this is not a place to get involved in a firefight," Roger said softly.

"Boy, you said a mouthful," Jim returned.

"But the music is worth every bit of it," Sheila nodded.

"How many white folks are here?" Roger queried.

"This is about standard, I think," Penny answered. "There are some up on that balcony," she nodded in the direction. Jim and Roger looked up. She was right. Looked like two couples at the table. And there was another couple on the main floor toward the back of the room.

Soon the band entered. Roger was surprised. There were over twenty musicians filing into the bandstand. They were all dressed in white shirts and ties. When they began to play, Roger was again pleasantly surprised. It was rock and roll as he'd never heard it played before. He turned to Penny.

"Would you like to dance?"

"Not yet. Let's wait until a few more people get up, OK? I really like to dance, but I think it's better if we wait a few minutes."

Roger looked around the room. She was probably right, he thought. Don't want to stand out in this crowd -- any more than he did already. Sort of like basic training, he thought. Never want to stand out in a crowd.

He turned to Penny. "What's the name of this place again?"

"Abe's 506," she said, and sipped her drink. "It has about the best music in town."

"I can believe that. It's probably the only place with a twenty-piece band..." Roger smiled.

For nearly three hours they danced, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. There was one altercation on the dance floor. It erupted between a couple of young black women. Jim was dancing nearby, but Sheila steered him in the opposite direction. It was after eleven o'clock when Roger noticed Sheila giving Penny the eye.

Penny nudged Roger, "It's time for us to go."

When they reached the street, Roger looked back at the front of the building. It was certainly nondescript. He would have never known that such a place existed. The canopy over the front entrance added a little something, but maybe that was typical of southern bars, Roger thought.

They piled into the VW. "Now, we're going to take you to the other side of town," Sheila laughed. "This was the class act. But we didn't dare stay there very late," she added. "We've never had any trouble there, but we found that it's smart to leave before midnight, too."

Again directions were provided by Sheila. Winding through the city streets, Roger was glad that he didn't have to find his own way. Finally they pulled onto a four-lane street and crossed some railroad tracks.

"Right up there. It's on the right," Sheila was pointing. This city block was nearly empty. There was one small building located on the street side of the lot. To Roger it didn't look as if it had windows in it. As he pulled off the street, the parking lot surrounding the building was grass. He looked at the building again. It didn't have windows, just holes where windows should have been.

"This is it, guys!" Sheila exclaimed. "It's a different kind of music, but I hope you enjoy it!" She was ready to go.

There was a large bouncer seated in a chair next to the door. He had a straw cowboy hat on his large head, and his chair was tipped back against the wall. One of his cowboy

boots rested on the small table in front of him. As Roger paid, he guessed the bouncer's weight at about 250, and it didn't look like he carried much fat.

Along the left side of the building was a long bar. The dance floor was on the right. There was no floor in the building. The band was western. Five persons in cowboy dress. All men, noted Roger. Jim was at the bar getting a pitcher of beer. It looked as if beer was all they served from the pitchers and glasses on the small, wooden tables. Roger couldn't believe it, but the floor was actually dirt. The dancers raised a little dust as they paraded around the floor.

When they arrived at a table near the back of the room, Jim poured beer all around. "This is some place, huh," he said. "Almost reminds me of back home."

"I thought you were from Washington," Sheila observed.

"That's right. But it's Eastern Washington. And where I come from they raise a lot of cattle. Western music and dress is very popular in Yakima."

"You must like to dance to it, then...?" Sheila raised an eyebrow as she asked the question.

"You bet," Jim answered, "but let me finish a beer first, huh? I wanta see if it's the same western music that we play up north." Soon the two of them were on the floor with the other dancers.

The music was so loud that conversation was almost impossible, Roger noted. He finally got Penny to understand that he couldn't dance to western music. It was so difficult to hear that he finally gave up any attempt at conversation. He occupied himself watching Jim and Sheila and the other dancers. When the band took a break, Jim and Sheila joined them at the table.

"That is some fun," Jim wiped the sweat from his forehead. "No wonder they don't have any windows in this place!" When the band returned, Jim and Sheila hit the dance floor once again. Roger nursed his beer watching them. A couple times he glanced at Penny, but she was watching the dancers as well.

It was well past midnight when the band broke again. "Let's crank this bird, and see if she'll fly. What do ya' say?" Jim said to Roger.

"Yeah. Sounds fine to me," he looked at the girls. They both nodded, and the four of them packed up. The air outside was much cooler and free of dust.

On the way back to the apartment building, Penny provided the directions. Jim and Sheila were occupied in the back seat. Penny helped tune in a local radio station. The conversation between Roger and Penny remained light. When they reached the apartment building, they all got out. Roger walked Penny to her apartment.

"I really enjoyed the evening," she said as she stopped at the door and turned to face Roger.

"So did I. I want to thank you very much for a swell evening," he said.

Penny leaned slightly forward. Roger kissed her gently. "Thanks again," she said. "I'm going to call it a night."

"It really was fun," Roger returned. "Thanks again." As she entered her apartment, Roger walked back to the VW. Jim was there waiting.

"Uh, Roger....we might have a little transportation problem."

Roger smiled, "I don't think it's anything we can't work out. You staying here tonight?"

Jim seemed relieved, "You hit the target, friend."

"Well, how about you drive me down to the statue, and you can pick me up there in the morning, OK?"

"That is really nice. I've gotta go back and tell Sheila."

"Sure. I'll even wait," Roger chuckled.

26: Al's Reputation Grows

At last instrument training was over. And nearly everyone had passed. It seemed much more important that the students learn what they needed to know. There was almost no fear of washing out of the flight program here. The greatest losses had been at Fort Wolters, where those that would probably never learn to fly were dropped from the program. The next phase of the course was Huey transition. Here is where the students would learn to fly what most of them would fly in combat. One of Roger's stick buddies was Al Hansen. The other was a skinny student named Steve Rickerts.

Their IP was a first lieutenant. Although he didn't talk about it directly, he was a vet from Nam. In fact, Roger thought he walked with a limp. Al swore that wasn't the case. Roger told Al that he would be willing to bet that their IP was back here because he had been wounded over there. Al wasn't so sure until he started flying with the new IP. The lieutenant constantly rode the controls. Sometimes Roger even found that he was working against the pressure exerted by the IP on the controls. Unable to gain the feel of the aircraft because of this, Roger was the last to solo. He noted that it was necessary to think a little farther ahead of this helicopter than the Bells in the earlier training. The Huey didn't seem to respond as quickly to control movement. Roger attributed it to the ship's larger size.

His difficulty with the new ship did not go unnoticed by his IP. The lieutenant put Roger up for a standardization ride shortly after he soloed. There was no warning at all. As they reached the flight line that morning, the lieutenant told Roger that he was going up with another pilot. Roger met the stan (standardization) pilot in the ready shack.

"Good morning," the stan pilot said as he sat down with Roger at one of the tables. He wore an orange flight suit with his name in the normal place over the shirt pocket. He was a chief warrant officer, Roger noted. "My name's Collins," he said, and offered his hand. Then he explained the flight. Roger was to act as if the stan pilot wasn't there. The stan pilot would identify the maneuvers he wanted Roger to perform. All during the briefing, Collins seemed friendly, but Roger was nervous.

When they reached the aircraft, Roger proceeded through the preflight check, and warmed up the engine. The two of them donned their helmets. Roger adjusted his mike close to his mouth, and talked to Collins over the intercom. "You want me to call for takeoff?" Roger asked. Collins clicked his mike switch twice for affirmative. Roger called the tower for takeoff instructions. Roger picked the Huey up to a hover, cleared himself by checking for other aircraft hovering nearby, and hovered out to the takeoff lane.

They took off, and Collins instructed him to move over to the autorotation lane. Roger got clearance from the tower, and brought the ship around the traffic pattern. "Go ahead and shoot me an auto," Collins said. Roger brought the Huey around, lined it up on the lane, and cut the throttle. He dropped the pitch to maintain the rotor rpm, and trimmed the ship with the tail rotor pedals. Upon approaching the ground, Roger flared, pulled initial pitch to slow the descent, leveled the aircraft, and let it settle to the ground, cushioning the landing with the remaining pitch. After they settled, he brought the engine power back up, and readied for takeoff. As he did, he called out a pre-takeoff check over the intercom.

"You don't need to tell me what you're doing," Collins said.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon do it," Roger answered. "I understand that this is only a stan ride, but I want you to know that I know what I'm supposed to be doing even if I screw up the execution of the maneuver."

"That's fine with me," Collins answered, and looked at Roger. "Are you a little nervous?"

Roger looked at him. Collins was smiling. "Yeah. You could sure say that. I know I was the last one in my group to solo in the Huey. That makes me a little nervous. And, this is the first stan ride I've ever had."

"Look. I can understand what you mean, but this is not a check on your abilities. This is to assure that your IP is teaching you the same as the other IP's are teaching their students."

For the next hour-and-a-half Collins grilled Roger on emergency procedures, had him shoot landings and takeoffs, hovering autorotations, in-flight autorotations, etc. Then they flew out of the traffic pattern, and Collins gave Roger a couple of simulated engine failures. As they were

returning to the stage field, Collins kept checking his folder.

"You know, Hunter, the grades and notes in your folder don't reflect the way you fly. Have you had any trouble with your IP, or something?"

Roger explained his feelings toward his instructor. "It's like he's been in a bad crash, or something, and that if he's not on the controls with you, then he's probably gonna have another one. Look, I don't blame him. I've never been through a crash, and I don't know that it might affect me the same way. All I know is that it's hard to get the feel of the ship with him pretty heavy on the controls through all the maneuvers. Especially the auto's."

"I can understand what you mean," Collins continued to write in the folder he was carrying. "Well, I want you to know that I think you're progressing fine. You're on a par with the other students, so my advice is to continue what you're doing."

"Thanks a lot, sir," Roger answered.

The next day, Roger's regular instructor had been replaced. The new IP had a much warmer personality, but he worked the students hard. He tolerated no foolishness in the aircraft, but he also showed them some tricks that he had learned about the aircraft that weren't in the instruction books. All of the students appreciated his advice. He also talked some about his flying experiences in Vietnam.

During their night training, he was especially helpful getting the cockpit lights adjusted so they didn't blind the pilot. He constantly bombarded them with "what if" scenarios. Many of these didn't deal with the actual flight of the helicopter, but dealt with flying situations.

As they made their final landing after one night flying class, the IP was debriefing Rickerts, Roger was filling out the log book to record the flight time, and Hansen went out to tie down the rotor blade. Roger finished the log book, and Rickert's debriefing had deteriorated to war stories. Roger looked around for Al. It seemed like he had been gone a long time just to tie down the rotor blade. Roger slipped out of the back seat of the Huey, switched on his flashlight with its red lens, and went back to look for Al. Roger found him leaning against the tail boom of the chopper.

"Al, what ya' doing? Does it take you all night to tie down the rotor?" But Al didn't answer. Roger moved closer

as Al turned to face him. Al had his hands up over his mouth and nose. As Roger brought the flashlight up to Al's face, he could see the dark stain down his hands. "What happened? Are you OK?" When Al just shook his head, Roger led him back to the cabin of the aircraft where he could examine him in better light. As Roger got Al to lower his hands, the IP and Rickerts joined them. Al had a nasty cut in his upper lip. It looked like it went clear through. And the blood was running freely.

"What happened?" the IP asked.

"Darned if I know," Roger answered looking at Al, "but I think he's gonna need stitches."

"You two button up the ship. I'll take care of him," the IP led Al away.

Steve turned to Roger, "What the hell happened?"

"Now that seems to be the sixty-four thousand dollar question. I found him like that when I walked back to the tail of the ship."

"Is the main rotor tied down?" Steve asked.

"I don't know. I never got that far before I found Al."

Together, Steve and Roger walked back to the tail of the Huey. "Yep. It sure is tied down. So he must have turned around to walk back to the cabin, and....I'll bet he walked into the synch elevator!" Toward the rear of the Huey was a horizontal stabilizer, much like on a normal fixed-wing aircraft. It's trailing edge was very sharp where the metal skin from the upper and lower surfaces was riveted together. Roger and Steve checked the elevator. They couldn't find any blood, even by changing their flashlight lenses to clear. But it was the right height.

"That sure was a nasty cut," Steve mused. "I can't believe he just walked into the elevator."

"Why not? If he had his flashlight shining on the ground, he wouldn't even see it," Roger scratched his head. "Well, maybe he can tell us tomorrow. Better call his wife. He'll probably be gettin' home late tonight."

The next day Al was able to tell them what happened. He had walked into the synch elevator. It had taken about twelve stitches to close the gash in his lip. The other students laughed at the incident. "Just a typical Al maneuver," one said. "Yeah," another agreed. "If you ever want to find out where the trouble is gonna be, all you have to do is follow Al,.....but not too closely!" They all laughed. Al had earned his reputation at Fort Wolters, and

it looked like it was going to follow him to Rucker as well...

Following Huey transition, the students were broken into groups. There was always some question whether the determinations were made based on flying abilities, academic work, or what, but they were made just the same. "Contact" was the next phase for most of the WOC's, but some were channeled to "gun" training. This meant they were to receive training in gunships. Both Roger and Al were among those chosen for guns. And they also became stick buddies in this phase. In this period of their training, Roger and Al became much closer. In gun training, there were only two students to an IP. And the two students did a lot of flying together without an IP in the ship. This meant that they got to know one another pretty well.

There were enough students in gun training to fill about a dozen aircraft. Of course, Hueys were used, but most of them were older Hueys. There were A and B models, while the D models had been used for transition training. Some days were spent on the gun ranges firing various weapons. M-60 machine guns were mounted on what were called hard mounts on the sides of the chopper. These machine guns were aimed by pointing the aircraft, and fired from a switch on the cyclic stick. Another armament system was the 40 millimeter grenade launcher. Called a "chunker" by the IP's, it was mounted on the nose of the Huey, and it was fired from its own sighting station by the co-pilot.

Rockets were also fired. They were held in pods mounted on each side of the chopper on the same hard mounts that were used to hold the M-60's. They were also fired by aiming the aircraft, but they were a little trickier. They tended to wind-vane into the relative wind when they left the aircraft. So if the pilot was flying out of trim, the rockets would veer off to the left or right. They would also climb if the ship was rising, and dive if the ship was dropping. Thus, a pilot had to have the ship trimmed very well, and held in a constant dive to hit a target with the rockets.

While it was fun to fire the weapons, gun tactics training was even more fun. Up to this time, the trainees had had their hands full just learning to fly the aircraft. But in gun training, they were taught to use the aircraft to its full capabilities. This meant tight, low-level turns,



Al Hansen at right.

steep banks and dives, fast landings and takeoffs, and generally what was referred to as "cowboying" the aircraft. The IP's were considered a special breed of pilot because they had learned the tricks necessary to stay alive in combat. The students considered themselves the "fighter pilots" of the Vietnam era. The IP's nurtured this image,

and the legends that grew from it. All this hot dogging with the Hueys didn't mean that the IP's couldn't handle precision flying, as they showed on more than one occasion by flying in such close formation on a return flight that the rotor blades from the Hueys were overlapping. It made the students nervous to fly so close, but they were impressed with the flying skill exhibited by the IP's.

During tactics training, the flight of aircraft was broken into two groups. Two ships were the "gun team", while the remainder represented the "slicks", or troop-carrying aircraft. The job of the gun team was to reconnoiter (recon) the proposed landing area (landing zone or LZ), guide the slicks into it, and provide cover for the slicks as they pretended to drop off their troops and exit the LZ. The IP's always added to the realism by imitating the noise of machine guns, rockets, etc., over the radios. At first, this was very distracting for the students, but soon became just part of the game.

It was a warm spring day when Al and Roger took off on one of their first flights as the lead ship of the gun team. The second ship of the team, called the wingman, was supposed to take directions from the lead ship, and provide cover for him during recon or actual attack of a target. When the slicks were brought into the LZ, the wingman provided cover on one side with the lead gunship on the other. Their landing zone had been identified during the preflight briefing on a map of the training area. During the briefing, the instructor had also indicated some buildings on the map. These, he said, were enemy positions. He further identified them as chicken houses on neighboring property that were not to be overflown by the choppers. He explained that low-flying helicopters did nasty things to chickens confined in a large chicken house, and that the Army was tired of paying for dead chickens that resulted from gun tactics training. On this particular mission, Al was doing the flying, and Roger was to handle the navigation. Roger had the map spread on his knees as they took off with the other gunship behind them.

Across the countryside they flew low level (to avoid enemy detection was what the IP's told them) toward the intended LZ. They were to identify the approach and take-off paths for the slicks as well as the formation the slick flight should use to get in and out of the LZ. No sooner had they cleared the field after take-off than the master caution light came on. This was a warning light that came

on when one of the electronically monitored systems of the aircraft malfunctioned. Looking at the panel of warning lights, Roger noted that it was one of the fuel boost warning lights that had come on. There was a fuel boost pump located in each of the two fuel tanks. These were needed to help the main fuel pump deliver fuel to the engine. They were not absolutely necessary, according to the manual, except under severe conditions. Roger recalled that a fuel boost pump failure was nothing serious, checked the circuit breakers, and found that the circuit breaker had popped. He pushed the circuit breaker back in, and reset the master caution light. Then he turned to study the map. A couple of seconds later Al came over the intercom, "That master caution is on again, and it looks like the same boost pump."

Roger again reset the breaker and the master caution. He also pointed out to Al that the proposed LZ was directly ahead. Zooming over the LZ at about fifty feet, Al put the ship into a hard left bank. As the ship shuddered in the sharp turn, the master caution blinked on once again. Roger noted it was the same boost pump, and reset the breaker and master caution while trying to get a good view of the LZ. As they recrossed it in the opposite direction, Al was discussing the landing pattern they should recommend to the slicks. "Probably a staggered trail left," Al concluded. As Roger started to acknowledge, the master caution came on again. This time both fuel boost pumps were lit.

"Oh, oh, Al. We got both boost pump lights on now." Trying to recall what could cause this situation, the only thing that Roger could come up with was low fuel. He checked the fuel gauge, but it read nearly full. As Roger continued to reset the master caution light and the boost pump breakers, Al continued to bank and zoom around the LZ. Becoming more concerned, Roger keyed his mike, "Al, did you visually check the fuel in this beast before we took off?"

Al's conversation with the wingman died in mid-sentence. He turned to look at Roger with a surprised expression on his face, "Uhhhh.., no I didn't. Did you?" The answer was already obvious. Neither had done it during preflight.

"Crap! I hope we aren't running out of fuel!" Roger was a little excited. Suddenly trees loomed ahead of the aircraft. "Al!" Roger screamed and pointed directly ahead. Al pulled back on the cyclic hard. The ship stood on its tail. Roger lost the map from his lap. The master caution

flashed on again. Al rolled the ship to its left, and entered a steep turn. The radio crackled in their ears as the lead slick called for landing instructions. Both boost pump circuit breakers had popped again.

"What a mess!" Al said. He held the wrong switch down and transmitted his comment over the radio to the other aircraft.

"What was that last transmission?" returned the lead slick ship. "What's the inbound heading?"

In the steep turn, Al was looking back over his shoulder to see if he could pick up the slicks yet. "Come in at one-eighty," he transmitted. He looked over at Roger, "Can you put out that master caution light?"

"Dammit, I'm trying!" Roger answered as he reached up and held the breakers in for the boost pumps. "You know, if this thing runs out of gas, we'll be the laughing stock of the gun pilots!"

"I know, I know, but let's get the slicks set up for the LZ first, huh?"

"Yeah. Nothin' like worryin' about the important things first! I mean, we might run out of fuel any second, and all you can worry about are those darn slicks!" Just then Roger looked ahead. "Oh no, Al!"

"What is it now!?!..."

"The chicken houses..."

Al looked beneath them. It was too late. They were already passing over the chicken houses. "Boy, when things go wrong, they really go wrong, don't they?" he looked at Roger and grinned. Roger would never forget that grin. Here they were, not knowing if they were going to run out of fuel, they had the slicks all fouled up on the inbound heading to the LZ, and now they had just flown over the never-to-be-flown-over chicken houses!

"Yeah, you got that straight, Al..." Roger looked back as the ship continued its turn. Dust and feathers floated out of the chicken house. "Well, guess it's chicken dinner tomorrow night..."

Over the chatter of the slicks on the radio, Roger and Al heard one of the IP's crow like a rooster. Al turned to Roger, "...And we've been caught," he said with a wink.

The slicks were now on short final for the LZ. "Gotta get alongside them," Al mumbled.

"For sure. Why do anything right now?" said Roger still holding the circuit breakers in with his left hand. His arm was starting to ache. Al managed to maneuver his

ship alongside the slick flight. The slicks poured over the edge of the LZ, flared, and touched down as one.

"Right fine landing!" came over the radio from Whetstone, the IP from Texas.

"Looks like somebody thinks we're doin' OK," Al said jauntily.

"Let's hope he's the one to give the critique," Roger said gloomily.

The slicks pulled up out of the LZ. "Break right! Break right!" was screamed over the radio. "Taking fire on the left side!" "Come on you GUNNIES!!" somebody literally screamed over the radio.

Al was back in control. Very cool now, he keyed the mike, "Roger, slick flight. I got 'em." With the mike keyed, Al made the sound of machine guns as he lined the ship up on the left side of the LZ. He turned to Roger. "Hang on, one more pass, and we'll squelch that mg," he said. With that, Al whipped the cyclic to the left. The ship rolled sharply and came around hard. Roger could feel the G forces building. As Al pulled in some pitch to keep the rotor from overrevving, the ship began to shake and bounce with the strain of the turn. Roger felt his stomach roll as he tried to look back over his shoulder to pick up the LZ.

"Oh no, not again, Al," Roger was almost dizzy as he caught the white chicken house out of the corner of his eye. They were passing directly over it a second time.

"What the hell. A chicken that's dead once can't die again!" Al continued the hard turn until they were lined up on the position of the simulated machine gun on the far end of the LZ. Again Al was on the radio making machine gun noises. Then he keyed his mike again, "It's OK slick flight. That machine gun won't hurt nobody."

Al and Roger sat together on the bus that was returning the gun pilot trainees to the company area. They suffered the jokes that came with screwing up a mission. But they had overcome all the little difficulties to get the job done. That had been the only saving grace in the critique of the mission by the IP's. They had also teased Al and Roger that the bill for the chickens would come out of their flight pay. One point that was stressed by the reviewer was that this is the way things usually happen. When one thing goes wrong during a mission, it usually is only a prelude of things to come, because trouble never comes alone. The first problem usually leads to something else, and that

again to something else, and so on. There was a complete discussion of fuel boost pump caution lights, though, which did generate some questions and discussion. But that was how they learned. Through mistakes. The IP's were less concerned with a perfect mission than they were that the students learned something from each mission. This is what seemed to ignite the comraderie among the gun pilots, and this infectious attitude caught on with the students.

Later in the flight training program, those who had taken gun training joined the other pilots for night flying and load handling. The comraderie with the other students never reached the stage that it did among the gun pilots. On more than one occasion, one of the students who had gone through gun training received a rebuke for poor radio procedures. The slick pilots were trained to observe strict radio procedures, which meant silence unless you had a problem.

To the "gunnies", this took a lot of the fun out of the game. There was a reason for this discipline, though, and those slick instructors knew why it was important. With everyone talking on the radio, important instructions couldn't be passed along to all ships in a flight of slicks at one time. This was absolutely necessary if a tight formation was to be maintained. And tight formations lessened casualties, according to the IP's. Something the students would only learn about first hand. ...And that was yet to come.

As flight school wound down, there were a lot of details to be cleaned up. One of these was the flight physical. One of the students was not anxious to join the others at graduation. He had come to school to learn to fly helicopters only, not ship out to Vietnam as a pilot. Among some of the students, he boasted that he was going to flunk the flight physical. His attitude was not widely shared by the other WOC's. He did flunk his flight physical, but no one seemed to know what happened to him after that.

The physical itself wasn't so tough. Blood pressure, eyes checked, hearing checked, and questions concerning any medical problems. Al worried some about the physical. He was still concerned about his ear. The others who had spent the New Year's party with him in Fort Worth laughed at his concern. They even suggested that maybe they ought to have another party. Al just rolled his eyes. But he did cut down on his smoking before the physical to be sure that he wouldn't aggravate the problem.

As the WOC's progressed through the physical exam stations, they carried their own records. At the hearing test, they took several candidates at one time. When Roger's group completed the hearing test, the orderly came out with their records. But when he passed them out, he didn't have one for Roger. He asked Roger to wait for a few minutes. Then a captain appeared with Roger's test results. He sat down next to Roger.

"Have you noticed any trouble with your hearing?" he asked.

Roger was apprehensive. Evidently there was a problem, or he wouldn't have been singled out. "No sir, he answered, "Why?"

"Well, it seems that your test wasn't satisfactory. I want you take it again."

"Yes, sir. I'd be happy to," Roger breathed a sigh of relief. His first thought was that they might think he was trying to flunk out. He took the test again, and again waited outside. The captain came out again.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hunter, but you failed again. Are you sure you want to pass this test?"

Roger was crestfallen. He had come this far only to flunk out on a stupid hearing test?! A lump rose in his throat, and he was almost afraid to look at the captain.

Gaining control, he looked at the captain, "Yes sir, I want to pass this test. Do you think I've come this far in this program to wash out now?"

The captain crumpled Roger's test results into a small ball, "Well, in that case, I think I can help you. You seem to have a problem with the low and the very high frequencies. Come on into the testing room again. I want you to watch me through the glass booth. When I give you the thumbs up, I want you to press your button. OK?"

Roger was relieved. He had been given a reprieve. "You bet it's OK, sir. Thank you." After the test, Roger waited impatiently in the hall. It seemed to take an eternity for the captain to appear. When he did, he had a smile as he handed Roger his test results.

"Mr. Hunter, it looks like you passed the hearing test with flying colors."

Roger was so excited that he missed the play on words. "Thank you very much, sir!" Roger said as he executed a smart salute. The captain was surprised, but returned the salute as Roger hurried to the next station.

Graduation was approaching quickly. It seemed that the beach parties carried even more importance with each passing week. Sometimes one student would catch another staring off into space, and he would know that the dreamer was wondering about what was to come.

And then graduation was upon the students. They said good-bye to their instructors, and, in turn, the instructors wished them well. There were a lot of rumors as the students awaited their orders to their next duty station. Many of them would be shipping directly to Vietnam.

There was a crowd around the clerk's office when the orders were finally posted. Both Roger and Al received orders to report to stateside units. In fact, there were definite similarities in the descriptions of the two units, but they were located in different parts of the country. Al was to report to North Carolina, while Roger's orders directed him to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

When they asked about their units, no one could provide an answer. It seemed that no one had heard of their units. Al turned and looked at Roger. "Now what do you suppose that means?"

"Good question. They must have heard about the chicken incident, and decided that we wouldn't do anyone else any good. Maybe it's not even flying status."

"What!!" Al's head spun as if it was disconnected.
"What are you talking...."

"Hey, take it easy. It's probably nothin'. Just a rumor that I heard....," Roger's voice trailed off.

Al grabbed Roger's shoulder, "What have you heard? C'mon, turkey! Spill the beans!"

Roger burst out laughing, "Honest, I haven't heard a thing...but write and tell me what your unit's like, huh?" Roger twisted out of Al's grasp laughing. Al came after him, but quickly gave up in the crowd of bodies.

There were even a few of the candidates scheduled to go on to Chinook school. Those were the big twin rotor helicopters. The nicest feature about them was that they had two engines, so an engine failure did not necessarily mean a total loss of power. And of course, there were two of the group who had orders for Germany. No one believed that, but there it was, in black and white. One of the other candidates snootily asked if the choppers in Germany were provided with heaters. This started a lively discussion of cold weather flying, which had only been experienced at Fort Wolters with the small choppers. No one had yet flown a Huey in cold weather among the entire gaggle of students. But that didn't stop the opinions or the guesses about the hazards of cold weather flying.

Most of the assignments were directly for Vietnam. It seemed that it was finally time. Each student took his assignment in his own way. Some quiet. Some laughing. But all of them, with the exception of the Germany assignments, realized that the war was coming close. For the large share of the WOC's, their reporting date for overseas shipment was a mere thirty days away.

At the graduation ceremony, the students received both their Warrant Officer bars and their pilot wings. In their dress-blue uniforms with the gold stripes on their royal blue trousers, the troops looked impressive. At this ceremony it was tradition that the warrant's wife or girlfriend pinned the wings on his uniform. Roger and Jim had invited the two girls that they had met from Alabama to the ceremony. One even brought her mother with her. There were a few tears as they pinned on the wings that had taken nine months to earn.

The party following graduation was one to remember! The booze flowed freely, and nearly all of those with a mind for it ended up quite soused. The partying lasted long into the night, for those who could continue to stand. The

others drifted off in small groups back to the barracks to tend to packing, or simply fell into their bunks in a stupor.

The next morning, another formation was held. This only required dress green uniforms. At this formation, the company commander who had provided so much support to this group of young men uttered his last words of advice. Then it was out processing, as all of the remaining gear that had been issued was turned in. The barracks were given a last cleaning, and farewells were tossed about freely under the sunny skies. And then they were gone. The instructors and IP's who remained behind prepared themselves for a new class of future pilots.

Jim and Roger packed their gear and themselves into Roger's VW, and headed west. Jim was assigned directly overseas after his thirty-day leave, and he was anxious to get home. He and Roger decided they would drive straight through, by trading off sleeping and driving. By the next morning, they were well on their way across Texas. The next night they were headed north out of Denver when they ran into a blizzard. Both dog tired, they traded off driving frequently. Finally Roger called a halt. They were going to kill themselves trying to get home, he said. At first Jim was unwilling to go along, but he was convinced after he went to sleep behind the wheel.

At Fort Collins, they left the interstate and began looking for a motel. Jim was still in his dress greens, while Roger had changed into civilian clothes before leaving Fort Rucker. Finding a small motel on the outskirts of Fort Collins, they brought the VW to a halt. It was late, so they knocked on the door of the small house that said office. An older gentleman came to the door.

"We just need a room for the night," explained Roger.

The older man looked them over. "Are you young men in the service?"

"Yes," Jim answered as he leaned against the door casing. He was so tired, he was about to go to sleep standing up.

"Well then, you can have the room for nothing."

Jim and Roger looked at each other. They couldn't believe their ears. Roger turned to the man, "That is a very nice offer, but we really can afford to pay."

The proprietor protested, but relented when half the going price was agreed upon. By then, the proprietor's wife had joined the group. Roger and Jim told them that they

would be leaving early in the morning. The woman insisted on giving them some instant coffee for the morning, and wouldn't let them leave for their room without taking some cookies and milk with them. Both Jim and Roger were astounded by the hospitality. Compared to the usual treatment they had received around the bases from the local population, this was something entirely different. The couple even described where they could get a good breakfast for a reasonable price at the early hour they would be leaving. As Jim and Roger turned in for the night, they continued to marvel at the warmth the couple had displayed.

The trip started early the next morning. Twenty-four hours later, Roger dropped Jim in Yakima, and continued on for the coast. By noon he was home. His parents were very glad to see him, and very happy that his orders were for more training, and not Vietnam.

29: Joining the ARA at Fort Sill

The leave was plenty long enough for Roger. As he left Western Washington on his way to new training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, he thought over the events of the last two weeks. There had been his five-year high school class reunion. It had come at a very opportune time for Roger to attend it. Two weeks either way, and he would have been unable to make it. Roger decided to wear his dress green uniform. It was an impulse, but he was proud of his pilot's wings.

As soon as he walked in the door, he realized it had been a mistake. Roger was the only one there in uniform, and probably the only one there in the service, too, he concluded as he looked around. The event was not that highly attended anyway. Of the two hundred or so in Roger's graduating class, probably fifty attended this reunion. However, Roger was well acquainted with most of those who were there.

The small talk came slowly, and it seemed there was nothing Roger could do to improve that. Some of his classmates were not thrilled to see a military uniform. It seemed everyone attending the reunion had avoided the draft. For most it was medical reasons, but Roger wasn't sure about the others. Some had demonstrated in college against the war. There were definitely different views on one's service obligation! Things mellowed some as the evening wore on, but it was not a pleasant night for Roger.

While on leave, Roger dated several times, but there was nothing serious. Many of the people he knew from high school were either married or left the area, and he wasn't up to the effort of trying to establish new relationships. He did run into two people he knew well from high school. One was running drugs for a living now, and the other was a drunk.

Roger shook his head as he thought of them. Maybe that's what it took to remain in a small town after graduation. But was it? Roger would have been happy to spend his life there. Was it something wrong with his graduating class, or was it a sign of the times? Or was it only because this was the average of all graduating classes, and Roger had just never really seen it head on before? Maybe this was the hard side of growing up. Watching your friends turn into something,something Roger

focused on the road, and the passing scenery to shake the thoughts.

As he headed for Boise to spend his first night on the road, he looked forward to seeing the girl at the motel again. He had called ahead for reservations, and she had answered the phone. And she had remembered him. In fact, she had invited him to dinner that evening if he was able to get into Boise in time. She had said her name was Vicki. Roger's thoughts also turned to Jim Wheatley. Jim was now on his last leave before shipping out. Roger wondered what he was doing. Jim had been a nice travelling companion. They had gotten along well all during their stay at Fort Rucker, and Roger missed Jim on this trip.

While Roger was home he hunted deer with his dad and one of his dad's friends. Roger, Bob and Roger's dad hunted down on the Toutle River. In a clearcut, while the others were eating lunch, Roger jumped a nice two-point buck. The deer bolted across the clearcut below him. As it ran between the stumps, Roger fired at it. The ammunition he was using was so old that it left a cloud of blue smoke each time he fired. The lever action .300 Savage felt comfortable in his hands as he worked the action between shots. He missed the deer as it dropped still lower in the clearcut. Then it cut back, crossed a small draw, and as it climbed the other side of the draw, entered the timber. As it did, Roger whistled. The buck stopped and looked back. Roger dropped him with the next shot.

The deer rolled down the side of the draw and disappeared from sight. Roger broke into a run down the cat road along the side of the clearcut. He stopped at the top of the draw and looked down. There lay the buck. A light cloud of steam rose from the deer. Roger approached it warily. When he got close, he knew it was down to stay. The eyes were already beginning to cloud.

As Roger rolled the deer over and began to clean it, he heard a shout. Roger whirled, and above him stood Bob. Bob was looking beyond Roger into the timber.

"Right down here!" Roger yelled.

Bob nearly jumped out of his skin. "Wow. I thought you were back in the timber. So you dropped him, huh? Just after you started shooting, some guy drove up to us. Said he saw you shooting at a buck running across the clearcut. Said you knocked it down."

"So much for an eyewitness report," Roger chuckled. "I never touched it when it was running. The only time I hit

it was when it was standing right up there," Roger pointed to the other side of the draw.

"Is that right? Well, can I give you a hand?" Bob began to pick his way down the side of the draw through the logging slash.

"Not cleaning it. I'm almost finished. But you can give me a hand dragging it back up the hill."

"Yeah, I noticed you let it get all the way to the bottom before you dropped it."

As Bob and Roger dragged the buck to the top of the draw, Roger's dad joined them. "You know, if you'd held off a little longer, it might have gotten all the way down to the river. Then we could have just floated it down to the bridge," Roger's dad pointed out. "Where was it when you saw it, anyway?" Roger pointed to a small bench about halfway between them and road above. "What were you doing with all the shooting? Did it take that many to get your gun barrel warmed up?" Roger's dad teased.

Roger smiled, "I was just checking to see what kind of shape you guys were in. If I'd dropped it where I first saw it, it would have been too easy!" Both Bob and Roger's dad laughed. Then all three put their shoulders to the task and dragged the deer up to the road. Panting and sweating, the three blew hard while Roger's dad poured a cup of coffee around. Roger enjoyed the company. It was easy and relaxed as they joked about Roger's shooting and the long drag with the deer. As they stood there sipping coffee and looking over the clearcut, Roger realized it might be a long time before he got out deer hunting with them again. But he said nothing about that.

As Roger neared Boise the memory of the hunt slipped from his mind. It was just getting dark, and he found the motel easily. As he killed the engine on the VW, he could see Vicki behind the counter. As he walked toward the office, she recognized him and waved. Roger returned the wave. He swung the glass door open, "Hi again!"

"Hello there. I was wondering if you would make it in time for supper. I didn't think it was that far, but then I remembered you were driving a Volkswagen," Vicki laughed. "I thought we'd go out to my sister's for supper. Hope that's OK."

"Yeah, that would be fine. But you've got to rent me a room first."

"It's all ready. All you need to do is sign the card," Vicki pushed the registration card and a pen across the counter to him.

It was a wonderful evening for Roger. Vicki's sister had three kids. Young enough that they were full of curiosity, but old enough to know what the Army was, and what helicopters did. Vicki's brother-in-law was also very nice. The conversation moved along easily. The supper was great. Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy were among Roger's favorites. After dinner, they sat around in the living room and talked. As Vicki's sister was putting the kids to bed, Roger mentioned that he had to get an early start in the morning. Vicki drove Roger back to the motel. As she dropped him off, she asked for his address. Roger told her he'd send it as soon as he knew what it was. Then he thanked her for the evening, and turned in for the night. He was only going as far as Oklahoma this time, but he still wanted to get an early start.

The next morning, Roger was on the road early. Just the VW and the truckers. They were always present. Sometimes Roger stopped at the truck stops along the way to find out about road conditions ahead. The truckers were always friendly, and when asked about road conditions, they were very helpful. On one of his trips north, Roger had lost his headlights between Fort Collins, Colorado, and Laramie, Wyoming, on a pass through the Rockies. A trucker stopped to help him. There was no moon that night, and the wind was blowing hard. It was cold. When Roger explained the problem, the trucker suggested that Roger follow him into Laramie. Roger was grateful for the help. He even tried to buy the trucker some coffee when they reached Laramie, but the trucker just smiled and turned him down. He was in too much of a hurry, he said. Roger thanked him for the help, but it didn't seem near enough.

Roger spent the night in Oklahoma City, and headed on south the next morning. He arrived at Fort Sill early in the day. The gate guard pointed the way to the post headquarters. Roger parked the VW, and entered the old building. He was wearing his dress greens. This was his first official unit, and he was a little unsure of himself as he approached the clerk at the desk.

"Good morning," Roger said.

"Good morning, sir. Can I help you?" the clerk asked in a pleasant voice. She was probably all of twenty-five, Roger guessed. Blonde. Nice looking.

"I'm looking for the Fourth of the Seventy-Seventh, Aerial Rocket Artillery. I'm due to report in to them today."

"Who? I don't think I've ever heard of them....just a minute, please," she rose from behind her desk and walked over to another clerk. A brief discussion ensued between the two clerks in hushed tones. The other clerk waved Roger over to her desk.

"What unit is it you're looking for, sir?" she asked. A small woman in her early thirties was speaking to him.

"Fourth of the Seventy-Seventh, ARA," Roger answered. "They're a helicopter outfit."

"Can you wait just a moment, sir, while I check with someone else?"

"Certainly," Roger answered. He looked at the blonde clerk. She just shrugged her shoulders, and walked slowly back to her desk. It took the other clerk about ten minutes to return.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but we can't seem to locate your unit. Are you sure it was Fort Sill?"

Roger pulled out a copy of his orders, and handed them to the clerk. "Unless it's a misprint, these say I'm in the right place."

She took the orders and read them. "Well, I can certainly sign you in, but I'm not sure where to send you. You might try down by the airfield. You said they fly helicopters?" She took several copies of Roger's orders, and provided directions to the airfield.

As Roger drove toward the airfield, he looked closely at the insignias of the units that were on signs along the road. Finally he spotted one that looked like it might be part of his unit. It said something about battalion headquarters. Roger stopped and went in. This time it was a male clerk. Roger told him that he was reporting to the unit. His orders said A Battery, but he hoped the clerk could help him find his unit. The clerk made a phone call, but apparently there was no answer.

"You're in the right place, sir, but I can't raise anyone down at A Battery. I think they're all out flying today. Here's the building number. Why don't you try down there a little later?"

Roger left, and drove along the flight line. He located the building that the clerk had identified, but it was unoccupied. He left the post and drove into town. Lawton was a small town, located just outside the post.

Probably wouldn't even be a town, if the post wasn't here, thought Roger.

He returned to the post later in the afternoon. This time A Battery's office was occupied. As Roger entered, he noticed several officers and one enlisted man in the room. When one of the officers turned to him, Roger introduced himself. The officer, Lieutenant Steerman, greeted him warmly. It was too late then to get Roger signed into the unit, but Steerman said that most of the other officers were probably up eating chow. He would take Roger with him, and introduce him. As they walked to the mess hall, Steerman told him a little about the unit and their organization.

"We're organized like an artillery unit," he said. "A Battery is one of the firing units. We've got twelve aircraft assigned to us. Headquarters Battery is also here at Sill. They handle all the administration for us and our two sister units. No, our sister units aren't here. One is in North Carolina, and.....I forget where the other is.

"Right now, all we're trying to do is get organized. Get our equipment lined up, and stuff. You wouldn't believe the paperwork!" Steerman was dressed in the grey flight suit that was characteristic of pilots in the Army. They were the same ones Roger had worn in training. Steerman also wore a flight jacket. It was the same grey on the outside, but international orange on the inside. The jacket flapped against his flight suit as they walked to the mess hall. Steerman's baseball cap was o.d. (olive drab). Centered on the front of it was Steerman's rank and his pilot wings directly beneath his lieutenant's bar.

When they reached the mess hall, two officers were just leaving. One was a major, the other a lieutenant. Both Steerman and Roger saluted smartly. The major seemed to look with disdain at Steerman, but he passed by without comment.

"Notice the look?" Steerman asked.

"Yeah, I did. What's his problem?"

They entered the mess hall. It was a bright and shiny affair. A sign welcomed them to the Fort Sill Open Officer's Mess. It was much nicer than the ones Roger had seen at the training facilities. Steerman hung his coat and hat on a long row of pegs. Roger hung his saucer cap also. As they entered the chow line, Steerman continued to explain in a hushed voice.

"Well, you see, this is an artillery post. We're about the only aviators here. When we're flying, we wear our

flight suits. Well, they don't like us coming in the mess hall in our flight suits. It's just that simple. Bunch of prima donna's. Personally, I think they're just plain jealous. Anyway, the Battalion CO straightened 'em out. That's our work uniform, and it's OK for us to wear 'em in here. The regulars still don't like it, but there's nothing they can do about it. Except give us dirty looks."

"I think that would bother me," Roger coughed. "I can't even believe I'm really an officer yet..."

Steerman laughed. "Have you met the Battalion CO yet? Steerman was loading his tray.

"No. I haven't even officially signed in yet. They didn't even know our unit was here when I checked in at the post headquarters. They couldn't imagine what a pilot was doing here at Fort Sill. Especially a helicopter pilot!"

Steerman looked at Roger. He appeared to be unconvinced. "Are you kidding?"

"No. They didn't even know for sure where our unit was located. They told me to check down by the airfield. Guess they figured if I was a pilot, my unit must be down by the airfield someplace."

"Hey, when you meet Colonel Radcliffe, he's the Battalion CO, you tell him about that. In fact, let's hustle dinner. We might be able to catch him. I'll show you where his office is."

A half-hour later, Steerman pointed out the Battalion Headquarters to Roger. "I've got some things to take care of, but I'll show you where you can get temporary quarters for tonight. Then you can get all squared away tomorrow."

Late the next afternoon, Roger found himself standing in front of Battalion Headquarters. He had spent the morning signing into A Battery, and filling out the forms required to register on the post. Roger straightened his tie, checked his uniform, and entered the headquarters building. It was a small building. The entry room took almost all of it. Two desks were along the side of the room, one manned by a clerk. Roger approached the clerk.

"Can I help you, sir?" the clerk looked up.

"Yes. I'm here to report in."

"Colonel Radcliffe's in his office. Let me tell him you're here. What's the name, sir?" the clerk rose and entered an office at the end of the building. Soon he reappeared. "Go on in, sir."

Roger entered Colonel Radcliffe's office. He came to the position of attention, saluted smartly, and stated, "Sir, Warrant Officer Hunter reporting for duty."

The Colonel returned his salute, "At ease, Hunter. Did you just get in?"

"Yes sir..... well, late yesterday."

"Sit down. Have you had chow yet?" Colonel Radcliffe was tall, and slightly graying at the temples. He had a warm manner, and began asking Roger questions about his home town. Then he began to explain the unit, and its mission. Roger listened closely. Roger explained the problem he had encountered in locating the unit. Colonel Radcliffe listened to the story, and shook his head. He said that he would take care of that problem tomorrow. After their conversation, the Colonel suggested that they head over to the Blade & Wing, and Colonel Radcliffe would introduce him to the other officers in the unit.

The Blade & Wing was a small officers' club on the post, or more realistically, an officers' club annex. The pilots from Roger's unit, A Battery, gathered here almost every evening for a few beers after work. When Roger and the Colonel arrived, the other officers from both A Battery and Headquarters Battery were sitting at tables eating popcorn and drinking beer. Colonel Radcliffe introduced Roger around as they pulled up a couple chairs. One of the officers had been in Roger's flight class at Fort Rucker. The others were a mix of warrant officers, lieutenants, and captains. Neither the CO nor the XO (executive officer, the second in command of the battery) was there. However, Roger did meet the Operations Officer, a captain by the name of Stark. He was from Spokane, Washington, which surprised Roger. After the introductions, and one glass of beer, Colonel Radcliffe excused himself and left. Roger listened to the conversation among the pilots. Some of the talk revolved around the events of the day. Some centered on the flying activities, but the rest dealt with paperwork and supply problems, commonly called logistics in the Army.

As the hour grew late, the officers began leaving. Stan Johnson, a fellow Warrant, lingered with Roger explaining the details and requirements of post registration.

The next morning was another busy one for Roger. He had met his CO and had been officially welcomed into A Battery. He was also told by his new CO that he had to get all his forms and records squared away that morning because

he was scheduled to fly in the afternoon. In the following days, Roger completed his twelve hours of transition flying which qualified him in the UH-1C, or Huey 'C' model helicopter. It was commonly called the 'Charlie model'. The fuselage configuration was the same as the gunships used in training at Fort Rucker, but the engine was a little hotter, and the rotor system was different. Overall, the C model was smaller than the D model used in Huey transition at Fort Rucker, but the general layout of the cockpit was the same. The cabin space in the C model was smaller than in the D model, but then this unit's mission wasn't to carry passengers. It was to deliver ordnance. On the hard mounts at the sides of the C model were hung two large cylinders - one per side. Each cylinder, or pod, contained tubes for rockets. Nineteen in each pod.

The unit's mission was to support the infantry on the ground with fire support. This is why they were classed as an artillery unit. Their job was the same as conventional artillery in this respect. The only significant difference being that the helicopters could see the target, while in most cases, conventional artillery support couldn't.

Following transition, it was Roger's job to learn to fire the rockets and hit what he was aiming at. This didn't sound difficult, but it was more difficult than it sounds. The aircraft had to be aimed to fire the rockets. To insure straight flight of the rockets, the ship had to be in a dive, well trimmed, with the appropriate power setting. If the ship was out of trim, the rockets would veer to the right or left, cross if the ship was tilted, and miss the target. If the power setting was too high, the rockets would tend to rise, and the rockets would dive if the power setting was too low. There were also numerous safety procedures to be followed when rockets were handled or fired, and these had to be committed to memory. Some tactics were also practiced, as well as radio procedures.

Roger's IP for gunnery practice was Mr. David Fair, a fellow warrant officer. Dave was a quiet, red-headed pilot. Before he had joined the Army, Dave had studied in the seminary. It was hard to conceive that he was now a gun pilot, teaching others how to shoot rockets. As soon as word of this got around, he was fondly referred to as Father Fair by other members of the unit. Father Fair had a light touch on the controls of the C model, and he was an exceptional pilot. Roger learned in short order that it was never a good idea to bet against him on the firing range.

Most of those early days with the new unit were spent at the firing range. It was shoot, shoot and shoot some more. Attack angles were varied so the pilots could see the problems encountered in steeper dives. Using a steep dive, the pilot had to bring the ship on target very quickly. The ship built airspeed so rapidly that only a few seconds elapsed before the ship was to 'red line', the airspeed that was not to be exceeded. Beyond that speed there was a good chance that components in the aircraft could be overstressed. Coming out of a sharp dive also required a bit of finesse on the controls. The rotor rpm would build quickly during the pullout or in a sharp turn. This meant the pilot had to pull in some pitch to keep the rotor rpm in the green. An overspeed on the rotor could result in the loss of a blade or the entire rotor head. Without a rotor, or wings, the helicopter doesn't fly well at all.

Night firing was also practiced. Everything to fire during the day was required, but the poorer visibility at night, especially the reduced depth perception and the flash from the rockets as they left the pods, made accuracy more difficult.

The evenings were often spent in the Lawton "impact area". This was the section of town that contained most of the bars. It wasn't long before the unit adopted a bar named "Scotty's". It was relatively small, had women bartenders and go-go dancers, and had a couple pool tables. John Thompson, one of the warrant officers in the unit, got very close to one of the bartenders who worked there. John was in the Air Force before he joined the Army, but he wasn't much older than the other warrants. He was always falling in love, but this one became quite serious. It came down to some of the senior officers talking him out of marrying the girl before the unit shipped out.

There was a wildlife refuge just north of the Fort. Roger spent some time out there with another warrant officer, Dick Rogers, and Dick's wife. Dick liked to fish. But when Roger found out that they were only fishing for bluegill, he gave it up. There were buffalo on the refuge, and he and Dick found great sport in seeing who could get the closest to one of the huge beasts. Dick didn't see much future in the Army. He wasn't what you could call an enthusiastic learner. Although he did his share of flying, he didn't volunteer for extra hours. He also carried extra duties in the battery like the others, but he went about his job with little enthusiasm. When the unit finally deployed

for overseas, it was overstrength, and Dick was one of those left behind. He didn't seem to mind at all. Roger mentioned this to Father Fair.

"Well, maybe he knows something that we don't," Dave replied.

"I don't think he's been overseas before, has he?" Roger asked.

"You wouldn't have had to have been there before to know what we're getting into," Dave replied flatly.

"Why would you know that? You got some inside information?" Roger teased Dave. Dave's past connection to the seminary sometimes provoked questions like this. But when teased, Dave would simply smile that disarming smile of his, and let the remark pass.

As the first weeks of training passed, more personnel continued to join the unit. Roger's platoon leader, John "Rock" McMann, was from California. Very talkative and likeable, Rock didn't fool around with women at all, but he certainly had a soft spot in his heart for them. His mind was made up that he wouldn't date until he came back from overseas. But he liked his beer, and could be found at Scotty's almost any night of the week. He was good at pool, and could hold his own on the table, sober or not. During many of the discussions among the pilots, Rock could usually come up with a satisfactory alternative when the opposing sides on the question had come to an impasse. He was always fair to those that served under him, and Roger felt honored to be counted among them.

One of the duties that was shared among the officers in the unit was officer of the guard for the airfield security. This was a job that had to be done every night. This was Roger's first experience at command when he received the assignment, and he wasn't looking forward to it. The first step was inspection of the troops who reported for guard duty. The sergeant of the guard, the second in command for the night, was a regular soldier from another unit. He didn't appear to have a great love for warrant officers. He formed up the guards for inspection. Roger was nervous, as he had never inspected troops before. The sergeant made it clear from the first moment that he wasn't about to help Roger, either.

There were a couple reasons for the inspection. First, to be sure that everyone had the proper gear, and were clean and neat. Second, one of the troops got to stay with the officer of the guard, Roger, in the airfield office, and

didn't have to stand guard with everyone else. This was choice duty. The troop who looked the best in the formation was usually selected for this position. Well, the one Roger chose was not the one wanted by the sergeant. So the sergeant's choice challenged Roger's selection.

Now Roger was more than a little confused by this situation, having never had to face it before. He asked the sergeant for his opinion. That wasn't really a lot of help. Finally, he separated the two choices, and asked them questions about the Army, guard duty, and anything else he could come up with. At long last, his helper was selected. Naturally it was the sergeant's choice to begin with. But even though Roger didn't know what he was doing, he wanted to go through the whole procedure, and not leave it to the sergeant, so he could find out what he was supposed to know in this kind of a situation. He thought it might come in handy later...

At dusk, the guards were posted, and shortly thereafter, Roger took his driver to make a tour of the airfield. It was a strange feeling to be driven down the runways and taxiways after dark. After checking all the runway lights, and all the guards, Roger and his driver retired to the airfield office. Concerned about his responsibility, Roger didn't sleep much, even though he could have. About two in the morning, he woke his driver and made another round of the airfield, checking the guards. He stopped and talked to each one for a few minutes. They seemed to appreciate the company, and Roger felt better about them being out there.

Warrant Officer Daryl Hessler was one of the supply officers. Like Roger, he had gone through flight training, and though he trained some with the others, he spent most of his time assembling equipment for the unit. He also had a thing about finding small, out-of-the-way bars in the countryside. If they had dirt floors, so much the better.

One night three of them -- Daryl, Roger and another warrant named Dick Reed -- headed northwest from Lawton to a bar that Daryl had heard of. They found it on an isolated stretch of road about an hour's drive out. When they pulled up, there wasn't a car in sight. As they approached the door, Dick noticed that the place didn't even have all its windows. It was a small adobe building that looked like it had been there for well over a hundred years. Inside, two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling. One dimly lit a large, old pool table, and the other hung over the bar

across one end of the building. An old lady with wrinkled features sat behind one end of the bar, smoking. The three of them approached the bar.

"What'll it be tonight, lads?" she asked. The ash on her cigarette was so long that it was about to drop on the bar. Roger noted that if the ash fell, it wouldn't be noticed as the bar had a thick covering of dust on it.

From the looks of things, Roger decided that it would be best to order something in a bottle. The other two concurred with his order, and the old lady disappeared into a doorway behind the bar. Soon she was back with three bottles of Budwieser. She uncapped them on an opener fastened into the end of the bar, and placed the bottles before the three of them. As Dick picked up his bottle of beer, he changed hands quickly, and looked down at his hand that had held the bottle first. There was also a thick layer of dust on the bottles!

They spent the evening drinking beer and shooting pool on the eight-foot table. It was an old table, to be sure, with leather pockets and ornately carved feet. Daryl suggested that the place had been built around the table. They even managed to engage the old lady in something similar to conversation. On the way back to the fort, the car was quiet except for the radio. Roger and Dick exchanged glances when Daryl dropped them off with the suggestion that they do it again. It seemed that Dick and Roger might have other ideas on how to spend their last months in the states.

And so it was. Roger hooked up with Dick, who not only knew a little about Oklahoma, but even knew a few people there. The next Saturday, they set off for Ada, Oklahoma, with a promise from Dick to Roger that there was a college there where he could probably roust them up a couple dates. Roger was all for that. They climbed into Roger's VW, and headed out. It took about two hours to reach Ada, but it was all that Dick had promised. He not only got them dates, but both of them had a swell time.

The next weekend, it was another date with the same girls. Dick's date, Helen, was a sharp blonde, while Vicki, Roger's date, was short with brown hair. They went to a bar in Oklahoma City, with Roger's first lesson in different drinking laws. Here you didn't go into a nightclub and order a drink. You first bought your own bottle. Then when you entered the nightclub, you gave the bottle to the bartender who used it to mix drinks for you. The four of

them found a corner table away from the dance floor that was conducive to conversation. There they whiled away the evening, telling stories that happened to them in flight school, dancing, and generally having a good time. When it came time to leave, Dick and Helen left in Dick's car, and Vicki and Roger left in Roger's car.

Vicki was staying at Helen's place in Oklahoma City, so the girls had agreed to a meeting time and place before the couples split up. But this was unbeknownst to Roger. Driving around the city, it was difficult for Roger to stay oriented, and he kept getting lost. Vicki finally guided him to a parking spot. They had brought along some Pepsi for mixer. Vicki mixed them a drink while Roger held the cups. It was a chilly evening, and they were soon pressed tightly together while they talked and drank.

"These Volkswagens aren't noted for their fine heaters," he said to Vicki.

"Yes, I know. But I really don't mind."

Roger found Vicki to be a very pleasant girl. She was easy to be with. As they snuggled closer together, Vicki unzipped Roger's jacket and slipped her arms inside. Her hands were cold on Roger's ribs, and he jumped. Then she began to tickle him. Roger tried to fight her off, and at the same time, to keep his drink from spilling. She finally backed away slightly, and the two of them just sat there looking at one another in the moonlight. The radio played softly as they leaned together. Vicki's kiss tasted warm and sweet, and Roger suddenly realized that it had been a long time since he had kissed a girl.

The evening came to an end much too soon for both of them. Vicki once again directed Roger through the city, as she explained about the plans with Helen. Roger just laughed. When they met the other car in a parking lot, Vicki gave Roger one last kiss as she jumped from the car. Then Dick got in, and they drove back to Lawton. The sun was rising as they entered the fort.

Their next trip to Ada was another good time, but as they were returning home to Lawton, they had a small accident. There were very few cars on the road, as it was again late, but along a straight stretch of highway they met a single car. Just as it was approaching them, Roger saw something run across the road in front of them. He was afraid to swerve off the road or into the path of the oncoming car, so he gripped the wheel and braced for an impact. Just as the oncoming car passed, they hit the

object in the road with a soft thump. Just before impact, Roger saw a long nose and pointed little ears on a gray lump before them. Suddenly the windshield was covered with something, and Roger braked hard. As he brought the car to a stop, he turned to Dick. "Just what was that?!" he yelled.

"For a second there, it sure looked like an armadillo, but I think it would be hard to tell now!" Dick laughed as the car came to a stop. They both got out and looked at the car. Roger pulled his flashlight from under the seat. He checked both headlights, but nothing appeared to be broken, just covered with blood and guts.

"I thought armadillos were covered with armor," Roger said.

"Yeah, they are. But it isn't tank armor, dummy," Dick chuckled. "It's only made to protect them from other creatures native to Oklahoma. Not some seventy-mile-an-hour metal monster from Detroit. Or Germany, as the case may be...."

Roger played the flashlight over the front of the car, "Look at that mess!"

"Yeah. I see. We better get back to Lawton and get this thing through a car wash before it all dries," advised Dick.

Roger continued to date Vicki as his training progressed. It was all weekends, because Ada was too far to go on a week night. But that made it easy for Roger. He wasn't up to stalking any action in Lawton, anyway. And it made it nice to make the trip with Dick so they could share the driving.

Back at the fort, the training continued. Roger drew an "ash and trash" mission one particular day. This meant hauling the lunch to the range for everyone participating in the training. After loading up, Roger took off. He was flying from the left seat with a crewchief in the right seat. Most of the crewchiefs had some "stick time" (flight time on the controls), and it got to be expected by the pilots that if they flew with a chief, then he got to fly the boring parts of the trip. The chiefs always enjoyed any chance to fly. As they paralleled the highway leading north out of the fort, Roger pressed the intercom switch, "Wanta fly?"

The chief was almost too eager, "Yes, I sure would."

"OK, it's all yours," Roger said as he watched the chief take over the controls. When the chief didn't respond immediately, Roger asked, "You got it?"

"Yessir, I got it," the chief answered.

Roger sat back and unzipped the shoulder pocket on his flight jacket to get a cigarette. Smokers usually carried their lighter in the same pocket, as pants pockets were hard to reach with the lap and shoulder belts fastened. As Roger unzipped the pocket, his lighter slipped out and tumbled to the floor. As Roger bent over to retrieve it, his stomach turned over. Roger looked up. He was looking almost straight down on the highway! He grabbed the controls and leveled the ship. In a cold sweat, he turned to the crewchief, "Uh, do you have much stick time in these things?"

The chief smiled back, "No. This is the first time I've ever tried it!"

Roger shuddered. This happy chief would have bored them right into the ground, and probably smiled all the way, Roger thought. He got the chief back on the controls, and then explained how to look out ahead of the aircraft to get a horizon. Keeping the horizon in the same relative position on the windshield was a little tough to explain, but it wasn't long before the chief seemed to manage it. Roger sat back again, but this time he didn't take his eyes off their intended flight path. He lit a cigarette, and continued to advise the chief on how to fly a helicopter.

As all the aircraft returned to the post that afternoon, there was a message for Roger from the CO. The commander wanted to see him in his office right away. Roger helped to secure the aircraft, and walked over to the CO's office. The CO was a short, sawed-off, runt of a guy. With his flight jacket and gloves on in cold weather, he looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy. Some of the pilots mused aloud whether he carried a pillow so he could see over the dash of the Huey. It was an experience to get into an aircraft after Major Link had flown it. The seat was adjusted as far forward as it would go, the pedals were adjusted all the way back, and the seat was raised as high as it would go. One of the pilots had said that it was like trying to get into a highchair. Roger chuckled to himself over that as he entered the major's office.

As Roger entered, the major seemed more than a little upset. Noticing his mood, Roger came to attention and saluted. The major returned the salute, and said "at ease", but he didn't offer Roger a chair. Then he stomped around his desk, and ruffled through some papers.

"You know, Mr. Hunter, we just got in some disturbing paperwork on you today. Let's see, I had it right here...", the major continued to sort through his papers. "Ahh, here it is," he produced some papers with a flourish, and began to read from them. Seemed a congressman had sent a letter to the Army concerning Roger. "According to this letter, Hunter, you're being investigated for non-support of your wife."

Roger was surprised at this statement. "Well, you see, sir, my wife and I are going through a divorce..."

"That doesn't make any difference. This is a congressional inquiry, don't you understand? I've already contacted the JAG people, and they'll be down here tomorrow to interview you. I don't know why you didn't tell me about this, but I expect you to keep me informed of all developments. Is that understood?" the major glared at Roger.

As Roger left the major's office, he thought about the situation. He had never expected something like this. When he had talked to the JAG office at Fort Rucker, they had told him to get a lawyer from his home state, and follow his advice. Roger had done that. Here he was, trying to learn enough to do a good job and stay alive in Vietnam, and his wife had decided that she didn't want to be married to a helicopter pilot, and had started dating her French professor at college. Now she was saying he hadn't supported her. Now that was some kettle of fish. Roger headed straight for the impact area in Lawton. As he drove into town, he had to laugh a little. It really did sound just a little ridiculous!

But the next day, it wasn't near so humorous. Two JAG officers came down to the company area to interview him. The list of questions seemed endless. All in all, they spent about five hours talking to him. And with each of his answers, they took plenty of notes. Seemed that congressional inquiries on an officer were a pretty big deal. However, when the interview was finished, they said that they didn't think he had anything to worry about.

Roger thought back to when he first heard from Janet that she wanted a divorce. She couldn't stand to be married to a helicopter pilot, she had told him. Roger said that he couldn't think of a worse time for her to make that decision. According to the statistics, he had about a fifty-fifty chance of coming back alive. Dead, he was worth twenty thousand dollars, he told her. He had a civilian

life insurance policy, plus one from the Army. If something happened, it would sure give her a good start on life. But she was adamant, ...then. Sounded like life on the range had changed. Roger wondered if she was still going with the French professor. Well, he had to hand it to the French prof. She was a good looker. Roger wondered if he would ever see her again. He had heard she was dealing cards in Reno for a short time. Maybe daddy was a friend of the congressman's.

Oh, what the heck, Roger thought. Things could be worse. It was going to take a long time to pay off all the bills when the divorce was settled. His lawyer had advised him to pay nothing, though, until everything was final. That had gone against Roger's beliefs. There weren't that many credit cards, but she had run up a pretty good bill. Roger had written all of the companies, and explained the situation. Some of them were very nice about it. But a couple others had turned him over to bill collection outfits. But he had made up his mind -- they would get their money. But they might have to wait a while for it.

As the weather turned colder, final preparations were made for the overseas transfer of the unit. Lists and equipment were checked and rechecked. If something was left behind, replacements were hard to get where they were going. In fact, it seemed easier to replace the people than it did the equipment.

It was early in October when the unit received the word of the first death in the battalion. Headquarters Company had shipped out less than a month before. One of the pilots with Headquarters had attended flight school with Roger. Both Roger's classmate and Colonel Radcliffe, the Battalion CO had been killed together. The details were sketchy, but somewhere near a place called the Bowling Alley their ship was shot down. Roger's CO asked for volunteers from the unit to attend the funeral. One of Roger's other classmates, Cleve, had joined A Battery, and the two of them decided to go. One of the other senior officers from A Battery accompanied them. Roger was glad for his presence. He took the responsibility of carrying the battalion's sympathies to Bart's wife. Roger stood close by her at the cemetery, but it was hard for him to look at her tear-stained face. It was a military funeral, complete with the firing of a salute and the formal presentation of the flag to the widow.

It was just in that short span of time that Roger and some of the other pilots began to realize just what it was that they were getting into. Maybe those fifty-fifty statistics they had laughed at as rumors weren't too far from the truth. One more of their's coming back in a box would put the percentage right on target for their battalion. And they had only been in country less than a month! A full tour was twelve months! Now that was something to worry about. On the way back from the funeral, the car was very quiet. Roger looked over at Cleve. He was staring out the window. Captain Orton was concentrating on his driving, or so it appeared. Cleve had gone through flight school with Bart, too. None of them had shed a tear at the funeral. Too scared, maybe, Roger thought. Maybe they thought it couldn't happen to them if they ignored it. Maybe Roger's ex-wife was smart. Their divorce was final now. It had been a welcome relief to Roger. He would do

his best to prove her wrong. It didn't look like much fun to come back in a box -- military funeral or not.

Soon after the funeral, Roger was packing up his gear. He was one of the first to go on his last thirty-day leave before shipping over. Roger lived on the west coast, and with winter rapidly advancing, he thought he might have trouble crossing the Rocky Mountains if he waited too long. As he stopped to gas up in Oklahoma City, his starter motor on the VW gave out. The gas station attendant was nice enough to give him a push to get him going again. After that, Roger vowed he would make Boise before he shut off the engine. Outside of Denver, Roger stopped at a cafe. It was very cold, and the wind was blowing hard. Roger left the car running. He stepped up to the counter. A young waitress approached and asked for his order. Roger ordered three cups of coffee -- black. She looked at him for a second, then turned to fill the order. She hesitated, then turned back to him. Did he want them to go? Yes, he did. As she brought the coffee, she looked around Roger at his car through the window. Were they all for him? Yes, he had a long way to go, he said.

Roger made out pretty well until he passed Laramie, Wyoming. Heading west, the road was flat and straight, and fatigue began to gain on him. It was a very dark night. No moon, or stars, and the wind blew hard. In places, it was hard to hold the VW on the road against the gusts. Roger ran his fingers along the edge of the visor. After much fumbling, he located a long straight pin he had placed up there a long time before. When he felt he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, he would jab the straight pin into his leg. This worked for a while, but soon the pin didn't produce much of a sensation. Roger rolled down his window and turned up the radio. This, too, worked for a while. Then he tried alternating. First the window and radio, then the pin. Finally, he could stay awake no longer. Finding a side road, Roger pulled just off the main highway, rolled the window down about an inch, and slept.

Roger awoke with a start. He was shivering, but the car was still running. He pulled back on the road, and continued west. The next two hours passed quickly, but then he began to nod off again. Again he tried radio, window and pin. But once again, it was very difficult to stay awake. All at once, something big and white in the road! Roger swerved to miss it, but there was another. He swerved again. The white blotches began to take form. He was in

the middle of a herd of antelope! Boy, they sure picked a fine night to wander around in the middle of the road, thought Roger. The scare did keep him awake, though.

Daylight came, and Roger continued driving. He felt better with the light. After the night before, it seemed that he was going to make Boise pretty easily. But it began to grow dark again as the sun dropped lower and lower on the mountains in the distance. But then, there were lights ahead. Boise, at last!

Roger was so relieved that he could scarcely believe that his mind wasn't playing tricks on him. But it was really Boise. Roger stopped at the first motel displaying a vacancy sign. Leaving the engine running, he went in and registered. Then he drove to his room. Grabbing only his shaving kit, he walked into the room and fell on the bed. Rolling over, he looked at his watch. Twenty-four hours. It had taken him just twenty-four hours to make Boise. He slipped out of his clothes, took a quick, hot shower, and fell into bed.

The next morning Roger called Vicki at the motel. She sounded happy to hear his voice. He explained the problem with his car. No, she wouldn't loan him her car, but she had a motorcycle. Vicki was able to get someone to watch the office while she came out and picked Roger up at the motel. They drove to Vicki's place where she introduced him to her cycle.

"Have you ridden one of these before?" Vicki asked.

Roger didn't know what to say. He needed the transportation, but he felt he had to tell the truth. "Yeah, uh,....but not very much. But it was a small one. Smaller than this one."

"It's not that tough," Vicki said as she showed him where the switches, etc., were located. "I'm sure you can handle it. Just no hotrodding, huh?"

"You can bet on that," Roger was relieved that she hadn't asked more questions about his experience. Roger returned to the motel, and jerked the starter motor out of the VW. Looking in the yellow pages, he called a couple places to find out if he could get the motor repaired that day. Getting a positive response to one of his calls, Roger drove into town and managed to locate the place without a great deal of trouble. The proprietor was an elderly gentleman.

"Do you mind if I watch while you work on it?" Roger asked. The old man seemed delighted that Roger wanted to watch. The hour or so it took for the repair was filled with conversation. The old man had guessed that Roger was in the service, and he told about some of his experiences in World War II, the war to end all wars. When the job was completed, the old man charged Roger much less than Roger expected to pay. Roger started to protest, but something in the man's eyes made Roger hesitate. Instead, he offered his hand. The old man took it warmly.

"Best of luck to you, son," the old man said, then turned and disappeared into the shadows of the shop. Roger's eyes followed the worn, blue overalls as they faded into the darkness of the shop. Roger stepped out into the sunshine. His thoughts swirled. Shaking his head, he thought if this was an example of the people I'm fighting for....and the motel proprietor and his wife in Fort Collins where he and Jim Wheatly stayed....well, he would do the best he could. He might be in a position where he could be flying support for someone in their family someday.....and since he would never know when that happened,.....he would just have to do his best every time out.....

Roger stayed in Boise a couple days. One evening, Vicki invited him out to her brother-in-law's for a family get together. Roger sincerely enjoyed the company. They were very warm people. But as the hour grew late, something in the back of his mind told him it was time to move on. He cornered Vicki in the kitchen. She had certainly been nice to him. And that was all their relationship ever amounted to -- good friends. They had never even kissed. Roger took her hands in his, but he felt at a loss for words. How could he express how much their time together, and her sister's hospitality meant to him? Roger kissed her gently, and thanked her warmly. Then he was out in the Boise night. Back to the motel, picked up his things, and back on the road again.

The rest of his leave was busy saying hello and good-bye to all the relatives. Roger did spend some time on the town, but most nights he was in early. He did date an old high school friend a couple times, but he just couldn't get into it. The old man in Boise even came to him several times in his dreams. He would never forget the look in the old man's eyes as he turned away from Roger. Not tears. Just,....vacant. What had he seen? The thoughts haunted Roger, but he didn't speak of it to anyone.

Then his leave was over. Roger's mother and father accompanied him to Sea-Tac airport in Seattle. A young friend of his dad's drove them all up. Roger's mom began to cry as he was preparing to board the commercial jet. He joked with her, and she made a strong attempt to control the tears. Roger's dad shook his hand. Roger looked at his dad's eyes. Concern was there. But not the same look Roger had seen in Boise.

Roger boarded the plane. As it rolled away from the loading ramp, he could still see his parents standing in the floor-to-ceiling window, waving. As Roger waved back, a lump rose in his throat. A last wave? Is that how they would remember him? Roger thought of Bart, his flight school classmate who was now in the ground in Oklahoma. Is this how he waved as his plane pulled out? Roger turned from the window. The thoughts rushed in, but Roger fought them back. No matter what, he would do his best to serve honorably. If his number came up, then that was it. He recalled one of the things his mother said while he was home. One of Roger's high school classmates had died in Vietnam. Or was it missing in action? It had been in the papers. And he was a helicopter pilot, too.

And then Roger thought of Lieutenant McMann, his platoon leader in A Battery. What was it McMann had said? It had been at Scotty's bar on a quiet evening shortly after Bart's funeral.

"Look at it this way," the Rock had said. "This is probably the only war our generation is gonna get. So, I guess we better make the best of it. Just think when you come back with all those medals on your chest. The women are gonna love you to death!" Rock had said it with a huge smile, but his eyes had been serious. Roger let the seat recline, and closed his eyes. He was ready to go. He had said good-bye to everyone....and then he slept.

When Roger's plane landed in Oklahoma, he felt like he was coming home. The first thing he did was rent a car. What else? It was a VW. They didn't have any white ones like his old one, but they did have a light brown one that was almost the same year.

When Roger arrived back on post, he had to take care of some paperwork. One of the offices he entered had an Army WAC working as a clerk. He smiled at her as he approached her desk. "Got some paperwork for you," he said as he produced the forms.

She returned his smile as she took the papers. She wasn't bad looking, Roger thought. Light, sandy hair, nice complexion, and slender. She had a warm smile. "Looks like you're with that bunch that is shipping out soon, sir."

"Yeah, we're trying to get in our last month of partying before we head out," Roger watched closely for a reaction.

"Is that right?" she said as she leafed through the papers. "I can have these ready for you tomorrow...or you can wait if you want, sir. There's some coffee in the back, if you'd like some."

Roger watched her eyes as she spoke. They almost seemed to sparkle. "Yes, I would like some coffee, and I certainly don't mind waiting." Roger followed her into an adjoining room. She poured a cup of coffee into a glass mug, and handed it over to Roger. As she did he glanced at her name tag. Leighton. "How long have you been at Sill?" Roger asked as he sipped the coffee.

"About six months." She smiled again, and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Roger looked at her over his coffee cup, "I'm sorry I haven't had business in your shop before." She blushed slightly and turned away.

"I'd better get busy on your papers," she said.

"There isn't any rush, Private Leighton," Roger said as she started out of the room. He couldn't help but notice her feminine curves even under the standard Army uniform.

She turned in the doorway, "You know, there's rules against officers dating enlisted personnel."

Roger laughed softly, "Yeah, and what's the penalty, Private Leighton? Do you think they might send me to Vietnam?" She nearly choked on her coffee as she laughed.

Roger was a little more serious as he asked the next question. "How about dinner tonight? Think we can find a place in Lawton that doesn't qualify for impact area rating?"

She looked directly at Roger, "I suppose we could manage that."

"Look, if you feel uncomfortable about it, let's just drop the whole thing right now. You are very attractive, and I would like to take you to dinner, but I don't want to get you in trouble. They can't touch me now. It's too close to departure date."

"I think I can stand the risk," she said with a smile.

Roger followed her back into the main office. "My next door neighbor took me to a German restaurant the other night. The food wasn't too bad, but I'll tell you right now that I don't know a thing about German food. Would you feel more comfortable if I asked him to join us?"

She turned to face Roger again, "That would be fine, if you want."

Roger picked up his hat, "Let me find out what he's doing tonight. He's not going over with us. He's been here at Fort Sill for quite awhile, I think. He might even have a date tonight."

She leaned against a desk, "Where can I meet you? You can't pick me up at the barracks, you know."

With the meeting place arranged, Roger left the office. He was flying on cloud nine. He couldn't believe he had a dinner date that night. He was anxious to get ahold of Mr. Baker, the warrant with the adjoining room in his quarters. Baker would be impressed, Roger was thinking. Just then he noticed a WAC officer passing him on the sidewalk. "Good afternoon, sir," he said automatically as he saluted. As soon as the words were out, Roger knew he had made a bad mistake. She wheeled around smartly with her hands on her hips.

"Do I look like a sir to you?" she barked. Roger stopped dead in his tracks.

He turned to face her, "No Ma'am. I apologize. I guess I was a little preoccupied."

She continued to stare at him. Finally she spoke, "It's all right this time, Mister, but you'd best be more careful." She seemed to bite off each word.

"Yes, Ma'am, I will," Roger promised. Then he saluted again. When she returned it, Roger turned and hurried down the street. Boy, gotta keep your mind on what's happening

around you, Roger thought. He hurried all the way back to his quarters. He wanted to catch Baker before he headed for the mess hall. Roger knocked on Ben Baker's door.

Ben opened the door. "Boy, am I glad to see you, BB," Roger blurted out.

"Hey, what's all the excitement? You look like you just got some stateside orders cut for you."

Roger explained the dinner date that was on for that night.

"Yeah," Ben said, "I'd like to join you. Are you sure I won't be in the way?" Ben produced a bottle from one of his dresser drawers. "How about a shot to loosen your tongue, Hunter? You look like you could use one."

"Come on, BB, you know I'm not used to this dating game. And I thought you might enjoy some feminine company. After all, it was you that introduced me to that German place."

"Yeah, yeah, I'd love to go with you. But there's a condition. I'll take my own car if you don't mind. And if you do mind, I'll still take my own car. Can I meet you there?"

With the meeting time arranged, BB poured Roger another drink. "Well, you look like you're doing a little better now. That should be enough courage. I don't want you gettin' off to bad start with this babe!" Ben grinned widely, and lifted his glass. "To a good evening, Hunter. Bottoms up!"

Roger showered. The hot water warmed him on the outside as the whiskey worked its magic from the inside. He felt very relaxed as he dressed. Before leaving, he glanced around the room. He straightened the bed, and picked up his scattered clothes. He paused at the door with his hand on the light switch. Sure not a very fancy place, he thought. Could even call it kind of dingy with the tile floor and the concrete block walls. Oh well, what the hell, Roger thought as he turned off the light and closed the door.

As Roger approached the meeting site, he could see someone waiting. As he slowed down, she turned, and waved as she recognized the car from Roger's description. Roger reached over and opened the door as he slowed and stopped. "Welcome aboard, Private Leighton," he said as she slid into the car.

"Look. Let's get one thing straight for tonight, huh? I won't stand being called private,...and I refuse to call you sir. Got that?" The words sounded harsh, and Roger was

taken aback. But then he looked at her. Her eyes were laughing.

"Got me on that one," he said, and she laughed.

"You'd better watch it," she said, "That may be just one of many!"

As they pulled away from the curb, Roger pointed to the handle on the dash of the VW, "Better hang on, this Thunderbird has some zip."

"Oh, right," she said, and grabbed onto the handle in mock fear. "How fast does it go?"

"Well, don't know if I've ever had it wound to the roof, but probably six in first, maybe 12 in second,...and if I push it, think we might hit forty in third. Now for the top end,...how much do you weigh? If it's less than a hundred and twenty, we can hit seventy. Otherwise we'll have to settle for under sixty."

Roger suddenly realized that he didn't even know her first name. The only name he had seen was on her name tag. "Uh, say, Miss Leighton. If I'm going to call you something besides your rank, it would be nice if I knew the other half of your name."

She turned toward him. "I was wondering how we were going to get around that. I only know you by your last name, too."

"If you're good on the Zodiac signs, we could start there."

She laughed again. "My name's Pam. Pam Leighton."

"Mine's Roger."

All the way to the restaurant they continued to tease one another about the car, and the big city of Lawton. With all the places to go, they wondered which one they should light up with their presence. As they entered Lawton proper, Pam said, "Well, I heard about a place that serves German fare. Seems a good-looking warrant walked into the office today with some cock-and-bull story about needing some paperwork. He was wearing wings, so I guessed he must have been one of those crazy flyboys. But you know what I hear about those flyboys? They have a real fondness for German food."

Roger chuckled, "And what else do you hear about those flyboys?"

Pam only smiled at him as they pulled into the parking lot at the restaurant. As they left the VW, Roger took Pam's arm, and guided her to the door. Even through her

jacket, her arm felt warm to his touch. Must be BB's whiskey, Roger thought.

BB was already waiting at a table when they entered the restaurant. Roger made the introductions. As Pam was sitting down, BB winked at Roger, and nodded in her direction. Roger only smiled. Let him think what he wants, Roger thought. So far the evening had been a lot more than he had even hoped for.

BB had an easy manner, and the three of them hit it off well. BB told some German jokes over supper that kept Pam in stitches. BB was not a pilot, but he had spent some time in the service in Germany. They ordered wine with dinner. By the second bottle, none of them was feeling any pain. As they finished the third bottle, Ben looked at his watch.

"Say, I sure hate to break up this party, but I've gotta get going. Got a long day tomorrow. One more for the road?" He waved the waitress over, and ordered three glasses of champagne. "This is always the way we finished good German meals when I was there." He raised his glass high as they were served. "A toast." Roger and Pam lifted their glasses in response. "To high flyers,...and low shooters."

Pam looked a little puzzled, but Roger caught the meaning. He returned BB's wink. Then Ben said good night and left. The table was suddenly quiet. Roger lit a cigarette. The restaurant was nearly empty. There were only two other couples left in the place. As Roger blew a long cloud of smoke, he caught Pam studying him. "Yes?" he said.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked. Her elbow rested on the table, and her chin nestled in the palm of her hand. "And what was that toast of Ben's?"

Roger leaned forward on the table, and turned to face her. "He's always making jokes about my flying." Roger raised his hand to imitate an airplane in flight. "This here's the high flyer, and this is the low shooter," he made motions with his other hand to simulate groundfire coming up, but falling short of the airplane.

"Oh, I get it," Pam finished her champagne.

"I promise, no more bad jokes tonight. What time is it?" Roger checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. "Almost twenty-two hundred," he said. "I got a busy day tomorrow, too. Let's call it a night."

As they drove back toward the post, Pam leaned against Roger's shoulder. Roger enjoyed her touch. He put his arm

around her shoulders, and felt a warm glow as she snuggled even closer.

Driving back to his quarters after dropping Pam off, Roger thought about the evening. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself. Pam was a very nice girl. Good-looking, too. But it was so short to ship-out date. He would hate to get something started that he couldn't finish. He just didn't feel right about the situation. He would have to tell her how he felt when he was with her again. After all, he did have to go back to her office for the paperwork. But that wasn't until Monday.

The next morning, Roger was roused from sleep by a banging on the door of his room. As he rolled out of bed, his head felt like it was going to explode. He made it to the door and opened it. There stood Dick, dressed in slacks and a sport shirt, topped off by his spare flight jacket. "Are you ready to go?" Dick asked.

Roger stepped back stupidly. "Please say again?" he said as he held his head in both hands.

"Oh, oh. And what have we been up to?" Dick entered the room and looked around. "Boy, if you had a party here, it must have been a tame one. No broken glass on the floor, and no party favors hanging from the ceiling." He turned back to Roger who had sat down on the bed. "Now I suppose you're going to tell me that you forgot..."

Roger rubbed his eyes, "Forgot what?"

"We're due in Ada at noon. For a picnic. Ring any bells?" Dick was standing with his hands on his hips.

"Picnic? Ohhh, for cryin' out loud. That is today?" Roger lay back on the bed. The fog in his head was beginning to clear. They had promised the girls that they would treat them to a picnic at the college. "Could you get me a couple of aspirin? They're in the top drawer in the chest-of-drawers. On the left."

Dick complied with Roger's request. "Well, time to get this show on the road. The battle plan's all laid, and we're not gonna get fogged out of this airport, Roger."

Close to an hour later they were on the road to Ada. Dick was driving while Roger slumped in the passenger seat. By the time they reached the college, Roger was feeling much better. It was a beautiful sunny day, but cold. The kind that turns your nose and cheeks red. They picked the girls up at school, but instead of a picnic, they went out to Helen's home. She lived in a small frame house near the college with her parents. Her parents weren't home when

they arrived. Helen fixed sandwiches, and they drank Coke they had picked up on the way. They laughed and joked while they ate.

After lunch, Vicki winked at Roger. "What say we go for a drive?" she asked. Roger caught the wink, and readily agreed. Dick and Helen wanted to be alone. Roger and Vicki loaded into Roger's VW and headed nowhere in particular. Vicki guided them to a large park. They left the VW and walked among the oak trees. The air was cold, but Vicki pressed against Roger as they walked. She wore a light blue skirt and a heavy knit sweater, topped by a light jacket. They made a large circle and turned back toward the car. Roger was shivering.

Suddenly Vicki broke from him, and raced toward the car, "Bet I can beat you!" she tossed over her shoulder. Roger broke into a sprint, but her head start was too much. She beat him easily. Their breaths puffed into the frosty air. "How about some heat and a good song?" Vicki asked as she swung open the car door.

"I'm all for that," Roger said as he slid in beside her. They kissed long and hard. Roger slipped his hand under Vicki's sweater. As he touched bare skin, she jumped and bit his lip. Then she leaned against the door, laughing.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said as she covered her mouth with her hand. "I am really sorry, but your hand was so cold."

Roger felt his lip, "Maybe we should have brought some coffee along."

Vicki slid up against him. "Give me your hand. I can warm it up." She took his hand between hers, and rubbed it briskly. Then she placed it under her sweater, and caught her breath as it again touched her bare skin. "Whew," she breathed through clenched teeth, "It's not near so bad now. How's your lip?" Roger kissed her heavily, pressing her against the seat. It wasn't long before the windows steamed up on the car. The cold north wind continued to rustle the last of the oak leaves clinging to the trees.

Late that night, Roger and Dick were returning to Fort Sill. They had talked little since they'd left Ada. Roger was driving, and Dick slumped in the passenger seat. They had taken the girls to a dance at the college, and had stayed until late. As they rounded a slight curve, the road before them stretched straight as a string.

"Promise me one thing?" Dick asked.

"Sure. What's that?" Roger responded.
"Watch out for armadillos?"

Reports on classmates in flight school trickled in. The oldest in the class was one of the first to go. Then others, one or two at a time, depending on how far the news was passed around before it was heard. Those with wives were often the first to hear. The grapevine seemed to work best among the wives because they kept in touch. Often it was hard to believe that they were talking about deaths. Once in a great while injury reports were also heard, but they were a rarity. It was as if nothing happened, or someone was killed. Roger, Dick and Cleve sat around the Blade & Wing one evening talking over the latest reports. Cleve had just heard news on several of their classmates. Some of it was stateside assignments, but the news centered on those lost in Vietnam. The number of deaths bothered each of them. When someone was lost, they recalled some of the times they had spent with this individual. As the evening wore on, the stories grew shorter, and the silences longer.

Finally Roger stood up. "Gotta go guys," he said as he donned his jacket.

"Where to?" Cleve asked. "The night is still young."

Roger picked up his cigarettes from the table, "Yeah, I know. I think that's why I'm leaving. This could get real depressing, talking about classmates that bought the farm."

"You're right, you know," Dick chipped in. "Shall we head into Lawton?"

"You guys go ahead," Roger said. "I think I need a little time by myself. OK?" Roger left the table. The air was cold as he stepped outside. It was already dark. As he walked to his car, he looked up at the stars. When he was leaving, he had intended to call Pam, but now he wasn't so sure. He backed the car out of the stall, then hesitated. He drove it back into the stall. There was a pay phone next to the Blade & Wing. He picked up the receiver as he fished in his pocket for coins. There was a dime. Felt like two of 'em, Roger thought. If I don't hit on the first one, I won't need another one anyway. The phone on the other end rang several times. A female's voice answered.

"Hello?"

Roger's breath hung in the air as he spoke, "Hello. Is Pam there?"

"Hang on, I'll see," the voice said.

Roger was about to change his mind and hang up the receiver when Pam came on the line.

"Hi, Pam. Roger. Look...., uh....," he couldn't seem to find the words. Pam waited patiently. "Look, I'd like to see you tonight. But I gotta warn you, I'm not in a great mood. How about a quiet beer somewhere?"

"Sounds fine to me," Pam sounded serious. "Meet me at the same place?"

"Sure," Roger said, "Tell me when."

"Can you give me ten minutes?"

"Sure can, Pam. Thanks," Roger hung up the phone, and then wondered if he was doing the right thing.

Pam was waiting when Roger arrived. She slid lightly into the VW, and looked closely at Roger. "You OK? It sounded like something was bothering you on the phone."

"Yeah, a couple things, I guess. You know a quiet place we can go for a beer?"

Pam smiled, "Yes, I know a very quiet place, so I came prepared. I brought a bottle of wine." When Roger gave her a puzzled look, she continued. "I might only be guessing, but I think I know one of the things that's bothering you. You're due to ship out in about a month, right? And you're wondering if you should continue seeing me. Pretty close to the mark?"

Roger was at a loss for words. He pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. "When did you come up with this conclusion?" he asked.

"Boy, you pilots may think you're good, but you have a lot to learn about women." She laughed. Then more seriously, "Roger, I sort of felt it the other night when we went out for dinner. I had a good time, and I wanted to tell you that it was OK, but I was afraid you might misunderstand. See, my boyfriend is in the artillery. But he already shipped over. That's why I got stationed at Sill. I remember how he was when he was about to go. I know it's hard. Anyway, if you want to spend the evening together, then it's OK with me. And no strings, OK?" She looked at Roger, waiting for an answer.

Roger smiled. He just couldn't believe this girl. Either it was one helluva line, or she was really serious. She looked away.

"Or, mister pilot, we can just spend the evening sitting in this cold VW with the poorest excuse for a heater I've ever seen!"

Roger couldn't help but laugh the way she said it. "OK, OK, I'm convinced," he said, and pulled back onto the road. Then he turned the VW around and headed for his quarters. He had been assigned to the married officers' quarters because he was married when he arrived at Fort Sill. They had decided to leave him there since he was so close to leaving, even after his divorce was final. At the BOQ (Bachelor Officers' Quarters), there was a main entrance with a desk that was manned twenty-four hours a day. Base policy restricted women from those quarters. But at the married officers' quarters, there were no desks, several entrances, and discreetness on the part of those living there. Roger had seen couples come and go at will, but it was never flaunted.

As they pulled up and parked, Roger turned to Pam, "You know, I think maybe you're setting this all up so I'll get sent to Vietnam."

When she laughed, the wine bottle slipped from her hands. As she bent quickly to catch it, she bumped her head on the windshield with a resounding whack.

Roger caught her shoulders, and pulled her to him, "And then again, maybe I brought you over here so I could beat you on the head with a windshield." Pam laughed, but there were tears in her eyes. Roger hugged her again, "You OK?"

Pam rubbed her head, "I think I'll survive, sir. Merely a minor brush with death."

They got out of the car and walked in. Roger's room was on the second floor. Roger expected the hall to be full of officers that would recognize Pam, but his fears were groundless. The place seemed deserted. When they entered his room, Roger was embarrassed by the lack of furniture. There was only one chair, a desk, a chest-of-drawers, and the bed. The bed itself took up over half the single room.

"I don't even have a TV, you know. But I do have a radio!"

"Woeee," Pam said, "Now that's what I call high living!" And she laughed.

As they sat on the bed, Roger told her about the discussion earlier that evening with Cleve and Dick. About their classmates that were gone. Pam listened in silence. Then she kissed him warmly.

"Look, Roger, I don't want you to think I'm forward, but I think I know something that'll take your mind off all that. For a few minutes, anyway. Since you were staying in the married quarters, I took the liberty of talking to Ben

about you. He told me about your divorce..., " her voice trailed off. Roger turned to face her. She looked apologetic.

"That's OK," he said, and took her in his arms. "I think I understand."

"I hope so. I told him if things got bad I'd beat on the door between your rooms!" Pam rolled away from Roger, laughing.

"What!" Roger sat bolt upright. "You rat! I hope he's over at the door right now, peeping through the keyhole!"

Pam lay face down on the bed, laughing. "Me too! 'Cause he said he'd be home tonight, and I told him if things worked right, I'd bring some German wine."

Roger shook his head, "I can't believe you. And now I find out Ben was in on the plot. You two oughta be ashamed!"

Pam rolled over and faced him. "I know we should. But I don't think either of us is!"

They invited Ben over. He brought a couple more bottles of wine with him. When he came in, he was wearing his robe and slippers.

"Hi, Roger," he said as he set the wine on the dresser. "How's every little thing?"

The teasing continued, as the three of them sat in Roger's room drinking wine, and eating some German pastries that also magically appeared from Ben's room. When the conversation died down, Ben quietly slipped back into his own room, locking the door between their rooms.

Final preparations for their overseas shipment continued. The Battery had its assignment of conex containers, large metal containers in which their gear would be shipped, and gear had to be packed into the proper containers. It wasn't long, and the advance party shipped out, leaving the rest with little to do. It was now that most of the remainder of the Battery took their last leaves before their overseas departure. Although it was only November, Roger made out his Christmas cards. He tried to include a short note in each one. He considered it practical. With the losses his flight class was sustaining in Vietnam, he had a good chance to become a statistic. He continued to date Pam. Ben had become a helpful ally in this operation. They also enjoyed each other's company, like a family, and the times were pleasant for all of them.

All too soon, the day approached. Roger turned in his rental car. He was sorry to see it go. He had an

understanding with Pam that he would spend his last night in the states with the rest of the pilots in the Battery. She had understood. They had their own party the previous night. For their last day at Fort Sill, all the members of A Battery were given their first taste of Vietnam, literally. The weekly malaria pill that they would take their whole tour there was handed out. They were to take it that night before they went to bed. There were also warnings about the effect of the pill. Cleve was sure they contained saltpeter. Dick said it was to counter the effects of all the alcohol they consumed before they left. What the pills did was to force each and every one to spend a lot of time on the toilet!

Scotty's bar was full of the A Battery pilots that night. There was a great deal of carrying on. Mostly everyone there got at least a little drunk -- even Father Fair. Roger watched himself closely, because he didn't want to face a hangover in the morning. When he said something about this to Rock, he just laughed.

"Why ruin your last chance to have a hangover for what could be a long time?" was his response. The Rock always believed in doing things up right, but he could probably hold his liquor better than anyone in the Battery. He sat right on the same barstool that he usually occupied at the end of the bar, and proceeded to get smashed. The only time he left that stool was to go to the latrine, or to play an occasional game of pool.

As Roger returned to the BOQ that night (all of them had out-processed, so everyone stayed in the BOQ that night) and got ready for bed, he noticed the present from Pam on the desk. It was a very small package. He had promised not to open it until he was on the plane, but he decided to open it now. Slowly he unwrapped the silver paper. It was a velvety box, like something jewelry would come in. Roger opened the box, and lifted out the contents. In it was a note that read, "Good Luck, Mister!", and a Saint Christopher's medallion. Roger turned the small medal over. On the back it read very simply, "Pam," in fancy block letters. Roger was truly pleased. He laid it next to his dog tags. He would put them both on in the morning. Then he checked all his gear to be sure everything would be ready to go. His last act before going to bed was to take the malaria pill.

33: Incoming

The next morning, all those that remained of the Battery were bussed to Tinker Air Force Base. Standing next to Cleve on the tarmac, Roger looked around them. Approximately 150 personnel waited to be loaded on the C-141 Starlifter. Its huge vertical fin seemed to reach halfway to the sky. It might have reached all the way as far as Cleve was concerned. He was still a little drunk from the night before. The enlisted personnel of the unit were loaded on first. As Roger looked around him, he thought they might as well have been on a Boy Scout outing. But then he changed his mind as he looked closely at the faces. The look of anticipation was there. There were very few "second-timers" in their unit -- those who had been over to Vietnam before.

When they entered the plane, it was like a huge auditorium. The flight crew's deck was way above the deck level where the passengers were seated in nylon fabric chairs. There was only a single window. Everyone sat and belted in. The floor began to vibrate as first one engine, then another was fired up. The plane began to roll.

"Wonder how long this is going to take?" Roger almost had to yell at Cleve to make him hear.

Cleve rolled his eyes, "Think I care? It's all good time, now."

Roger nodded. Good time meant they were now counting down from 365, the number of days in a normal tour to Vietnam. Soon they were airborne, and a line formed at the single window to get a bird's eye view of the ground. Although helicopters were the primary element in this unit, many of those assigned to the unit never had the chance to fly. Roger slumped in his seat, and slept.

When Roger awoke, Cleve was fooling with the seat between them. Then with a flourish, he removed the armrest. Roger did the same on his side. With the empty seat between them, one of them could actually lay down and sleep. A call came over the public address system in the aircraft, "Anyone on board from Washington State? If so, head on up to the cockpit. You'll get a chance for a last look of your home state, for a while." Roger was glad they added the "for a while" on the end of that statement. He climbed the ladder to the flight deck, and approached the cockpit.

The pilots of the 141 pointed out far below them, "It's supposed to be right there." Roger nodded. It was almost totally obscured by clouds, but as he looked for familiar landmarks, he was able to make out the southern tip of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. He pointed it out to the pilots. Roger stayed for a minute to chat with the flight crew. He found out that their next stop was Alaska, where they would refuel. Then it would be on to Danang, RVN (Republic of Vietnam). Roger asked about the time it would take to get there. They would be in Alaska in a couple hours, the pilots responded. But it would take a long time to get from there to RVN. Roger quickly added the hours in his head. Something like twenty hours in the air from Tinker, he figured. When he returned to his seat, he found that box lunches had been passed out. Cleve pointed under Roger's seat. Roger picked up the box, and thanked Cleve. Then he opened it. It was a nice lunch. Fried chicken, roll, salad. Reminded Roger of a Kentucky Fried Chicken lunch.

When the plane landed in Alaska, the passengers had to disembark for the refueling process. Roger looked out the door. It was dark, and snow was being pushed by a stiff wind. Here they were, dressed in tropical zone gear, being asked to walk a quarter mile to the terminal in a blizzard! There were a lot of complaints, but even so the journey was made by all even though some of the troops didn't even have a jacket. The "terminal" was simply a hangar with a single stove set in the middle of a large open area. The entire Battery tried to crowd around the stove. Roger soon tired of this game. He asked an Air Force crewman if there was a phone nearby. The crewman pointed it out. Roger dialed a familiar area code, and the number. When the operator came on line, Roger told her it was a collect call. The phone rang several times before a sleepy voice answered.

"Dad! Hey, dad, is that you?" Roger asked. It was his father. When his dad had awakened enough to understand who it was, Roger asked, "I'll bet you can't guess where I am now. Would you believe Alaska?" His dad couldn't believe it, but he was happy to hear Roger's voice. Roger explained that he was on his way over, and that they had stopped in Alaska to refuel. They talked for only a few minutes. Roger's mom wasn't home. She had gone somewhere for the evening. It was just as well, Roger thought. It would probably have upset her, knowing her son was on his way to war.

Soon the passengers were reboarded, and they were off again. On this leg of the trip, Roger and Cleve took turns sleeping in the makeshift bed they had made. Once when Roger awoke, Cleve again pointed under his seat. There were two box lunches there this time. When Roger asked about the number, Cleve said that he had slept through two meals. Roger ate one, and gave the other to Cleve. Roger wasn't very hungry.

It was also on this leg of the trip that the Hong Kong flu was discovered among the troops. By the time they were making their approach into Danang, over half the personnel on board were showing symptoms of the disease. It was a real zoo, with the limited number of latrines that were on board. Even the head provided for the flight crew was pressed into service.

They dropped into Danang early in the morning. It was still dark when they landed. It was spooky among the huge revetments on the airfield. The revetments were constructed to protect the aircraft from incoming rounds on the airfield. These were tall, to protect the tall aircraft, Cleve explained. It was damp and chilly, as they waited for further instructions. Apparently someone was to meet them, but they hadn't arrived yet. Probably our sawed-off CO, thought Roger. Late for the arrival of his own unit. They would probably be hit and wiped out by a single shell, mentioned Cleve. It would be the shortest unit history in the records of the Vietnam war. They found some humor in this line, and continued joking about it.

At last the unit was divided into groups and loaded onto Chinook helicopters for the flight up to the Battery area. It was located at a place called Camp Eagle, near the village of Phu Bai. The Chinook was complete with door gunners. Roger's first aerial view of Vietnam was framed by the legs of the door gunner, his box of ammo for his machine gun, and the machine gun itself. First there were steep hills, which quickly gave way to flat, semi-flooded plains. Word was passed around that the ship on which they were riding had engine trouble, and would be landing in Phu Bai rather than Camp Eagle.

Cleve poked Roger in the ribs, "Lucky this thing's got two engines, huh? I'd feel real naked if we crashed now. No weapons, don't know where we are."

"You don't suppose this is some sort of omen, do you? I mean, it's our first flight in Vietnam, and we've already got engine trouble." Roger had to communicate this twice to

Cleve over the noise of the helicopter. Cleve just shook his head, and made an obscene sign at the floor of the Chinook. They did land in Phu Bai, and were trucked to their unit at Camp Eagle. The truck ride didn't take long.

They were to move into their assigned areas that day. Their gear had arrived, and it was time to go to work. One of the first orders of the day was to build a "hot box". This was for storing clothes. A light bulb was wired into the box, and it was allowed to burn all the time. This kept the clothes dry enough that they wouldn't mildew. Without the hot box, clothes would literally rot away. Folding cots were set up in the brand new "hootches". Cots were equipped with four short poles that rose vertically from each corner. Once the cot was set up, it was covered with mosquito netting.

The hootches, or living quarters, were plywood and screen buildings constructed on a sixteen by thirty-two foot frame foundation. The lower half of the walls were plywood, and the upper halves were screen. There were board shutters hinged at the top of the windows that could be swung upward to provide shade, or could be lowered over the window to keep out the rain. Roofs were tin, and sandbags were added on the tin roofs to keep them from blowing off in a hard wind.



Typical hootch.

Roger was assigned to one of the officers' hootches. Officers in that hootch were pilots who made up the two fire teams of the 1st Platoon. Since there were four ships per platoon, eight pilots were housed in the hootch. There was a door at each end of the hootch, and it was important that the direct line between these two doors was not blocked. The reason given was that it might be necessary to leave the hootch quickly in pitch darkness.

A shower had already been built by the advance party, and a large single tank was hoisted to its roof by a mobile crane. An immersion heater was placed in this tank. Each evening the immersion heater was started to warm the water in the tank. Shower heads, each with a single faucet, were rigged on the walls of half the building. There was no

temperature control. Whatever the temperature of the water in the tank was what reached the shower heads. If the water was too hot, it was necessary to wait until the tank cooled off. The floor of the shower was evenly spaced boards, and from there the waste water drained into the soil. The other half of the shower building had plywood counters. At first, each person had to supply their own mirror, but eventually these were added to the bare studs on the wall. Each person used his own plastic wash basin for shaving. There were electric lights installed in each of the hootches and the shower building. These were simply bare bulbs hung from rafters in the buildings.

Human waste was a real problem, since the concentration of personnel on the camp could lead to serious health concerns. "Piss tubes" were appropriately located. They were a metal cylinder, usually artillery canisters, that was placed on end in the ground. The open end was often covered with screen. Some said that the screen was to discourage flies, while others maintained that it was only to keep the user from getting splashed. This controversy was never settled... Excrement was more of a problem. Anywhere from two to five-hole outhouses were constructed from plywood. But they weren't placed over holes in the ground, like a normal outhouse. Fifty-gallon barrels were cut in half and placed beneath the "holes". The waste collected in the barrels was burned on a regular schedule. This produced a black, smokey pall over the camp on still days. It also produced a never-forgettable, lingering odor.

To keep insects down around the camp, it was regularly sprayed with insecticides. This was usually done in the evening by a specially-equipped helicopter. Cans of insecticide were also available at supply rooms for use in the hootch. Ants were a big problem unless they were sprayed frequently.

Bunkers had to be constructed. This was a top priority after the arrival of the main force. Metal culverts were often used for the structure, and a couple layers of sandbags were added on the sides and tops. Rats, a common nuisance, found the bunkers to be ideal home sites.

All the pilots arriving in-country were temporarily grounded. At least this was the word that was handed out. Cleve suspected that there was too much bunker building to do, to let the officers go off flying. Supposedly this grounding was to allow the personnel to acclimate. Cleve also translated this. It was intended to teach everyone how

to sweat, drink, and take salt tablets -- most noticeably when they were building bunkers.

In addition to flying, all of the officers were also assigned other tasks within the Battery. Roger's first assignment was vector control officer. Roger didn't have the vaguest idea what vectors were when he was assigned the task, but soon learned that this meant rats and mice. And there were lots to control. Poison was not an acceptable means of control. Naturally, Roger asked Cleve about this policy, since it seemed that they could spray all kinds of poisons in the air to control the insects. Why not poison for rats? Cleve explained it very matter-of-factly. If the camp should be cut off from all sources of supply for a long period of time, then they would have to resort to the rats for a food supply. If poison was available, then some of the meat might be tainted. Thus, rats had to be controlled by manual means. Roger shook his head, and went to supply to requisition some traps. Leave it to Cleve to find the real reason for everything!

It was periodically required of officers to report on the progress of their assigned tasks. Roger had already taken some heat from the CO for his failure to do something right. And since the CO was noted for his ability to stand before the pilots for long periods of time, called a briefing, and tap on a map with a plastic overlay covered with marks and arrows, Roger decided to follow his example with the vector control program. Roger made a map of the Battery area, including hootches, the mess hall, bunkers, etc. Then he made a plastic overlay. On this he sketched the major infiltration routes of the enemy (rats), and the major concentration of sympathizers (mice). Then, in a different color, he sketched the battle plan in which he identified the ambush sites (trap locations). He used other colors on the overlay to show how he shifted his limited resources to meet the enemy's changes in tactics. When he was called upon to make his report on the vector control program, Roger was well rehearsed. It was a real hit with his fellow officers at the meeting, but he wasn't sure how the CO reacted, because he didn't say anything, or even crack a smile during the entire presentation. This was the only report Roger had to give on the vector control program.

While in charge of the vector control program, Roger was roused from his bunk by Rock late one night. It seemed that Roger's latest campaign included traps under Rock's hootch. The ambush produced a casualty, but a loud one, and

its squeals woke everyone in the hootch. Afraid to bring in the heavy artillery, like a .38 or an M-16, Roger took it on hand-to-hand. Subduing took a little doing, since it was wedged under the edge of the hootch which had a very small clearance between the floor and the ground. After much beating with a wooden club on the floors and foundation under the hootch, Roger finally scored a direct hit. Thereupon, he carried the enemy into Rock's hootch for a confirmation on the kill, and a properly identified body count. Rock mumbled something about pilots needing their sleep, and promptly threw Roger, rat and all out the door.

The CO effectively cancelled Roger's participation in the program when the job was assigned to an NCO (non-commissioned officer) in the unit. The CO said that he decided it took too much work for a pilot to perform in addition to his flying duties.

Flight training started the next week for the new arrivals. It began with training on handling loaded aircraft. The combined heat and humidity severely reduced the operating envelope of the aircraft. Helicopters are not noted for their great efficiency, anyway, and their small wings (just the rotor blades) suffer from the reduced lift of these conditions. While it was neat to pick a fully-loaded chopper up to a ten-foot hover, spin it around a couple times for clearing turns (making sure you weren't going to take off into someone landing), and blast off with a near-vertical takeoff, this was just not possible in Vietnam. First, there was the additional load. While they had carried passengers in stateside training, it wasn't two gunners, body armor for all the crew, two M-60 machine guns, enough machine gun ammo to kill four regiments, fuel for a 90-minute flight, a load of rockets, and food for three days. Periodically, the pilots would go through the gear the crewchief and gunner brought aboard the aircraft to get rid of extra weight. When the choice came down to food and water or body armor, the food and water usually went.

Takeoffs were a thing of beauty to watch. The takeoff alley had to be reasonably level and free of obstacles (until the pilots became adept at dodging stationary objects, or were under direct mortar fire...). Then the pilot would attempt to hover the ship. If he could, great. The takeoff could usually be handled smoothly by easing the ship forward until it gained enough airspeed to enter translational lift, and it began to fly. If it couldn't be hovered, and all extra weight had been stripped, then the

takeoff was made by bouncing the ship across the ground until sufficient airspeed had been gained that it could be coaxed off the ground.

These takeoffs required very smooth handling of the controls, even though it looked like someone was really cowboying the aircraft. It was a touch that was only learned through experience, and some of the first attempts were abysmal failures. The pilots used all sorts of personal techniques in getting their machines airborne. Cleve always thought screaming at it at the top of his voice helped. However, the crew got upset when he would forget and push his intercom switch while screaming at the chopper. It would nearly blast them out of their flight helmets.

What was embarrassing during one of these "running takeoffs" was to get to the end of the takeoff alley, and realize that the ship just wasn't going to fly. Everything was brought to an abrupt halt, and, as the cloud of dust swirled, the pilot would have to wait patiently until it settled enough that he could see to hover back and try it again.

Radio procedures also produced some errors. Each ship had three radios that the pilots had to monitor all the time. The trick was to set the volumes at different levels, so the pilot could tell automatically which set the calls were coming in on. The emergency, or guard, channel was also supposed to be monitored, but when things got hectic, it was usually turned off. Ships flew in teams of two, sometimes called a fire team, but usually called a section. One ship was "lead", the other was "wing". Each pilot in the unit had his own call sign. This was the unit name followed by a number that identified his platoon, and a letter that designated the individual pilot. A Battery finally decided on the unit call sign of Dragon. In the first platoon, Roger's call sign was Dragon One Two Echo.

Unit combat tactics were also practiced during this orientation period. Since Aerial Rocket Artillery was a new concept to the Division, the calls, or fire missions, weren't frequent at first. With a normal section of aircraft, it was the lead who decided the attack plan on the target, and did all the talking on the radio with the ground contact. It was the wing ship's job to cover the lead aircraft and follow his instructions to fire on the target.

The Battery's job was to support the infantry. This meant standing by waiting for the units in the field to call. When the infantry units got into contact with the

enemy, they would call for help. The call would be relayed to the Operations section in the Battery who would scramble a section. While the section was starting their choppers, someone from operations would run out with the unit's name, approximate location and radio frequency to use to contact it. With this information, the section was on its way. Lead ship would attempt to contact the unit as soon as possible. Some missions were close to camp, but others were in the mountains where radio range was reduced.

Once in radio contact with the unit on the ground, lead would get a situation report from him, positively identify his position, and set up the attack. To identify the friendly position on the ground, smoke grenades were used. The friendly unit would pop a smoke grenade, and lead would identify the color. Sometimes the friendlies were under the jungle canopy, and couldn't be seen from the air without smoke. On occasion, a signal mirror was used, but this was usually only when the unit on the ground ran out of smoke. Mirror flashes resembled muzzle flashes when viewed through brush or jungle canopy.

Once the target was identified, lead ship would roll in to fire on it with rockets. Depending on the location of the friendlies, other units in the area, etc., the door gunners may or may not be cleared to fire by the pilot. He would usually use them if it was at all possible because their fire helped to cover the ship when it "broke". "Breaking" happened when the ship finished its rocket run, and turned away from the target. This was when it was most vulnerable because it would have its side or belly toward the target. And the enemy sometimes got a little hostile when they were being fired at with rockets. If they fired back with tracers, they could be seen coming up from the target. This was especially true at night. The wing ship would follow lead during lead's rocket run, but would usually break off further away from the target. That way he could cover lead with rocket fire while lead was breaking, but wouldn't give the enemy gunners much of a chance to hit him by breaking further away from the target.

Before the pilots could participate in combat missions, there was a unit policy that required each one to write a will. When this was passed down to Roger and Cleve, Roger was a little miffed. "Why do they want us to write a will? That seems like a negative approach to this whole ball game."

Cleve already had out a pencil and paper. "Come on, Roger, my boy. Think about it. Lots of guys are married over here. Take the operations officer, for example. Everyone knows he was fooling around with another woman at Fort Sill. Well, let's say this woman writes him a letter. Or a bunch of them, that he keeps. He gets dusted. The rules say that without a will, all...note I said all...of his personal effects get sent to his next of kin. Well, his next of kin is his wife, usually. So here she gets all these letters. Now that does not reflect great credit on the soldiers of our dear country. So, how to avoid it, you ask. Simple. If the guy has a will, then the instructions in it are followed. Usually some statement about all things not mentioned in the will can be disposed of. So the letters get dumped. Understand?"

"OK, OK, I see what you're talking about. Do you have to specify an executor of the estate, too?"

"I would strongly advise against that. He might get dusted with ya', and then you'd be in the same fix as with no will," Cleve continued to write as he spoke to Roger.

"There. That oughta do it."

Roger hadn't written anything yet. "That was quick, Cleve. What did you write?"

"Not much. Just wrote my medals should go home. Everything else can be disposed of."

Roger started to write, "No wonder you finished it so quick."

The following day it poured rain. This didn't alter the training schedule except when a couple heavy squalls hit, and reduced visibility to almost zero. But the rain also collapsed one of the officers' bunkers. The CO was hopping mad about that, and sent the XO to take care of the problem. When the XO arrived at the first platoon's hootch, there was only Roger, Cleve, and Lieutenant Green there. He proceeded to march them over to Headquarters Battery to view the proper way to build a bunker. After the show, the XO walked off.

"What a parade," Lt. Green said, as they watched the XO stomp off. "Sure hope nobody was watching."

"Dreamer," Cleve returned. "I saw some of the mechanics pointing at us from their hootch."

Green turned back toward the Battery area, "Well, let's get with it. We gotta at least build it good enough that it won't fall down in the next rain storm."

Cleve followed him, "Yeah, I know. But if he could just wait until we fire some more rockets, we could fill the boxes they come in with dirt for the walls. It would sure be a lot easier than making sandbags."

When some of the other pilots returned from flight training, they pitched in to help. This single bunker was used by all the pilots in all three flight platoons. The next day it was completed. It was a good thing, because two nights later, incoming 122 mm. rockets brought the unit out of bed. All the pilots piled into the bunker. As the last ones were entering, the air raid siren went off.

"Kind of late, aren't they?" Cleve mumbled. The pilots could hear two of their choppers cranking up on the flight line. "Wonder who's got the watch tonight?"

Rock was scrunched up next to Cleve, "It's all the third herd's tonight. Hope they find 'em."

Everything got quiet. There was some low conversation in the bunker, but this soon died out. Everyone was tired, and ready to go back to bed, but they had to wait until the all clear sounded. Someone produced a flashlight, "Say...look at all these rat tracks in here!"

Cleve whispered to Roger, "And if you were a rat, where would you hide during a rocket attack?"

Roger's stomach growled. Cleve turned to him, "I heard that. I'm hungry, too. You had any care packages from home lately?"

"Yeah. Got one this week. It was full of those chocolate chip cookies you like," Roger knew that Cleve's weak spot was food.

"Did you bring 'em with ya'?" Cleve was definitely interested.

"No, but they're only forty feet away in the hootch. Want some? I can run get 'em."

Cleve peeked out the end of the bunker. "Well, it looks clear out there."

Roger got up, and adjusted his steel pot on his head. "Lemme out. I'll run get 'em." Roger slipped out of the bunker, and into the hootch. Just as he approached his area, he could hear the whooshing rattle of an incoming rocket. As he dove to the floor, his steel pot came off and bounced across the floor. The whoosh of the rocket passed overhead, but sounded like it was close. As Roger raised his head, there was a deafening blast. The hootch floor shook, and Roger made himself as flat as he could. It sounded like the rocket had hit the other end of the Battery

area. Roger scrambled around on the floor, trying to find his helmet in the dark. He didn't know where his flashlight was, and all the lights were out. The generator was always shut down during an attack at night. He located his steel helmet under his cot, and got the can of cookies out of his foot locker. Then he hustled back to the bunker.

Cleve was standing in the door of the bunker. "Whew! That was close, baby. I could see the flash, and now it looks like it started a fire. All I could think of when that thing came in was you out there gettin' the cookies. I could see the headlines, 'Aspiring Army aviator killed during a rocket attack while trying to retrieve some cookies from home'. Some headline, huh?" Cleve looked closely at Roger. "Were you scared?"

Roger handed Cleve the can of cookies. His hands were shaking. "No, I wasn't scared, but I'm going to have a heck of a time explaining how I lost the skin on my nose. Nobody will believe I did it on the floor of the hootch!"

Cleve already had the cookies open, "Yeah, you're right. They wouldn't believe that. Don't think I'd mention it, if I was you." He pushed another cookie into his mouth.

Roger held out his hand, "Come on, pig-o, hand over the can." Cleve reluctantly complied.

The next morning, they found that the rocket that came so close to their area had hit the Chinook parking area across the road from their Battery. One ship had burned, while a couple others were damaged.

During Roger's first combat missions, he was assigned as Lt. Green's pilot. Green was the aircraft commander (A/C). The A/C usually sat in the left seat. They flew wing on Lt. Rock. Cleve was Rock's pilot. Green was a nice guy to fly with, Roger thought. He usually let Roger do the flying, while he handled the radios. As the training missions continued, Roger got the hang of shooting rockets. Green readily acknowledged that Roger could probably outshoot anyone in the platoon.

On a mission near the camp, an infantry unit had taken fire from a cave on the opposite hillside. The country here was cleared of trees. The infantry unit wanted the ARA to fire into the cave. Rock tried several times, but couldn't hit the opening of the cave. Finally he called over the radio, and told Green to try it. Green turned the ship over to Roger, and said over the intercom, "Think you can do it?"

"Maybe. But we gotta get close," Roger took the controls. "We don't have much room to maneuver. That draw's too narrow."

"Go ahead and drive in. I'll ask the infantry unit for covering fire," Green said over the intercom. While he talked to the infantry on the radio, Roger set up his approach. Coming over the infantry unit, he almost zeroed his airspeed. Then making a pedal turn to line up on the target, he put the ship into a shallow dive. As they closed on the cave, he asked Green, "How far away from the ship do the rockets arm themselves?"

"Somewhere between fifty and a hundred meters," was the reply.

Roger concentrated on the target. Holding steady he checked his trim. He punched off a pair of rockets, and broke steeply to the left along the bottom of the draw. The rockets missed the cave entrance.

Rock's voice came over the radio, "I don't think we can hit that thing."

Green quickly returned, "Hey, give a guy a chance. You had several passes, you know."

"Roger that," Rock answered, and clicked his mike button twice to signal acknowledgement.

Green was on the intercom again. "Think you can do it, Echo?" he said to Roger. Roger pressed the mike button twice as he again concentrated on the target. This time he drove in even closer. They were almost on top of the target when Roger punched the fire button. The rockets left their tubes with a swish. Roger had to bank very steeply this time to avoid flying into the ground. The ship shuddered as the G-loads built in the turn. As they came around, Green craned back over his seat trying to see the target. "Yahoo!" he said. "You did it!" As the ship continued to come around, Roger could also see the cave. Smoke was pouring out of the entrance. Rock guided his ship in close to the target.

His voice came over the radio, "Nice shootin', Bravo." He was using Green's call sign. "You know how close you guys were?"

Green winked at Roger, "No. How close?"

"One of your rockets didn't have time to arm. It's stuck in the dirt next to the cave..." Then Rock called the infantry, and asked them to blow up the rocket when they went down to investigate the cave.

On the flight back to camp, Green congratulated Roger. "Think you earned yourself a beer tonight, Buckwheat. That was some shot." Roger felt good about hitting the cave. He hadn't believed that he could do it.



Waiting on flight line at Camp Eagle.



Door gunner - always looking, always ready.

Missions came in sporadically at first. Missions were happily received because the waiting between missions was boring. Infantry units in the field were just learning about ARA, and what ARA could do for them.

Changes were taking place in the Battery. Since the entire unit had arrived in country at one time, all of the pilots would be due to DEROS (rotate back to the states) at the same time. To avoid this, the Army used a process called infusion. This meant some of the pilots from Roger's unit would be traded to other units for pilots with different DEROS dates.

Two pilots in Roger's unit were tired of the CO's antics. As soon as the infusion program was announced, they volunteered to join the med-evacs. Roger couldn't believe they volunteered to fly med-evacs. To go from armed helicopters to med-evacs was a big change. The med-evacs were called in to pick up wounded. Their reputation for bravery under fire and dealing with difficult situations was widely acclaimed. All the pilots had a healthy respect for the med-evacs. Their call sign on the radio was "Dustoff". Anytime med-evacs asked for cover, other pilots would do everything they could to provide it.

As the infusion process started, another change faced the Battery. Cobras began to arrive. Cobras were a sleek, new helicopter. They were very narrow, and carried a crew of only two -- an A/C and a pilot. The old C-model Hueys normally carried four -- two pilots, a crewchief and a gunner. The crewchief doubled as a gunner when they were in the air. The Cobra could carry twice as many rockets as the C-model. Cobras had four rocket pods, two on each stubby little wing, in contrast to the two pods carried by the Charlie models. The Cobras also had a chin turret on the front of the aircraft. Mounted in the chin turret was a minigun and a 40 mm. grenade launcher. The minigun was a rotary firing machine gun with six barrels. It had a very high rate of fire. At night, it looked like a solid stream of tracers coming from it. But there was only one tracer for every five rounds in the belts of ammo. The "thumper", as the forty millimeter was called, had a very slow rate of fire, and a low muzzle velocity. Its advantage was that it could be fired as the ship started its break, and grenades

would be exploding on the ground as the ship turned its tail toward the target.

Qualification to fly Cobras required further training for many of the A Battery pilots. Most of the pilots being infused into the unit had already received this training. Some of the original A Battery pilots had qualified in Cobras in the states, but those pilots who weren't qualified were sent south to Vung Tau, where an in-country training school was located. It took two weeks of training to qualify. Roger guessed that he was low on the list of pilots to be sent, since he and the CO had had their differences.

A new lieutenant arrived in the first platoon. He replaced Green, and became Roger's A/C. His name was Jeff Klein. He was easy to get along with, and quickly became well-liked and respected within the first platoon. Roger enjoyed flying with him.

When on missions in a Cobra, Roger always had the front seat since he wasn't qualified to fly the ship. Jeff gave him a lot of stick time in the front seat, but Roger wasn't satisfied. He was happier when they were assigned to a C-model, and Jeff let him do all the flying.

On one of Roger's days off, he was eating lunch late in the mess hall when Al Hanley walked in. Al was a warrant officer, but he worked in supply. He was qualified as a pilot, but he was able to avoid combat flying almost entirely.

"Hey, Roger!" Al yelled across the room. "How about going for a little ride with me?"

"Can I finish my lunch?"

"Sure. Go ahead. We need to move a bird from up by the mess hall down to maintenance. I'll go out and preflight it while you finish. Get your gear and meet me out there, OK?" Al grabbed a cup of coffee while he talked. Roger nodded affirmative.

A few minutes later Roger joined Al on the old "hot pad". This was a small landing pad on the top of the hill right behind the mess hall. It had been used for the standby section when the Battery first arrived in-country. Now that the new flight line was almost complete, it was only used for occasional parking.

Al was standing next to the pilot's door on the ship, talking to one of the maintenance sergeants as Roger walked up. Al turned to Roger, "Jump in. We gotta get this thing down to the maintenance hangar." They always had to have

two pilots in a ship when it was being flown somewhere, according to Battery policy. Sometimes the maintenance officers ignored the policy, but not too often. As Roger put on his helmet and gloves, Al cranked the aircraft. Roger checked the back seat. They had two passengers. One was the crewchief, and the other was one of the ammo handlers. The latter was just going along for the ride. The chief had probably invited him because he had been provided with a helmet. Roger signaled to him to buckle up his seat belt.

As Roger was buckling in and getting his helmet plugged in, Al was already calling the tower for takeoff clearance. As Al picked the aircraft up to a hover, Roger checked the instruments. It was standard operating procedure (SOP) to do a pre-takeoff check. Before Roger completed the check, Al was already starting his takeoff. It was then that Roger noted they were already pulling more power than they should have been. In his urgency to inform Al of the problem, Roger missed the floor mike switch with his foot. When he finally hit it, they were already taking off, sort of. With the wind, what little there was, from the north, they had to take off right over the main part of the Battery area. Luckily there was a road that ran between the hootches, because they didn't have enough power to clear the first hootch!

As they started down between the hootches, Roger thought the rotor wasn't going to clear the tops of the hootch roofs. Halfway down the hill through the Battery area, they met a jeep driven by one of the supply sergeants. Roger could see the sergeant's eyes were as big as half dollars as they bore toward one another. Roger imagined it was the first helicopter the sergeant had ever met on a road. Just as they were about to collide, the sergeant swerved the jeep off the road, and into a ditch. Clearing the Battery area, they left a cloud of dust and one irate sergeant behind them. All this time, Al was simply staring straight ahead, intent on steering the chopper between obstacles.

They passed over one of the main roads through the camp. Usually heavily travelled, Roger thanked his lucky stars that they didn't meet a truck there. They were now at the mind shaking altitude of six feet. The only thing that had saved them thus far was that they were headed downhill. But they were about to run out of downhill. The ground flattened across the road. But first, an A-frame crane

loomed directly ahead. They were entering a tank maintenance unit, and the current job was lifting an engine out of a tank. When those working on the tank first looked around, they were amazed to see a helicopter coming directly at them. But as Al swerved around the A-frame, their looks turned to anger as the dust engulfed them.

Now the chopper crossed some small bushes and approached a swamp that lay roughly in the center of Camp Eagle. Al turned to Roger, "What do I do now?"

Roger was taken by surprise. He had wanted to believe until now that Al actually knew what he was doing, and that the problem was with the aircraft, not the pilot. Now he recognized that it might be a little of both. For the first time, Roger heard the screaming noise to which he had been listening since takeoff. It was the low rpm audio warning beeper that put out a sound like weep! weep! weep! The low rpm light was also flashing on the dash. Roger realized that during the entire flight so far, probably less than 15 seconds, he had been pushing down on the pitch control lever at the same time that Al was trying to pull it up.

Roger keyed the intercom and said to Al, "Gotta get some rpm back! Flare it! Flare it! And don't pull in any more goddam pitch!!" Roger thought that the swamp under them would be as good a place as any to crash. At least there were no solid obstructions to hit, and no people nearby. But after the slight flare, the ship gained some rpm, and Al continued to drive on. They had actually begun to climb some. Roger finally took his first breath since takeoff, and rapidly lost it as he looked ahead. Antennas! Lots of them!

The ship was barely climbing. Maybe, just maybe. If they could avoid the tallest one, they might just clear all the rest. Roger felt he could reach out and grab the tops of them as they went by. Clearing the antenna farm, the ship was seventy feet in the air. The low rpm audio warning continued to beep, but the rpm gauge showed the rotor was now in the "sustaining flight" range, anyway. This was the way they continued around the camp. When A Battery's maintenance area came up on the right, Al brought the ship around to a final approach heading.

Roger stepped on the intercom floor switch, "Al, whatever you do, don't try to hover this beast. Shoot a running landing. If you try to pull any more pitch than you've got now, we're just gonna bleed off rpm. We can land it anywhere, ya' know, and they can tow it to the hangar."

Al said nothing. Just nodded in return. Roger wasn't positive Al understood what he said, but he hoped for the best. Roger left his hand resting on the pitch lever,....just in case.

The landing was uneventful. As Al shut down the engine, Roger removed his helmet. His fingers were so stiff, it hurt to hang onto his helmet. He wasn't even sure that he could take his gloves off. When they had landed, the crewchief jumped out of the aircraft. He was madder than hops! He was convinced that Al and Roger had broken his ship, and he wanted to let them know all about it! Roger unbuckled, and got out on shaky knees. Then he proceeded to calm the crewchief down.

By evening chow, the word of the event had been thoroughly passed around. Both the XO and the maintenance officer cornered Roger after supper, and wanted a complete description of the flight. Roger explained that he had noticed the problem, but Hanley was already taking off before Roger could relay the information to him. The maintenance officer seemed to accept what Roger said, but the XO was clearly suspicious. It was clear to Roger from the XO's questions that he thought the two pilots were cowboying the ship. But the XO didn't press his case. The next morning, the maintenance officer dropped by Roger's hootch. The engine had suffered "FOD" (Foreign Object Damage). Evidently something had gotten through the the air screens on the engine and damaged the compressor blades. This would have resulted in the loss of power Roger described. The maintenance officer went on to say that he couldn't believe they hadn't crashed. They shouldn't have had enough power to keep the darn thing flying. When Roger questioned him about what could have caused the FOD, the officer just shrugged his shoulders.

There didn't seem to be any more to say. Alone, Roger thought about the frenzied trip the day before. What the heck, he thought, they say bumblebees can't fly, either. Then he reached for the St. Christopher medallion on his chest. He studied it closely, then slowly turned it over. Maybe there was something to it after all, he thought. Then he quickly dressed for breakfast. He was on duty that day, and high up on the list.

When Roger reached the flight line, he found that he and Lt. Klein had been assigned to a Charlie-model Huey. Roger felt good as he preflighted. The crewchief had checked to see which pilots were assigned to his ship. When

he found out it was Roger, he had opened all the panels. If there was one thing Roger believed in, it was a good preflight. He remembered the words of one of his instructors in flight school. The instructor had pointed out that half of the aviators killed in Vietnam were not downed by enemy fire. They were killed in accidents. Roger was determined that he would not be killed in an accident. If he bought the farm from enemy fire, then that was the way it was supposed to happen. But not in an accident.

He went over the ship carefully, checking all the oil levels, control actions, and safety wires on the proper nuts and bolts. The ship was old, but it was clean. The chief (crewchief) was doing a good job. The log book was up to date, and the entries were readable. Finishing the log book, Roger turned to the chief. "Button 'er up. Looks real good, chief." The crewchief smiled, and began preparing the ship for flight. As the chief was finishing on the outside, Roger checked the M-60's and the gear stowed inside. Nothing extra. Williams was a sharp crewchief. As Roger was finishing his inspection, the chief returned to the cabin.

"Everything OK, sir?"

Roger grinned, "You bet, Williams. You're really down to bare bones in here."

"Thanks, sir. But with the heat, we need to shed every pound we can."

"I wish some of the others would follow your example," Roger mumbled as he put on his chicken plate. This was a heavy piece of equipment, but it added a feeling of security when the going got tough. Roger plugged his helmet in, and laid it on the center console next to his flight gloves. Then he chatted with Williams about the previous day's missions. Williams said that they had supported one unit back in the mountains. Steep country. Williams was glad he was seeing it from the air. Roger removed his breast plate, and tried on the one in the other seat. It felt a little better, so he traded. Lt. Klein hadn't reached the ship yet.

Roger's section was second in line to be called for missions that day. The pilots in the first section were already sitting in their aircraft. This was the new Battery policy, established by their grand commander. The goal was to be off the ground in two minutes from the time the call came in, but Roger didn't feel that the pilots had to sit in the sweatbox of an aircraft to make that. They could just

as easily sit in the shade in the operations building, and run for their ships when the call came in.

The first section to go was labeled the two-minute section, or the hot section. The second section to go was the five-minute section. As a section was called into action, another section was alerted to replace them, until the Battery supply of aircraft was exhausted, if the going got that heavy. As sections returned from missions, they were not added to the end of the line, but reassumed their original position.

If the action was slow, the crews would read, sleep or play cards to pass the time. The hardest part was the waiting. Especially when it was hot. Roger returned to the operations "shack". It was actually part of the main hangar. In "Ops" a large map of the area of operations (AO) was posted on one wall. Next to it was the list of aircraft and their status, along with the assigned pilots. Along the other wall, the large shelves were filled with radios. A large, round table held forth in the end of the room, surrounded by chairs. Lt. Klein was the section leader in Roger's section, and was talking to Ops personnel about missions the previous day. Knowing who was where gave them a leg up on the situations as they developed. On their wing would be Davis and Castle. Davis came over with A Battery, but Castle was a new addition from the infusion process. Castle was trained in Cobras in the states. Davis received his Cobra training in-country, but he was good in the old C-models. Roger walked back outside after exchanging some small talk with the other crew. He was going to catch some sun-tanning time before it got too hot.

Suddenly he heard the whine of the turbine engines of the hot section. Watching the crews strap on their armor, Roger headed for his ship. His crew was now on two-minute status. And since he was the lower-ranking pilot, it would be his job to sit in the ship. When he reached the ship, Williams was sound asleep on the nylon bench seat across the back of the ship's cabin. From what Williams had said earlier, he had been up late, helping with the periodic inspection on the ship. The gunner sat on the floor leaning against the wall, reading a book. His name was Sharps. Roger didn't wake Williams, but nodded to the door gunner as he reached the ship. Sharps nodded in return. Roger slipped into the armor seat on the right side. Then he checked the switches. As he did, he remembered his first cockpit checks and runup checks in flight school. It seemed

that they took forever. Now it was two switches, battery and fuel, to get the engine started. The radios were turned on as the rotor came up to speed. Other incidentals, like nav (navigation) lights, gyros and rotating beacon were added, and they were on the go.

Roger looked up from his checks and saw Klein running toward the ship, waving his hand in a circle above his head. Roger barked, "Crank! Let's go!" Then he leaned his head out the open door and yelled "Clear!" to alert anyone in the vicinity that they were cranking. The crewchief jumped to his feet, and stationed himself next to the engine compartment, peering through the inspection ports. This was to check for fire, or any other visible malfunction. When Klein reached the ship, he jumped into his armor and began buckling in. Then he donned his helmet, and began throwing switches. Roger watched the instruments closely during the start. The whine of the turbine reached a high-pitched scream. Klein took the controls as Roger slipped into his helmet, and buckled in. Roger checked the back seat as Klein turned the controls back over to him. The gunner was ready, and gave a thumbs up signal. Williams did likewise. Klein was already talking to the control tower to takeoff clearance. As Roger picked the ship up to a low hover, the crew in the other ship signalled with thumbs up to show they were ready to go, too.

Roger already knew which way they were taking off. He was listening to the tower's instructions as he checked the instruments once more as they were hovering. Then he eased the ship forward. It began building speed, dropped slightly and shuddered as they passed through translational lift, then began climbing. Roger adjusted the power setting and made another quick check of the engine instruments. As they cleared the perimeter of the camp, Klein pointed toward the mountains. Roger squeezed all the power he could get, and trimmed the ship.

"System coming hot," Klein said over the intercom. "Load 'em up," he said as he looked over his shoulder into the back seat. The chief and gunner began loading their M-60 machine guns. "Somebody called Alpha Six made the call. Said he was in contact." Klein pushed the map on the dash toward Roger, "I'll fly if you want to check the coordinates."

Roger passed control of the ship to Klein, and unfolded the map. "Looks like about twenty minutes out to his location," Roger said as he studied the map. He checked

their fuel gauge. Subtracting their travel time, they would have about an hour on station if they needed it. Then he spoke into the intercom, "Hey, Williams, is this the guy you shot for yesterday?"

Williams pushed his mike against his lips so the rushing air wouldn't block his words, "Yeah, I think so. He was kind of disorganized yesterday. We bored a lot of holes in the sky waitin' for him to get his people squared away."

Roger admired Williams. He was a sharp crewchief, and he paid attention to what was going on around him. Already at nineteen he was a combat veteran. So they had to fly circles yesterday, waiting for the guy on the ground to collect and organize his people, thought Roger. He hoped it wasn't going to be one of those kind of days. Roger lit a cigarette. They had plenty of time before they reached Alpha Six.

As they approached the vicinity of the target, Klein dialed in the proper frequency on the FM radio, the one used for air-to-ground contact. Raising the infantry unit, he found that they could hear the choppers. Klein told them to pop smoke. On a ridge off to their left, Roger spotted yellow smoke rising above the trees. Klein said, "You got it," and passed control of the ship to Roger. Klein was now getting a sitrep (situation report) from Alpha Six. They had one wounded, but had broken contact with the enemy. Alpha Six gave them a heading and distance to the target from his position, and Klein indicated that Roger should roll in and fire a marking pair of rockets. Then Klein contacted the wing ship to make sure they were in a position to cover the leader, and that they had monitored the radio conversation with Alpha Six. They said they were ready.

Roger put the ship into a slight dive, picking out a tree for an aiming point on the ground. As the tree loomed larger, Roger hit the fire button once. A pair of rockets hissed out from their pods, streaking for the ridge. They left a trail of brown smoke as the flash of the burning motors disappeared. Then Roger was breaking right, away from the ridge.

Alpha Six's excited voice came over the radio, "You're taking fire! Taking fire!!" Roger held the turn, rolling back level as the wing ship passed them on its inbound run.

"Door gunners cleared to fire!" announced Klein to the wing ship. Roger could see rockets leaping away from the wing ship as it provided cover for the lead. As Roger reached the altitude he wanted to start his second run, he

slowed his airspeed to wait for the wing ship. When he was sure they were in position to again cover them, he rolled into his second run. Alpha Six was now telling them that they had taken automatic weapons fire on the first run. And he was telling them that he had a Dustoff coming for his wounded.

At this announcement, Klein called the wing ship. "Go easy on the rockets. We need to save enough for that Dustoff's cover."

"Roger that," Castle's voice returned on the radio.

Klein was again talking to Alpha Six, trying to find out the med-evac's ETA (estimated time of arrival). Alpha Six guess about ten minutes.

Roger was already into the second run. He thought he could see muzzle flashes in the trees just below the tree he had used for his initial aiming point. Lining up on them, he fired three pair of rockets and again broke to the right. As the ship leaned into the turn, Williams opened fire with his M-60. Held by his "monkey strap", Williams was leaning out the open door of the chopper firing back toward the target as Roger continued the turn. Again Roger could hear the rockets from Castle's ship as they split the air on their way to the target.

Alpha Six was excited on the radio, "Way to go you guys! Pour it to 'em!"

After two more passes, there was no more return fire. The enemy had broken off the fight. As the ships continued to circle the target area, Williams spotted the inbound Dustoff.

"Hi, Dragons!" the Dustoff had come up on their radio frequency. "How's it going today, guys? You got everything cooled off for us?"

Klein described the situation to them. "We'll provide cover on both sides of you when you go in," Klein assured them. With no weapons on board, the Dustoff was a sitting duck if the enemy decided to hit them. The Dustoff was now talking to the infantry unit on another radio to set up the evacuation.

To be a med-evac pilot took nerves of steel. They had to hold the ship perfectly still while they lowered a litter down through the trees to the infantry unit so the wounded could be loaded. The crewchief-medic on board the aircraft gave instructions to the pilot on which way to move the aircraft to get the litter down through the trees. He also ran the hoist for the litter. While this operation was

underway, the section of Dragons maintained positions from which they could fire if the Dustoff should receive fire from the enemy.

When the lift was complete, Dustoff passed his thanks for the cover over the radio. "Thanks for the help, Dragons. Always enjoy doing business with you guys. Hope you have a good day for hunting!" And then the Dustoff was gone, heading back to Camp Eagle or Phu Bai with the wounded safely aboard.

Roger checked the fuel gauge. They had only about ten minutes on station. He pointed at the gauge so Klein would see it. Klein nodded that he had. He was on the radio with Alpha Six again. Alpha Six wanted them to remain until he could move to another position further up the ridge. Klein told them the section had only about ten minutes left on station, but that he could muster another section if Alpha Six wanted it. Alpha Six politely declined the offer, and gave the section an end of mission. On the return flight to Camp Eagle, Williams and Sharps swept the empty brass (spent cartridges) out the doors of the ship.

Upon arrival at Camp Eagle, the first stop for the section was the refueling area. They put in enough fuel to get them back to the Battery area, in addition to the normal load for the next mission. Arriving back at the Battery area, they rearmed with rockets, and parked the ships, ready for the next mission.

Lt. Klein walked away from the ship. He was headed for Ops to give them a report on the mission. Roger and Williams checked the ship over. Everything looked fine. Roger also noticed that the hot section was back in place. That meant Roger's section was back on 5-minute status.

The day passed slowly. Not many missions at all. The hot section flew a prep in the afternoon. This was a scheduled mission where infantry were being inserted. The hot section had to fire on the landing zone (LZ) before the ships landed. The timing on these missions was tight. Conventional arty (artillery) usually bombarded the area first. Just as the arty prep was ending, the Dragons would roll in, both ships together, to fire on the precise LZ. The slicks (troop ships carrying the infantry) would be right on their tail. The slicks were escorted by gunships. The gunships carried machine guns instead of rocket pods like the ARA. They stayed right with the slicks while they dropped off their troops, and then escorted the slicks back to camp. When Cobras were used by the gunship outfits, they

carried two pods of rockets and two pods with miniguns. Even after prepping the LZ, the ARA section would hang around until they were given an end of mission. Sometimes the infantry would run into resistance on the ground after the landing, and they would want support from the ARA section.

As evening was coming on, Roger noticed a jeep drive up to Operations. Two people got out. Roger watched for a moment, then turned his interest back to the aircraft. They were preparing to fly mortar patrol. Just at dusk each evening, a section of ARA would launch and fly around the post for an hour to discourage any enemy attempts to fire mortars. Sometimes it worked, and other times it didn't, but at least it seemed to give everyone a greater feeling of security to know that there were ships in the air ready to respond to a mortar attack.

Roger was strapped into his seat, and ready to start the ship. He was waiting for Klein to join them. But as Klein walked out of Operations, there was someone with him. A tall, lanky fellow, who had his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows walked at Klein's right. Typical of the infantry, Roger thought as the pair approached the ship. As Roger was about to pull the trigger and fire up the turbine, Klein waved at him. Roger hesitated, watching Klein. Klein drew his hand across his throat, indicating to Roger not to start the ship. As the two officers reached the ship, Roger suddenly recognized the other person. It was Ken Doan! And he was wearing captain bars. Roger fumbled with his straps, and almost fell out of the ship as he attempted to get out.

Klein was smiling, "Found somebody hanging around who said he wanted to meet you, Hunter."

Roger and Ken grasped hands in a strong handshake, and then they grabbed each other in a hug. As they pulled apart, Ken's smile reached from ear to ear.

Roger groped for words, "What are you doing here? And wearing captain's bars, yet! Did you know I was here, or do you just hang around all the flight lines...?"

Ken held up his hands, "Hey, not so many questions. I hear you have a mission to fly."

"Well, yeah, but....," Roger looked at Klein. "Look, it won't take that long. Maybe we can meet after..."

Klein cut him off, "I've already taken care of that. I cleared it with Ops that Captain Doan can go with us. I'm sorry we can't provide you with a helmet, Captain, but we'd

be happy if you'd like to go with us. So, let's get with it, huh?"

As they were getting into the ship, one of the Operations specialists ran up to the ship. He had a small piece of paper in his hands. It was a contact mission. Roger called "clear", and the big turbine began to whine. Klein was strapping in as Roger called for takeoff. Roger checked over his shoulder as he began to lift off. The crewchief signalled thumbs up, Klein gave him an OK on the engine instruments, and then they were on the go. As they cleared Camp Eagle, Klein was checking the map. He indicated south, along Highway 1 toward Danang.

As Roger turned to the proper heading, he suddenly remembered Ken. He looked around, and there, sitting in the middle of the bench seat in the back was Ken. The wind was whipping Ken's short hair, but he didn't seem to mind. He smiled, and gave Roger a thumbs up as they flew toward the site of their mission. Roger just shook his head, and waved back. He couldn't believe Ken was on board. Klein informed Roger that their mission was in the Bowling Alley. As they approached the target area, it was already starting to get dark. Roger listened as Klein came up their working frequency, and contacted the unit on the ground. Trucker One was the infantry unit's call sign. The contact had occurred as the grunts (infantry) were trying to get into a defensive position for the night. They were now trapped in an open rice paddy, and wanted some help. They used a strobe light to signal their position to the aircraft.

Roger set up his attack heading, and rolled in. At night, the flash from the rockets would temporarily blind the pilots. To prevent total loss of their night vision, the pilots would close one eye when the rockets were fired. As Roger punched off the first pair, he could see the long fingers of red tracers coming up to meet them. The ship was less than 300 yards from the target, and the tracers quickly streaked past them. Roger punched off another pair of rockets, trying to place them on the source of the enemy fire. As the second pair of rockets were on their way, Roger noticed that the rocket on the right appeared to be spinning. Then he could see small flashes of light where the rocket had disappeared in the darkness and its own smoke trail. It looked almost like a Fourth of July sparkler. Roger quickly guessed that one of the fins had broken off the rocket, and was causing it to spin and throw off sparks.

Then Roger instantly tensed. Whatever it was he had seen in the rocket smoke was coming directly at them! And it was coming fast! Almost before he could react, it was on them. Roger ducked low, thinking it was coming right into the ship. But it barely missed them, passing right by Roger's side of the ship. Roger looked back at the doorgunner, who had leaned back into the aircraft. As Sharp saw Roger looking at him, he wiped his brow with his gloved hand, and simulated shaking the sweat from his hand. That had been close! Almost on the target now, Roger fired several more pair of rockets, and broke left through a flurry of red tracers. Sharp was now returning the enemy's fire with his M-60. The ship shuddered as Roger brought it around sharply. The wing ship was now firing on the target. Klein was telling the wingman to break early with all the return fire coming up.

As Klein was passing instructions to the wingman, the ground unit was yelling on the radio. Klein continued his instructions, telling the wing that Klein's ship was going to come around quickly for another firing pass. Castle's voice from the wingship was coming in slightly garbled. Probably in a hard turn right now, thought Roger. He held the outbound heading for only an instant before turning back to the target.

Roger could now see the tracers from the friendly unit concentrating on the target. As he pushed the ship into a dive, the red tracers began reaching up again to meet them. As Roger trimmed the ship, he knew why Klein wanted to return to the target so quickly. He wanted to get a second run in before the enemy could reload their RPG (rocket propelled grenade) launcher, and fire again. Whoever was firing that thing was good. He had darn near bagged a Charlie model with it! Roger hit the fire button again. The whoosh of the rockets nearly drowned Klein's voice on the intercom. Klein was telling Roger to break right this time, and he was warning Williams to get ready to fire.

Complete darkness now hid the target. If the enemy wasn't returning fire, Roger would likely have lost it completely. But the tracers kept coming at them. Roger held his fire until he was certain he was on the greatest concentration of enemy fire. The muzzle flashes were clearly visible now, and Roger hit the fire switch. When the last pair of rockets left the ship, they were barely 100 yards from the target. Roger rolled the ship steeply, pulling in the pitch. The pounding of the rotor blade mixed

with the chatter of William's machine gun. Empty brass careened over the console and bounced down between Roger's legs. Williams was giving it all he could. Then again Roger heard the ripping scream of Castle's rockets covering them on the break. As they came out of the dive, headed outbound, Roger looked back toward the target. He could see no more tracers coming up, even as Castle made his break. They made several more passes, shooting in the vicinity of the last enemy fire, but the enemy had broken off.

As they got an end of mission from Trucker One, Roger tapped Klein on the arm. Getting a nod from Klein, Roger answered Trucker's call. "If you boys should find an RPG launcher down there, would you save it for us? That guy nearly had our number, and we'd like a souvenir if you find it."

"Sure will, Dragon one zero," Trucker answered, using Klein's call sign. "Thanks much for the shootin'."

Roger again pushed the radio switch, "Thanks a lot, Trucker. If you run into anything else tonight, don't hesitate to give us a call."

"You bet, Dragon. Thanks again!"

As things quieted on the radio, and the breath came a little easier, Roger heard an unfamiliar voice on the intercom. Turning, he looked at Ken. Roger had forgotten that Ken was even with them. Ken was wearing Sharp's helmet.

"Nice show, Hunter," Ken said. "I'm impressed."

Klein took the controls of the aircraft while Ken and Roger chatted over the intercom.

"Say, Ken, you haven't told me yet how you knew where I was. Or do you always hitch rides on strange choppers?"

Ken laughed. "Do you remember when you sent out your Christmas cards?" Roger thought for a moment, then remembered it was in November before he'd left Fort Sill. Ken continued, "Well, you mailed it to my folks in Seattle. They forwarded it to me here. It got here a week ago. You said you were coming to the 101st Airborne, so I just asked around until I found out where your unit was stationed. I was hoping you'd still be here. This is my first ride in a gunship, and I really had a thrill."

When Ken mentioned gunship, both Roger and Williams frowned. Ken caught the look. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"Sort of," Roger returned. "We don't like to be called gunships. We're ARA. Aerial Rocket Artillery. And we've got a different mission than the real gunships."

"Oh, I see," Ken said. "Well, gunship or not, I sure enjoyed the ride."

When they got back to the Battery area, Ken and Roger went up to the unit's officers' club. There they got beer, and sat quietly in the corner over a chess board, while other pilots from the unit gathered around the card table in the center of the room. Ken soundly defeated Roger at chess.

"Looks like all your running around in the boonies hasn't hurt your chess game," Roger said.

Then Ken began telling of some of his experiences. He also told of the country they had taken while Ken was commanding an infantry platoon. The more Ken talked about the places he had been on the ground, the more confused Roger became. Nearly all of those places were now deserted by the Army. When Roger asked about this, Ken quickly filled him in. It was this way every year during the wet season. During the dry season, the Army was able to take a lot more of the countryside, but when the rains came, they had to pull back. They couldn't support all the units in the field when the weather became so unpredictable that the helicopters couldn't fly. Roger was astounded.

"You mean we keep taking the same ground every year?" he asked.

"Well, yes. I guess you could call it that," Ken said. "When the good guys pull back, Charlie comes right back, and moves in."

Roger was still unconvinced. "Then we go back into the same areas during the next dry season to take it again?"

"Yes. That seems to be the way it works," Ken sipped his beer.

"So we aren't really gaining anything in terms of the country we control?" Roger was very confused.

Ken took a long drag on his Pall Mall. "Didn't they teach you anything in flight school? I'm sorry. I shouldn't be sarcastic. You know, people have been fighting over this country for lots of years. The Japanese. The French were in here before us. It's a tough place to do battle. The US thinks it can do it with the helicopter. But North Vietnam and its allies continue to fight. It's become a real thing with them. See, Ho Chi Minh fought with

the US against the Japanese in World War II. But now Ho is on the other side. And he is one helluva tough opponent."

That night, Roger had trouble going to sleep. He kept going over and over what Ken had said. Ken was well read when it came to Vietnam and the history of warfare in this small country. They kept fighting over the same ground. Just what was the point of the war? What were they trying to win? And how do you measure success? No wonder body count was so important. They certainly couldn't use acres. If they used the amount of land controlled, the US probably wasn't any better off now than when they'd entered this war. It had been about a year ago when the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) had taken Hue. That was the large city just outside Camp Eagle. Now it was considered in friendly hands, but was it really? Suddenly Roger felt as if he were just a little pawn in a very large game. But this game was serious. Some of Roger's friends had come out on the short end of the stick already. What about Bart Johnson's funeral? He had been shot down near the Bowling Alley, hadn't he? That was the same location where they had flown that mission at dusk today.

Roger sat up, and pushed his mosquito netting aside. He found his sandals, and walked out of the hootch. He sat down on the steps, and lit a cigarette. He looked up at the stars. It was a clear night. He looked for and found the Southern Cross, and he tried to recall the lines from the song that he liked so well, that mentioned it. He slowly smoked the cigarette. His mind wandered back to the mission that they had fired in the morning. He wondered how seriously the guy was hurt that the Dustoff picked up. He thought about the pilots who'd left A Battery and joined the med-evac unit. Maybe they already knew what he was just beginning to realize. This is insanity, he thought. Just what the hell are we trying to win?

The troubled thoughts continued to pour in on him. He lit another cigarette. Did this change the way he felt about his job? Just what was his job? It didn't appear now that it was to win anything big. Maybe just another stalemate, like Korea. Almost a nothing in the history books. About the only stories he had read of any value about Korea were the US aces. The rocket jockeys, or the wing nuts, as Cleve called the jet pilots. But what was he? Where did all the pieces fit together? Roger wouldn't be able to sleep until he found some answers. And he suddenly

realized that no one would be able to help him with those answers. They had to come from his own beliefs.

Roger stood up, and stretched his legs. Then he sat down, and lit still another cigarette. Again he looked to the stars. He reached down and felt the St. Christopher medallion. Then he thought back on his training. All through it, the Army had tried to teach him to hate the enemy. "Kill, or be killed," they had said. Well, maybe. But you didn't really have to hate someone to kill him. Look at police officers. Roger had received good training to do the job he was now doing, but he didn't feel like he hated anyone. In fact, Roger had a lot of admiration for the enemy he had come up against. The US had complete control of the air. The good guys moved about freely, without fear of death from the air. The enemy had long supply lines, when you considered how they got their supplies to the war. Usually it was on their backs for at least a large part of the journey.

But, again, what of Roger's role? Suddenly it came to him. He wasn't there to win anything. His job was to keep as many Americans alive and in good health as he could. That meant he had to do the things he had been trained to do. If that meant killing, then so be it. He would kill to save lives. The enemy wanted this war, and nothing anyone could do would stop them from wanting it. Who in the US wanted it? Politics were an important consideration in any war. Roger felt the US leaders wouldn't send so many young men to this far-away country unless they felt that holding the line against Communism was important. Why else?

Roger's head hurt. He had come to grips with his purpose, and that was most important to him now. If one was not clear in purpose, then he could not be effective in his job. Wasn't that a quote from somewhere? Roger couldn't remember. He wondered what time it was. Roger finished his cigarette. He thought he could sleep now, and slipped quietly into the hootch. The cot creaked as he lay down and tucked in the mosquito netting. Save as many American lives as he could. That was an easy goal to remember. It would require every skill he could muster to accomplish, and he would have to work hard at it every day. But he could identify it, and he could try to do it every day. Every single day....

35: First Battle Casualty

As the Battery became known and accepted by the Division, the number of missions increased steadily. Many of these were out past FSB (Fire Support Base) Bastogne. The FSB was located about ten minutes by air southwest of Camp Eagle along the "Perfume" River. Roger wasn't sure that was the river's real name, but that's what it was called by the pilots in the unit. The wet season was drawing to a close, and the push was on to move back into the mountains again. This was the same ground over which Doan fought the year before. This continued to bother Roger on missions in this area. The FSB itself looked like a large ring from the air, from the perimeter road that ran around it. On the outside of the road were rows of concertina wire. Claymore mines and trip flares were mixed in with the wire. Artillery guns, 155 mm., had been flown into this position. They supported the infantry as it continued to press further into the mountains.

Many of the hills in the area of Bastogne were nearly bare of trees. Shell and bomb craters pocked the countryside. Large parts of the area had been defoliated, and the dead trees stood as mute testimony to the effectiveness of the chemical agents. Many of the missions in this area were conducted in the rain. Mists often formed in the valleys, and these became distinct hazards at night. On night fire missions in the shabby weather, a system was worked out to reduce the chance of mid-air collisions. The trail ship would always fly much higher, and his direction of break, or turn, was determined before the ships left the ground. The lead ship would be breaking in the opposite direction. Then, if lead flew into one of the mist clouds, and trail lost sight of him, they would both break in separate directions. Then when everyone got clear of the clouds, they would rendezvous and begin again.

Close support missions suffered from reduced visibility as well. Especially during rain storms, the smoke from the rockets mingled with the clouds, obscuring the target as well as the other ships. Sometimes a Light Observation Helicopter (LOH, commonly called "loach" -- rhymes with coach), was involved as the spotter aircraft on the mission. LOH's also went by other names such as egg or little bird. LOH's were small, two-man ships, that were highly maneuverable. And their pilots were noted for their flying

skill and bravery. The LOH's would often mark the particular target they wanted the ARA section to hit by dropping smoke grenades from their ship directly on the target! They would then exit the area as fast as possible. They reminded Roger of mosquitoes worrying a warm body, buzzing quickly in, and getting out even faster! The LOH pilots had a theory -- that the enemy wouldn't fire on them because it would give away their position. This was found not to be universally true. Particularly when the LOH was dropping smoke grenades right on top of a target.

In these situations, the ARA section would position itself so it could cover the LOH at all times. Usually one ship would follow the LOH by flying slow, lazy circles around it as the little ship buzzed in and out of the jungle canopy, or along streams or paths, looking for signs of enemy presence. The other ARA ship would remain higher, in position to cover the lead. From a distance, the three aircraft looked like they were on stair steps, if the LOH could be seen at all. These teams began as three-ship formations, but as the flying hours in the ARA unit mounted, they were dropped to two-ship formations. A single ARA ship was used to cover the LOH. These two-ship formations were often called "hunter-killer" teams.

It was on a "little-bird" mission that Roger and Jeff Klein were covering a LOH in the ROUNG-ROUNG Valley southeast of Camp Eagle. The ROUNG-ROUNG was a shallow valley, and much of it was covered with low brush rather than jungle. Since this particular area was quite a distance from any friendly units on the ground, three ships made up the formation. Castle and Davis were on the wing. After about a half hour of chasing the LOH along the river, Klein called Castle, and suggested the two ships switch positions. Castle would take over monitoring the LOH. Covering a LOH as it buzzed to and fro required total concentration, because the safety of the LOH's crew was in the hands of the pilot tracking it. The tracker had to watch the LOH closely every second, to be able to react quickly if the little guy ran into trouble. Although all three ships were in constant radio contact, the LOH pilot always assumed that his cover ship was in position to fire for him.

As the LOH hovered along a branch of the river, he called out that he'd found some tracks. He zipped back and forth across the stream, poking into all the nooks and crannies of the vegetation to see if he couldn't stir

something up. With his radio call, the ARA section was even more alert than usual. Suddenly Castle's voice broke the static on the radio, "He's firing at something!" As Castle rolled in to fire his rockets under the LOH, the LOH pilot quickly called him off.

"Hey, Dragons, you'll never guess what we got! My gunner just bagged us a deer! And it's a big one. You think one of you guys can come down and load it up?"

This was a new situation for Klein, and there weren't any guidelines in the Battery policy on which to base a decision. He hesitated for a moment, and looked over at Roger. "Did he say he just killed a deer?"

"That's affirmative," answered Roger on the intercom.

Klein called back to the LOH pilot to confirm the kill. He also asked about ground conditions. The Hueys the Dragons were flying weren't as maneuverable as the LOH because of all the weight they carried. "How much do you think that thing weighs?" Klein asked. The LOH pilot guessed about two hundred pounds. Klein turned to Roger, "Think we could lift that much out of there?"

Roger checked the fuel gauge. They had burned off over five hundred pounds of fuel. "Sure, I don't think we'd have a problem."

Klein called Castle on the radio, "Hey, Wild Bill! Why don't you go down and give it a try, huh? We'll cover you from up here."

Castle's voice was hesitant on the radio, "Uh, yeah, we'll give it a try..." Then his voice trailed off into static.

Roger understood the position Klein was in. The LOH was asking him to commit one of his crews to landing out here in the boonies to pick up a deer! What would the old man think when they returned with this booty? Probably a medal, or a court martial, thought Roger. Roger brought their ship in closer to the site as Castle made his approach.

It looked as though Castle's crew was having difficulty as the two gunners and finally, Davis, joined in the effort to load the deer on the chopper. The LOH hovered nearby, watching the operation. Seeing the trouble they were having, the LOH moved in next to Castle's ship, and the gunner joined the Dragon crew to hoist the deer into the ship.

Klein watched the proceedings uneasily, "That thing must weigh a lot more than 200 pounds," he said to Roger.

Castle's voice on the radio interrupted, "We're coming out. That is one helluva big deer. I mean like an elk!" The wing ship moved slowly along the stream, gaining airspeed. It seemed to take a long time for it to gain any altitude. Roger's breathing was shallow and forced as he watched the ship below them slowly lift over the brush along the stream. The LOH was flying alongside Castle.

The LOH called Klein on the radio, "Hey, Dragons, what say we call it a day, huh? Let's take this thing home and see if we can't get it on the dinner fire tonight." With that, the LOH pilot nosed his ship over and pulled in power as he headed for Camp Eagle. The LOH soon began to outdistance the other two ships. Castle couldn't even hold seventy knots, and Klein was sticking right to Castle's tail.

As they approached Camp Eagle, Klein called in to Ops. The sergeant on duty in Operations was somewhat confused by Klein's call. Klein requested that one ship land up on the old hot pad by the mess hall. The pad by the mess hall was rarely used since the new flight line had been completed. The landing was finally arranged, and Dragon lead landed at the refueling area, while Castle dropped in next to the mess hall. By the time Dragon lead was refueled, and returned to the flight line, the word of the kill was spreading through the Battery. The XO came to meet Klein in Operations, to find out what was going on. When Klein explained, the XO seemed perplexed by the situation. As Klein walked away, he suggested that A Battery should at least extend an invitation to the LOH company, since they were responsible for making the kill.

As Roger and Jeff walked back to the hootch with their flight gear, Roger tried to cheer Klein up. "Look at it this way. You remember one of the mottos you heard back in flight school? I think it went something like, 'Kill all you want, but eat all you kill.' Well, we're sure gonna make that one come true tonight!"

Jeff only smiled at the crack. "Yeah, I hear what you're saying, but I'm waitin' to see what the old man has to say about this whole escapade. I'd be willing to bet that he comes out with some silly regulation tomorrow about not landing to pick up wild game, or some such ditty."

Roger was not to be set aside so easily, "Yeah, mebbe so, but let's take it one step at a time, huh? Tomorrow doesn't get here until the sun sets and then rises again.

By that time, the deer will be gone, and the whole Battery will be happy about the fresh meat."

"I suppose you're right," Jeff answered unconvincingly.

But dinner that night was unforgettable. Jeff Klein was one of the last officers to reach the mess hall. When he entered, a round of applause broke out. A placard was set at a place at one of the tables for him. It boasted of him being the first Dragon to receive the dragon slayer award. Jeff's plate was already dished up for him. Amid the ribbing of his fellow officers, he was allowed the first bite of the kill. The cook had done an outstanding job on the animal, and all found it very tasty. Most pleased were the LOH pilots who had joined the Battery for supper. They didn't seem to think that this was anything out of the ordinary, and they thoroughly enjoyed themselves. When the entire group had retired to the officers' club, there were many toasts to the muscles of those who had loaded the animal, and to the ship who had carried it home.

Amid all the boasting and toasting, the CO, Major Short, was very quiet. He enjoyed the praise received from the LOH pilots, but it was apparent that he didn't feel that he was on very firm footing with the kill. He spoke quietly to Jeff when things had settled down, and it was suspected that he wasn't any too happy about the mission. But the next week, the CO had other worries.

With the heavy load of missions, the pilots were dog tired. Sleep was caught wherever and whenever. On the flight line, the pilots were sleeping in the ships with the crews. The Operations ready room looked like a flop house. There was always a minimum of two crews waiting, and sometimes as many as eight. The push to regain the mountains was again in full swing. Many of the missions were flown back-to-back, and the pilots became accustomed to eating on the run. Maintenance was pushed to the limit, to keep enough ships flyable. But the pace began to tell. Small errors resulted in near disasters in the air. One leaking fuel system nearly torched an entire crew. It was an alert crewchief that saved their bacon that day.

It was during this whirlwind of activity that Mister Bill Dolliver finally lost it. He had applied for a transfer out of the unit during the infusion process, but was turned down. In all reality, it was probably more of a screw-up, than an official denial, but the end result was the same. Bill was one of the youngest warrants in the bunch. He had been raised in the Mid-west, and had a

protected upbringing. Although the other pilots in the unit liked and respected Bill, he never seemed to fully fit in with their fun and games.

It was in the middle of a heavy fire mission south of Bastogne that his string finally broke. He suffered a nervous breakdown. Dean Christian was flying with Bill, and the affair nearly toppled Christian. The officers' club was very quiet that night as Dean told of the events. Dean got very drunk, which was quite unlike him, and he nearly cried several times during the telling. Many of the pilots listening, shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. Gradually the group drifted away, many before the story was completed. Jeff finally took Dean by the shoulders and walked him out of the club. There was some head shaking among the remaining pilots, but it seemed everyone of them was afraid to break the silence. Those remaining finished their beers quietly, and left for their hootches.

When Roger returned to his hootch, the lights were out. He lay back on his bunk and listened to the whine of the turbines as yet another section was responding to a mission. Soon the slap of rotor blades joined the turbines' scream. Roger closed his eyes, and the events Dean had described began to take shape in his mind. He could see the inside of the Huey cockpit. The two pilots sitting side-by-side. The sun was fading as they continued to attack a very stubborn enemy position near the top of a hill. Dean had said his gloves were so sweaty that he was afraid the controls would slip from his grasp. He and Bill had been flying since the early morning. Dean had said that he tried a change in tactics, and swung in on the target from the side.

Paralleling the ridge line, he had nearly dropped in on the enemy before they knew he was there. He said that he felt like he was firing almost point blank on them. The enemy tracers had surrounded the ship like a nest of angry bees, and Dean was doing his best to blast everything he could before he had to start his break. Suddenly he was aware that Bill was screaming at the top of his lungs. Dean thought Bill had been hit. Dean said they were so close to the ground that the blast from his last rockets engulfed the ship. Out of the smoke of the blast came parts of a human being. They reached up out of the smoke like they were grasping at the ship. The gunners in Dean's ship were pouring everything they had into the enemy position. The ground contact for the mission was screaming into his radio, on top of all the other noise and confusion.

As Dean headed outbound after the run, he was carefully checking the instruments to see if he had sustained any damage. But Bill continued to scream. Amid the confusion on the radio, Dean was finally able to get the crewchief to understand Bill needed help. About this time, Bill pulled off his helmet, and threw it into the chin bubble. Dean couldn't understand what was happening. He broke off the attack, and as he flew back to camp, it took both the crewchief and gunner to subdue Bill. Dean called ahead to Operations, and wanted a medic to meet them when they landed. Other sections working missions at the same time heard this transmission on the radio, and figured it was simply a battle casualty. Bill was definitely a battle casualty, but not the kind everyone expected.

After reaching the Battery area, and getting Bill out of the ship, another pilot joined Dean to fly over to the refueling area. When the ship returned from the refueling area, and parked, the gunner proceeded to vomit all over one of the rocket pods. Dean was really shook up. He didn't know what to do. He went into Ops, and asked to see if he was going to get a replacement for Bill. Then the gunner walked into Ops. He glared at Dean, as if it was Dean's fault that Bill had lost his marbles. The gunner threw down his flight helmet, said that he'd had enough, and stomped out.

In the officers' club, Dean kept asking just what did they expect of him? That was when Jeff intervened. Roger kept rolling these thoughts around in his mind. It was tough to get to sleep. He heard the section return before he dropped off. When he awoke in the morning, he felt like he had the world's worst hangover.

By noon Bill's gear had been packed and shipped out. Nobody knew where he went. It was a common assumption that he had gotten an early trip home. Dean's gunner transferred units. The gunners on the ships were all volunteers. The crewchiefs had to double as a gunner. It came with the job. But it seemed there was always a shortage of gunners for the ships. And it paid well, considering. Flight pay was an extra \$110 per month. Since the base pay of an ammo humper or a cook's helper wasn't much more than that, they could almost double their pay if they signed on as a gunner. During training in the states, it was considered a class job, and there was a lot of competition for the slots. But when the going got heavy in-country, it always seemed there was a shortage.

There was also action in flats north of Camp Eagle. The coast wasn't that far, about fifteen minutes flight time. The coastal plain along this part of the country had almost no gradient at all, until the mountains south of Camp Eagle and Hue were reached. Besides the cities, it was here that most of the people of the country now lived. Many of the villages near the mountains had been resettled nearer to the cities on the coastal plain. The grand plan was that this situation made the good guys easier to protect from the bad guys. Many of the villages in the low country to the north of Camp Eagle remained. Almost this entire area consisted of rice fields, interspersed with small villages. Canals and small waterways ran every which way. Much of the travel was by boat.

With the country so flat here, and a general lack of tall vegetation, combat tactics were a little different. Roger's first mission into this area occurred at night. He and Jeff both noted the different call sign when the mission came in. They were on hot status in Charlie models that night. As soon as the section cleared the perimeter of Camp Eagle, Jeff tuned in the working frequency for the mission, and contacted the unit on the ground. On Jeff's second call, the unit answered, but the contact was whispering. This was the first time they had encountered a ground unit who was whispering on the radio. When the ground unit told the section that they could hear them overhead, Jeff called for a flare from the artillery back at Camp Eagle. A moment later, a flare blossomed in the black sky.

The unit on the ground, Sneaky Six, immediately came on the radio. "Hey, Dragon, no more lights, huh?" he whispered. "We don't want the bad guys to know where we are until you're in a position to shoot for us. OK?"

"Roger that," Jeff returned. Then to Roger on the intercom, "Just what the heck is going on down there?" Roger was about to answer when Sneaky Six came back on the radio.

"We want to bring you guys in over us as close as we can without using any lights. We're caught in a little canal, and the bad guys are on both sides of us. You are now to our November."

Sneaky Six was using the phonetic alphabet to indicate the section was north of his position. This was common radio slang. Jeff immediately turned south, and dropped down until the section was about 500 feet above the ground.

Sneaky's voice again addressed them, "OK, looking good. You're coming up on us right....now. Mark, mark." Roger and Jeff looked to find an identifying landmark that would allow them to maintain visual contact with the target area. In the moonlight, they could make out what appeared to be a canal intersection.

Jeff keyed his mike, "OK, Sneaky, we think we got you."

"Roger that," Sneaky answered. "Get ready to roll in then. We're gonna see if we can blast our way out of here. We're in a PBR (Patrol Boat River), and as soon as the action starts, we'll be heading to the Sierra Whiskey. You guys ready?"

Jeff set the inbound heading for the attack for Castle in the wing ship. Sneaky would be heading southwest when the action started. Jeff called Sneaky, "OK, Babe, we're ready to go."

Suddenly directly ahead, muzzle flashes from automatic weapons were visible, along with the brilliant flash from grenades. Tracers ricocheted in the air, coming up at all sorts of crazy angles. Sneaky's voice on the radio was frantic, and mixed with the sound of automatic weapons, "Hit 'em! Hit 'em! Jesus, hit 'em!!"

Jeff pointed forward with his finger, and Roger nosed the ship over into a dive. As they closed with the target, Roger could make out two separate groups of muzzle flashes on the ground. The one on the right was moving to the southwest. He lined up on the other group, and began firing rockets. Punching off four pair, he rolled into a right turn.

Tracers reached up for the aircraft. Jeff was on the radio to the wing, "Taking fire, Castle! The target is on the left!"

Castle's voice was very matter of fact, "Got 'em, one zero," and the rest of his transmission was lost in the blast of rocket fire over the radio, as he punched off his rockets.

Roger brought the ship to an outbound heading and struggled for altitude. Sneaky's voice came through clearly on the radio. He was no longer whispering, but he sounded a little more settled. "Wowee! You guys are on 'em! And you've got 'em mad! Give 'em hell!" On Roger's second run, there was no more fire from the ground, but he could still identify the target from the smoke caused by the earlier rocket blasts. Lining up on a small group of bushes, he again fired four pair of rockets before breaking off. The

chatter of Williams' M-60 sounded comforting as Roger began his second break. There were no tracers coming up on this pass.

As the ship came around, Jeff was on the intercom, "Hey, Williams, did you see any return fire that time?"

Williams' voice was garbled by the wind rushing past his mike, "No sir. No muzzle flashes, and no tracers."

Jeff called Castle on the radio, "Alpha, we'll hit 'em a couple more passes. We're changing our inbound heading so we can lay 'em right along the canal. Got it?"

Castle's voice was steady, "Right on ya', big dog! By the way, we had a close one."

Jeff looked over at Roger, raising his eyebrows in the red glare from the instrument lights. "What was that, Alpha?" he said to Castle on the radio.

"We took a hit. Don't think it's anything serious. Went through the cabin somewhere, but everybody's OK."

Sneaky came on the radio again. He wasn't able to hear the radio communications between the two aircraft. "Way to look, Dragons! You guys put on quite a show. We owe you one. We'll go back in after daylight to see if we can find any pieces." As the chatter between Jeff and Sneaky continued, the pilots learned that Sneaky was the call sign for a Navy outfit. They used small patrol boats to travel the shallow waterways in the coastal area. They had been chasing a couple sampans when they got into a narrow canal, and discovered they were surrounded by the enemy. The enemy was only about twenty feet away when the firefight first erupted. Most of the ricochets the pilots had seen were caused by rounds glancing off the boat.

After refueling, the section returned to A Battery's flight line. Some personnel from the maintenance shop helped go over Castle's ship. Flashlights moved slowly over the aircraft, as the search for the bullet hole continued. As Roger approached, the crewchief said, "Here it is." All the flashlights focused on the ceiling of the cabin. There was a small, round hole in the roof of the cabin.

Castle looked at the position of the hole, "Must have come through the open door." Lining up the hole, the crew also checked the rotor blade for any damage. Finding none, the maintenance personnel put tape over the hole, and promised they'd fix it the next day. Castle's crewchief noted the damage in the log book. After the excitement, the crews settled back slowly. They had the rest of the night

on duty, and there was nothing to do but wait for another mission.

Roger walked back to his ship and swung up into the armored seat. Williams was checking over the log book. Sharp was lying on the deck of the cabin. He was using his flak jacket for a pillow. Roger took his helmet, and hung it on the hook above the center console. Williams snapped the log book shut, and turned out his flashlight.

Williams spoke to Roger, "Well, sir, one more in the book. How long have you got to go?"

Roger looked out through the windshield at the moon-washed flight line. "Let's see. Been here about two and a half months, I guess. You've been here a lot longer than that, haven't you?"

Williams moved into the other pilot's seat. "Yeah. I've got in five months now. In fact, it's 215 and a wake-up to go."

Roger's clothes clung to him as he shifted in his seat. He looked toward the lights from the Operations room. His face felt sweaty. He would sure like a shower. He checked his watch. Three more hours to daylight. But at least it wasn't raining. Night duty was miserable when it rained.

Williams toyed with the controls. "What part of the world you from, sir?"

Roger thought back to the hills and forests of Washington State. He could now picture Hoods Canal on a moonlit night, sitting on a gravel beach sharing a beer with friends. "The northwest. Washington State." Roger continued to think about those days. When he was going to college he had dated a girl who lived up on Hoods Canal. Often on his way to pick her up for a date, he would stop to buy a paper sack of shrimp. He always stopped at a small seafood place just south of Hoodspoint. The owner there got to know him over the summer, and would usually tease Roger when he came in. The owner chided Roger about never bringing his date in to meet him. Roger returned the jibes. He teased the owner about his short hours, and that if he stayed open longer he would bring his date by. Roger suddenly realized he was daydreaming. He looked behind the seats. Both Williams and Sharp were lying down now. Williams lay on the bench seat.

Roger checked his watch. Still two and a half hours left before they were to be relieved. Again his thoughts returned to Hoods Canal, and the girl he dated there. He had enjoyed his trips up along the Canal. He had always

felt that it was misnamed. It wasn't a canal at all. It was an extension of Puget Sound about two miles wide that reached south to the mouth of the Skokomish River before it turned east like a huge fishhook. It was flanked on the west by the Olympic Mountains. The water was cold almost all year around, but it was a great place for water skiing or digging clams. Most of the beaches were rocky, or fine gravel, and enough of them were uninhabited to provide great spots for parties. The road along the west side of the Canal was crooked and relatively narrow. Not the place to be if you were in a hurry, but if you weren't, it was a very relaxing drive. But there weren't any night spots of any significance. It was a fifteen mile drive back to Shelton, for what it had to offer, or on to Olympia, an additional twenty miles. Roger did a lot of driving in those days. As he thought more about the girls he used to date, Roger fell asleep.

The next week, the push into the mountains continued. Roger was firing an LZ prep with Klein and company, when the fourth ship going into the LZ crashed. It promptly caught fire, keeping other aircraft from landing in the small landing zone. This prolonged the ARA section on station, and they circled in utter boredom. Running low on fuel, Jeff had to call for a replacement section. The section flew most of the day on very boring missions. Nothing hot, just hours in the sky. That night Roger was happy to be replaced. Their section was on the bottom of the ladder, and they might as well get drunk because there weren't enough aircraft available even if a thousand fire missions came in.

After supper, Roger, Jeff, Castle and Davis went over to their officers' club. It wasn't much of a club. It was built of the same construction as their hootches, but it was a meeting place for the pilots. No one tended the simple plywood bar. It was "get your own", or get one for your buddy. A large, wooden wire spool was used as the card table which occupied the center of the single room. It had been covered with a wool Army blanket. The main game was poker, and Roger played a lot. He liked straight poker, not the fancy games. Sometimes later in the evening, the wild games would begin to appear. It was then that Roger would usually sit aside to watch, or return to his hootch where he would read or write letters.

On this particular night, the unit's pilots got a treat. Some of the pilots with whom they had trained in the

states dropped in. These pilots had come over with A Battery, but had since transferred to a nearby Med-evac unit. The discussion was lively, as stories were traded back and forth. Jenson, one of the first pilots to transfer to Dustoff, was the one who broached the subject. It seemed there was a little good-natured kidding about whose mission was doing the most good toward the war effort. Jenson was a very likable and outgoing pilot. He carried the rank of warrant officer well. He always had a ready laugh for a good joke. He'd had a little more than enough to drink tonight. Green was teasing him about leaving the unit. Jenson felt that he was doing a better job for the war effort in the Med-evac unit. As the kidding became more serious, Jenson's irritation began to show.

"Look, Green," Jenson said. "You can believe what you want, but I don't think we're going to win a blessed thing in this war. And I think that I can feel more comfortable about my job, which is saving lives, than I ever could about shooting people."

Green leaned back in the director's chair in which he was sitting, and tossed his cards on the table. He looked evenly at Jenson. There had never been any love lost between these two. Green had always felt that Jenson didn't have what it took to face danger in combat. "So that's what you do, is it? Save lives? My, aren't we the wholesome one." Green's tone was bitingly sarcastic. Green leaned forward over the table. "You know what the real difference in our jobs is, Jenson? We both go out to help the same people, but here's the difference. You don't mind picking up the pieces after it's all said and done. It's my job to keep those pieces whole so the grunts can continue to stay alive and do their job. I'll bet I've kept more guys alive in one day than you'll do during your entire tour over here!"

Roger felt sorry for Jenson. Roger had liked him from the moment he had joined the unit. Jenson hadn't been the greatest pilot, but he was always steady and reliable. Since Jenson had joined Dustoff, Roger had been with sections providing cover for Jenson while he was making pickups. Roger felt Green was way out of line, degrading Jenson. Jenson had shown a lot of pluck in some very sticky situations. He had never dropped a pickup, and had even gone into some hot LZ's to make a lift. Roger knew the Dustoffs could refuse a pickup until the LZ was cold, and

all firing had ceased, and no one would've thought less of them for it.

Jenson's feelings were hurt. He quickly drank the rest of his beer, and got up to leave. The other Dustoffs also rose to go. As they started out the door, Jeff caught Jenson's shoulder, "Do you mind if I walk a ways with you?" Jenson just shrugged his shoulders. As they stepped outside, Roger followed. Jeff was addressing the Dustoff pilots.

"I want to apologize for the exchange in there," Jeff was saying. "We all know the kind of job you guys do, and we're happy to know you're there. I've never seen you guys let anyone down. I think Green's had a little too much to drink tonight. And he's had a tough week. We've all been flying a lot of hours. Come on, Jenson, you know how he is when he's had some to drink."

Jenson worried the ground with the toe of his boot. "Yeah, I hear what you're saying..."

Jeff broke in, "I think it's real nice that we can get together with pilots from another unit once in a while. I just don't want to see tonight spoil that. It could be the start of a very good thing that might help us all better understand one another." Jenson nodded in agreement. Roger could see that Jenson was about to cry. Roger turned and left the group standing outside the club. He didn't want to further embarrass Jenson. As Roger walked back to his hootch, he tried to understand Green's attitude. He had seen it before. Pilots in a unit often considered pilots from other units as outsiders, and made derogatory comments about them. This was rarely done face-to-face, though.

As Roger reached his bunk in the hootch, he started to reach for the novel he had been reading. He thought better of it, and began to undress. Jeff walked into the hootch as Roger was hanging up his .38 pistol. Jeff sat down heavily in one of the nylon fabric chairs in the hootch.

"I can't believe Green saying that about the Med-evac pilot." Jeff looked at Roger. "Didn't both of those guys join the unit at the same time back in the states?"

Roger pulled off his shirt, "Yeah, they sure did. And you know what? They never got along. Green used to pull rank on Jenson all the time. Not serious like, but enough to show him that there was a difference between warrants and RLO's (officers of the rank of lieutenant and higher were often referred to as Real Live Officers). And he's always been that way when he's drinking." Roger pulled off the

trousers of his Nomex flight suit. The cloth felt almost greasy.

Jeff was watching him. "What's that red stuff on your hip?"

Roger turned and looked down at his hip. He had an infection there. "Just where my skivvies rub a little, I guess."

Jeff leaned back in his chair. "Well, watch it. Those things are hard to heal up, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Don't you get 'em?"

Jeff stood up. "Nope. Wanta know the secret? Quit wearing skivvies. Especially those briefs like you wear. In the unit I came from, none of the pilots wore underwear or socks. You sweat all the time anyway, and if you don't wear 'em, you stay drier. That'll help keep from getting those darned infections."

"Thanks," Roger said as he wrapped his towel around himself. He slipped into his shower shoes, and left the hootch with his shaving kit in hand. When he got to the shower, the lights were off. How about that, he thought. I get it all to myself tonight. It was late, so Roger didn't have to worry about saving the hot water for someone else. He enjoyed the shower. It was still nice and hot. Almost too hot. The steam rose around him, and drifted out through the screening on the shower building.

Jeff came in. "Hope you saved some of that for me."

"I think there's plenty. Watch it when you come in, though, 'cause it's pretty hot. Why don't you take this one. I've got it all warmed up."

"Thanks. I will."

Roger toweled himself dry. It was a nice feeling, but he knew it wouldn't last long. The sweat was already beginning to run afresh. Roger filled one of the plastic wash basins with hot water from the single tap on the wall next to the shower. Then he moved to the plywood counter, toweled off the mirror, and began to shave. As he finished shaving, Jeff came out of the shower.

"Boy, that did feel good. Oh, there's something I need to tell you about tomorrow. They've got a mission up north somewhere, and they need a navigator. I hope you don't mind, but I volunteered you."

Roger finished shaving, and poured his pan of water into the shower room. Some of the flecks of shaving cream clung to the boards on the floor. Roger reached in and turned the nearest shower on to wash the shaving cream down

between the boards in the floor. As he replaced the plastic pan on the counter, he turned to Jeff, "Do you know who I'm flying with tomorrow?"

Jeff stopped his razor in mid-stroke. "I knew you were gonna ask that. I'm sorry, Roger. You're in with Green."

"I guess I kind of figured that. He's not bad to fly with."

"You're in a Cobra tomorrow. Sure wish I was. I think the rest of our platoon's got the day off. I'll make sure you get an extra one this week."

"Honestly, I don't mind. I don't even mind flying with Green. He's a good pilot, you know. At least I think so, anyway." Roger leaned against the door frame.

"Thanks, Roger. I appreciate your attitude. They wanted you. That ought to tell you something about your navigation ability."

"Do you know where we're going tomorrow?"

"All I know is that it's something to do with the Marines up north. I think they're committing a bunch of their gunships to some big mission, and they want a couple of us to standby for them. Take your camera. You might see some nice country up that way."

The next morning, Roger was on the flight line early. He had checked in Ops to see which ship he was assigned to. It was 634, Decker's ship. Decker was a good crewchief. He had the ship all unbuttoned before Roger reached it. Roger tossed his helmet in the front seat. Decker approached Roger from the rear of the aircraft, and gave him a snappy salute, "Good morning, sir."

Roger returned Decker's salute. "What's with the spit and polish this morning. You bucking for a promotion?"

Decker colored slightly at the remark, then grinned.

"No, sir. But if it'll help, I'll do it again!"

Roger laughed. "You got any problems with this baby?"

"No sir."

"How about the turret weapons? They both firing OK?" Roger walked around to the other side of the ship.

Decker followed him. "There was no write-up on them, and I think we reloaded both sides twice yesterday."

"Good," Roger climbed up on the stubby wing and checked the transmission and rotor head. Everything was clean, spotless almost. "You sure run a tight ship, Decker."

"Thank you, sir."

Roger finished the inspection in short order. While Decker was replacing the inspection panels, Roger checked

the log book. He called out to Decker, "Looks like you're pretty close to a hundred-hour inspection?"

Decker finished with the tail rotor driveshaft cover, "Yes, sir. I talked to the maintenance sergeant about it. If you guys put any time at all on the ship today, I think we'll pull it in tonight." Decker walked around to Roger's side of the ship. He had seen Lt. Green coming out of Operations, and knew it was about time for take off.

Roger swung up into the front seat of the Cobra. Decker handed up his armor breastplate. "Here you go, sir. Wish I was going with you."

Roger slipped into the breastplate, "I wish you were, too, Decker. That's why I like the C-models, I guess. I always feel safer with another pair of eyes watching out for my tail."

Decker was closing the canopy door for Roger, "I miss flying time." Decker had been a crewchief on a Charlie model before he became a crewchief on a Cobra. He went around to the other side of the ship to get Green squared away. As soon as Green was seated in the cockpit, Decker untied the main rotor blade and stood next to Green's canopy door.

Green ran through his pre-start check silently, then called "clear". Decker echoed his call, and the turbine began its whine. Roger put on his helmet, checked the altimeter and set it, and then adjusted the rear view mirror mounted on the canopy above his right shoulder so he could see Green. Decker latched Green's canopy door, then checked Roger's. Roger gave him a thumbs up. Decker returned the sign, and backed away as the rotor blade reached operating rpm.

As Roger heard the hiss of the radios in his helmet, he switched on the VHF radio on his instrument panel. Then he checked the sighting station to be sure it was in the locked position. With his lap belt and shoulder straps buckled, he was ready to go. He adjusted the mike on his helmet so it just touched his lips.

"Ready in the front?" Green said over the intercom.

Roger tapped the radio switch on the floor twice with his foot to signal "affirmative". Green called for take-off clearance, and the big ship began to lift. As they hovered out of the parking stall, they were buffeted by the rotor wash from the revetment walls. Once clear of the walls, the ship steadied. Green called the wing ship. They said they were ready. As the ship began to move forward, Roger

signaled a thumbs up to Decker standing at the edge of the flight line. Decker signaled back.

As they cleared Eagle's perimeter, they swung north along Highway 1 toward Hue. As they passed over the city, Roger marveled at its beauty. It was a beautiful city from the air. Surrounded on all sides by the green of the rice paddies, it looked like a jewel sitting in the middle of a calm sea. The river ran through the middle of the city, passing under two bridges.

"See that bridge over there? The one on the right?", John Green's voice came over the intercom.

Roger tapped the floor switch twice.

"I was reading in the safety notes a while back that some guy in a LOH decided to fly under it. He must not have been much of a pilot. Didn't give himself enough clearance. He caught his rotor blade on the bridge and bored it into the river."

Roger looked at the bridge. It looked like there was plenty of room to fly under it, all right. "He must have been a bad pilot," Roger answered. "By the way, John, where are we headed today?"

"Up to Quang Tri. The Marines asked for some help up there today. I think they've got a big mission going today, or something. We're supposed to provide support for the southern part of their AO. I couldn't find out how busy they've been up here."

When the ships approached Quang Tri, John checked in with the Marines to find out where they wanted the section to park. Then he called the tower for landing clearance at the refueling area. Quang Tri had a regular runway, and there was a lot of fixed wing traffic there. This was different than Camp Eagle. Eagle had a lot of traffic, but it was all helicopters, as there wasn't a runway for fixed-wing aircraft. When they parked the ship, John asked Roger to tie down the main rotor blade. John said he'd check in with the Marine operations to let them know the section was on the ground.

Roger was just tying down the main rotor blade when John came running out of the quonset hut. He had his hand above his head making the familiar circle pattern. Roger quickly stowed the tie-down hook in the nose compartment, and jumped into the front seat of the Cobra. Roger was buckled in with his helmet on when John brought the engine up to operating rpm. The radios warmed up quickly, and as

soon as they had takeoff clearance, they were quickly leaving Quang Tri behind.

Roger grabbed the map from the console behind him as John passed the coordinates of the location to him over the intercom. Roger wrote them on the canopy with a grease pencil, and quickly turned to the map. He located Quang Tri, then the target area. "Head southeast. Well, more southerly. Looks like about fifteen minutes," Roger said as he quickly estimated the distance to the target. When they arrived on station, they found the Marine unit located about halfway down the side of a steep hill. They were taking fire from an enemy position directly above them on the same hill. The friendly unit popped smoke.

"I've got goofy grape," John called on the radio as purple smoke drifted above the jungle canopy. The smoke rose almost straight up in the still air. The Marine unit identified the distance and direction to the target. "Turret coming hot," John said as he set up the aircraft for the first inbound run. Calling the wingman, he passed on the attack instructions. "All right, Delta, inbound heading is about 300 degrees. Don't fire on the first pass. Just cover us. I'm putting in a single marking pair to make sure this joker knows where he wants the fire. No turret fire on the first pass either, and hang back from the target 'til we find out what they've got."

Brown, call sign Delta, was flying John's wing today. Roger knew him only slightly. While Green had been with the unit back in the states, Brown had only recently joined them. But he had been with a gunship outfit, so he already was familiar with most of the unit's tactics. Roger didn't even know who was flying with Brown.

John put the ship into a very shallow dive. They were almost at the same altitude as the target. He fired the first marking pair from about 500 yards. As he broke off to the left he called the Marine unit. "How'd those look?" he asked. The answer came back that he was almost on target. The grunts wanted the fire a little more toward the top of the hill. John set up for the second run. He held the aircraft nose high with the target out the left side of the ship. As the airspeed slowed, he turned toward the target and nosed over. Roger watched intently as the target grew larger. John punched off five pair of rockets, and rolled into a left turn. As they began to turn, Roger fired the minigun in the turret. The stream of tracers raced toward the ridge. They looked as if they were curving sharply to

the left as the aircraft continued its turn. As the ship turned away from the target, Roger watched Delta make his inbound run. As Delta began his break, the Marine on the radio said that he was taking fire.

Delta called lead on the air-to-air channel. "I fired to the right of your bursts, three zero. I must have stirred something up if they started shootin'." Roger wasn't used to the call signs of the 3rd Platoon. Three zero was obviously John's call sign.

The Marine was on the radio again, "Hey, Dragon three zero, you took fire on that last pass. You copy?"

John instantly returned the call, "Gotcha, Jolly One. We're comin' in again."

Roger strained his eyes to try to look through the thick canopy of trees. He couldn't see any muzzle flashes. But he could feel the sweat begin to trickle down the side of his cheek. He glanced at the air nozzles on the sides of the instrument panel. They were closed. Then he remembered he had closed them on the early morning flight to Quang Tri. He quickly opened them.

As they closed with the target, the bright sun of the clear day seemed to reflect from the jungle canopy. The smoke from the earlier passes still hung above the trees. John lined up to the right of the smoke. Suddenly, Jolly One's voice crackled over the radio, "They're on ya' again, Dragon. Sounds like several AW's (automatic weapons)."

Roger continued to sweep the hillside with his eyes, straining to spot any sign of the enemy. The rockets from the ship jumped out in front. As the first pair veered away slightly, Roger felt John adjust the trim of the aircraft. Several more pair followed. Then John was rolling the aircraft to the right. Roger hit the fire button for the 40 mm. grenade launcher. And then they were outbound again. On about the fifth pass, John was closing with the target, and flew in closer than the last few passes. Just as he began the break, Roger heard a sharp thump and felt the floor of the aircraft jerk very slightly beneath his feet. He hit the radio switch with his foot, "I think we just took a hit, John." Then he squeezed the fire switch on the 40 mm. again. The steady rhythm of the thumper was reassuring as they continued their break.

After the next pass, Jolly One asked them to hold off while he tried to maneuver closer to the target. John pulled the section off into an orbit above the target area.

As he broke from the racetrack pattern, he called Delta on the radio.

"You copy Jolly One's last transmission?" John asked.

"Roger that. Did you guys see any fire coming back?"

"No, we didn't see any, but the front seat thinks we might have taken a hit. You want to look us over?"

Delta immediately slid up next to the lead ship. As lead stayed in a lazy orbit, Delta swung below, then came up on the other side of the lead ship. "You look good to us, three zero," Brown called over the radio. "No leaks, anyway."

John keyed his mike again, "OK, we'll check it over when we get on the ground."

Jolly One, the Marine unit, was again taking fire from the hillside above. He passed this information to the Dragon section. Again the section hit the target. This time they worked further to the left, along the ridge. Again Jolly One reported they were taking fire, but they still couldn't see any tracers. After several more passes, John called Brown on the radio, "How's your fuel, Delta?"

After a slight pause, Brown came back, "Think we've got about thirty minutes left, tops."

"Roger that," John returned, then to Roger over the intercom, "We got about the same. If we make any more passes, go easy on the thumper ammo. I don't know if we can get any more of that up here."

Roger hadn't thought about the possibility of no 40 mm. ammo. Ammo for the minigun was easy to get, but the 40 mm. stuff was special for their gun.

John called the Marine unit, and advised them that the section's time on station was very short. Jolly One thanked them for their help, and gave them an end of mission.

When the section returned to Quang Tri, they refueled and rearmed. At the arming point, they found that 40 mm. ammunition was available, much to Roger's glee. When he was helping to rearm the turret weapons, Roger looked the front of the ship over carefully for damage, but he couldn't find any. When they had returned to their parking area, a heavy cloud cover was beginning to drift in over the mountains. Once on the ground, Roger again began searching the ship for any battle damage. After looking over the nose carefully, he moved his search to the skids. He was sure he'd felt an impact under his feet. After searching the skids, he moved up to the rotor system. Then he crawled under the ship.

Near the point on the aircraft where the forward support tube for the skids crossed under the belly of the ship, he noted four empty screw holes. It looked like something should be mounted there. He crossed over to the other Cobra, and checked it. At the same position on the other aircraft, what was called a "hard mount" was located there. It was held in place by four screws. This point was used as a jacking point when the aircraft was lifted with jacks. Roger crawled back under his own ship. There were no scrapes or other evidence that the jacking point had been forcibly removed. He made an entry in the log book that the jacking point was missing.

When he walked into the quonset hut with the other pilots, he told John what he had found. John didn't seem very interested.

"Maybe they left it off when they put the mother together," John said.

"Maybe so," countered Roger, "but we'll find out when they pull it in for the hundred-hour inspection. If they find the ends of those screws with the nuts on them, then I'll bet that's where we took the hit."

The Marines provided them with lunches from the mess hall. It wasn't bad chow, and they thanked their contact person for his thoughtfulness. Shortly after lunch, they received another mission. This one was further into the mountains than the first. By the time they took off, the cloud cover was total, and it was dropping rapidly in the mountains. As they reached the first ridge of the mountains, the clouds were nearly down on top of it.

Roger was studying the map to see if he could find a route to the target. They entered one of the many valleys available to them. The further they progressed up the valley, the more difficult the conditions became. John called Brown, and asked him to wait at the river junction they were now over, while John would scout ahead to see if a route to the unit could be found. Roger tracked their progress as they followed the river higher and higher into the mountains.

Although they were close, they needed to get over one more ridge to reach the target. They tried different branches of the river, one by one. Coming up on still another dead end, Roger looked above them. It looked a little lighter at the top of the ridge dead ahead. John had seen it, too, and was now flying directly at the light spot.

"Hey, be kinda careful, partner. That might just be a sucker hole," Roger said.

"Yeah, I know," John answered, "but we only need to make one more ridge."

As they followed the trees on the hillside further into the clouds, visibility dropped until they could only see trees nearby on the hillside. Just as Roger was about to say something about turning back, they flew into a cloud. Roger immediately looked to the instruments. He expected John to suck in the power and begin a climb. Instead, John rolled the ship into a tight turn. Roger gasped, and looked in the rear view mirror. John was looking to their left. As Roger glanced that way, he suddenly saw trees coming at them. The trees appeared to be tilted. And then they broke out of the clouds. They had emerged into another valley. Now Roger wasn't sure of their position. He backtracked their trail up the river valley, but he wasn't sure of their headings as they had played the deadly game with the clouds.

"Well?" John asked.

"Well, I think we're in the extreme north end of the Ashau Valley, near as I can tell," Roger studied the map.

"Where's the guys we're trying to reach?"

"Back over that way," Roger pointed off to the left, into a mass of boiling clouds and mountains. "Why don't you try to reach that guy on the radio, and ask him the weather over his position?"

"Good idea," John tuned in the frequency on the radio, and attempted a call. There was no answer, just static. Then John tried again, asking for any unit that could hear him. Again there was only static. John was checking the gauges. "Rog, my boy, I think we're gonna bow out of this one gracefully. We've used up half our fuel already. Even if we find him now, we won't have enough gas to do a decent job for him. Think you can find us another way out of here?"

Just then, several helicopters appeared in front of them. They looked unfamiliar at first, and Roger was unsettled until he realized he had seen pictures of them. They were old Sikorskys, with the long, banana-shaped fuselage, and a main rotor on each end. "Are the Marines using those old things?" Roger was flabbergasted.

"Yeah, I'd believe that. That's about typical of the Marines, from what I've seen," John said.

"Do you want to try contacting that Marine unit again? This might be the guys who wanted us to shoot."

"Yeah, I could, but we don't have enough gas to shoot anything now, except a straight path for home."

Roger was again studying the map, "I agree, and I think I know where we're at. If we follow this valley we're in, I think we'll come out on the coastal plain very close to Quang Tri."

John tried to contact their wing ship. After several tries they came in very weak and garbled. John told them we were giving up, and to return to Quang Tri. He repeated the message several times, but neither John nor Roger was sure whether the wing ship understood the message. When lead broke out of the mountains, there was a solid overcast extending as far as they could see. John tried again to contact the wingman.

"Delta. Dragon One Zero Delta. This is Dragon One Zero. Over."

The return transmission was so loud it hurt Roger's ears. "We read you loud and clear, like five by, big One Zero!" Brown's voice rattled in their earphones. John quickly turned the volume down on the air-to-air radio.

"Thanks a bunch, Delta. What's your position?"

Brown answered that he was approaching Quang Tri at the present time, and was about to land in the refueling area. John told him that the section would join up there. Returning to the parking area, John left the ship running and walked into the quonset hut. He appeared a few minutes later. As he climbed into the ship, he spun his fingers above his head. When he got his helmet plugged in, he informed the section that the Marines had given them an end of mission. John was talking to Brown on the radio, "The jarheads said that the weather was coming down in the mountains, and they were calling all their ships back in. Let's head for home. We're done for the day."

When they returned to A Battery, the place was abuzz. Seems two Cobras from the unit were on a mission near the Ashau, much further south than One Zero's section, when they took fire from a fifty caliber machine gun. One of the rounds had passed through the canopy on Klein's ship. It was the first fifty caliber that the Dragons had encountered in-country. Neither pilot was hit, but they were doing their share of drinking at the club that night. With the weather coming down, the entire unit was grounded until it cleared, so everyone gathered at the club for the story of the fifty. It was told several times as the rain beat down on the tin roof.

About 2200 hours the phone in the club rang. It was only a field telephone. Captain Jones, the maintenance officer answered it. With all the revelry going on, he finally had to scream for quiet so he could hear the party on the other end. Everyone turned to watch him, as he mostly listened. Then he reached over the makeshift bar to hang up the field phone, and turned to face the group.

He looked directly at Roger, "Did you write up a possible hit, Hunter? Something about a jacking point?"

"Yes, sir," Roger nodded his head in agreement.

"Well, they found the ends of your screws. Seems like you were right. Decker said for me to tell you to be more careful with his airplane." Then he addressed the whole group, "Speaking of battle damage, I don't want you guys gettin' into a habit of this. That's two ships today, you know. What are you guys doing, bucking for medals?" The gathered pilots laughed.

Green's voice from the back of the room carried over the others', "Yeah, that's right. Just remember, when you get back to the world, all those medals and a quarter will still get you a cup of coffee." Again everyone laughed.

36: Ship Lost in the Bowling Alley

The next week, things got more serious. The weather worsened with low clouds and rain. Green and a new pilot, Barry, were the lead ship on a mission to the Bowling Alley. The unit calling for support was located on a ridge to the southwest of Highway 1. The choppers were attacking a target just at the base of the clouds when one of the ships disappeared. There was no radio transmission or any sign that anything had gone wrong. Just silence on the radio. The wingman searched until the deteriorating weather forced him out of the area. The following day, the weather was so poor that no one was able to approach the area. The unit on the ground had been taking incoming fire at the time the ship disappeared, so they had no idea what had happened to it.

The weather improved on the third day, and every available aircraft from the unit joined the search. Even Jenson got clearance from his unit to join the search with a Dustoff ship. By the afternoon of the third day, hope was beginning to fade, but no one wanted to say what was on everyone's mind. Meal times were especially quiet. And then just after supper, word came in that the ship had been found. But the word wasn't good. Only one pilot was with the ship. That night, Jenson came over to the club to share what he knew.

The room was very quiet as Jenson related his tale. "We were sure that we were too low on the hillside. Everything the ground unit was able to tell us indicated that the clouds were a little higher when the section was trying to fire for them. So, we decided we'd try hovering up along the side of the mountain. We didn't have a lot of visibility, but we could see enough to find our way around. That was as long as we stayed right above the trees. Well, the medic on board spotted a broken top on a tree just above us. We hovered on up there, and sure enough, there was the ship. The rotor blades were gone, and it was pretty busted up, but it was right side up. As we hovered over it, the medic called out that he could see someone sitting next to the ship. We dropped down as low as we could. See, the trees were pretty tall.

"We couldn't tell if the guy was alive or dead. He wasn't moving. Finally the medic thought he saw him move. When he saw that, he volunteered to go down and check it

out. Crap, I didn't know what to do. We didn't have any support up there at all. It was starting to rain again, and the visibility wasn't looking any better. Besides it was getting late in the day. I finally just said 'screw it'. I knew if we didn't get him out then, that he'd probably never last another night. I told the medic it was OK. We put him on the jungle penetrator, and lowered him down on the hoist. It was Green. He was lying against the side of the aircraft. His ankle was all busted up, and he'd lost a lot of blood. He had the first aid kit from the ship in his hands, but he told us later that he couldn't break the safety wire on it, he was so weak. Probably from all the blood he lost. Anyway, the medic asked about the other pilot. Green told the medic that he hadn't seen him at all."

Klein spoke up, "You mean he never saw him after the crash?"

Jenson continued, "Green couldn't remember the crash. The last thing he remembered they were still in the aircraft, flying. Green told us that he didn't know how long he was out before he came to. He didn't even know he had been on the ground a couple days. The first thing he remembered was lying next to the aircraft. He didn't know if he climbed out himself, someone helped him out, or if that's just where he landed during the crash. He did remember trying to get to the first aid kit. He said he was really happy when he finally managed to reach it. He said he must have passed out again. He was really hazy about the time element. Anyway, he remembered sitting next to the ship, and trying to get the first aid kit open. But he was so weak that he couldn't break the safety wire on it. He said that is about the most frustrated he's ever been. Hell, it wouldn't have helped him that much even if he had gotten it open. His ankle was all broken to hell. I'm sure that he's done over here. He'll get a one-way ticket home with that injury. After what he's been through, I think he should get a ticket home. It was just blind luck that the medic ever spotted that broken tree with the visibility we had.

"Anyway, the medic tied Green on the penetrator, and sent him up. While we were hoisting Green up, the medic checked out the ship. He couldn't find hide nor hair of anyone else. There wasn't any blood or anything in the other seat. He even looked around the ship on the ground. I was scared to death. I didn't want him to go very far.

If anything happened to him down there, there was no way for us to get him out. He'd already broken every regulation in our unit by going down to get Green. As soon as we got Green in the ship, we sent the penetrator back down for the medic. He didn't really want to come back, but by then the light was getting so bad, he didn't have a choice.

"The clouds had dropped down a long ways by the time we started down the mountain. It took us almost half an hour to hover all the way down until we got out of the clouds. I was afraid we were going to have to hover all the way back to Phu Bai."

Jenson took a long pull on his beer, "I'm sure sorry about the other pilot. What was his name, Barry? The medic sure tried to find some sign of him. That medic has a lot of guts."

Klein coughed. "Well, that medic's gonna get some recognition for what he did. We're gonna put him in for a medal."

Jenson shook his head from side to side, "Hey, you can't do that. If the CO of our unit finds out what he did, he'd probably get court martialed."

"Come on!" Klein was exasperated. "He couldn't do that!"

"Yes, he could. And he very well might. He's pretty strict on regulations," Jenson's hands were shaking as he lit a cigarette. "He doesn't want anyone setting that kind of example. Some guys will do some crazy things, like we did. And another situation like that one could very well cost us a whole crew, you know." The assembled pilots nodded in agreement. They could understand Jenson's CO. It didn't seem right when it was one of their people who was down, but the CO was just trying to look out for his crews. They were vulnerable enough, with no weapons on the aircraft. And the bad guys didn't always respect the large red cross painted on the side of the aircraft.

With February coming on strong, the weather continued to improve, but it seemed by inches. Roger always felt better when he rose in the morning to silence. When the rain was falling, it sounded like a group of drummers gathered for a jam session as it pounded on the tin roof of the hootch.

It was a cloudy night that Roger had five-minute status with Rock. It was infrequent, but not unusual, to be teamed up with a pilot from another platoon. Rock commanded the 2nd Platoon. They were assigned Charlie models, but there

was little chance of action that night. It was just sit around and wait, even for the hot status ships. About an hour before daylight, the hot ships were scrambled.

Roger was awakened by the field phone in the hootch. When he lifted the receiver, he fully expected it to be Operations telling him that he was now on hot status.

"Hunter? That you?"

Roger stretched as he watched the hot status ships lift off the flight line. "Yeah. I know we're hot, and I'm on my way."

The night duty operations specialist was excited, "No! No! It's not just hot status! You guys gotta go! I've got another mission in already!"

"Really?! Christ!" Roger dropped the receiver, and grabbed his clothes. He wasn't even dressed. Pants and boots on, he slipped into his shirt, grabbed his helmet bag and pistol belt, and ran for the flight line.

The ship was already cranking when Roger piled into it. They had both gunners on board and Rock was in the right seat. Since Rock was the aircraft commander, he should have been in the left seat, but he had grabbed the right seat because it's easier to start the ship from there.

Roger pulled on his helmet, and began throwing switches as the turbine came up to speed. Glancing at Rock, Roger noted he already had his helmet on, and looked ready to go. When the radios warmed up, Rock already had the ship at a hover, and called Eagle tower for takeoff clearance. Roger was buckling in, and checking the crew in the back seat. As the ship hovered down the strip, both crewmen gave Roger thumbs up. Roger turned, and made one last instrument check as the ship began to gather speed for the takeoff.

A call from the wing ship broke the silence on the radio during the takeoff. They had an engine problem, and were going to have to abort. They would try to pick up another ship, and join up as soon as they could.

Rock rogered the transmission in clipped syllables. He was concentrating on the takeoff. The dim red light from the instrument panel lights bathed Rock's face in a warm glow. The ragged rivulets of perspiration on Rock's face reflected the panel lights. Dust and dirt scattered before the blunt nose of the C-model in the brightness of the searchlight. The ship shuddered as it passed through translational lift.

Airborne, the pace slowed in the aircraft. Roger lit a cigarette, and called Operations. From them he received the

coded radio frequency, the call sign, and the location of the unit asking for the support. Roger switched to intercom, "Down toward Danang. Think it's near the Bowling Alley, Rock."

"Yeah, OK. Come up working fox mike, will you?"

Roger tuned the FM radio to the correct frequency using the code book. "You got it." Then Roger leaned back in the seat of the ship, and took a long drag on his cigarette. His clothes felt cold and clammy. They had not yet warmed from his body heat. Below, Roger watched Highway 1 unfold to the south as the sky turned a shade lighter in the east.

"Roll up your window will you?"

Rock's voice on the intercom surprised Roger. For one thing, Roger had been daydreaming, but the message still confused him. They always flew with the windows open. Besides the cargo bay doors were wide open, too. Roger looked over at Rock, but Rock was facing straight ahead. Roger glanced back over his seat just to make sure the cargo doors were open. They were.

"I said, roll up your window, will you?"

It was Rock's voice again, and Roger quickly turned to face him. Rock remained staring straight ahead. Roger shook his head, and slid the window closed beside him. Then he turned to look at Rock again. With a start, Roger noticed that Rock's arm was bare. He didn't have his shirt on. Then Roger noticed movement at the edge of the armor seat next to Rock's thigh. A small corner of pink fringe from the end of a towel wafted in the breezes there. Roger's gaze dropped to Rock's feet. Rock had come on this mission with his shower shoes, a pink towel, his chicken plate, and his helmet and gloves. That was it. No shirt, no pants, no boots.

Roger laughed to himself. No wonder Rock was cold. And a pink towel, yet, thought Roger. If we're forced down out here today, Rock will never live this one down.

As they approached the Bowling Alley, the eastern sky was turning pink. Hill 88 rose from the flat rice paddies just east of Highway 1. It was a very distinctive hill. Shaped like a haystack, all rounded and smooth, it reminded Roger of a lone mole hill on a large, smooth lawn.

Rock contacted the infantry unit. As the single helicopter approached their position, the ground unit used a flashlight to mark their position. They said they weren't taking fire right then, but they had taken fire from the east side of the road. Rock circled the vehicles on the

highway, then turned east. Although the paddies themselves were still dark, dawn was coming quickly.

Holding between fifty and a hundred feet above the ground, Rock cruised slowly to the east, zig zagging back and forth over the rice paddies. The gunners and Roger strained to spot any movement, or anything that would give the enemy away. As the darkness seeped from the paddies, it was Roger who spotted the prone figure in front of them. He was lying in the shallow water, and was so close that he passed under the chopper before anyone could fire.

Rock rolled the ship around to the right sharply, and sucked in the power. After gaining a little altitude, he slowed their airspeed, and turned back toward the target. In a shallow dive, Rock set up on the prone figure. Suddenly the enemy jumped up and sprinted across the paddy. He knew he'd been spotted. Rock closed quickly with the running figure, and punched off a single pair of rockets. Roger realized they were very close to the target,....and the ground! The mud and water from the rocket blast enveloped the ship.

Rock rolled the ship sharply right. Water rivulets ran down the windshield amid clumps of mud and grass. "Did we get that dink?"

Roger punched the floor mike, "I don't think so. We had 'im bracketed, but we were just a little long."

Rock spun the ship around toward the target. They were scarcely at a hundred feet. The spot where their last pair of rockets hit the rice paddy was clearly visible. Rock thought he spotted the enemy, dumped the nose of the ship, and punched off two quick pair. Again the blast showered the ship with water, mud and grass. Losing sight of the enemy, the ship's crew again began searching.

It was now full daylight. Some distance away from where they fired at the first enemy, the gunner spotted another. Again they were right on top of him before they saw him. They were very low, and Roger could see the pack on his back, and an AK-47 slung over the pack.

"Hey, Rock, let the door gunners have him. We just lose sight of them when you try to hit 'em with rockets," Roger said.

"Yeah. Good idea." Rock brought the ship around sharply. "I'm putting him on our side, Wilson," Rock said to the crewchief. The ship seemed to inch toward the target. Roger could clearly see the enemy lying in the shallow water amid the green shoots of rice. The crewchief

leaned out of the ship, but as Roger watched, he made no move to fire his machine gun.

Again Rock flew over the target. Again the crewchief failed to fire. After the third pass, Roger was convinced that Wilson had seen the target all right. He just wouldn't fire at the enemy.

Rock was getting frustrated, "Wilson, what's the problem?! He's right out there!"

Wilson's voice was subdued. "I know, but I....I just can't see him."

Rock turned to Roger, "OK, then we'll put him on your side, Hunter. You and Galiano can see him, can't you?"

Roger looked back over his seat at Galiano. Galiano gave them a thumbs up, and Roger shook his head, "Yeah. We can see him."

"Well, gun him," Rock was setting up for yet another pass over the enemy.

"Rock, we could hit him from a little higher, you know. If that guy decides to jump up and shoot us, he could do a whole lot of damage this close." Roger was getting concerned that they had already made several passes, and they had been unable to place accurate fire on the enemy.

"Yeah, but this is the last pass," Rock answered.

As the ship approached the prone enemy, Rock kicked it out of trim so Galiano had a better view of the approaching target. Roger watched the enemy soldier as the bullets from Galiano's M-60 splashed in the water around him. Then Roger could see the bullets tear into the soldier's pack and clothes.

They continued to hunt for other targets, but their fuel was nearly exhausted. They had to break station. Rock called the infantry unit. "Hey, you guys, we gotta leave now 'cause we're about outta gas. If you want another section, just let us know, huh? It's been great working with you."

As the ship left the area, a Marine stood on the shoulder of the road watching the helicopter. He and one of the pilots would cross paths again many years later, and over a beer would recall this mission on an early morning in February, 1968, near Hill 88.....

On the return flight to Camp Eagle, the crew in the chopper was silent. For all of them, it was the first enemy they had actually seen. Roger looked over at Wilson. Wilson's head was turned toward the cargo door opening, and Roger couldn't see his face. It was too bad, Roger thought.

Wilson was a good crewchief, but if he couldn't fire at an enemy, he would never make it as a crewchief/gunner on an armed helicopter. The next time his failure to fire could cost them the entire ship and crew.

With the continuing improvement of the weather, the big push toward the Ashau Valley gained momentum. Lt. Ron Travis, the 2nd Platoon leader, was covering a lift of 155 mm. howitzers into one of the forward FSB's. The one-five-fives

were artillery guns that were so heavy that they were lifted into place by the large "flying crane", CH-54, helicopters. The

flying cranes' call sign was "Hurricane". They were aptly named, because the rotor wash from these huge ships approached the velocity of a hurricane. As Travis circled the unloading operation, he got a master caution light on the instrument panel. Checking further, the individual caution lights showed the transmission chip detector light was on. Travis recognized that this warning light could be the start of something serious. Without a properly operating transmission, the main rotor system could seize and either stop altogether or come apart. Heeding the caution, Travis landed the ship on the fire base. Before maintenance could get a ship out to them, the weather closed in, and Travis and his crew had to spend two nights on the fire base. It was not something they relished, but there wasn't much they could do about it.

Upon their return, Travis was called into the commanding officer's hootch. Major Short chewed him out mercilessly for being overcautious. Travis tried to explain the situation as he had seen it, but Short cut him off. Travis left the CO's hootch angry and confused. He thought he had exercised good judgement in landing the ship until the

problem was checked out. But what really bothered him was the CO's approach. The old man had jumped all over Travis before giving Travis a chance to explain the situation. At the club that evening, Travis had an extra helping of scotch.

Late that night, Camp Eagle took incoming rounds, and the Dragons were scrambled. First Platoon was on hot status, and were the first ships to go up. This time they were in Cobras. Roger was in the front seat of Jeff's ship. Castle was driving the other Cobra, with Davis in his front seat. The incoming quickly stopped, but camp security

wanted the ships to orbit in the vicinity for a while to see if they could spot anything. To reduce the visibility of the choppers to anyone on the ground, Jeff came up with an idea. He called Castle on the radio.

"Hey, Delta, I've got a great idea to keep the gooks from seeing us so easy."

"Yeah, what do you got, One Zero?" Castle sounded amused. This wasn't the first bright idea that Jeff had come up with, but Castle always heard him out before he denied the request or offered alternatives.

"How about if one ship stays lower than the other, and flies with his lights off?" As the conversation continued, the ships slowly drifted over Hue. Jeff had many reasons why the plan would work, but Castle slowly and carefully countered each one. Castle didn't like the idea of one ship flying around in the dark with no lights.

During the conversation, Castle suddenly chuckled, "Say, One Zero, did I tell you the story I heard the other day?" Not waiting for a reply, Castle continued, "It was just after the Battery first arrived in country, the way I heard it. They were flying all C-models then. None of this new fancy stuff like we got now." There was a long pause as Castle waited for a reply from either Hunter or Davis. But none was forthcoming, so he went on with his story.

"Anyway, one particular ship seemed to be taking all the fire on the night missions. This went on for a couple weeks. Finally the guy flying it got really mad. He tried everything. Like turning the dash lights way down, and taping off the bottom of the navigation lights. But he still kept taking more fire than the other ships, even though it was only at night. So finally he stood out on the flight line one night, and had another pilot fly his ship over him. When the ship went over, the guy nearly fainted. There was a light on the bottom of the ship that looked like a flashlight! Well, they brought the ship down, and proceeded to check it out. This pilot had the crewchief crawl under the ship, and guess what? There was a light in the cargo hook hole (commonly called the "hell hole") that was burning every time they turned their lights on! Evidently that ship had been used for hauling loads at some time, and someone had rigged up a light in the hell hole so the guy hooking up the load could see the hook! Isn't that something else?"

Roger checked his watch, and shifted himself in the

seat. These nylon seats were OK when it was hot, but tonight it was just humid. He turned off the air nozzles on the instrument panel. Still feeling cold, he reached over his shoulder and turned off the forced air that was blown through his seat cushion. Then he shifted the armor breast plate. Roger wondered about the origin of its nickname, "chicken plate". After refastening its velcro straps, he raised the seat a little. As the ship rolled into another lazy turn, Roger noticed he was getting reflections on the canopy bubble from the lights of the city below them. There weren't many there, but the few caused bright specks on the canopy. As they came out of the turn and leveled off, Roger stiffened. He thought something had passed right by the ship! Jeff was on the radio before Roger could find the floor switch.

"Hey, Delta, which direction are you heading?" Jeff asked.

Roger looked at the compass as Castle answered. The two ships were headed exactly in opposite directions. Roger's stomach rolled over.

Jeff was asking another question, and this time his voice sounded shaky, "Yeah, and what's your altitude?"

Roger's eyes jumped to the altimeter. He wanted to look away, but he couldn't. Castle's answer nearly stopped his heart! The reported altitudes of the two ships were almost exactly the same. The two ships had nearly hit head on over the city of Hue! Roger struggled to breathe. Jeff's voice sounded strained as he called Castle again.

"Uh, say, big Delta. How about you climbing up about 500 feet or so, huh? I think we almost had amid-air," Jeff's voice cracked.

Castle's voice sounded surprised, "Are you kidding me? Naw. We couldn't be that close." There was a long pause. "By the way, just where are you guys, anyway?"

So this is how it happened, Roger thought. He looked in the rear view mirror at Jeff, but Jeff's face was nearly hidden in the dim red glow from the instrument lights. Roger wondered what Jeff was thinking about now. That had been a close call, and Castle and Davis didn't even know it.

Without further incident, the section approached the new refueling area at Camp Eagle. Coming to a hover, dust blew across the blacktop in the landing lights of the ship. It was eerie to come in at night. It was almost like landing on a foreign planet. Like a scene from a science fiction movie.

As they hovered along the taxiway, Roger marveled at the engineering done by the unit that constructed the new refueling area. They had located it in the middle of a graveyard. In order to move the graves, the engineers had to secure permission from the relatives of all the deceased in the cemetery. They had succeeded pretty well. There had been only one grave that they couldn't move. Roger looked at it now, out the left side of the ship. It rose above the rest of the POL (refueling) area because the engineers had dug out all the dirt around it to make the area flat. This left the grave standing atop a ten foot pedestal of dirt. The engineers had further placed a red light on each corner of the hazard, so ships wouldn't run into it at night. Some fix, thought Roger. Either a nice aiming point for the enemy gunners, or a sure setup for a night accident when someone hovered into it by mistake.

Jeff set the ship down by one of the fuel nozzles. The nozzles looked just like those at the corner gas station, except the nozzle itself was a little larger. There was also a grounding wire at each station that was supposed to be attached to the ship. This prevented any buildup of static electricity on the ship which could arc, conceivably causing an explosion. The grounding wires had a metal clothespin affair on the end to attach to the ship. These were sometimes forgotten after they were attached, but usually caused no problem. The clothespin would simply slip off as the wire itself became taut.

Roger opened his canopy door and held the controls while Jeff filled the ship with JP-4 fuel. When Roger looked at Jeff over his right shoulder, Jeff looked like a space man with his clear visor down and the instrument lights reflecting from it. Jeff was watching the fuel gauge. They only took so many pounds of fuel on board. The ship was capable of carrying more in the tank, but the weight was too much with all the ordnance on board, too. After refueling, they took off and shot their approach into the Battery flight line.

Roger was glad to be back on the ground. He didn't especially like flying in a Cobra at night. With the bubble canopy, the pilots were completely enclosed. More like a fighter plane than a helicopter, Cleve had said when he and Roger first looked at a Cobra closely. But they were more powerful, carried more fuel and ordnance, and they flew a

lot faster. These advantages made the Charlie model obsolete. But at night, with no open windows, the reflections on the inside of the bubble were distracting. Already most of the light bulbs that were indicator lights for the turret weapons were lost. The pilots in the front seats of the Cobras had unscrewed them to reduce the reflections on the canopy for the pilot in the rear seat. At first it was a game. Each morning, the crewchiefs would dutifully locate the bulbs on the floor, under the seat, or wherever, and screw them back in. The next night, the pilots would unscrew them again. Finally, the pilots just threw them away so they couldn't be replaced.

Also because of the reflections off the bubble canopy, the pilots were always after the crewchiefs to polish the canopies. Many of the crewchiefs left a bottle of bubble polish and a rag in the nose compartment so it would be handy for their task. The polish removed the small scratches as well as the dirt. In the dry weather, polishing was not a bad task, but with the rains, it became a nightmare. Of course, that was when the pilots wanted better visibility. The water spots and streaks complicated the vision problem, and there was no method for rain removal from the canopy. The pilots had to simply let the slipstream blow it off.

The narrow fuselage of the Cobra had its advantages when the ship was taking fire. The small cross-sectional area of the ship when viewed from the front made it a difficult target for the enemy. But side or belly shots were about the same as the C-model. However, if hits were taken from the front in the Cobra, they usually hit something of importance.

37: Friendly Fire Incident

The next week, the weather cleared. As Klein had promised, Roger got a day off. While he was wondering what to do with it, a friend from flight school called him. Dan Brady was a warrant officer in one of the neighboring aviation companies. Dan flew slicks. He was going into Phu Bai the next day to pick up laundry and supplies. He wondered if Roger wanted to go along. Roger was excited. He had never seen any of the country over which he was now flying from the ground. Dan picked him up at 0700 hours (7:00 am) in a 3/4 ton truck. The truck had a canvas top on the cab and bed, with wooden siderails on the bed. Dan had a Spec Four (Specialist Four) driving the rig. Dan and Roger rode in the front seat, while a friend of the driver rode in back by himself.

As they left Camp Eagle, they were stopped by MP's at a vehicle safety inspection station. Here the MP's went over the truck with a fine tooth comb, writing up all the safety violations. Dan attempted to bribe them, but to no avail. Dan had been in country nearly eight months, and he knew his way around.

As they continued toward Phu Bai on the dirt road, they passed some refugee villages. It was here that villagers from the outlying areas had been relocated. Some of them still went out and worked their rice fields, if they weren't too distant. Roger wondered what the rest of them did. They lived in small shacks with tin roofs. Garbage lay thick around the village. Most of it was tin cans, and other cast offs that had originated in the land of the great PX, good ol' America. They passed quickly through the refugee village and entered Phu Bai. Crude signs hung everywhere, advertising the wares sold within the squalid huts. Dan had the Spec Four park the vehicle near a group of small buildings.

"Here's where we pick up the laundry, but I'm sure it isn't ready yet. How about a tour of the town?"

Roger wasn't sure what Dan meant. Roger didn't feel like drinking at this early hour of the morning, and he hoped that this wasn't what Dan had in mind. They wandered among the buildings. Literally everything was offered for sale. Some of the small children even offered their sisters. Their broken English was amusing, but the products they were pushing weren't. What a way to grow up, thought

Roger. As he wandered along the muddy street with Dan, Roger thought that more Americans should visit this place. Not because there was a war going on, but to see how much Americans take for granted every day. Sewers and clean drinking water did not exist here. Mud was a way of life when the rains came.

As they passed the small huts, Roger noticed some of the chairs that he had seen around the Battery area. He walked in to look. As soon as he did, the proprietress, an elderly lady with black teeth, hustled right over to him. She did her best to make a sale. Roger declined most of the items she offered him, but he did buy one of the chairs.

As Roger left the hut, he noticed an engraver's shop next door in a large tent. Together, Roger and Dan entered the tent. A very old man was crouched over a workbench in the center of the tent. The light he worked by was provided by a large hole in the ceiling of the tent. This could be closed during rainy weather. Roger looked over his assortment of lighters, buttons and pins. Then he moved on to look at some of the engraving the little man had done. Roger marveled at its detail. It was very good, compared to what Roger had seen around home. And every bit of it was done entirely with hand tools. Roger turned back to the examples of engraving. The little man behind the counter had attempted to engage them, to determine their interests. He could speak only about six words of English, one of which was "like". This word was usually preceded by "you", as he brandished one of his works. Roger decided that he would have his lighter engraved. He had a Zippo, which was almost universally carried by smokers in the service. It had a clear, silver case. Roger picked the type style from an old worn paper the little man produced from beneath the crude counter. Then Roger drew the letters on a piece of paper. Then he showed the old man that he wanted them to slant across the face of the lighter. The little old man was delighted, and set to work on the job immediately. Roger watched as the craftsman used his rudimentary tools with a skill that somehow seemed out of place in a dirty brown tent on the edge of a refugee village. Soon the letters of Roger's last name began to appear in a flowery script across the face of the lighter. Below the name, the words, "Vietnam '68 - '69" appeared. These were done in a more simplistic type style, and were much smaller than the letters of his name.

As the craftsman finished the work, he turned the lighter over, and indicated to Roger that he shouldn't leave the other side blank. Roger looked among the sayings that the old man produced on more sheets of paper from under the counter. From these, Roger selected one that to him seemed to portray his feelings as he thought of the protesters back home, and the turmoil the war had caused. It read simply, "To those who fought for it, freedom is something the protected will never know". Later, much later, Roger was to learn that this saying had supposedly originated from words scratched on the inside wall of a bunker at Khe Sanh, many miles to the north.

When the old man had finished the engraving, he handed the lighter back to Roger. Roger was surprised when the craftsman had produced a crude, one-man powered engraving tool, and had used it along with a template to produce the block letters of the saying on the back of the lighter. This almost removed the mystique of the engraving on the other side of the lighter. The old man looked like he was ready to haggle over the price. Roger obliged him, but didn't try to push the asking price down much. He felt a little sorry for the old man. It was plain to Roger that the man had seen much better times in his life.

When Dan and Roger left the engraver's tent, it was time to pick up the laundry and head back to camp. When they reached the truck, the two enlisted men were ready to go. Children gathered around them as they loaded up, holding out their hands for anything the GI's might be willing to give them. Dan took a handful of Vietnamese money out of his pocket, and scattered it among the children when they were ready to leave. With the children chasing the money, the driver jammed the truck in gear, and they roared off. When Roger looked at Dan, Dan shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, they always crowd around the truck like that, and I'm afraid we're going to run over one of the little devils. I just found it's easier to bring a handful of piasters." Then Dan looked away. "You know, on one laundry trip, one of these kids threw a grenade into the back of the truck as it was leaving. Only thing that saved their bacon was the kid forgot to pull the pin... Guess you never know, ...or do you?" His question went unanswered. Roger looked into the back of the truck through the window in the canvas. The soldier in back had an M-16 lying across his lap. Roger could see the magazine protruding from it.

They returned to Camp Eagle by the same route as they had come. Along the road they saw some of the villagers. There were a couple in a rice paddy working a crude pump that looked as if it had been fashioned from a bicycle. One Vietnamese woman along the road was dressed in traditional clothing - the long, straight dress - and she was carrying a white parasol. Roger tried to take her picture as they passed her. At the entrance to the camp was a crude car wash. A small pump sat next to the stream there, and several children waved at them as they approached. The children were signalling them to pull over. The driver simply waved back as the truck entered the gate to camp.

The next couple weeks were very boring ones for Roger. The missions continued to come in, but there was little resistance on the part of the enemy. Most of the LZ preps were lazy affairs after the initial run. After boring holes in the sky for about an hour, the section was given an end-of-mission with all the rest of their rockets remaining in the tubes. A few contact missions were flown, but little, if any, fire was taken on these.

Then one night at a pilots' meeting, the CO told the assembled pilots that they had a new duty to fulfill. A selected officer was to be responsible for one sector of the perimeter defense. Their sector was centered in an artillery unit just off the edge of A Battery's flight line. It was the 2nd of the 11th Artillery, the old man said. The job wasn't that tough, he went on to explain. There were about fifteen bunkers in that sector for which the sector commander was responsible. He could choose to spend the entire night in the bunker provided for him in the artillery unit's area, or he could spend it out on the bunker line.

Only a few nights later, one of A Battery's most unassuming officers found himself on perimeter duty. Lt. Wilson was from back east, very quiet, and even stuttered when excited. He was on duty at sundown, just as the last aircraft from the day's missions were coming in. It was a clear night, but there wasn't any moon. Following supper, most of the pilots retired to the club for a round of cards. About 2200 hours, loud explosions were heard from the vicinity of the perimeter. The blasts jolted the pilots from their card game, and they raced for the nearest bunkers. Huddling in the damp night air in the bunker, things seemed a bit dismal until someone produced a candle in an old whiskey bottle. This was lighted and placed in the center of the bunker. Then things warmed a little, and

some chatter surfaced. Soon someone was wondering how Wilson was making out. Some of the rounds had sounded very close. When the "all clear" sounded, Klein asked Roger if he would mind checking the aircraft for damage.

"No, I wouldn't mind at all," Roger answered. He even thought it might let his mind settle down some before he went to bed. Roger gathered his steel pot and flashlight from the hootch, and crossed the ditch to the flight line. Searching with his flashlight, he found a couple pieces of shrapnel on the ground, but no damage to the aircraft. Reaching the far end of the flight line, he looked over to the artillery unit's area. Their mess hall sat quite close to the flight line at this point. Roger noticed that the mess hall was a shambles. Pieces of lumber lay strewn about it, and there was a huge hole in the center of the roof. Roger stopped and listened. He could hear voices talking rapidly in the vicinity of the mess hall. Flashlights flickered back and forth between the mess hall and a nearby building which Roger took to be the headquarters building of the unit.

When Roger returned to the club to brief Klein on the flight line, everyone was talking excitedly. It appeared that the artillery unit next door had been hit, and hit hard. As Roger listened, he heard someone say that their mess hall had taken a direct hit. Then Roger spoke up.

"Yeah, I know. When I was out on the flight line, I saw it. But you know, there's something funny about that. If that thing took a direct hit, it must have been an air burst." As the others in the club turned toward Roger, the conversations stopped. It became very quiet in the club.

"What does that mean?" one of the pilots asked.

"Well, if they had taken a direct hit from a 122 mm. rocket, that mess hall would have been in a lot more pieces than it was. And those rounds that we took were sure a lot bigger than some mortar rounds."

Conversation stirred around the room. "But the gooks don't have any shells with airburst capabilities, do they?" Again the room fell silent.

Roger lit a cigarette. "Yeah, I've heard that, too." He took a long drag on his cigarette. "I think it might have been one of ours."

Castle smashed his beer can in his hand. "You think it might have been friendly fire? Some of our guns?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "I only know what I saw." The card game resumed, but the conversation lagged.

The next day, Lt. Wilson recounted what had happened in the artillery unit. There were some personnel working in the mess hall when the first round came in. They immediately left the mess hall, and dropped into a trench nearby. Eleven of them were killed when one of the air bursts exploded directly over the trench. Several more were hurt badly. And the cause? The story was that a US artillery unit fresh in from the states was firing some H&I (Harassment and Interdiction) fire. Apparently they had one gun laid wrong, and the rounds from this gun hit Eagle's perimeter and the artillery unit. It had taken several minutes to shut off the fire, but by this time the damage was done. That it was airbursts was unrefutable because there were no holes where the rounds had hit. Wilson described the evening in hushed tones. He didn't smile through the entire description. He had had to help with the clean up of the mess, and then he had to give a full statement to the officers who investigated the incident. Wilson had a great deal of trouble sleeping for the next few nights.

The next week brought more gossip to the Battery. Travis, who had now been promoted to captain, and was 2nd Platoon leader in A Battery, tore up a ship. Quite serious injuries were sustained by the crewchief and gunner. Travis had been shooting some unauthorized low-level autorotations when the accident happened. The CO had been livid, and rumors abounded that Travis wouldn't be with the unit much longer. The chopper, a C-model, had been completely destroyed in the crash.

Later in the week, Klein told Roger that they were slated for a long-range recon mission. They were to get a briefing on it in the morning. "But be sure all your gear's all ready to go. Bring along whatever you think we'll need. We can always dump a couple rockets if we're too heavy. I think we might be headed for the Ashau. We brief at 0600, so I've arranged early chow for us." Roger wrote a letter to Pam that night. It was hard to keep things light in the letter, but he felt he had to write.

He didn't mention anything about the artillery incident, but he did tell her about Travis's crash. And he told her that he missed her, but not enough for her to put in for a transfer to Vietnam. Roger didn't have a lot more to say, but he didn't feel sleepy, so he continued to ramble. Finally he put the letter aside, and picked up his book. He was about seventy pages into "Catch 22". The book

had been advertised as humorous, but so far Roger failed to see any humor in it. There were a lot of parallels between it and what he had seen in Vietnam. The major difference for the pilots was that in Nam they had 365 days to serve, instead of a required number of missions. But so far over here, there had been no increase in the number of days that had to be served. In the book, it seemed that as the pilots approached the magic number of missions, the required number was raised.

The mission briefing in the morning didn't take long. There were to be three ships involved. Two Cobras from A Battery, and a slick that was carrying some special equipment. The equipment was designed to measure the amount of ammonia in the air. This was supposed to indicate the presence of large troop concentrations. The route to be flown was covered in detail. It was to be A Battery's job to do the navigation for the mission. The slick ship had to fly right on the treetops to get accurate measurements. The first Cobra would fly close cover, behind and just slightly above the slick. This would enable the Cobra to place fire directly under the slick if it should come under attack. The other Cobra was to fly much higher. It would do the navigation as well as provide additional cover for the two low ships.

The pilot of the slick, a captain, gave the briefing for the mission. He was clean shaven, and had close cropped brown hair. His uniform was pressed and starched, and his boots were polished to a high shine. To Roger, the briefing officer presented the perfect image of a captain bucking for a promotion. The briefing was thorough, but concise. Part way through the presentation, Roger looked at the A Battery pilots to take part in the mission - Klein, Castle, Davis, and himself. None of them had starched fatigues or polished boots. Most of them had longer hair. Davis kept his fairly short, but the others had found that the flight helmets rode more comfortably if there was more hair to cushion them. A raw spot on the head that quickly became infected was not at all pleasant to nurse during a long day of flying. All of the A Battery officers also had moustaches. Klein's was black against his light complexion. Davis's moustache was so light in color that it was barely visible. It made his upper lip look dirty. Roger glanced down at his boots. They were black, all right, but there was no hint of a shine. Roger wondered if the briefing officer had a hootch

mate who shined his boots for him. Most likely, Roger thought as he leaned back in his chair.

As the briefing concluded, the captain put on his baseball fatigue cap, and marched from the Operations center with his materials under his arm. Jeff, with his boonie hat askew, gathered the section pilots around him for further instructions.

"Castle, you and Davis will be the low ship. I'll be up above with Hunter, and we'll handle the navigation. I want you guys on his tail all the time. No horsing around. We've also got different call signs for this mission. Castle, your ship is Foxy One. I'm Foxy Two, and the slick is Rabbit. We'll head for the refueling area when they give us a call on the land line (telephone), and then we'll meet up out over FSB Bastogne. Watch your chatter on the radio. Here's the assigned frequencies that we'll use as soon as we rendezvous. We'll use VHF for our ship-to-ship radio traffic. All communications with Rabbit will be on UHF. We'll use the FM as a back-up in case of radio problems. Be sure your aircraft has a survival kit on board, and you might want to carry a canteen or two of water, too. Hunter, you got your M-16 on board our ship?"

"You bet," Roger answered. Roger had procured his M-16 from Captain Doan. He had paid twenty dollars for it. It was a weapon that had been lost to the enemy, and then recaptured, so it wasn't on anyone's property books. The only weapons issued to pilots in A Battery were pistols. They couldn't get M-16's. Roger didn't feel that his four-inch barrel .38 was much protection in case he ended up on the ground, and considered the M-16 a sound investment.

Klein continued, "You've got a flare gun, one of those little jobs, with about six flares, Castle. Don't use the red flares unless you run out of the other colors, OK? When we hit the refueling area, I want fifteen hundred pounds of fuel on each bird. If you think that might present a problem for your ship, drop some rockets to lighten up the load.

"You should have a survival radio on board. As soon as we get to the ships, I want to run a check on them to be sure they're working all right." Klein paused, and checked his notes. Then he looked at the map on the wall of Operations. "I guess you guys know that we're going into the Ashau. The captain covered the locations of known enemy guns. There's only one 37 millimeter shown. I don't know what the range is on those. If we take fire from it, it'll

likely be the high ship. I'm bettin' that they don't have radar control on it. If they do, we'll probably be a dead duck. If you do see an air burst, call it out quick. The high ship will get on the deck ASAP (As Soon As Possible), and we'll figure out from there how we'll handle the rest of the mission. The .50's marked on the map have a range of about a click (one kilometer), so we'll do our best to keep you clear of the ones marked. If an unmarked gun opens up, try to identify the type, like a .50 or a 37, or whatever, and then try to get low to avoid it. Don't attack it unless it's firing at the slick. Our primary mission is to cover that slick.

"If anyone goes down, stay cool, huh? It might take a while to get a rescue ship out there, so don't go using all your ammo and gas in a hurry." Klein checked his notes again. "Well, I guess that's about it. Any questions?" Klein looked to each of the pilots. It was a pretty somber group, but there weren't any questions.

"OK, let's get out to our ships, and get those survival radios checked, huh?" Klein stood up.

When Roger reached the ship, he checked the survival kit, and tested the survival radio. He stowed his M-16 down in the ammo bay for the minigun. Then he got into the cockpit, and arranged the map, his canteen, and cigarettes. Satisfied that everything was ready, he checked the log book one more time. Everything seemed to be in good order. Then Roger joined the crewchief at the edge of the flight line for a smoke. The chief's name was French, but he was called "Frenchy" by almost everyone.

"Well, Frenchy, how's it hanging today?" Roger asked as he lit up.

"Looks like I got an easy day of it, sir. You're going to be gone all day, aren't you?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. Probably two, two and a half hours, maybe."

"Oh," Frenchy looked puzzled. "With all the preparations, I thought you'd be gone for all day."

"No, but we're heading for the Valley. That's why all the gear. I hope we don't need any of it, but it's nice to take it along," Roger finished his cigarette and lit another.

"I know what you mean, sir. Not too many friendlies out that way, are there?"

Roger chuckled, but it sounded forced. "No, I guess not," Roger wanted to change the subject. "How's this ship been running?"

Frenchy tossed his cigarette down the bank, "Pretty fine. Had some trouble with the radios yesterday, but the UHF set was replaced last night. Other than that, everything's A-OK."

Roger felt reassured by Frenchy's talk about the chopper. He looked toward Operations, expecting someone to step out and give them the crank sign. But there was no one there. The preparations were finished, and now all there was to do was wait. Roger wanted to walk back to Ops, but instead he sat down next to Frenchy on the edge of the bank that defined the flight line. "How long have you been over here, Frenchy?"

"Not too long. I've got 244 and a wake-up to go, sir. Why, how long have you got?"

Roger hadn't thought about it. Everyone talked about how "short" they were -- how many days they had left to serve in country, but Roger normally didn't keep track of his. Maybe it was a kind of superstition, but ever since he had heard that pilots most likely bought it either the first three months of their tour or the last three months, he preferred not to know how close he was to reaching that three-month mark. Roger looked at Frenchy. Frenchy seemed to be waiting for an answer to his question.

"Think I've got about the same as you to go. You must have trained on Cobras in the states, huh?"

Frenchy kicked the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Yeah. Got my training at Fort Hunter. Sure was a nice school. But they required you to keep the decks in the aircraft clean enough to eat off 'em. That was kind of tough. But the instructors were great." Frenchy continued on about his maintenance training on the Cobra. Roger was relieved. It was nice to talk about something besides the upcoming mission. Roger tried to concentrate on Frenchy's words, and block everything else out of his mind. But visions of the briefing map kept creeping in. The known enemy gun positions kept swimming before his eyes.

Roger stood up. "Think I'll go over the map one more time, Frenchy."

Frenchy was looking toward Ops, "Looks like it's time to crank, sir."

Roger looked down the flight line. Sure enough, here came Jeff. Jeff had a characteristic of walking with his

head held low. Roger could spot him a mile away by his walk. As Klein passed Castle's and Davis's aircraft, he spun his hand in the air. The crewchief on the other ship untied the main rotor blade, and stationed himself by the engine compartment next to the pilot's canopy door.

Frenchy already had the main rotor untied and the tiedown strap stowed in the nose compartment. Roger lifted his chicken plate from the step on the side of the ship, and slipped it over his head. Frenchy helped him straighten the straps in the back. Then Roger slid his .38 around from his hip, and centered it over his groin. The western style gun belts and holsters allowed this to be accomplished easily. Most of the pilots wore their pistols in this position when they were flying. Roger grabbed the leather handle in the canopy, and swung up into the front seat of the Cobra. Frenchy handed in his helmet.

"Everything OK, sir?" Frenchy said as he balanced on the step.

"You bet, Frenchy. Thanks," Roger settled himself in the seat.

"You're welcome, sir. Have a good flight."

Roger grinned, "Thank you, Frenchy. I'll sure try." Frenchy was looking directly at Roger. Roger wondered if the fear showed. Some said you could smell it. In that split second when their eyes met, Roger knew that Frenchy understood. The common element that held them together in this far-off land, in a war that they didn't really understand, was captured in that instant. Roger winked at Frenchy. The spell was bent, but not broken. Frenchy grinned back, and climbed down.

As Roger checked the altimeter, Frenchy helped Jeff get himself squared away in the back seat. Shortly, the yell of "clear" cut the air. It was echoed from Castle's ship, and the turbines began their scream. As the engine reached operating rpm, Frenchy locked down the pilots' canopies, and retreated to the edge of the flight line. The ship lifted slowly. Jeff was getting take-off clearance to the POL area. Roger looked at Frenchy standing, watching. Roger signalled thumbs up to him. Frenchy returned the sign, and then saluted. Roger grinned, and returned the salute.

With fifteen hundred pounds of fuel in each ship, the section left the refueling area. Roger pulled out the map, and began studying the flight route and the enemy gun positions. He was trying to commit as much as possible to memory. He folded the map carefully to position the route

in the center of the map, and yet keep all the marked positions in view. Roger's fingers tingled. He lit another cigarette, and opened the ashtray. It was absolutely clean. Frenchy ran a tight ship, thought Roger. Then he checked the air nozzles on the dash and on the seat. They were all wide open. Roger tightened his shoulder straps, and settled more comfortably in the seat. Then he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The map began to swim before him. Roger opened his eyes a slit, and looked in the rear view mirror.

Jeff's voice came over the intercom, "There's our man. Come up the working radio freqs." Roger leaned forward, and tuned in the VHF radio to the proper frequency. He knew Castle and Davis were doing the same in their ship.

"Gun system coming hot," Jeff said over the intercom. Then over the radio to Castle, "Go hot on your system, Foxy One." Castle acknowledged the call with two clicks on the radio transmit button. Roger removed the sighting station for the turret from its locked position. He squeezed the "action" handles, and moved the station left to right and up and down. He could hear the turret rotating under his feet. Then he released the handles, and heard the turret return to its stowed position. Then he pulled the map from the dash, and placed it next to the arm on his seat where the sighting station rested in the locked position. Roger was ready.

The flight of three ships climbed to about three thousand feet, and headed for the Ashau Valley. At this altitude, the countryside below took on a different perspective. The river was clearly visible below them, but the hills seemed flattened. Roger monitored their progress on the map. It seemed agonizingly slow. At this altitude, their movement was less apparent than it was at their usual altitude of about 500 feet,

However, it wasn't long before Roger could see the Valley opening up before them in the distance. He identified several landmarks, even this far away. He continued to check the terrain against the map to locate the flight route, and the enemy gun positions. They were heading for the south end of the Valley. Most of the route where the slick wanted to take readings was right on the floor of the Valley. Roger slipped his sunglasses on. Noting that they were filthy, he removed them and cleaned them on a corner of his flight shirt that stuck out from under his chicken plate. Then he put them on again.

As the flight passed over the ridge that marked the edge of the Valley, they began dropping quickly. Knowing that they were the last ship in the flight, Roger kept eyeballing the sky around them and to their rear. If a 37 mm. fired on them, the air bursts would likely appear behind them first. Rabbit called them, and said that they were ready to begin the route. Roger acknowledged the call, and gave them directions to the starting point of the route.

As they continued to lose altitude, Jeff explained that this specially equipped slick was called a "Sniffer" ship. Jeff said that he had heard of them, but this was the first time he had ever seen one in operation. As Roger listened to Jeff's conversation, he identified the location of two of the gun positions marked on the map. Both of them were less than three clicks away. Suddenly the sniffer ship veered away from the course it had been following. It turned directly toward one of the marked gun positions.

Roger called on the radio to the sniffer ship. He noted that there was a marked gun position directly to their front, and gave them an estimate of the range to it. The sniffer ship continued to fly directly toward the gun position. In a conversation with the section, Roger had heard the sniffer ship say that they wanted to check something out. As the sniffer ship closed with the marked gun position, Roger called Rabbit again, and informed him of the gun and his range to it. Rabbit rogered the transmission, but he didn't change course. Roger advised Jeff of the situation over the intercom. Jeff suggested Roger tell them again of the danger.

Roger keyed his mike, "Hey, Rabbit, you're about to fly over one of those gun positions we've got marked. I suggest you come around to a heading of zero eight zero to get to the route to fly." Again the sniffer acknowledged the call.

The range between the sniffer ship and the gun had now closed to less than a click. Roger was worried. The acknowledgements he had received from Rabbit had been almost matter-of-fact, as if he didn't recognize the danger. Roger keyed his mike again, "Rabbit, this is Foxy Two. Suggest you immediately make a right turn to heading zero eight zero to avoid an enemy gun position!"

There was a short pause, and then Rabbit rolled into a sharp right turn. As he did, a different voice came over the radio, "Hey Foxy! Get your head out of your ass!! You almost flew us directly over an enemy gun position!! What the hell are you trying to do?!"

Roger angered quickly as he listened to the transmission. "If you had been following my directions, you wouldn't be in that stupid position, you crazy bastard!"

Immediately Rabbit returned the call, "Foxy Two, I want to see you on the ground when we return from this mission." Roger was trying to figure out why the sudden change in voices on the radio from Rabbit, and why they hadn't followed his instructions before. He communicated this to Jeff.

Jeff said suddenly, "I got it! You were talking to the pilot of the ship before. That new voice on the radio is the colonel, or whatever he is, in the back seat. He probably didn't hear any of your earlier calls! Well, Roger, you were doing your job. If anything comes out of this, I'm behind you all the way."

The mission continued without further incident. When the flight returned to Camp Eagle, the sniffer ship landed first at A Battery while Jeff's section landed at the POL area. When the section returned to the Battery flight line, the sniffer ship was still parked outside Operations. Jeff told Roger to stay with the ship while he checked things in Ops. A few minutes after Jeff disappeared into Ops, the mission commander, a full colonel, walked out and jumped into the sniffer ship. It then took off. After it left, Roger walked up to Operations.

Jeff had left already, but the operations sergeant was standing by the radios with a grin on his face. He turned to Roger as Roger entered, "Wow! Did you miss a show! Boy, was that colonel mad! I don't think I've ever seen a guy as red as he was. He wanted somebody's head on a platter. That's for sure. He sure chewed out the XO. And that was only because he couldn't get to the old man."

Roger was puzzled, "What happened?"

The sergeant began to explain. The colonel had come stomping into Ops, madder than a wet hen. He demanded to see the CO. When he was told the CO wasn't around, he then asked for the XO. It had taken a couple minutes for the XO to get there from his hootch, and by the time he had, the colonel had worked himself into a froth. He proceeded to chew on the XO for a good ten minutes, and then stomped out. Jeff had come in just at the tail end of the whole show. He and the XO had then left together.

Roger walked back to his hootch. He was down on himself. How had this whole thing happened? He had only been trying to do his job. And now, everything had been

blown out of proportion. He sure hoped that Jeff wasn't taking a bunch of crap for him.

After supper, the CO returned to the Battery area. Shortly thereafter, Roger was called to Major Short's hootch. As Roger entered, he removed his boonie hat and saluted the CO. Major Short sat behind his desk and proceeded to give Roger the worst tongue lashing he had received since he was a kid. After about twenty minutes of abuse, the CO finally began to calm down. At long last, he turned to Roger. "Just what happened out there, anyway?" he asked.

Roger couldn't believe that he had just been chewed out for twenty minutes for something he had done, and now Major Short was asking him what had happened.

Roger's calm voice belied his inner anger, "It sounds as if you've heard it all already, sir." Roger waited for the major's reply.

For a long time, the major just stared at him. Then he spat the word, "Dismissed!"

Roger left the CO's hootch, and returned to his own. Jeff was there. For a long while, they sat and discussed the events of the day. Jeff sympathized with Roger. Jeff thought that the CO would calm down, once he thought it over.

The next day proved Jeff wrong. Roger was lying on his cot reading when Jeff came in. Jeff sat down in a chair next to Roger's cot. Jeff wouldn't look at Roger, but stared at the floor instead. "I've just come from the CO's hootch, Roger. He wants you transferred. I tried to talk to him, but he was beyond reason. I'm really sorry. I liked flying with you. If you'll give me some idea of where you want to go, I'll do my best to see that you get there." Jeff looked up, and their eyes met. Roger could see the pain in Jeff's face.

"I understand, Jeff. There was nothing you could do. Major Short and I have had our differences that started long before you got here. Which unit, huh? Well, if I've got my choice, I'd like to stay in ARA. Isn't Charlie Battery about to come in country? Maybe I could get infused with them. They'll need to do a lot of that when they arrive."

Jeff was straightforward, "I'll do the best I can, Roger."

"Thanks, Jeff. I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"It isn't your fault, Roger. I just can't believe that Major Short wouldn't listen. I think some of the advance

party from C Battery is already here. I'll see if I can't talk to one of them."

Roger missed Jeff at lunch that day. Roger returned to the hootch, reading "Catch 22" and napping through the heat of the afternoon when Jeff burst through the door. He had a smile on his face. "Pack your shaving kit, man! You got a job! C Battery's aircraft are arriving in country right now, and they need some pilots to ferry them up from Danang! You and Travis and Davis are supposed to get to Danang as quick as you can. I think you can catch a ride over at the "bus station" (Chinook landing pad). There's Chinook flights going out of here to Danang every couple hours. The clerk in the orderly room is already typing up your orders. Major Gray will meet you in Danang when you get off the 'Hook' (Chinook helicopter). But you better hustle, 'cause you need to catch up with those other guys! Don't forget your flight gear." Jeff grabbed Roger's hand, "If I don't get to see you before you go, take care of yourself. You hear?"

As Roger dressed, he said to Jeff, "Hey, no more good-byes yet, OK? I'll have to come back to get my gear."

"Yeah. But I might not be here then to send you off!"

Roger turned to Jeff, "Thanks a lot, Captain. I really do appreciate what you're doing."

"Hey, don't blame me for everything. When I mentioned you to Major Gray, he seemed happy to get you. Do you already know him?"

Roger tried to recall the name. "I don't think so, Jeff. And I don't know where he could have heard of me, unless you gave me one helluva buildup."

"Honestly, I didn't have anything to do with it. Hey, you better get going. Got everything you need? I sure envy you. You'll probably get to spend a couple nights in Danang."

Roger picked up his flight helmet. "Well, if I find anything good, I'll try to bring some back for you." Jeff laughed as Roger walked out of the hootch, and hurried toward the orderly room to pick up his orders.

38: Transfer to C Battery

When Roger reached the orderly room, he found Major Gray, Travis, Davis and Frank Young, another warrant officer from A Battery gathered there. The clerk was typing up Roger's orders. As Roger entered the room, Major Gray turned. Their eyes met.

"Welcome aboard, Hunter," Major Gray said as he extended his hand. Roger took it. The handshake was firm, and Major Gray's eyes never left Roger's. "You have all your gear, Hunter?"

Roger returned the Major's gaze, "Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"OK. Headquarters Battery is supplying a slick to fly us all down to Danang. They're going to pick us up on the pad by the mess hall." Gray checked his watch. "They should be there any minute."

As soon as Roger's orders were ready, they all boarded the chopper, and took off for Danang. Roger felt a little out of place being a passenger on a helicopter. He had spent a lot of time in helicopters lately, but none of it had been as a passenger.

The trip to Danang took about a half hour. They landed at the docks on the south side of Danang harbor. Major Gray checked with the maintenance officer from C Battery on the status of the aircraft. He then gathered the pilots together. They all piled into an open jeep, and drove into Danang. Riding along the streets of Danang in the back of the open jeep, Roger marveled at the city. There were fences and barbed wire everywhere. Vietnamese walked alongside the streets, carrying heavy loads of fruit and vegetables on the ends of poles slung on their shoulders. There were many motorbikes, and the olive drab color of army uniforms was everywhere. Most of the Vietnamese were very slender. They looked almost like children to Roger, except for their faces. Their faces looked much older. They passed a small van that apparently was a bus. It overflowed with people inside, and was carrying an oversized load of luggage on its top. There was even one Vietnamese hanging on the back of it.

They soon reached what was called the "White Elephant". This was a Navy area, complete with gate guards. As the driver stopped, Major Gray conferred with one of the guards for a moment. Then they drove on. The jeep dropped them

off in front of a large, low building. Major Gray addressed the group. "All right, here we are. The bar is now open, gentlemen. The only request I have is that we stay sober enough to fly tomorrow. I want everyone in the bar here by 2200 hours, and I'll check us all into the transient billet for the night. Any questions?" There were none, and the group quickly followed Gray into the building.

The bar was dark after the bright sunshine outside. Each pilot checked his gear, including his sidearm, in a room near the entrance to the bar. As the group entered, heads turned to eyeball the newcomers. In their worn fatigues and flight gear, they were obviously old hands in country, and coming into a bar like this in a group, they aroused the curiosity of the regulars.

The place was nearly full. Roger and Travis found an opening at the bar, while the others located a vacant table. As Roger looked around the room, there were a lot of strange uniforms. He could identify Marines, Navy personnel, a couple Air Force and some others. Soon, Roger and Travis struck up a conversation with a Navy warrant officer next to them. The Navy warrant was very interested in Roger's boonie hat. As they continued to tell stories, laugh and drink, the warrant offered to buy a round of drinks in exchange for the hat. Roger was surprised at the offer.

"You want this hat?" Roger said as he turned it around in his hands.

"Yes, I would," the warrant continued.

"Well, I'll tell you what. I'll trade it to you for yours."

"That's a deal," the Navy warrant answered.

Dinner was splendid that evening. The group ate from real dishes, using real silverware, at a table with a cloth covering, and cloth napkins. The water glasses were cut glass, and contained small ice cubes. Roger turned to Travis. "Now how would you like to serve your whole tour over here with these amenities?"

Travis turned slowly and smiled. "Not too shabby, huh? I think I could get to like this kinda livin'."

Roger looked around the room. "You know, I'll bet this is as close to the war as a lot of these people get."

Travis' gaze followed Roger's. "I'll bet you're right. And I'll bet they tell as many war stories as we do. Can you believe this menu? I think I'm going to order the biggest steak I can."

Following supper, the group returned to the bar. As promised at 2200 hours, Major Gray appeared in the bar and gathered the crew together. He herded them to the transient quarters, where the group marveled at the beds which were complete with springs and mattresses.

The next morning, they all breakfasted on steaks and eggs, and then returned to the pier. Some of C Battery's maintenance personnel had worked through the night assembling the aircraft as they were unloaded from the ship which had carried them across the Pacific. As the assembly on each was completed, the C Battery maintenance officer took it up for a short test flight. The aircraft were then ready for the flight north. Major Gray assigned only one pilot to each aircraft.

"We're flying these up to Camp Evans," Gray explained. "Just follow Highway 1 right on through Hue. The first camp you'll see will be FSB Sally. Continue right on by there, and the next spot will be Camp Evans. Evans has a runway that runs about north-south. C Battery's area is on the southeast side of the camp, right next to the perimeter. If you have to set one of these birds down for any reason, be sure to put out a call on guard (the emergency channel), and try to get one out on the Battery frequency as well. If it's a minor problem, you can go into Red Beach maintenance area over on the other side of the harbor here in Danang, or go into A Battery's area at Eagle. Here's the frequencies you'll need for Evans tower, A Battery and Red Beach. Any questions, gentlemen?" Gray looked around at them. "Once you get there, just drop off the airplane, and try to get back down here as quick as you can for the next trip. We'll figure on spending tonight here in Danang. Happy flying, gentlemen!"

As Roger preflighted his first ship, he felt good about flying C-models again. He also noted that the unit's insignia was painted on the nose of the ship. It was a griffin holding a bolt of lightning. As Roger prepared to take off, the ship's main generator failed. He waved the maintenance officer over. Roger pulled his helmet away from his ear with one hand, so he could hear, and yelled the problem to the maintenance officer.

"Take it to Red Beach. They can fix you up over there," was the reply.

Roger landed at Red Beach. This was simply a maintenance area that sat right next to the beach on the northerly part of the harbor. Roger shut down the aircraft

and walked into the office. He addressed the clerk behind the counter. When the clerk asked for the paperwork on the ship, Roger couldn't produce any. The clerk walked into a back room, and called for his superior. Soon a heavy set platoon sergeant came to the counter.

"What seems to be the problem here?" he asked.

Roger explained the main generator failure, and that he was only ferrying the ship for another unit. The sergeant said that he couldn't do anything without the proper forms and numbers. Roger was at first disconcerted by this news. When he had left the pier with the ship, C Battery's maintenance officer had said nothing about maintenance numbers that he would have to have. And Roger didn't like the sergeant's attitude.

Finally, Roger became angry as the conversation continued. "I'll tell you what, sergeant," Roger said. "Why don't you call your superior in here, and let me talk to him. I've given you the unit, and where they're located, and everything else that I know. I don't have the numbers you need. If we can't work something out, then I'm going to leave this bird parked right where it is, and I'll go get Major Gray to straighten this out with your boss. Is that what you want?"

The sergeant could see that it was a no win situation. He had probably buffaloed many warrant officers in his time, Roger thought, but he's going to have to work to put one over on me.

Finally the sergeant relented. "OK. We'll fix you up, but it'll take about an hour."

Roger was relieved. "That's fine with me. I'll wait. I got nothing else to do. You got someplace around here that I can get a cup of coffee?" The sergeant pointed to another building nearby. "Can I bring one back for you?" Roger asked.

The sergeant smiled, "No thank you, sir." Then he turned and left the counter.

The repair job took even longer than the hour estimated by the sergeant. Roger strolled down along the edge of the maintenance area that fronted on the white sand beach. The beach and the water looked inviting as the morning began to warm. A line of sandbagged bunkers faced the beach, and an imposing wall of barbed wire divided the maintenance area from the beach. Roger wanted to walk on the beach, but there didn't appear to be an access through the barbed wire.

When he saw the maintenance people open his ship, he returned to watch the repair.

Soon he was on his way again. He climbed steeply out of Red Beach. With no load, the chopper was responsive and light to the touch. This is more the way they felt in flight school, Roger thought. Soon he was rising over the mountains out of Danang. Much further ahead, he could see the coastal plain that would lead him to Phu Bai. On his left and far below, he could see Highway 1 snaking its way up the steep climb out of Danang. It clung to the sides of the steep mountains as it wound over what was called "Hai Van Pass" by the pilots. Then it dropped down to the coastal plain on the other side of the mountains. It wasn't a long stretch over the pass, but it was hazardous. The enemy had often used this area for ambushes, according to stories Roger had heard.

Roger tuned in the ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) to the Armed Forces Vietnam radio station (AFVN), and listened to the latest in popular music from the states. In less than an hour, Roger was on the outskirts of Camp Evans. He dialed in the FM radio to C Battery's frequency, and the UHF radio to Evans tower frequency. After two calls, C Battery answered, and Roger asked where they wanted him to land. Then he called Evans tower for landing instructions. There was little traffic at Camp Evans, and Roger made a slow approach, trying to identify as much on the ground as he could before he landed. As he began his final approach, he went over the instruments for his prelanding check. He still couldn't get used to the idea of only himself in the cockpit. He was so used to having another pilot alongside him, that he even pressed the intercom switch to give the prelanding check to the other pilot. He could see the other Charlie models that Travis, Young and Davis had flown up earlier.

It was growing late by the time he landed. C Battery invited him to stay for supper. It was unlikely that he could get back to Danang this late in the day, and the C Battery personnel told him that they had a courier flight coming in that would get him as far as Eagle that evening. Roger decided to ride it instead of trying to make other arrangements. Roger ate with the other officers from Charlie Battery's advance party in the brand new mess hall. Things were still in disarray, but it looked like they were working hard to get straightened away.

The conversation through supper was light. Roger was surprised that members of the advance party looked to him as a veteran already. He had been in country less than three months, but to them he already was a seasoned pilot with combat experience. He related a few war stories for them, but tried to keep the conversation light. That evening, the courier ship from their Battalion was on schedule, and Roger caught a ride with it back to Camp Eagle.

Jeff was surprised when Roger walked into the hootch that evening. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be down in Danang living it up with the other ferry pilots!"

Roger laughed. "That's the way it should have worked, but you know how it goes. I had a main gen failure, and got hung up at Red Beach most of the morning. I had supper with the guys up in C Battery, and caught the courier back here. We did have a good time last night in Danang, though. Talk about accommodations!" Roger went on to describe the beds, and in minute detail, the fabulous dinner. "You know, they even have flush toilets down there?" Roger said, and slapped Jeff on the shoulder.

Jeff nodded, "Yeah, I know, Hunter. I could think of a lot of places I'd rather be than up here in I Corps. This place really sucks when it comes to creature comforts. I got a letter from one of the guys in my old unit the other day. You know that they live in real buildings. Like, made out of concrete with real showers and real beds. And they have a real club that's handy. On top of that, they have hootch mates that come in to do the cleaning and the laundry. You can even leave your boots outside your door, and they'll polish them for you. Compared to this, that seems like heaven!" They both laughed. "C'mon, let's go up to the club, and I'll buy you a beer."

The next morning, Roger was on the go early. He caught the Chinook "bus" to Danang, and then hitched a ride over to Deepwater Pier, where C Battery's aircraft were being unloaded from the ship. It was the same procedure as the day before. The ships weren't ready to go, so the pilots waited. Travis teased Roger about getting lost the day before.

"We sure missed you last night! We hit another club, and it was a doozy! They had some locals in a band that played popular music. I never laughed so hard! They even did some western stuff. Have you ever heard country and western sung in a Vietnamese accent? Ha! Ha! That was something! Young got so drunk, we had to carry him out!"

Roger was sorry that he had missed the evening. He enjoyed Travis' company. He had been a lot of fun back in Oklahoma during training, too. And Major Gray seemed like one heck of a fine officer. He didn't seem to mind that they were blowing off some steam, as long as they were able to do their job. Besides, Gray had an easy manner, a quick smile, and a good sense of humor to go with it. Ron Travis fit right in with Major Gray. Ron worked hard, played hard, and, in general, lived hard. He could consume more scotch in one sitting than anyone Roger had ever seen.

Ron hoisted himself up from the sandbags on which he was sitting. "Say, Roger, why don't we see if we can't find a Coke around here somewhere?" They wandered down the pier and soon found a small office. As they entered, there were two enlisted personnel sitting in folding chairs. On the wall facing the entrance to the office was a large collage. It had cutouts from newspapers, posters and magazines. Ron stopped before it, eyeing the cutouts from "Playboy".

"Now, if we had a few more of those in the flesh over here, this war wouldn't be that bad at all," Ron whistled. Roger laughed.

The two privates looked at the pilots with what seemed to be a sense of awe. One of them spoke, "Are you two really pilots?"

Travis turned to him. Roger could see that Travis was about to unload a real war story. "That's right. We just came south from the war zone to fly up some new airplanes. We've been running short of planes recently." Roger could hardly contain his laughter as Travis continued. The two privates were totally taken in by Travis' line. "Have you guys got any cold sodas around?" Ron asked. One of the privates jumped up, and disappeared into another room. He returned with two Cokes. "Thank you very much," Ron said. Then he reached into his wallet and pulled out two dollars in military script. He dropped them on the desk. "Here you go. We don't have much opportunity to spend this up where we're at. But we sure appreciate your hospitality down here in civilization."

As they left the office, Roger started snickering. "I can't believe you pulled that off, Ron, and never even cracked a smile!"

Ron opened his Coke. As he raised the can to his lips, he winked at Roger. "Practice, my man, practice."

The trip north with the aircraft began as before. This time Roger made sure that he was the first to run up his

ship. No matter what, he wanted to be able to return with the others, instead of getting stuck in some maintenance area waiting for repairs. As he flew across the harbor, and began the steep climb up over Hai Van Pass, the engine and rotor tachometers suddenly dropped to zero. Roger was startled. He started to put the pitch down to enter autorotation. Just as he began to look for a place to put the ship down, he realized that the engine hadn't quit. He checked the engine instruments. Except for the tachometers, everything looked fine. He didn't like flying without those two indicators in case something else went wrong, but he didn't want to return to Red Beach with another problem, either. Roger decided to continue the flight north. They could repair the problem when he got to Charlie Battery. He did turn off the AFVN, though, so he could listen to the noise of the aircraft more closely. A thought flashed through his mind. If he bored it in, and bought the farm, he wondered if anyone would ever know that the tachometers weren't working when it all happened.

The next day, it was ferrying another lift of ships. By this time, it had become routine, and Roger was looking forward to something new. Major Gray was assigned to Battalion, and would not be working directly with C Battery. Roger was sorry about that. The few nights that they had spent in Danang, Roger had come to like him very much. Gray was not the kind of person that looked over your shoulder when he gave you an assignment. He figured how you accomplished it was your business, unless you ran into problems. Roger and the other pilots from A Battery got back to their Battery area late that evening. The next morning Jeff walked into the hootch as Roger returned from his shower. It was always cold showers in the morning. No one bothered to light the heater then. It was a real waker-upper. Especially shaving with cold water.

"Well, Hunter, you might as well pack the rest of it."

Roger turned to Jeff with a puzzled expression.

"What?" he asked.

"You're on your way to C Battery. You, Travis, Davis and Young. The Battalion ship will be over about 1000 hours to pick you all up." Jeff let out a sigh. "I know and you know why you're leaving, Roger. It was that crazy sniffer mission. I just feel bad that I couldn't do more for you on that deal."

"Look, Jeff, forget it. The old man and I...well, we just didn't get along. Major Short likes 'yes' men, and I

just don't happen to be one of those. If it hadn't been that particular mission, then it would have been something else. You know, I don't think he even had me scheduled for Cobra transition. And this unit is getting Cobras, just in case you hadn't noticed."

Jeff looked at Roger. "Yeah, I can hear what you're saying. But I still think you're some pilot. And you're the best navigator I ever met. Most of the pilots here can't even read a contour map, let alone navigate by one. I just want you to know that if you ever need a recommendation, let me know. Will you?"

Roger finished dressing. "Sure will, Jeff. And if you ever need a navigator for that once-in-a-lifetime mission, I guess you'll know where to find me, huh?" Roger smiled at Jeff. "I really did enjoy flying with you, Jeff. You're one helluva pilot. And you do a good job. It was a pleasure serving under you." Roger offered his hand. Jeff took it warmly.

"Break a leg," Jeff said, and turned away. He hesitated, then left the hootch.

Roger finished packing his gear. One large cardboard box with a lot of military gear that, so far, he hadn't used. One duffel bag with all his clothes and personal gear. And his flight gear in his flight helmet bag. That was it. Roger looked around his area. He wondered who would replace him. Probably a new guy in from the states. Roger hoped he learned quickly. If he flew with Jeff, he probably would. Jeff would make anyone a good stick buddy.

The Battalion slick dropped them at C Battery's hot pad at Camp Evans. The rest of C Battery had already arrived in country. Roger was assigned to the First Platoon. Travis was assigned to the same platoon, and since he was a captain, he became the 1st Platoon leader. Davis was also assigned to the same platoon, but Young was assigned to another platoon. Roger was happy with the assignments. He liked both Davis and Travis. Young was OK, but he was not a very good pilot. Roger had flown with him a couple times, and Young had scared the hell out of him.



Charlie Battery flight line.

As they were settling into the hootch, Travis met with the new CO for C Battery. His name was Major Brown. When Travis returned, he asked Roger to join him outside. They walked up to the mess hall, and got a cup of coffee. They always had a pot going up there. It was a nice touch. they walked into the officers' side of the mess hall, and sat down. Travis lit a cigarette, and Roger followed his example.

"Look, Hunter, I want to give you this just so it's between you and me, OK? You've met some of the pilots from this unit already, and I imagine you've formed some impressions. Well, I have, too. These guys are all green. Sure, they've got training under their belt, but no combat flying. I want you as an aircraft commander, and I want you flying my wing, but that isn't going to happen for a couple weeks, anyway. You're going to be assigned to Major Ramsey's section. He'll be herding the other section in the 1st Platoon. I don't think he'll last long, though. I

think he'll be one of the first to go in the infusion process. Right now, you're assigned as his pilot.

"Just be sure to watch him. He might be a major, but from what I could gather, I don't think he has any combat experience. Got that?"



Charlie Battery flight line.

Roger nodded his head yes. "Is there something you're trying to tell me, Ron?"

Ron shook his head. "No, not really. It's just that these guys are green. You've gotta understand that. But they don't know they're green. They think it's gonna go just like it did in training. So watch yourself."

The next day, C Battery was considered operational. The rocket pods had been mounted on the ships, and most of them were flyable. The rocket pods were strange-looking affairs, compared to what they had had in A Battery on the C-models. They were square-looking boxes. But Roger liked the locking lugs and the rocket contacts in the tubes themselves a lot better in these pods than in the old pods in A Battery. Otherwise, the C-models here were the same as those he'd flown in A Battery. However, the first morning he went down to preflight his ship, he noticed that the gauges were all mounted right side up. Roger pointed this out to the crewchief. Roger wanted all the gauges rotated so that when that particular instrument was operating in the normal range, the needle in it would be straight up and down. This made it easier for the pilot to note a malfunction. If a needle didn't line up vertically, then it was an indication that something wasn't functioning as it should. The crewchief said all the other ships were set up the same way as this one. Roger said to let it go, but he decided he would bring it up at the first pilots' meeting.

That happened the next evening. Major Brown gave them all a briefing on the AO, the terrain, the facilities at Camp Evans, and what he expected of them. It was a good briefing. Not a lot of BS, thought Roger. But right down the line, what had to be done. Roger was impressed with Major Brown.

The next afternoon, C Battery was welcomed to the 101st Airborne Division by the commanding general of the Division. After his initial remarks, all were dismissed except for the C Battery officers. They formed a line, and the general walked the line, shaking hands with each one. When he reached Roger, he stopped. As they shook hands, the general noted Roger's moustache. "You don't need one of those to do a good job, MisterHunter," the general said as he read Roger's name tag.

"I know that, sir," Roger returned, "but it gives me confidence, sir." The general hesitated and looked Roger in the eye. The contact lasted for only an instant. The general looked about ready to say something, but then changed his mind and moved on down the line.

C Battery's call sign was "Griffin", and according to Major Brown, this wouldn't change. He wanted to establish a

call sign that the grunts would remember. The motto of the unit was "Death on Call", and that was exactly what Major Brown expected of the unit. It was the unit's job to support the infantry to the best of the pilots' abilities. That meant to try, and try hard, to do what they asked. If it was at all possible to provide fire power, then the ships were to provide it.

The next morning, Roger found himself on the flight line before daylight, inspecting a C Battery ship. He had brought up the subject of rotating the gauges at the pilots' meeting the night before. Major Brown thought it was an excellent idea. Roger was happy to note that during his preflight check, the gauges in his ship had been rotated. Major Ramsey arrived shortly after daylight. He was surprised that Roger had already preflighted the ship. Soon both ships were ready. Ed McCallister, a warrant officer, was the aircraft commander in the wing ship. His pilot was Harry Andrews, who was also a warrant. Both of them were young pilots. Major Ramsey appeared to be about forty, Roger guessed.

A tent had been set up along the flight line to be used as a maintenance hangar until the new one was constructed. Work had already started on the new hangar, and it was a beauty. It followed the same lines as the one built in A Battery. It would have three bays, and offices on both sides. The long side opened on the flight line. Close to the temporary hangar, a small hut had been constructed of empty rocket boxes. This was the temporary ready shack. A PRC-25, a back-pack radio normally carried in the field, was the communications link with Operations. The Operations bunker was located up on the hill near the mess hall. On the hill beside the bunker was a small landing pad called the hot pad. This is where the hot section would stand by. The rest of the flight line, where Roger now stood, was located on a flat below the Battery area. It was about two hundred yards from the Battery area to the flight line. The camp's perimeter lay on the far side of the hot pad and the mess hall from the flight line.

As Roger stood next to the aircraft, the PRC-25 crackled. The hot section was already launching on the hill, and now it looked like a call was coming for Roger's section, the five-minute section. The radio operator copied the mission on a small piece of paper. Then he ran to Roger's ship, and handed the scrap of paper to Major Ramsey. Roger donned his chicken plate, and slid into the right seat

of the C-model. He looked to make sure the crewchief had untied the main rotor, set the throttle, and yelled "clear". As he turned to check the instruments, Major Ramsey was copying the mission down on another piece of paper. Roger wondered why he was doing that. He already had the scrap of paper from the radio operator. As the turbine caught, Roger rolled in the throttle to bring the engine up to operating rpm. Major Ramsey had broken the lead in his pencil, and was busily locating another pencil. As he started copying again, he broke the lead in the second pencil. Roger began throwing switches in the cockpit to supply power to the flight instruments and the radios. When the engine was up to speed, Roger caught the cyclic stick between his knees, and pulled his helmet on. Then he checked the back seat. Both the crewchief and gunner gave him the thumbs up. Roger turned back to Major Ramsey in the left seat. Ramsey was still trying to copy the mission down. Roger called the tower for takeoff clearance.

The voice from the tower came back crisply, "Roger, Griffin One Two, you're clear to proceed. Winds at zero five from the north. The altimeter is twenty nine point nine four. You've got traffic to your east, over."

Roger punched the radio transmit button, "Roger, Evans. I've got the traffic."

"Have a good trip," the tower's voice surprised Roger. Must be another new guy, thought Roger. He was still watching Major Ramsey copying the mission. Ramsey didn't have any of his gear on yet. Roger began to have his doubts about Ramsey. Roger hoped that Ramsey didn't handle himself in the air the way he did on the ground. Major Ramsey glanced over at Roger. Surprise showed on his face. He pulled his shoulder straps down, and buckled his lap belt. Then he grabbed his helmet. As he began to pull it on, Roger pulled pitch, and the ship lifted from the ground. Roger kept it at a low hover, and checked the engine instruments. All looked good. Roger checked for other aircraft, and began the takeoff. The ship slowly moved over the ground, dropped slightly as it hit translational lift, and began climbing.

Roger reduced the power slightly, and keyed his mike. "Which direction?" he said to Major Ramsey. The major looked startled as if the question was completely unexpected. Then he recovered himself, and pulled the map from the dash. Roger began to wonder how many times they

were going to have to circle the camp while Ramsey tried to figure out which direction they should fly. Roger glanced at the slip of paper with the mission on it. Noting the first two numbers of the coordinates, he compared that with Evan's coordinates, which he'd already memorized. Roughly southeast, computed Roger. He headed the ship in that direction. Then he called the wing ship.

"Griffin One Two Alpha, this is One Two, over."

McCallister answered immediately, "Go ahead One Two."

"You with us?"

"Sure am," McCallister's Kentucky accent was clearly discernible on the radio.

"Go ahead and go hot on the gun system, and have your gunners load up. I'll pass the freq code for FM as soon as we get it. Go ahead and come up Battery UHF."

"Roger that, One Two."

At least Alpha sounded like he knew what he was doing, Roger thought. Roger keyed the intercom, "Major Ramsey? How about checking the radio frequency for the mission. We need to pass it to Alpha." As Roger spoke on the intercom, he slid the map from Major Ramsey's grasp over onto the console. Roger quickly checked the coordinates given. The ground unit was located over the first ridge from the coastal plain. Roger estimated about ten minutes to the target. Major Ramsey now had the SOI (Signal Operating Instructions) book in his hands, and was trying to determine the FM frequency they were supposed to use. Radio frequencies were always passed over the radio in code, and it was necessary to decode them before they could be used. Again, it seemed to take Major Ramsey an eternity to look up the frequency. After a long pause, he reached over to the FM radio, and dialed in a new frequency. Roger spoke over the intercom again, "Uh, .. Major Ramsey, you need to call the wing ship and give them the frequency code." Ramsey gave him a thumbs up, and proceeded to do it. Then Major Ramsey sat back in his seat, and began to look out the window.

Roger again keyed his mike, "Say, Major Ramsey, what was the unit's call sign? We're almost on 'em now."

Ramsey jumped when Roger asked the question. He immediately began to search for his piece of paper with the mission on it. It had blown off the console. My god, Roger thought. I hope I don't have to fly many missions with this guy. He could ruin a good pilot. The major retrieved the paper from the floor. Lucky it didn't blow out the door,

thought Roger. Ramsey then held the paper up in front of Roger. Wonder why he doesn't use the intercom, thought Roger.



C Battery hootches at Camp Evans.

Roger contacted the grunt unit and set up the attack. It was a simple affair, and the area didn't seem hot. Lucky for us, Roger thought. Ramsey might really lose his cool if he was under fire. Roger felt good. His first mission with C Battery went well, even considering Ramsey's so-called help. Roger wondered how long he'd have to fly with Ramsey. He hoped not long.

They flew only three missions that day, and to Roger it seemed like an eternity had passed when they were finally relieved. That evening Travis had another meeting with Major Brown. When he returned from the meeting, he had good news for Roger.

"Looks like you did OK today, Hunter. Tomorrow you and Justin will be flying together on my wing. The CO was out monitoring all the missions today. He even complimented you." Ron smiled. Then with a coy look, he asked, "How'd you get along with Major Ramsey today?"

Roger coughed, and when he looked up, Ron was laughing. Ron continued, "I can guess how you feel. I had to fly with him the other day, and he about drove me nuts!" Then more seriously, "But don't get the idea that he's the norm in this unit. They've got some good pilots here. I flew with Fulton today, and he knows his stuff. Maybe a little weak on tactics, but that'll come with practice. He knows what he's supposed to do, anyway."

Roger was happy to be flying with Justin Cook. Cook was from back east. He had blonde hair, and a gregarious nature. He also liked to play cards almost as much as he liked to breathe. At Justin's urging, the 1st Platoon's top priority was to get their living area squared away. On Roger's first day off from flying, he made a trip down to the Seabee area with Ron. They cornered an old, crusty sergeant in a ramshackle office. When they had entered the Seabee area, they had seen some stacks of plywood. Although they didn't have a requisition order for any plywood, Ron thought he might be able to make a deal. Ron approached the sergeant. The way the sergeant watched Ron, Roger knew he was probably an old hand at this game. Roger was also impressed with Ron's approach. It took about fifteen minutes of haggling before a price was agreed upon. The sergeant specified the next night to make the pickup, and Ron handed over a roll of cash.

As they walked back to the Battery area, Roger was curious. "Have you done this before, Ron?"

Ron laughed. "Hey, if you're going to get anything in the way of equipment or supplies in this man's army, you're going to have to learn how to do it. You bet I've done it before. How do you think we got the furnishings for my hootch down in A Battery? I'm sending you down here tonight with Justin to pick up the plywood. Now remember, if you're caught, make up any kind of story you want, but don't, I say don't, mention any names. Got it?"

"I got it," Roger said and shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't actually believe he was coming down here that night to steal a load of plywood.

Ron guessed what Roger was thinking. "Don't think of it as stealing. I prefer to call it midnight requisition. These guys that handle the construction supplies always have more than they need. They order it that way, you know. Then they have a little extra to barter with. This process is know as 'comeshaw'. I don't know where the name originated, but always remember it. It can be the best

friend you've got when you need to get something from supply. Especially if you need it in a hurry. All of the services do it, and it's pretty common in civilian life, too, if you know where to look."

The midnight requisition went well. As they were loading up the plywood, Roger noticed a pile of two-by-four lumber nearby. When the plywood was loaded, he tossed on a few sticks. When they came to the gate of the Seabee area, Roger reached under the seat. Ron had made sure he would be ready. The gate guard stopped them, and asked for their requisition papers. Roger pulled the bottle of whiskey out from under the seat of the truck, wrapped a twenty-dollar bill around the neck of it, and handed it over to the guard. The guard promptly took the package, and waved them through the gate. Roger was still nervous. He kept looking behind them all the way to the Battery area. Everyone in the platoon was ready when they arrived. They quickly unloaded the plywood, and carried it into the hootch. Ron was happily surprised by the lumber. He punched Roger's shoulder, "Looks like you catch on fast."

The next couple days, the 1st Platoon worked like a hive of bees. It looked like a regular construction crew. Ron also sent a truck into a nearby village where they manufactured lumber, to purchase a load of two-by-fours. The ones Roger had taken weren't nearly enough for what Ron had in mind. Ron shared his plans with the others in the platoon. The hootch would be roughly divided into thirds. The middle area would be the community area for everyone. They would build a card table for it. On each end of the community area would be a personal area for four pilots. The aisle down the center of the hootch had to be kept open, so this aisle would divide each of the living spaces into two parts. The plans included bunk beds in each living space. Then a small space for dressing was laid out. Then, out of the plywood, large hotboxes were built. The hotboxes not only held all of their clothes and personal things, but they also divided the community area from the personal living areas.

The plan was put into action, but not without its problems. The lumber purchased at the village turned out to be mahogany. It was impossible to drive a nail into it, it was so hard. At first try, the onlookers teased Ron that he didn't know how to drive nails, but after some of the others tried, it was clear it was the lumber, and not the nail driver. Ron left the hootch while they were discussing what

to do. Five minutes later he returned with a drill. They had to pre-drill all the boards before they nailed them. It took most of two days to complete the job, but they now had the best living area in the unit. And it was complete with a spiffy card table. The card table was built in a hexagon, with trays along the edge for chips, beer, ashtrays, etc., and it was covered with an army blanket for the playing surface. Much later, a deck was added to the downslope end of the hootch. Here sat the refrigerators, and it doubled as an excellent sun deck for tanning. This was high living!

The wooden rocket boxes were a source of building material. Since the Battery shot lots of rockets, there was an abundant supply of boxes. These were used for shelves and other odds and ends. A bookshelf was built all the way across one side of the community area. It held several hundred books of all kinds and descriptions. Roger's cousin was one that helped supply the never-ending demand for reading material. Every few weeks a large box would arrive in the mail. All the pilots would gather around expectantly, while Roger tore it open. When the weather came down and all the ships were grounded, there wasn't much to do besides read or play cards. The books were passed around the Battery until they were so dog eared that it was difficult to turn the pages.

One night everyone in the 1st Platoon had settled down with a good book. It was very quiet in the hootch, except for the sound of the rain on the tin roof. Suddenly Travis jumped up, swearing at the top of his voice. The others, startled by the sudden outburst, quickly gathered in the community area. As they stood there with their mouths open, they watched Travis stomp a book into pieces with only his shower shoes! When Ron finally settled down, the book was scattered in pieces all over the floor. Randy Baker, a new warrant, looked at the scene, shook his head, and mumbled, "Boy, that must have been some book." Then he turned and walked back to his area. Ron was puffing and panting from the exertion. He was staring wildly at the remnants of the novel.

Justin Cook reached over and put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "That's OK. Everything's gonna be all right now," he said softly.

Travis turned and glared at Cook. "Sure, that's easy for you to say. Do you know what that was?"

Fulton scratched his head, "No. I don't think we do, and I don't know who's going to be the first fool to ask, either."

Travis looked from one to the other in the group. Then he laughed. "I'll bet you guys think I'm nuts, don't you?"

Roger nodded, "I guess you could say that thought crossed our mind, Ron."

Ron laughed again. Then he spun and pointed at Roger, "Go ahead and laugh, you bean brain. This was all your fault. Yours and that nutty relative of yours that sends these books."

Roger was beginning to fear for Ron's sanity, "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. And no doubt about it," Ron stomped across the floor and waved his hand at the torn pages. Then he stopped at the edge of the group, and placed his hands on his hips. "That, my questioning friends, was one of the best mystery stories I've ever read. And you know what? Some son-of-a-bitch tore out the last page! The very last page! Do you know what that means??! I'll bet we can't get another copy of that book to save our lives. And now I'll never know what happened." Ron's voice had almost broken as he finished his last statement. The others turned and looked at one another.

From the far corner of Randy's area came a light snicker. It hung in the air for a second before the others caught it. Smiles broke, followed by racking laughter. Some pilots from the 2nd Platoon had entered the hootch. They had heard the racket, and had come to see what was going on. However, the 1st Platoon pilots were laughing so hard that they couldn't tell what had happened. The more questions, the more laughter.

The next morning, there were about half of the Battery's ships in the air on missions. Roger was on Ron's wing, when a small voice came over the radio, "Say, have you guys heard about that neat Agatha Christie novel....?" The pilots in all the ships broke up. The story had made the rounds of the Battery.

40: First C Battery Loss

With the coming of the dry weather, missions poured in. Day after day, the Battery put up every ship that was flyable. The maintenance personnel were working around the clock to keep all the ships flying. It was during this hectic period, that the pilots discovered a neat trick to reduce the number of hits they were taking. The enemy gunners seemed to use the nose of the aircraft as an aiming point. The pilots would kick the aircraft out of trim, so they were side-slipping through the air. Then they would smile and watch the tracers pass by the side of the ship. Return fire from the enemy was becoming more common all the time. And the stories from further north, up near the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), demonstrated that the enemy up there were getting better training. Most of the hits taken so far by C Battery were in the tail boom or tail fins of the aircraft. Further north, the hits centered in the cockpit area, or so the stories went.



Returning to Camp Evans from the mountains along the Song Bo River.

At Fire Support Base Jack, about two kilometers southwest of Camp Evans, the enemy staged its first pitched battle under the cover of darkness since C Battery's arrival. They actually overran the base, tossing satchel charges into the bunkers where the friendlies were hiding. Jimmy Parker, a warrant officer from the 3rd Platoon, led the attack for the ARA. Expending all his rockets, Jimmy hovered his C-model over the bunkers while his crew raked the enemy with their machine guns. Jimmy refused to leave until his crews exhausted their ammunition. Jimmy was later credited with breaking the attack, and was decorated for his actions.

This attack made everyone in the vicinity realize that the camps weren't immune to attack. Even though most of the missions flown were back in the mountains, there was still enemy to be found close at hand. To offset this, night patrols were sent out to locate and disrupt enemy operations.

A night mission outside of FSB Jack in support of a night recon patrol raised the adrenaline level. The 'sneaky petes' had set an ambush, but instead of a squad, they had run afoul of an enemy platoon. When Travis contacted the "petes" on the radio, they answered in whispers. It wasn't long before Ron was whispering back to them. After several exchanges covering the situation, the attack heading and tactics, the ground contact came on the radio again.

"Say, Griffin," he whispered, "How come you're whispering?"

From the pause before Ron's reply, it was clear he hadn't realized he was whispering. In a normal voice he replied, "Well, I don't know Sneaky. Guess it doesn't matter, huh?"

Sneaky whispered back, "Look. I don't care if you whisper or talk normally, but make up your mind which it's gonna be, OK? I have to keep adjusting the radio volume so the bad guys won't hear us." This statement revealed to the section just how tight the situation on the ground was.

The enemy had chased the "petes" to a grave yard. Although the night was clear, there was no moon, and it was difficult for the pilots to stay oriented on the target. Not wanting to give their position away, the recon unit didn't want any flares. To mark their position to the Griffins, they dropped a strobe light down the barrel of an M-79 grenade launcher. They would keep even this light covered until the aircraft were inbound, when they would

uncover the end of the barrel and point it at the ship. The flashing light was easily visible to the pilots.

After each pass, the recon unit wanted the Griffins to fire closer to their position. Roger was flying Travis' wing, and adjusted his rockets on Travis' blasts. The range soon dropped to about twenty-five yards from the recon unit's position to the target. This was getting very close, and the Griffins were driving in close to make sure their rockets were hitting where they were wanted.

"Looks pretty good, Griffin," the voice of the recon unit whispered on the radio. "How about a little closer on the next pass, huh?"

"Are you sure, Sneaky? That's awful darn close."

"We just took a vote down here, and the majority says yes, closer," the voice whispered out of the darkness.

These recon units were noted for their sheer courage. Even with all the boasting that went on, Roger had worked over them enough to know that even most of the boasts were all too true. One unique trait that these units shared was that they would key the radio handset when the ARA was firing for them. The grunts thought it was neat if the pilots could hear the blast from their own rockets. Once this behavior got started, there was no stopping them.

Travis began his next run, and Roger followed him down. The strobe winked at them, and Travis began firing. As his rockets impacted, Roger held on the far side of them from the friendly unit, and punched off three pair before he broke.

"How'd that look, Pete?" Travis' voice was loud on the radio after listening to the whispering from the ground unit. Instead of a quick response, there was only silence. Ron called Roger on the air-to-air channel. "Hey, Hotel, is my FM bad? I didn't hear a response to my last transmission."

Roger keyed his mike. "Nope. Nothing wrong with your radio. Ours is quiet, too." Roger's concern for the ground unit began to grow. They had been firing awfully close to them. Even a minor mistake at that range could mean disaster. The two C Models climbed a little, and began orbiting the area. If they couldn't establish radio contact, they would have to give up and go home.

Sneaky's whisper broke the long silence. "Ha! Ha! Thought ya' got me, huh? Well, we don't give up that easily, Griffin. Nice shootin', though. That was just close enough. Think you ran off the last of them."

"That's great, Sneaky, but why didn't you contact us sooner after the last run. You make us kind of nervous up here, when you don't talk."

"Yeah, Griffin, I know. I wasn't gonna tell ya', but I guess I will. When I held up the handset on that last pass, some of your shrapnel cut it in half. Took us a minute to find a new one, and get it hooked up in the dark."

Travis' voice came over the air-to-air channel, "Do you believe that, Hotel? We cut his handset in half, and all he's worried about is finding a replacement?"

"Nope, I sure can't," Roger was shaking his head. Those Sneaky Pete's were certainly cut from a different cloth, all right.

The next day, the Griffins celebrated with the Sneaky Petes when they returned from their mission. These guys were a never-ending source of captured weapons, and they gave a lot of them to the Griffins to display on the walls of their hootches. One of the best, in Roger's opinion, was an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) launcher. It was one of the smaller versions, but its simplicity and light weight made it an outstanding weapon. They also provided an AK-47. It took Roger only a couple minutes to figure out how to field strip it. Again he was amazed by its simple construction and functionality.

After standing around and discussing the weapons for a while, they all went into the hootch for beers. John, the leader of the mission from the night before, began to tell what had happened. They had set a small ambush down next to the river, expecting only a squad-sized enemy force. They were surprised by a platoon-sized force, and they beat a hasty retreat. In the open grassland where they were, hiding places were hard to find. Luckily, they happened upon the graveyard where they hid, and called for help from the Griffins.

John lit a cigarette as he recalled the events. "They surrounded us in that graveyard, and then they started crawling closer and closer. We were afraid they were gonna be on top of us before you guys got there. Then when you started firing, they kept moving around. They still weren't sure where we were, and we were afraid they were going to jump right on top of us while they were trying to avoid your fire. That's why we had you shoot so close to us. When your rockets started hitting in the graveyard, they must have figured we'd gotten away, so they beat feet.

"When it got daylight, we searched all over for any sign of them, but all we found was a couple weapons and one patch of blood on the ground."

Roger began to mellow as he drank beer and listened to the story. He couldn't imagine sitting out all night in that graveyard, waiting for the sun to come up. The accommodations in their hootch weren't the Ritz, but they were certainly better than a grave yard!

The following week, the Battery suffered a severe blow to its morale. The first death occurred. It was one of the old hands that had come over with the unit. There was a great deal of discussion over the crash. The question that was never answered was whether they were shot down, or whether they crashed. The other pilot was hurt severely, and his ticket home was punched. Thompson's death was taken hard by those who knew him well. Captain Travis, 1st Platoon leader, was called upon to help inventory Thompson's belongings. Thompson hadn't written a will, so everything had to be shipped home. Major Brown picked McCallister to escort the body back to the states. McCallister got so drunk the day it happened that Lt. Fulton took him down to the shower and really slapped him around. McCallister cried and cried. Other pilots in the Battery were pretty sober for a few days. The seriousness of the war and its consequences were seeping in around them like the grey mist on a horror show.

The next week, Roger was lifting out of the refueling area on a hot afternoon, and bled off rpm as he tried to climb too fast. The C-model began to settle. Roger steered for an open area down slope from the POL area. The ship hit, bounced, hit again, and began sliding down the hill. There was a sharp jerk as it hit something solid. When they stopped, Oliver, Roger's pilot, was yelling something. Roger looked around and lifted the end of Oliver's helmet cord. It had come unplugged. Roger plugged it back in. Oliver's face was red and he was sweating heavily.

"I was trying to tell you when we started the takeoff, but you couldn't hear me. I thought my mike had gone hokey," Oliver was breathing fast.

"It's OK, man. That happens," Roger said. Then Roger checked with the crewchief and gunner. They were both OK. The chief jumped out to check the ship. He looked over the skids and belly, and then jumped back in.

When the chief got his helmet plugged in, he said, "Looks OK to me, sir. I don't know what we hit."

They flew back to the Battery area, where maintenance checked it out thoroughly. They had dented one skid, and lost a cap off the end of it. It wasn't serious damage, but the CO called Roger into his hootch that night.

As Roger approached the major's hootch, he recalled the night back in A Battery when he had been called into Major Short's hootch. Roger wondered where they would send him this time. But it was an entirely different session. Major Brown first asked Roger about the accident, and what had happened. After Roger described the incident in detail, Brown offered him a beer. No, Brown wasn't going to take any disciplinary action, but he did want Roger to fly with him the next day. When he left the CO's hootch, Roger breathed a sigh of relief. He just couldn't believe the difference in the two CO's. It was like night and day. Roger found that he liked Brown. But then maybe Brown couldn't afford to lose another pilot. There were several down in Vung Tau now, going through Cobra transition training. The training took two weeks. Which also meant that it wouldn't be very long before C Battery began to get Cobras. Roger would know if they meant to keep him, when they sent him to school to learn to fly the Cobras.

The heat of the dry season was now upon them in earnest. All of the pilots sported healthy tans. Most of them were tan only from the waist up, though. They went without their shirts whenever possible, usually donning them only to fly and eat. The rest of the time it was either trousers, or shorts. In the heat it was imperative to fly without skivvies or socks. The continually sweating bodies were a prime growth medium for fungus. Salt tablets were taken like candy on the hot days. The water tasted terrible because all of it had to be treated before it could be drunk. The consumption of soda and beer climbed to astronomical proportions. Refrigeration was a necessity. It was so hot and humid, that it was difficult to write a letter during the day without smearing the ink all over the page.

The aircraft didn't respond so quickly to the controls in the heat and humidity. And they were difficult to get off the ground. Running takeoffs became the norm. On the hot afternoons, it was almost impossible to hover the ships. They were moved on the ground by lifting everything off the ground but the toe of one skid. Then the pilot would slide

the ship along on this until he could get a little airspeed built up. Then he would lift the ship, let it settle, lift it again, and continue this process until enough speed was attained that the aircraft began to fly. Sometimes the gunner had to be forsaken to lighten the load enough that the ship could fly.

The push south to the Ashau Valley continued. The infantry had reached so far into the mountains that it took a considerable amount of time to reach the target on a scramble mission. For this reason, Major Brown decided it was time to move the ships closer to the action. The first forward area that was used was called LZ Ann. It was located about twenty minutes flight time from Camp Evans down the Song Bo River. It was built on a flat along the road to the Ashau that the Army engineers were constructing. It got very hot in the depression where Ann was built, and it made it tough for the pilots to get their C-models airborne. A Battery was also using the same LZ, and they were flying Cobras. The A Battery pilots looked down their noses at the crude Charlie models, and the pilots who flew them. They considered themselves among the elite when they were at the controls of a Snake (Cobra). They even laughed as the C Battery pilots bounced, cursed and prayed to get their ships off the ground in the heat and the dust.

On a particularly hot afternoon, Roger's section was scrambled out of Ann. Roger knew it was going to be a tough takeoff. There was a large ditch to cross from the parking area before the takeoff could be initiated. There wasn't a breath of wind as Roger urged the overloaded ship forward. As the ship approached the ditch, Roger pulled in a little pitch. Instead of lifting slightly, the ship sluggishly plowed forward, and the rpm started to bleed off.

As they passed over the ditch, Roger pulled in more pitch and let the rpm bleed down a little further, maintaining his altitude. Reaching the other side, Roger deftly lifted the nose of the ship, slowing its forward motion. As the ship began to settle close to the ground, the rpm began to increase as the ground cushion from the rotorwash supported the aircraft. Roger managed to recover the rpm he'd lost without touching the ground. After stabilizing the ship, he started his takeoff. As the ship made its third bounce and gained translational lift, the radio crackled in Roger's ears.

"Nice job, Griffin," the unfamiliar voice said. "That was a nice touch."

Looking back, Roger could see the A Battery pilots gathered near one of their ships. They were all signaling thumbs up. Roger smiled, and keyed his mike, "Thanks, Dragons. Maybe we'll graduate to Cobras some day, too!"

The C Battery sections were rotated in and out of the forward areas. Usually two sections were sent in a group first thing in the morning to the forward area. On this flight, the ships were really loaded because they carried the crew, C-rations for lunch, water, and lots of soda. The soda was usually carried in a fifty caliber ammo can. The lids fit tight on these, and they were used like a miniature ice box. The mess hall always supplied lots of ice. The water, soda, and lunches were then left at the forward area when missions were flown. If the missions were heavy, the crew would pick up what they needed when they came in to rearm and refuel. If it was a long day, the pilots would trade off, so they could eat lunch either going to a mission or returning from one. At night the ships would all return to Camp Evans because LZ Ann was not considered secure for aircraft after dark.

Roger flew Travis' wing for most of the operations out of Ann. They were now flying support in mountainous terrain, and the tactics had to be modified to accommodate the conditions. One additional hazard of the dry season was the dust. Often, the wing ship had to wait for the dust to clear after the lead ship took off. The dust also surrounded the ship anytime it was hovered. Hovering was minimized whenever possible. Even the pilots liked to see where they were going. The dust covered everything in the aircraft. It even seemed to seep into the ammo cans used for ice boxes. The pilots' sweat caused the dust to cling to their bodies. Putting on a sweaty flight helmet was like sliding sandpaper down over the ears.

A couple days later, the 1st Platoon was on the bottom of the list as far as flying status went. Most of the pilots slept late. When they were getting up, Travis informed Roger that he was to fly the admin ship that day. That meant taking a C-model down to Camp Eagle to pick up and deliver paperwork. It was only a half-hour flight, then a half-hour on the ground, and another half-hour back. Travis assigned Fred Drake, a warrant officer, to fly with Roger. The crewchief also went with them, but they had no gunner.

On the "ash and trash" flight to Eagle, as the pilots often called the admin run, low level flying was often

practiced. It was fun flying low. It reminded Roger of the days in gun training with Al. Shortly after leaving Camp Evans, Roger turned the ship over to Drake. Drake had come over with C Battery, but Roger wasn't sure how he had lasted so long with the unit. Drake wasn't much of a pilot. He did most of his flying from the right seat, and from what Roger had seen, he doubted that Drake would ever make an aircraft commander. He was always doing something stupid. Roger took the ship up to about 500 feet above the ground before he turned it over to Drake. As they approached the city of Hue, they began to enter a low-lying layer of clouds. Roger waited for Drake to drop below them. Nobody flew instruments unless they were practicing, or they had to fly instruments. Drake continued to fly at the same altitude, right into the clouds. Roger was becoming concerned that they might meet another ship coming the opposite direction along the highway.

Finally Roger could stand it no longer. He keyed the intercom, "Why don't you drop down below these clouds so we can see where we're going?"

"Well, ...OK,....sure," Drake replied. He began losing altitude. "Do you mind if I take it down on the deck?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't really paying any attention. His thoughts were wandering back to the flight school days with Al. He wondered where Al was now. Al had been assigned to B Battery, and they weren't in country yet, but they would be soon. Roger had heard that they would be stationed at Camp Eagle. It was too bad they weren't here yet. He would like to drop by, and tease Al about being short.

Drake took the ship right down on the deck. As they passed Hue, he dropped down on the river, and was following it. The trees rose on both sides of the ship. The river was quite wide, and there was an occasional sampan on it.

Trees loomed ahead as they came to a sharp bend in the river. Suddenly Roger realized too late that Drake wasn't going to make the bend in the river. It seemed that the ship was sliding toward the trees on the right bank. Roger grabbed the controls and leveled the ship. He pulled pitch hard, and slammed the cyclic back to bring the nose up. The trees reached up toward them.....ker-whack! They hit the top of a tree! Roger leveled the ship, and reduced the power. He looked back at the crewchief. The chief was over next to the open door of the cabin, leaning toward the rocket pod. Roger could see the limbs hanging on the rocket

pod. What a pilot, Roger thought. Drake hadn't had the controls five minutes, and had almost flown them into a tree. Almost? That was a little closer than almost.

The rest of the trip went smoothly, but Roger refused to let Drake take the controls again. The clouds were even lower on the return trip, and Roger didn't trust Drake at all. Drake didn't have anything to say about the incident. He just tuned in the AFVN station, and turned up the volume. Roger wondered how Drake had ever managed to join this unit. Roger wondered if Drake's old man was a mucky-muck in the Army or something.

That afternoon Roger played gin rummy with Cook. Cook was about the best gin rummy player Roger had ever seen. Cook would play rummy with anyone, as long as his opponent was willing to put up some money. Roger was the only pilot in the unit that Cook would play for fun. Some hands Roger could beat him, but only if Roger concentrated totally on the cards. When Cook beat him for the third game straight, Roger gave up. He decided it was time to write a letter. And to whom should he write? Roger thought of Pam. Fulton was sprawled in one of the "dink chairs", as the plastic contraptions were called. Fulton was out on the deck enjoying the strong rays of the sun. He had a "Playboy" on his lap, but he was sound asleep. Roger stepped out of the hootch. He couldn't help noticing the magazine was open to the centerfold. The picture riveted his attention. He looked at it for a long moment.

How long had it been? He had shipped out in mid-December. It was what month now? He couldn't even remember. Must be about April. Wasn't it? Four months? Could it be? Let's see, when was the last payday? Roger checked his watch. It showed the nineteenth. Boy, it had to be April. He looked at the centerfold again. Whatever month it was, it had been too long.

Roger sat down on the edge of the deck. He thought about his ex-wife. He wondered what she was doing now. Still going with the French professor? Roger doubted it. But as he thought about it, he could remember the springs in Pullman. The warm sun. The clear skies. Everyone would be looking forward to spring vacation about now. There would be water fights between the fraternities and the sororities, and the men's and women's dorms. Maybe even a little softball.

Thinking about softball made him recall an incident below the student union building. Roger and another student

had been dating the same girl. Roger really liked her. He had even thought of marrying her. She loved to dance, and so did Roger. In fact, he had asked her out for a dance that Saturday night. But this was only Tuesday. He knew she was dating someone else, but he didn't know who. Roger had invited her to watch him play softball that evening. She was there, and Roger enjoyed it. Roger caught for his team. Then the play happened. There was a runner on second, when the batter hit a line drive into short center field. Roger knew that Sam, the center fielder, had a good arm. And Sam would try to cut down the runner at home.

Roger moved up the baseline toward third waiting for the throw. He could hear the runner bearing down on him from third base. The throw was on its way, but it was going to be close. Roger braced for the collision. The ball and runner arrived at almost the same instant. Roger was knocked head over heels as the runner took him out, but he managed to hang onto the ball. When the dust settled, the umpire called the runner out. The runner lay on the ground, just past home plate. He was holding his ankle. Roger was shaken, and his ribs hurt, but it felt good to make a play like that in front of his girl friend! The baserunner's ankle was swelling quickly. One of his friends took him to the hospital, as the game continued.

After the game, Roger walked her back to her dorm. On the way she started laughing. Roger looked around, but he couldn't figure out what she was laughing about. Finally he stopped walking. She doubled over with laughter, and dropped to the grass.

Roger was perplexed, "All right, just what's so funny?"

As she looked up at him with tears in her eyes, she said, "Do you know who that was that got hurt at home plate?" Then she began laughing again. Roger remembered the play, but he didn't know who the guy was. Then the light slowly dawned. His face must have changed expression, because she began laughing harder.

Roger just looked at her. Her dark hair fell about her face as she laughed. "Was that him?" Roger asked.

She was laughing so hard that she couldn't answer. She just nodded her head yes. Roger laughed, too. "Does that mean you're going to the dance with me on Saturday?" Again she nodded. Roger looked off into the distance, "Boy. That was a better play than I thought." She kept laughing.

Roger missed her. He looked around. The hootch below came into focus. He wondered if she would have been happy

to be married to a pilot. She was the same girl Roger and Rex had driven across the state to see on that wild weekend....how long ago? It seemed like an eternity. Roger shook off the daydream, and walked back into the hootch. Fulton was still asleep. The "Playboy" was still open to the centerfold.....

41: First Engine Failure

Even after a day off, the next day was back to the war. It was such an elusive thing. The infantry was making contact with the enemy every day. The ARA sections from C Battery answered the calls. The days became almost routine. Sometimes several missions were flown for the same unit in one day. The voices and call signs became familiar for a day or two, then everything would change. The only time the pilots knew they were being fired at was when the infantry would tell them, or someone would spot the tracers. At night, the tracers were easy to see.

On a night mission, Roger and Justin were lifting over the ridge to the south of Camp Evans. The highest peak on this ridge was named Nui Khe Mountain. It was appropriately marked with the remains of an Air Force fixed wing spotter plane. He hadn't missed by far. The wreckage lay less than one hundred feet from the top of the ridge. Roger and Justin had wondered how it happened, but they couldn't find anyone who could remember.

Recently the days and missions seemed to run together. Tonight, a grunt unit had reported incoming mortars and a ground probe by the enemy. The night was clear, and there was a partial moon. The ridges and valleys below looked eerie in the moonlight and the scattered mists. As they crossed the ridge, Justin looked below them.

"Hey! We're taking fire from the ridge!" he said excitedly.

Roger looked below. Sure enough, tracers were rising from the ridge. Coming straight at them, the tracers seemed to start out very slow. As they approached the ship, they seemed to move faster. But the tracers were burning out far beneath the ship. Roger turned to Justin, "No sweat. They got tracer burnout way below us. I'll bet we could fly over them all night at this altitude, and they'd never hit us."

Justin wasn't convinced. "You know there's four rounds between every two of those tracer rounds. That means there's a lot of lead flying around up here with us."

"Big deal. Shooting at us beyond tracer burnout is like flock shootin' ducks. It looks like a hit for sure, but it never happens." Roger looked down at the tracers again. Justin was right. There was usually only a tracer every fifth round in a normal belt of machine gun ammunition. "Well, we'll call it in when we get home, but I

don't think it's anything to get excited about. They must have a good supply of ammo to be shootin' at us up this high. I know if I had to carry the bullets to the top of that mountain, I'd be a little more careful how I fired 'em."

That night, as the mission ended, and the ships were shutting down, Justin noticed that the navigation lights on Ron's ship were getting very dim. "Maybe he's got a bad battery," observed Justin. He turned to the gunner, "Hey, run over and tell Travis he must have a bad battery, or something. His nav lights are gettin' dim."

The gunner returned. "Those guys took a hit when they were crossin' the first ridge on the way out tonight. It got 'em right square in the battery."

Justin turned to Roger, who was filling out the log book with his flashlight. "They got a hit..... Did you hear me?"

Roger looked up from the log book, "Yeah, I heard. So what?"

"Well, nothing, I guess, except that they took it when they were crossin' the ridge tonight. I thought you said we were too high to get hit."

Roger snapped the log book shut, and tossed it up on the dash. "Well, you gotta admit, Ron and Tim were lower than we were."

"Sure! By about fifty feet!"

Roger slid out of the seat, and dropped to the ground. He reached back in and fished his hat off the dash. "Like I was tellin' ya', Justin, it's just like flock shootin' ducks. Once in a while you get lucky." With that, Roger turned and walked away from the aircraft. Justin still sat in the armored seat with his straps buckled.

He yelled at Roger, "You dumb ox! I'm never gonna believe you about anything again!!"

As Roger walked toward Operations, Travis joined him. "What's up with Justin?" Ron asked.

"I told him we were too high to get hit when we went over the ridge. We could see the tracers, but they were burning out way below us. Guess he believed me, until he found out about your hit."

Ron laughed, "You mean you saw the fire coming up?"

They reached the entrance to the Operations bunker, and Roger stopped. "Of course we saw the fire. What do you think we were doing? Watching the in-flight movie?"

Ron squeezed past Roger in the narrow opening. "You could have said something...", he mumbled as he pushed past.

They entered Operations. The bunker was not very big. Along the left wall was the map of the AO. A small, crude desk constructed from rocket boxes occupied the far corner on the right. Radio sets occupied the right wall. Aircraft and pilot assignments were kept on a board on the back wall. The Operations technician was a specialist five at night. Deke Trowbridge was his name. Deke was considered one of the older guys in the unit. He was in his early twenties, so that did not make him much older than average, but he was already nearly bald which added years to his looks. Deke took his job very seriously, and he did a good job. It was always comforting to hear his voice on the radio when the section was returning from a mission.

Ron walked up to Deke's desk, "Say, Deke, we need another ship for hot status."

Deke looked up from his paperwork. He blinked a couple times behind his huge dark-rimmed glasses. His expression formed the perfect question mark.

Ron continued, "Deke, why don't you get another pair of glasses? Those Army issue jobs just don't do you justice."

Deke pushed his glasses higher on his nose, "Maybe you're right, Captain Travis. What's this about another ship?"

Ron leaned over the desk, "We got shot tonight. Splattered the battery. We need a TI (Technical Inspector) to check the ship to be sure nothin's structurally bad. Battery juice leaked all over back there. We need an APU (Auxiliary Power Unit) to get it started so we can move it. And we need another ship from that bunch you've got parked down on the flight line. Otherwise Hunter, here, is going to have to take the next mission all by himself."

"I'll get right on it," Deke said as he reached for the field phone on his desk. "You got any debriefing for me?"

Travis slid his hip up on the edge of the desk. "Sure do, Deke. In fact, I'm gong to give you the coordinates of that SOB who shot me." Travis turned to Roger. "That is, if Hunter will get 'em off the map."

Roger moved closer to the map on the wall, and began tracing the ridge with his finger. "There's Nui Khe. Think it was just a little west of the peak itself. Must be right here," Roger pressed the map with his finger. Together he and Travis located the coordinates.

The next day, the 1st Platoon was off. They were on the bottom of the ladder as far as flying assignments, and there weren't enough ships flyable for them to man. While they were sitting around the hootch after breakfast, the field phone rang. Davis answered it, listened for a moment, and turned to the others. "It was Deke. If you guys want to see the results of your after action report from last night, he wants you to join him on the hot pad by the Operations bunker." Everyone put on a pair of pants, and headed up the hill past the mess hall to the hot pad. An artillery unit made up of 155 mm. howitzers was located just beyond the hot pad. It was firing a mission. The pilots joined Deke at the hot pad.

"This is really neat, you guys," Deke yelled over the sound of the guns. He pointed to the ridge in the distance. "That artillery unit right below us has the fire mission, and they're shooting up your target you identified last night."

Sure enough. As the pilots looked to the ridge, they could see the shell bursts. Travis shaded his eyes with his hand, and squinted into the sunshine. "Hope they give that son-of-a-gun a headache," he said. Then he looked below them to the artillery unit. He could see the gunners sweating as they moved the shells and powder canisters into position for the guns. An idea suddenly dawned on Travis. "Come on, you guys," Travis said, and sprinted for the hootch. The others followed. Inside, they grabbed their chairs, and Ron tucked a case of beer under his arm from the frig. "Hurry up, or we'll miss the show," Ron said breathlessly. Back up the hill the group scurried. When they reached the far side of the hot pad, they set up their chairs, and popped open the case of beer. As each round impacted on the ridge, they would cheer and clap.

Soon the artillery unit spotted them. The gunners and shell handlers poked one another and pointed to the assembled pilots. Soon the whole artillery unit was aware of the pilots. When rounds landed on the very crest of the ridge, the pilots would jump up, clapping and shouting. When the show ended, the pilots all stood up, and very solemnly gave the artillery unit a good round of applause. The gunners and ammo handlers smiled and bowed in return.

The next day, it was back to the war again. The first mission was on the coastal plain just a few miles southeast of Camp Evans. There in a loop of a small stream, the LZ was an abandoned rice paddy. Roger and Justin were flying

wing on Travis and Davis. It was a simple LZ prep mission. They orbited as the artillery rounds hit the LZ and the surrounding area. Soon, two willy peter (white phosphorous) rounds burst over the LZ, and the ARA section began its inbound run. Travis told Hunter to take the left side of the LZ, and cleared the door gunners to fire. Roger passed the information over the intercom to his crew. They didn't really expect to take any enemy fire on this mission, but they allowed the door gunners to fire at every opportunity they could. It was boring for the gunners to ride in the ship all the time without getting to fire their weapons.

The M-60 machine guns used by the door gunners on the C-model hung from the middle of the cabin door openings by a bunji cord. This was so the gunners could handle the guns without having to bear the entire weight of the weapon. The barrels of the M-60's also had metal rods attached to them. The gun on the right side of the ship had the rod fastened on the left side, while on the left side, the rod was on the right. These rods prevented the barrel of the machine gun from pointing inside the cabin. This allowed the gunners to attempt to hit targets on the ground by watching the tracers, without having to worry about swinging the barrel into the cabin. It also gave the pilots a little more security. The gunners themselves, wore a harness with a large strap, called a monkey strap, that fastened to their harness and then to a large cargo tie-down ring in the back wall of the cabin of the helicopter. By adjusting the length of the monkey strap, the gunners could actually lean out of the cabin, or cargo door, of the chopper, and fire over or around the rocket pods that were hung on the sides of the aircraft.



Shooting an LZ prep in the loop of a stream.

Travis had called a right break for both ships. As Roger finished his rocket run, he rolled into a right turn. As soon as the ship began to roll, the gunners opened fire. Spent cartridges skipped and bounced across the cargo deck as the gunners poured fire into the LZ. As Roger leveled the ship coming out of the turn, he sensed something was wrong. He quickly checked the instruments. Everything looked OK. Then he looked into the back seat. The gunner on the right side of the ship was looking out the door, but when Roger checked the crewchief/gunner directly behind him, there was no one there! The M-60 swung wildly in the door on its bunji cord. Roger could see the monkey strap stretched tight out the door.

Roger keyed the intercom, and addressed the gunner, "Hey, Jackson, where's Smith?!" Jackson, the gunner, looked to the other side of the ship. His eyes widened behind his clear visor as he saw the empty door. He quickly stowed his machine gun, and slid to the other side of the ship. Roger looked over his shoulder, watching Jackson.

Justin keyed his intercom, "What's going on? Where's Smith?"

Roger pushed the mike switch on the floor, "I think he fell out."

"Whaaat!!?" was Justin's reply.

"You fly the ship," Roger said. "I'll give Jackson a hand if he needs it."

Justin was still disbelieving, "Honest to Pete, he fell out?"

"Well, I don't think he got shot. I didn't see any fire. Did you?" Justin's reply was negative as Roger twisted around in his seat to watch Jackson. Jackson was pulling on Smith's monkey strap, bracing himself against the edge of the cargo door opening and the seat stays. Soon Roger could see Smith's gloves appear, followed by the top of his helmet. It wasn't long before Jackson had Smith back in the aircraft. Smith sat on the floor. He was puffing so hard that he had fogged up the inside of his clear visor on his flight helmet. After resting for a minute, he plugged his helmet cord back in.

"Monkey strap a little long there, cowboy?" Roger said with a grin. Smith's reply was unintelligible, as his mike was swung away from his mouth. Finally Smith just raised his hand with a thumbs up gesture. "You OK?" Roger asked. Again Smith signaled thumbs up. "Check him out good, Jackson."

Justin's voice came over the intercom, "Yeah, check him good, Jackson. I wanta see how we're gonna write up a casualty report for a crewchief gettin' bucked off his own ship!" Justin's laughter echoed on the intercom.

On the way back to camp after the mission, Smith explained what happened. He always left enough slack in his monkey strap to allow him to step out on the hard mount above the rocket pod. This allowed him to fire behind and beneath the ship on a break. But this morning, he had probably allowed just a little too much slack. He had slipped as he stepped out on the hard mount. And from there, the rest was history. His helmet cord had unplugged when he fell, so none of the rest of the crew had missed him for a brief moment.

As Justin and Roger walked over to Operations for the mission debriefing, Justin chuckled and looked at Roger. "Boy, if things weren't exciting enough around here, we got gunners jumping out of the ship to get closer to the action." Roger just laughed and shook his head. When Justin told Ron and Tim about the incident, they wouldn't even believe him.

Tim turned to Roger, "Are you kidding me? Did that really happen?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders, and with a look of complete innocence, said, "Boy, I don't know if I'd believe that either, Tim. I think maybe Justin's been into the stump juice this morning."

Tim turned back to Justin, "I sure wish I'd had a picture of that!"

Roger's jaw dropped, "I never even thought...! And I had my camera with me, too! Crap!" Roger thought for a second. "Well, that settles it. We'll just have to go out and ask Smith to do it again so we can record it for posterity!" They all laughed.



Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Charlie Battery.

The missions in the mountains continued. Ann was now a full-fledged support area. But the pilots hated the place. It was so difficult to get out of it with a loaded ship that they wanted someplace else to use. The road from the Hue-

Camp Eagle area to LZ Ann was now well established. Trucks and tanks used it continuously.

Pilots in the unit were in short supply as many of them were being rotated south to Vung Tau for Cobra transition training. For this reason, the pilots from the various platoons were often mixed together in sections. Whenever possible, flying crews from the same platoon were kept together. It was on one of these days that Roger and Justin had the job of flying wing on a 2nd Platoon ship. The lead ship was commanded by Jim Kaiser, a first lieutenant. Kaiser was Jewish pilot from back east. He had been raised in New York City, and loved to gamble. His specialty was rolling dice. The section was flying out of Ann, supporting infantry units that were now entering the Ashau Valley.

The section had flown several missions out of Ann that morning, and were returning from a boring no-shoot mission. The infantry leader had been unable to get his people together, so the section refused to shoot for him. By the time the grunts were ready to use the section, the ships were too low on fuel, and had to break off the mission. The lead ship was quite a ways ahead as they returned to LZ Ann. The wind was light, and out of the south as the ships made their approach. It was hot already, and the pilots enjoyed the air time. It was much cooler up flying around than it was sitting on the ground at LZ Ann. It had rained hard in the preceding days, and the ground at Ann was muddy where the vehicles used it.

Roger and Justin were on the base leg of their approach. Smith was the crewchief, but they had a new gunner. His name was Tribble. Today was the first day he had ever gunned on a ship. He had been a cook's helper. Gunners didn't seem to last long on the ships. There was always a shortage of them. The pay was good. They received flight pay for the job, but a lot of the troops avoided the job. The pilots had a hard time understanding why.

As the approach to LZ Ann continued, Roger had identified where he was going to make his turn to his final approach heading. Just then, Justin started to give him a prelanding instrument check. As Justin did, he hesitated. Roger's eyes darted to the rpm gauge. The rpm was dropping. Justin reached out and tapped the gauge, but the needles continued to unwind. Roger hit the beeper on the handle of the collective. This switch was used to adjust the engine rpm slightly. Roger tried to beep it back up, but there was no response. The rpm continued to decay. As the needles

moved through the 6000 mark on engine rpm, the low rpm audio came on in the pilots' helmets, and the low rpm warning light on the dash began to flash. Roger dropped the pitch slightly, and tried to stop the decay in rpm, but it was to no avail. There was definitely something wrong with the engine, but the other gauges gave no indication what it was.

As Roger pushed the pitch full down to enter autorotation, Justin turned to the crewchief and gunner in the back. "You guys better stow your machine guns, we're gonna crash," Justin said to them.

Yeah, it does look like it, Roger thought, but he didn't like Justin's choice of words. The term "crash" had a negative ring to it. He trimmed the ship and looked for a place to set it down. He considered turning around and heading back for the river behind them. It nestled in a deep valley, and Roger remembered seeing a large grassy area where it forked with a tributary. But there was also an opening coming up in front of them. It was where the road from Eagle approached Ann. Just north of Ann, the road made a right angle turn, and was very wide. Roger decided to try to make the road. At first he thought they would make it easy, but as they autorotated out of the sky, they were sinking much faster than Roger had anticipated.

A line of trees along the road loomed into view. Roger estimated the distance to them, and said over the intercom, "Hang on. This is going to be close." Roger checked the rotor rpm. He had a lot to play with, and his airspeed was fine so far. The trees seemed to reach higher.... The sweat poured down Roger's face. He couldn't make them.... It looked like they were going to hit them....unless.. As Roger flared the ship, Justin reached over and flipped the lock on Roger's shoulder harness. Roger was surprised at the action. It showed him that either Justin was just ridin' this one out, or he thought it was going to be a real barn burner of a crash.

With the flare, the nose of the ship came up, and Roger pulled in some pitch. He had picked out what looked like the most rotten of the dead trees to hit, hoping that they would simply smash through it if they hit it. He hoped to glide over the trees, but he could see the rotten pieces of bark hanging on the snag directly in front of them.... And then they were over the trees!

Roger pushed the cyclic forward to drop the nose of the ship, and slammed the pitch down. The ground was now rushing up at them, but Roger had to keep what airspeed he

had, or the aircraft would just fall out of the sky. The ground raced up to meet them. Roger could see the tracks from tanks in the soft dirt. He flared the ship hard. The nose came way up, and Roger pulled pitch hard. He was trying to stop their forward motion. He looked out the side window to estimate their speed relative to the ground and their distance above the ground. It seemed so close. Then as the ground stopped moving past them, Roger pushed the cyclic forward to level the ship. He could already feel the rotor blades slowing. As the ship leveled, Roger pulled the last of the pitch to cushion their impact with the ground. As they hit, the ship lurched slightly to the right, and settled.

Roger couldn't believe they were on the ground. For an instant he felt relief. Then he whirled to the back seat. "Smith! Check for fire!" he yelled over the intercom. Smith and Tribble sat frozen to the back seat. Then Smith seemed to awaken. He unbuckled his seatbelt and vaulted out of the ship. He landed knee deep in mud. He struggled through the mud to check the inspection panels. Roger ripped off his helmet. He turned to Tribble, "Get the hell out of the ship!" Roger screamed. Then Roger realized the engine was still running. He looked back to the gauges. Smith waded through the mud, up to Roger's door.

"No fire, sir! Everything looks OK back there!"

"OK, Smith. Thanks." Roger rolled the throttle down to flight idle. As he was doing this, Justin was on the radio to someone.

Then Justin took off his helmet, and extended his gloved hand across the console. "Good job, Hunter. We made it. I just told Kaiser that we shot a landing a click short of the refueling area. He rogered it, but I don't know if he understood."

"Give him a minute, and then call him again," Roger said. Roger suddenly felt very tired. His hands were shaking, and he needed a cigarette. He shut down the engine. As the rotor blade slowed, Roger got out of the ship. He stepped carefully from the toe of the skid to some stumps next to the road. He looked back at the ship. It sat at a nose-high angle in a large mud hole at the edge of the road. Roger looked back toward the trees they had just cleared. It didn't look like any of them were broken. Roger's knees began to shake. Then muscles all over his body began to twitch. He lit a cigarette, and moved around to loosen his muscles.

Roger spoke to Smith, who was now making entries in the log book, "Hey, Smith. From the looks of the mud on the tail fin, I think we probably got a tail rotor strike. Would you mind checking it? I know it's muddy, but you're already covered. And check the bottom of the tail boom, too, will you?" Roger watched Justin put on his helmet, and make another call on the radio. Then Justin took off his helmet, and climbed out Roger's side of the ship. He joined Roger on a dry piece of ground, and looked back to the ship.

"I got ahold of Kaiser again. You were right, Roger. He didn't understand the first message, but he knows where we are now." Justin turned and looked up toward a small rise behind them. "Hey, did you know those tanks were there?"



First engine failure.

Roger turned around. There were several Army tanks sitting on the rise, about a hundred yards from where they stood. A lone individual was approaching from the tanks. A single row of concertina wire separated them from the tanks. As the individual approached, they could see he was a young

kid. He walked up to the concertina wire separating them. "Hey, did you guys crash?" he asked.

Justin grinned at Roger, then turned to the tanker. "Naw. Not really. We always land like that. If you really want to see something, hang around for the takeoff." Roger's mouth was so dry, he couldn't even laugh.

Justin and Roger then tiptoed through the mud to the tail of the ship. They checked the tail rotor, and traced their path back toward the trees. The tail rotor had hit the mud all right, but it didn't appear to be damaged other than a couple minor dents. However, the whip antenna that stuck up from the tail fin was shredded. They figured the impact must have forced it over into the tail rotor. They also found a single skid mark in the mud from the stinger on the tail of the ship. The stinger was like a tail skid. It wasn't normally used, but it was there to protect the tail of the ship. In the steep flare just before the landing, they had drug the stinger quite a ways. As they looked at the marks in the mud, Roger spoke. "No wonder it leveled so easy at the end. The tail was already on the ground."



Side view - first engine failure.

"Yeah. Sure looks like it," Justin added. "Well, I think it's about picture time. Your knees quit shakin' yet?"

Roger looked quickly at Justin. "Yeah.....I guess they have." As the crew gathered on the dry ground near the ship, they traded taking pictures of one another with the ship. The tanker even returned for a few quick pictures.

As they stood there waiting for a ship to come with the maintenance people, Justin sidled up to Roger. "Have you talked to the new gunner, Tribble?" he said in a low voice.

"No. Why? Is he OK?"

"Yeah, sure, he's OK physically. But I think he lost part of his marbles or something."

Roger studied the gunner. "Holy cow, Justin, he might be in shock."

"Nope. I checked his pulse, eyes, and everything. But you know, he wet his pants."

"Tell you what, Justin. I feel sorry for him. This was his first mission."

"Is that right? Jesus, I didn't know. No wonder he's so freaked out."

Roger lit another cigarette. "You know, Justin, I probably would have wet my pants, too, if I hadn't been flying. I'll bet that was scary as hell. If I hadn't been so darn busy with everything, I would have had time to worry."

Justin grinned, and slapped Roger on the shoulder. "Hey, Hotel, you did just fine. Remember what they used to tell us in flight school, 'any one you can walk away from is considered a good landing'."

"Thanks, Justin. It's really nice of you to say that. I wasn't sure we were going to make it until we were on the ground, though."

"And what was your greatest fear, Roger, if you screwed it up? That the Army might send you to Vietnam?" Justin laughed.

Before long, another ship arrived with Mister Christian, the maintenance officer, and another pilot. Justin took Christian's place in the replacement ship, and offered to take Tribble along as the gunner on that ship. Tribble refused, so they left with only the single crewchief/gunner.

Roger and Smith, the crewchief, helped Christian check out the aircraft. Christian soon started it, and flew it up to the refueling area at Ann. They dumped some JP-4 in it,

and took off for home. Roger was apprehensive about flying it home, but Christian seemed unconcerned. Roger noticed that he watched the engine instruments closely on the flight, however.

When they got back to Camp Evans, it didn't take long to discover the problem. The fuel filter was plugged solid, and there was a lot of gunk in the bypass line. The ships were getting bad fuel at LZ Ann. Christian got on the field phone to Ops, and passed the word. They would have to bring all the ships down that night to pull their fuel filters. And until the problem was corrected at Ann, they weren't to refuel there any more. All the tanks on the ships would also have to be drained. Christian wasn't happy. He would have to put on a double shift that night to get everything done.

When Roger arrived at the mess hall that evening, he took the usual ribbing for putting a ship down in the boonies. Roger insisted that they didn't crash. Merely shot a little short of the refueling area at LZ Ann. The other pilots laughed at that. Roger asked Christian if there was any way they could check for that kind of problem, fuel contamination, before it caused an engine problem. Christian said that he had already taken care of it. Ships using forward areas for refueling would have their fuel filters pulled more frequently, and checked for dirt.

The next morning, Roger and Justin were again assigned high up on the ladder for mission status. As they started through the breakfast line in the mess hall, Roger spotted Tribble working behind the counter. Tribble was dishing up the instant scrambled eggs. Roger stopped before him. Tribble didn't look up at first as he dished the eggs. When Roger didn't move, Tribble looked up.

Roger smiled at him. "Aren't you going up with us today, Tribble?"

Tribble looked at him. The spoon stopped in mid-air. "Uh,....no,..sir. I think I like working in the mess hall just fine, sir."

"Well, I can understand that. I hope I didn't scare you too bad yesterday. You did a fine job as gunner, Tribble."

Tribble lowered the spoon. He looked at Roger as if he was seeing a ghost. "Thank you, sir. It's just that....I had no idea what you pilots went through up there. I think I'll serve the rest of my tour on the ground." Tribble dished up a few more eggs on Roger's plate.

Roger sat down across the table from Justin, and began to eat breakfast. Major Brown had been behind Roger in the chow line. He joined Roger and Justin at their table. Brown sipped his coffee and looked at the two pilots. "What was that all about in the chow line, Hunter?"

Roger looked up, "Oh, that was our gunner yesterday, sir. Guess he prefers a job on the ground."

Brown laughed. "Flying isn't for everybody, you know."

Justin chewed off a piece of toast, "Yes sir. That's right, but we're running terribly short of gunners."

Brown started in on his breakfast. "I know that, Cook. I'll see what I can do about it. But if it gets any hotter, we'll probably be down to just a crewchief shortly anyway. The ships just can't carry the weight."

A couple days later, one of the machine guns malfunctioned on one of the ships, and the crewchief and gunner switched guns. They forgot to change the barrels, though, so the rods bolted to them were on the wrong side. On the next pass, the crewchief swung the rod against the door frame, and opened fire. The rounds from the M-60 blasted into the door frame, and ricocheted under one of the pilots' seats. The door frame was shredded, and the chin bubble beneath the pilot's tail rotor pedals was shot out before the chief realized what was happening. It scared the soup out of the pilot, but the only loss to him was one of his boot heels.

42: Forty-eight Hours Straight

As April drew to a close, the pilots in C Battery were pushed to the limit. McCallister had returned from his body escort mission with Thompson's body to the states. Shortly after his return, Ed was very sober, and quite cautious in the air. But it didn't take long before he put the past behind him, and began doing his job again.

The 1st herd was again on the bottom of the list for mission status, but one of the ships from another platoon experienced problems, and Roger and Ed were called on to fill in for them. This occurred late in the afternoon of a very hot day. Missions came at a steady rate, even after dark. They never got to shut the ship down between missions the action was so hot and heavy. The enemy had launched attacks on several fire bases simultaneously, so every ship that could fly was put in the air. The rest of the 1st Platoon was able to rest since there weren't enough aircraft for them to fly.

The cooks provided them a hot meal that night. The meals were delivered to the ship, and Roger and Ed ate while the ship was being rearmed. All through the night, they flew wing on a 2nd Platoon bird. Sorger, the Operations specialist during the day, made sure that coffee was delivered to the aircraft between missions, too. But as daylight came, Ed and Roger were still flying. The other pilots in the 1st Platoon came on duty to replace the 2nd Platoon pilots, but there was no relief for Roger's crew. They traded off flying and eating C-rations for breakfast. And they continued to drink coffee when they could get it. Soon fatigue began to overtake them. As the steady stream of missions continued through the day, they began to trade off flying and sleeping. On the way to the target, one would sleep and the other would fly. On the return trip, the roles would be reversed. The crewchief and gunner even sacked out on the cargo deck during travel to and from the targets.

Roger was sure they would be spelled that night, but it wasn't to be. They got to shut down their ship, when they were ordered to change aircraft, for the first time in over twenty-four hours. The missions soon blended with one another, until neither Ed nor Roger knew how long they had been flying. It seemed like an endless dream. With the new ship came a new crewchief and gunner. Roger was so tired he

could hardly see straight, but still the missions continued.

One time he awoke as they were flying along. He looked at a box of C-rations on the console of the Huey. It was daylight outside. He looked over at Ed, and keyed the intercom. "Say, Ed, are these C's mine or yours? "

"Help yourself, if you're hungry," Ed said dryly. "I don't even know if they're breakfast or lunch."

Roger opened the box of C-rations. There was a tin of peaches in the box. Roger opened them with his P-38 can opener, and slurped them down. Then he tightened his shoulder harness and dropped off to sleep.

It seemed like the daylight lasted for a long time. As they returned from still another mission, Ops told them to land on the hot pad, and shut down the aircraft. Roger had to ask twice to make sure he understood what they were telling him. Roger and Ed got out of the ship. They could hardly stand, they were so stiff. They walked down the hill toward the mess hall. When they walked in, the cooks seemed surprised to see them. There was no food out.

Roger looked across the counter at the bewildered cook. "Look, I only know what time it is because my watch tells me. And that's set on Greenwich Mean Time. All I know is that Ed and I are hungry as hell, and we'd like something to eat."

The cook eyed the unshaven, disheveled pilots. "It'll take me just a couple minutes to fry you up some eggs. Is that OK, sir?"

"I think we'd eat just about anything. We've been eating cold C-rations for the past day or so. Eggs sound just dandy."

Roger and Ed carried their plates into the officer's side of the mess hall and sat down heavily. Roger started eating. He looked across at Ed. Ed's head drooped lower and lower, and then dropped into his plate. Roger was so foggy, he couldn't believe his eyes. As he was wondering what to do, Major Brown walked in. He looked at Ed, then at Roger.

"What's wrong with McCallister?"

Roger leaned back on the bench, "I don't know, sir. I think he just went to sleep."

Major Brown looked closely at Roger. "How long have you been flying?"

Roger shook his head. "I don't really know, sir. I think we started sometime yesterday, or maybe the day before."

Major Brown swore. "Are you serious?"

Roger shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. He really couldn't remember. "I just don't know, sir. You'll have to check with Ops."

Brown straightened. "Hunter, take McCallister down to your hootch, and both of you get some rest. I'll see that you get the rest of the day off."

Roger reached across the table, and shook Ed. There was almost no response. Brown helped Roger wake Ed. Roger steered him out of the mess hall and down to the hootch. When he got Ed to his bunk, Ed rolled into it, clothes, boots and all, and was promptly asleep. Roger was only seconds behind him.

Brown's promise to give them the afternoon off was kept. But when dusk fell, they were awakened.

"I'm sorry, you guys, but we're out of pilots," Travis told them as he prodded them into consciousness.

Roger looked around as he tried to shake the cobwebs from his brain. "It's dark out," he observed sleepily.

"Yeah. You guys must have slept through chow," Travis said as he leaned against Roger's bunk. "But if you hustle, you probably have time to grab some grits before you go on duty. I'll call the mess hall, and tell 'em you're coming." As Travis looked away, Roger couldn't help but notice the bloodshot eyes and drawn face.

Roger had almost made a nasty comment about covering for the whole Battery. After seeing Ron, he was glad he'd kept his mouth shut. This was getting to be a long war, and the strain was mirrored in Ron's face. Roger hoped he didn't look that bad.

They were assigned to ships on the hot spot. Stopping in the mess hall, Roger looked down at the plate the cooks had prepared. He turned to Ed.

"Are these the same eggs we had our last meal?"

Ed grinned, "Could be. But eggs are good for night vision, Hunter."

When they walked into Operations, Deke was surprised to see them. "What are you guys doing on duty? You know you logged almost 48 hours straight of flight time? You're way over the limit on hours!"

Ed turned to face Deke, "Tell somebody who cares, Trowbridge. There's a war on, after all..."

Deke adjusted his glasses. "Yeah, but there's supposed to be a difference between war and suicide. We'll have to doctor the flight records before they go to Battalion."

Ed chuckled, and turned to Roger. "Hear that, Hunter? You'll have to fly tonight. I'm way over on hours."

"Yeah, I heard. I'm over, too," Roger replied. "Guess we'll have to let the crewchief fly."

A few nights later, Roger and Cook were assigned together to fly wing for a 3rd Platoon ship. They returned to Camp Evans after dark in a blinding rainstorm. There were no lights visible as they approached the refueling area. They made their approach, but were having a hard time seeing anything on the ground. They weren't even sure how high they were. As they were trying to pick up the ground using the searchlight and the landing light, the aircraft began to vibrate. Roger was flying, and his eyes swept the instruments. The airspeed was zero! They had lost translational lift, and they were falling through! The aircraft had essentially quit flying! It felt like someone had jerked a rug out from under them. Roger tried to look through the rain out the side window. Then in the landing light, he could see the ground racing up at them. Roger pulled in the pitch as hard as he could. The aircraft hit solidly, then lurched forward. Roger pulled the cyclic aft until it hit the stop. The ship hit again. As it did, Roger bottomed the pitch. He wanted to stay on the ground this time. The ship slid a few feet, and stopped with a jerk.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Chief, jump out and see where the hell we are, and if we've got any damage, will you?" Roger looked over at Justin. Even in the dim red glow from the instrument lights, he could see that Justin was pale. "We really screwed that one up, didn't we?" Justin only nodded. The damage to the ship was slight, but they had narrowly missed landing on a short post next to one of the refueling pads. It was used to keep the fuel nozzle off the ground. As they refueled, Justin and Roger discussed the approach, and how to keep one like that from happening again. They decided that if visibility was that bad, the one flying the ship would fly it just as if he was flying on instruments, while the other would use the landing and searchlights to look for the touchdown point. They put this procedure into action, and as new pilots joined the platoon, they were trained in the same procedure if they flew with Hunter or Cook.

After all the problems with fuel contamination at LZ Ann, and the problems of taking off there, Major Brown moved C Battery's forward operations to FSB Blaze. At first, it

looked like this was a much better area. It was, until the first ship landed. FSB Blaze was west of Ann, and rested on the slopes overlooking the Song Bo River. It was just a little closer to the Ashau Valley. C Battery's parking area here was a joke. A finger ridge jutted out from the main hill mass. Along the top of this ridge was the chopper refueling area. Just below the crest of the ridge, a narrow bench had been bladed out by a cat. It reminded Roger of a wide logging road cut into the side of the hill. The bench was the parking area for ARA ships. It was only large enough to accommodate two ships. When landing, the pilots had to be careful that they didn't get too close to the bank or they would hit it with one of the main rotor blades. The turbulence set up on the bench by a chopper trying to hover into position to park, was nearly unbelievable. It would literally shake the chopper.



Parking at Blaze.

The first time Roger and Justin landed, Travis' ship was in ahead of them. Travis called and warned them about the buffeting, but they had no idea it was going to be as bad as it was. It was also imperative to park the second ship as close to the first as possible. This gave the last

ship to land as much room to take off as was possible on the short bench. During hot weather, it was absolutely necessary to bounce the ship at least twice, and usually three times, to get enough speed to get it flying on the takeoff. After they had shut down the engine, Roger and Justin walked the bench, looking carefully for anything that might endanger their takeoff. They stood at the end of the bench for a long time, looking down into the river valley. Below them, a wide area had been cleared of trees. The purpose was to clear fields of fire for the security forces on the fire base, but it also provided the choppers a reasonably clear forced landing area if they should have to abort a takeoff.



Checking the takeoff path.

As they were discussing possible forced landing sites, Justin kicked a dirty ammo box that lay on the end of the bench. As it turned over, it rattled. Justin stooped and opened it. Inside were fifty caliber rounds in a machine

gun belt. Justin reached in and lifted them out just as Travis was approaching.

"What you got there, Cook?" Travis asked.

"Looks like some fifty rounds. I never realized how big these bullets are. Would you look at them?" Justin was studying the belted ammo.

"Let me tell you, they look a lot bigger than that when those tracers are coming up at you. More like little footballs," Ron said as he lit a cigarette. "What are you guys doing, discussing takeoff routes?"

"You got that right, Ron," Roger said. "Ever since that trip we took at Ann, we like to look over the territory."

"Not a bad idea. What have we got here?"

Roger pointed below them, "There's the Chinook landing pad right below us, but I don't think we could hit it on an aborted takeoff. It's got wire all around it. But that flat down by the river doesn't look too bad."

Ron followed Roger's finger. "You can't see 'em from here, but you might want to watch for stumps if you have to go in by the river. They removed the trees, but it's a cinch they didn't bulldoze that whole area."

They walked back to the ships. The crews had already unloaded the ammo cases with their ice and pop. Smith, and the new gunner, Godwin, already had their shirts off, and were catching some rays. Just as they were getting comfortable, a chopper took off from the refueling area. It lifted directly over their ships, thoroughly dusting everything. Smith jumped up, waving his arms. He profanely told the ship what he thought of it and its relations, and then added a couple obscene gestures.

Ron, Justin and Roger had crouched against the bank as the chopper took off, to avoid the dust. As it pulled away, Travis coughed. "You know, this place might not be too healthy."

Justin wiped the dust from his sweaty eyebrows, leaving long, dirty streaks. "You could say it might even begin to grow on you..." The others laughed. "Are we going to have to put up with that all the time we're sittin' on the ground?"

Travis waved his hand, "And just where else would you suggest we spend our time? Must be a greasy hamburger joint somewhere around here. You know what I think of this place already?" Justin and Roger watched as Travis walked over to the edge of the bank and urinated. "That about says it

all," Travis said through the cigarette clenched tightly in his teeth. They carried a PRC-25 radio with them for communications. The crews took turns monitoring it. It suddenly crackled to life, and Smith yelled.

The pilots sprinted to their ships and donned their armor. As they piled into the ship, Roger noted the new red patch sewn on Justin's flight shirt. It identified them as the Fourth of the Seventy-Seventh Aerial Rocket Artillery Battalion. It had a menacing cobra in black thread centered on a red background. They quickly cranked the ships. Roger brought his ship to a low hover, and Justin made a careful check of the engine instruments.

"Watch it, Roger. We're pulling about all we can get," Justin said as he checked the engine compressor gauge.

"Yeah, I know," Roger answered, "But we should make it OK." But as they hovered toward the end of the bench, Roger could see that he was going to have to eat his words. As they bounced off the end of the bench, the ship still wasn't flying. Roger nosed it over, hoping to pick up some airspeed. The ship just seemed sluggish and unwilling to respond. Roger pulled a little more pitch to clear the barbed wire surrounding the Chinook landing pad. That bled off a little more rpm. Then he dropped it slightly as they passed over the barbed wire. They were still losing altitude rapidly. Roger flared slightly, and pushed the pitch down, to gain back some of the lost rpm. As he nosed the ship over a second time, he could see that they were not going to fly. He would have to set it down on the flat below them. As he tried to nurse the ship along to clear some of the rougher ground, Justin turned to the crew in the back seat.

"Stow your weapons and buckle up! We're going in!" Then he spun around to face forward. "You got a spot picked, Roger?"

"Yeah. The road there."

"Watch for stumps."

"Got 'em."

Roger tensed as the chopper slowly sank. He just couldn't believe it refused to fly. The engine was still putting out a lot of power. This wasn't like an autorotation, and Roger knew he had a lot to play with. His eyes scanned the dirt track ahead, looking for the smoothest place free of stumps that he could find. There it was. He pulled in a little more pitch to make it. As he approached the spot he had picked, he flared slightly to slow the

ground speed, leveled the ship, and cushioned it on with the remaining pitch.

"Nice job," Justin said calmly.

"Thanks, Justin, but that makes me mad. This thing should have done better than that. I can't believe I muffed that takeoff."

Travis' voice on the radio stopped their conversation. "You OK down there, Hotel?"

Roger keyed the mike, "Yeah. We're fine. Gonna have to burn off a little gas before we try it out of here, though. Go ahead. We'll catch up."

"Roger."

Roger was upset. He picked the ship up to a hover, turned it 180 degrees, and began hovering up the track. After he had covered a hundred yards, he turned it around, and attempted to lift the ship to a high hover. The rpm bled off quickly. Roger lowered the ship, and keyed the intercom, "Sorry, Godwin, but we can't make it with all this weight. You're gonna have to stay here." Roger touched down lightly while Godwin jumped out with all his gear.

As soon as Godwin was clear, Roger nudged the ship forward to initiate the takeoff. The ship struggled forward, but shuddered into translational lift. Roger took a deep breath. They were flying. As they headed after Travis, Roger again came on the intercom, "Sorry, Smith. We just couldn't make it out of there. You'll have to cover both sides for us today, gunnie. Hey, just remember if you switch sides, that rod on your gun barrel is on the wrong side if you're on my side of the ship, OK?"

"Got it, sir," Smith's reply was almost lost in the wind rushing across his mike. Roger looked over his shoulder at Smith. Smith had his clear visor down, but gave Roger a thumbs up signal.

Roger keyed the intercom again, "I hate to kick out a gunner."

"Yeah, I know," Justin answered. "But sometimes that's the way it goes, compadre."

Fire Support Base Airborne was where the section was headed. The fire base was aptly named. It was situated on the east side of the Ashau Valley toward the north end where the valley narrowed. At this time, the enemy still owned the valley floor, and they didn't seem to like the fire base perched on the edge of their valley. When it was first established, two slicks went down under the guns of the enemy on the initial assault. There was no leaving, because

the fire fight was so intense. So the Army did the usual thing -- it continued to pour troops into the LZ in the hope that they could overcome the resistance, and secure the location. The first few days were touch and go. And every time the fire base got hit, the ARA was called on to help them out. Patrols sent out from Airborne were almost assured of making contact.

The next day, it was the same story. More missions around Airborne. But there was a reversal of roles as Hunter and Travis took off out of Blaze. It was Travis who had a little trouble on the takeoff, and Roger was soon outdistancing him on the way to the mission. Travis called on the radio, and told Roger to go ahead and initiate the mission. By the time that Travis arrived over the target, Roger had established radio contact and was ready to shoot.

The next day, Roger was elated when Ron told him that he was now a section leader. Roger could now lead his own section of two ships. With the shortage of pilots in the unit, it was probably a very straightforward thing to do. But to Roger it was an honor. After all, he was only a warrant officer. Unless Roger wanted to apply for a direct commission, it was as high as he could rise in the unit. Platoon leaders were all commissioned officers. Travis flew Roger's wing for a few days, just to make sure all was square, and then newer pilots were assigned to Roger's section.

Roger had also recommended that Cook be given an aircraft commander's status. Roger felt Justin was an excellent pilot, and with the infusion process in full swing, Roger wanted a qualified pilot on his wing. Travis accepted Roger's recommendation, and Cook was assigned as Roger's wingman. Together, they made quite a team, and they thoroughly enjoyed flying in the same section.

Roger's section was working a mission along a ridge on the east side of the valley, while Travis had a section covering an infantry unit on the valley floor just west of Blaze. Roger's section was monitoring the air-to-air radio traffic on Ron's mission. On this particular mission, Ron was flying a lot of circles. The unit on the ground was disorganized, and Ron's section orbited while the infantry commander tried to account for all his troops. While the section orbited in lazy circles, they tried to see what they could on the ground. Travis was leaning out the window in the C-model when a round struck his helmet. The round continued through the window and shattered the "greenhouse"

-- the green plexiglass panel in the roof of the chopper above Ron's head.

As Ron regained his senses, he heard the infantry commander say that his unit was taking fire. Somewhat angered by the situation, Ron keyed his mike, "So you think you're taking fire down there, huh? Well, I just took a round in the head! If you want us to fire for you, let's get with the program, huh?"

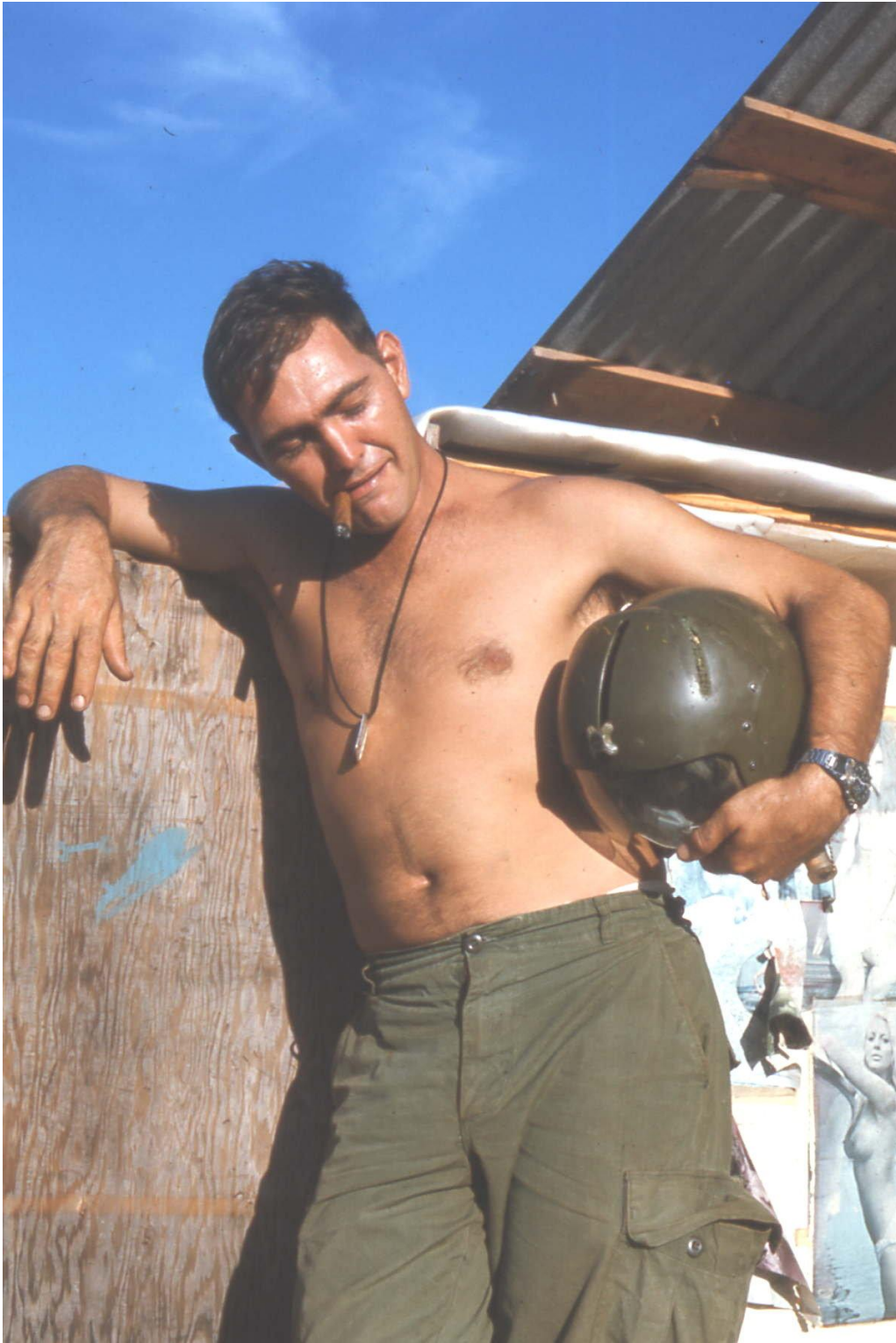
As the story was relayed over the air-to-air channels, the other sections had a good laugh. Someone commented that they had always known the 1st Platoon leader was hard-headed, but he didn't have to go to such lengths to prove it. Another comment dealt with the enemy's intelligence. It seemed that the bad guys knew where the softest spot on the ship was located. Travis took the ribbing in silence. This worried some of the 1st Platoon pilots, because they were sure Travis would find a way to get even.

That evening, when Roger's section landed at Evans, Travis' section had beat them in by over an hour. When Roger and Justin walked into the hootch, they found Travis sitting at the poker table, drunker than nine-hundred skunks. Ron's helmet sat before him on the table. His eyes nearly crossed as he looked at the two pilots.

"Hey, come on you two. Join me in a drink?" Ron said as he waved a bottle of Chivas Regal scotch before them.

Justin just snorted, and walked on by. "I wouldn't touch that bottle of rotgut if it was the last bottle of scotch on earth, Ron," Justin said as he turned away.

Ron was taken aback. He looked at the bottle he was holding. "What do you mean, rotgut?" he slurred. "This here's the best money can buy."



John Moore's close call (Ron Travis in the book).

Justin dropped his flight gear on his bunk, and returned to the community area. "Yeah, mebbe, but just look at the company you're keeping," he said as he gestured toward the empty room.

Travis nearly tipped his chair over as he looked around the room. First over one shoulder, then over the other. Roger didn't know whether to laugh or not. "What company?" Ron blurted.

Justin was combing his hair in a mirror hanging on the wall. "That's precisely what I mean, Travis. You couldn't even wait for the rest of us." Justin finished with his hair. "You coming to grub with us, Travis?" he asked.

"Grub?" Travis again nearly unseated himself. "Naw. I think I got all I need right here." He again raised the bottle.

"Come on, Hunter. Let's get something to eat," Justin strode out of the hootch.

Roger leaned down to Travis. "Hey, take it easy there, good soldier. Let's not go hog wild, huh?"

Ron became serious, "You know they're gonna mount that thing?" He pointed to his helmet. "The Division commander wants to see it."

"Is that right? Is he coming here to pick it up?"

"Don't rightly know. But if he does, I'll be ready for 'im," Ron nearly fell over the table.

Roger caught him by the shoulder. "It's OK, Travis. I can understand how you feel. Can I help you to bed?"

Ron leaned back in his chair and stared at Roger. "You're not so bad, Hunter. Sure glad I made you a section leader. If anyone can handle that uppity Cook, it's you."

Roger was able to coax Ron into bed. Once he had him down, he headed for the mess hall. Roger wondered how he would react to a situation like that. Probably the same way. It had been a very close call. Ron had always been known for his drinking ability, but as smashed as he was, Roger was sure he had to be on his second bottle. That would probably do it because Roger was sure that Ron didn't have any more. Unless he hit up some of the NCO's. They might have some stashed away.

The next morning, Ron was pretty shaky as they rolled out of bed. As he walked by the poker table on the way to breakfast, he stopped and took a long look at the nearly empty bottle of scotch still standing there. Then he shook his head, and left the hootch.

After Ron left the hootch, Justin rolled over in his bunk. He slept on the top bunk near the door of the hootch. Raising up on one elbow, he watched Roger getting on his gear. "Suppose he posted the flight crews yet?"

Roger brushed back his hair with his hands, "Are you kidding? I'm not even sure he knew where he was."

Justin lay back on his bunk, "Well, he's in for a surprise when he hits the mess hall."

"Why's that?" Roger asked he plunked his baseball cap on his head.

"Today's pill day," Justin said, and rolled over laughing.

"Are you kidding? I thought we just had the big one a couple days ago."

Justin sat up in bed. "Are you kidding ME? You must be getting old. Losin' your memory, and all that."

Roger stopped at the corner of the bunk near the door. He turned his hat around backwards. "Well, you know how time flies when you're having fun." He walked out of the hootch.

When Justin and Roger returned from breakfast, Ron was posting the crews. He turned as they came in. "Hey, Roger, you're flying with a new guy today. Cook, you'll be on Roger's wing. You're the third section to go today, so you best get your gear ready. Probably going to be as busy as it was yesterday."



¾ ton used to ferry pilots to flight line.

Roger had drawn a real new guy. His name was Fletcher, and he was a warrant. He was straight over from the states. This was his first unit in country. He was assigned to the 3rd Platoon, but they were even shorter on pilots than was the 1st Platoon, so they didn't have anyone to train him. Roger looked at the aircraft assignment. He had 422. That was Smith's ship. At least he had seasoned gunners behind him. Roger grabbed his helmet bag, and joined the others as they loaded on the 3/4 ton truck that would drive them to the flight line. Roger was one of the first ones on the truck. He sat down next to the cab on the wooden bench seat. The other pilots loaded. They looked toward the mess hall as Lieutenant Jordan ran toward them. He had his helmet bag and map in one hand, and a cup of coffee in the other.

Jordan stepped up on the bumper, and began to swing his leg over the tailgate. Just as he did, Roger heard the engine in the truck begin to wind up. It was winding much higher than normal, when the truck lurched forward. Jordan was caught in a bad position. With one arm holding the coffee cup high to keep it from spilling, and the other

flailing the air, he disappeared from view behind the tailgate. The truck stopped, then jolted forward again. Roger tried to hang onto the side rails, but lost his grip. He joined the other pilots, flight gear, and spilled coffee on the bed of the truck. The truck gave another jump, and then stopped and died. The tangle of arms, legs, gear, and coffee cups in the back of the 3/4 ton was unimaginable.

Someone swore. Justin sat up on the bench seat. He had a one-inch cut on his forehead, and the blood was beginning to run down the side of his face. Fletcher stood up quickly, and held his coffee-stained shirt out from his body. As he did, he slipped on the bed of the truck and fell against Justin. It was Reed, from the 3rd Platoon, who began laughing first. He was lying over the tailgate pointing toward where they had just come from. There, lying on the ground like he was spread-eagled, was Jordan. He had raised his head, and coffee-milk mixture dripped from his face. Those that weren't hurt also began to laugh. Cook held his head.

"What the hell happened?" someone asked.

Then realization began to dawn. Someone said, "Oh, I'll kill him. It's Mallory! And I'll bet Travis put him up to it!" Travis had jumped out of the cab, and was now peering over the side rail on the passenger side of the truck at the carnage in the bed below.

Reed had turned around, "Dammit, Travis, if you're gonna teach Mallory to drive, at least let us know beforehand, huh?" Then he spotted the blood on Cook's face. "Uh oh. We got a casualty. You OK, Justin?" Justin pulled his hands down, and the others could see the blood running down his face. Reed grabbed Justin, and inspected the cut. "Not serious. But I'll run you by the medic." The two of them got out of the truck, and walked off toward the medic's hootch.

When Jordan reached the truck, he was hopping mad. "Travis, I'll have your head for this!" he stormed. But Travis wasn't about to be bluffed. He had the rank in the crowd, and he wasn't going to let anyone tell him what to do.

As Travis came around the back of the truck, he met Jordan face to face. "What's your problem, Lieutenant?" he said with his hands on his hips.

Fletcher was flapping his shirt, "Boy, that coffee was hot!"

That was all it took. The tempers resided, and reason prevailed. A check of everyone and their gear was made. Then the remaining pilots remounted the truck. This time, they hung on like their very lives depended on it.

Travis' voice from the cab was clear, "OK, Mallory, let's try it again. Not quite so much gas this time, OK?"

As soon as the truck gained a somewhat steady speed, the pilots in the back began rubbing their sore spots. Mallory was a warrant officer from the Mid-west. He had been raised in a protected environment, and he had never learned to drive. He had actually learned to fly a helicopter before he could handle a vehicle. As Jordan later put it, "It just goes to show you that they can teach anybody to fly one of these eggbeaters." Travis had taken it upon himself to teach Mallory how to drive. Travis felt it was a perfect place to learn. A vehicle that was almost indestructible, and not much of value to destroy even if Mallory ran into it. There were no traffic lights, or lanes, so he had pretty much a free rein. And learn he did. But from then on, the pilots always checked to see who was behind the wheel of the 3/4 ton before they loaded up.

Roger's section didn't have to wait on the ground long. They were scrambled on a mission to Airborne before everyone had finished a second cup of coffee. The fire base was taking fire from an adjacent hill, and the FO (Forward Observer) wanted Roger's section to fire on the hill. Roger cleared the gunners to fire as he rolled in. After firing several pair of rockets, he rolled into a right break. The machine guns in the back began to chatter.

Just as they got well into the break, Roger let out a yelp. "Take it! Take the ship!" he yelled at Fletcher. Fletcher's eyes were big as saucers as he looked at Roger, but he made no move to take the controls. "Dammit! Fly the ship!" Roger screamed. Finally Fletcher grabbed the controls. Roger unbuckled his seat harness, and jumped out of the seat, pulling out his shirt as he did. He shook his shirt, then turned and swept out the seat with his hand. Then he sat down again. Letting out a sigh, he replugged his helmet cord which had come out while he was hopping around. Then he keyed the intercom, "Sorry about that. It was the hot brass from Smith's machine gun." Roger pulled his collar down. There on the back of his neck were two bright red burns. Roger pointed to the back seat. "It was his shells." Roger adjusted his chicken plate, and buckled back in.

Fletcher looked in the back. Smith was doubled over with laughter, and the gunner had a silly grin on his face. Fletcher keyed the intercom as Roger took the controls of the ship. "Whew, I thought you got shot," he said. Roger looked at him, and began to laugh.

"I never thought about that," Roger said with a grin. Roger pointed to his collar. "When you fly in the left seat, never forget to put your collar up. If the gunner on this side gets a little excited, he sometimes sprays you with hot brass. It's OK, as long as it doesn't get down your shirt. If it does, it'll burn you bad, as I can now attest." Roger looked over his shoulder at Smith.

"Sometimes I think they might even do it on purpose." Smith grinned broadly, and pointed at Roger. Roger smiled back. Fletcher started to put his collar up. Roger keyed the intercom, "No need for you to do it. It's only on this side. The M-60 on that side throws the brass the other way."

A new lieutenant joined the 1st Platoon. Travis assigned him to Hunter. "It's your job to train him as an aircraft commander," Ron explained to Roger. "You do a good job out there, and I think you can help him a lot." Roger wasn't thrilled by the prospect. He might have felt differently if the new guy, Lieutenant Gary Delaney, seemed to have any respect for an experienced pilot. But Delaney was rank conscious. He had little respect for anyone that was not at least a lieutenant. This made things a little awkward in the aircraft. Although Roger was only a warrant officer, he was the aircraft commander in the ship. This meant that he outranked Delaney when the ship was in the air.

Roger demonstrated the tactics and radio procedures used in the Battery to Delaney. Then he let Delaney do the flying while Roger handled the radios. On the next day, Roger let Delaney do the talking on the radios while Roger did the flying and shooting. After several days of trading off, Roger let Delaney run his own show. The Battery CO, Major Brown, was in the air that day, and was listening in on the mission. Delaney was having a hard time of it. It was a difficult target in the first place. The friendlies were located on a finger ridge down in a steep valley. They wanted the fire below their position, and it was difficult to get at it. Delaney made several passes, and either fouled up the rocket run, or muffed the radio calls. As

they came around for another inbound run, Roger heard Brown's voice on the radio.

"Hey Griffin One One Hotel (Hunter's call sign), who is doing the flying in that machine? Over."

Roger told Delaney over the intercom that he would handle this call. "Delta's (Delaney's call sign) shooting this one, Six Six (Brown's call sign)."

"Well, I think he'd better do some more practicing. You take it from here, Hotel. I'll see you both when you get back tonight."

Roger keyed the mike, "Roger that, Six Six." While Roger finished the mission, Delaney sat back in the seat, very put out with the whole situation. Roger couldn't blame him. It was very embarrassing to have your Battery commander come down on you when anyone listening on the radio could hear it. As they got an end-of-mission from the grunt unit, Roger switched the FM radio back to the Battery frequency. He then received a call from Operations. They were asking whether he had enough fuel and ammo to shoot for another unit. Roger checked the fuel and ammo situation on his ship and his wingman's. He called Ops back, and told them he thought he did. Ops passed the new contact's call sign and coded radio frequency to him. The location given was nearer to Camp Evans, so Roger thought they would have plenty of fuel to handle the mission. Delaney wore the SOI book, which had the radio frequency codes in it, around his neck on a string. Roger asked Delaney to decode the frequency.

Delaney removed the SOI from around his neck, and began looking up the frequency code. When he found it, he wrote the freq down on the window in grease pencil. Then Delaney lit a cigarette. As he waved the match to put it out, he must have gotten confused. Instead of throwing the burnt match out the window, he threw the SOI book out the window. Roger couldn't believe what he had just seen. He looked back at the crewchief on the right side of the ship behind Delaney. The chief had seen it go out, too. He looked at Roger, twirled his finger by his ear, and pointed to Delaney's back. Roger could hardly keep a straight face. Delaney would have some explaining to do when they landed.

When they landed on the hot spot after refueling, Delaney shut down while Roger filled out the log book. Roger took some time checking the book, and as he closed it, he looked up. Gary was standing outside Roger's door.

"What's on your mind, Delaney?" Roger asked.

"Is that how you address a superior officer, Mr. Hunter?" Delaney barked. Roger was surprised at Gary's tone and manner. "Come to the position of attention when you address a superior officer, Mr. Hunter."

Roger couldn't believe Delaney's actions. "Are you kidding, or what?"

"It's Lieutenant Delaney to you, Mr. Hunter," Gary said evenly. Roger slowly assumed the position of attention, as he got out of the ship. As Delaney began berating Roger for his poor military attitude, Roger glanced at the crewchief. The crewchief was as surprised as Roger. After a couple minutes, Gary stepped back, barked, "Dismissed," and walked away. Roger was still in shock at Delaney's outburst. It had taken him completely by surprise. This behavior was unheard of in Vietnam. A less-experienced pilot chewing out an aircraft commander??! With whom he'd just flown? Sure, Roger was only a warrant officer which ranked below a lieutenant on the ground. But in the air, the roles were reversed, as Roger was the assigned aircraft commander.



ARA hot spot at Camp Evans. Mess hall in background.

After Delaney walked down the hill out of earshot, the crewchief spoke to Roger, "That wasn't fair, sir!"

Roger picked up his helmet and gloves. "Forget it chief. He just had a bad day."

That evening, Travis had a long discussion with Major Brown. When he returned to the hootch, he was very quiet. It was late when Travis posted the aircraft crews for the next day. When Roger checked the list, he wasn't surprised. Delaney was assigned to fly with Travis. Cook was assigned to Roger's ship. Roger was delighted that he was flying with Cook again, but he felt sorry for Delaney. If Delaney just didn't have that "holier than thou" attitude, Roger thought. Delaney really caught it for throwing the SOI out the window. All the radio codes would have to be changed for all the units in their AO as a result. The chances of the enemy finding it were slim, since he threw it out over the jungle, but the Army took no chances when it came to security. Roger wasn't sure how much good it did, but at least it kept things from getting too routine.

A few days later, the 1st Platoon was relaxing in the hootch. They were on the bottom of the status board, and they were taking it easy. Most of them were either writing letters, or sitting in the sun out on the deck. Jordan walked into the hootch, "I need a couple volunteers for flight duty. We got a mission up north, not enough pilots, and they just brought another ship out of maintenance."

Captain Travis spoke up, "Any volunteers?" No one answered. They were all tired of flying in the heat and the dust. Most wanted to catch up on their letter writing. "OK, then. I'll go. Who else?"

Roger stretched, "I'll go with you. Where we headed, Jordan?"

"Ops said the 5th Marines, I think. Up along the Z (Demilitarized Zone). You'll be flying my wing, guys."

Ron was pulling on his flight clothes, "Got more than the crazy gyrenes can handle, eh?" The Marine gunships were even older models than the C-models that C Battery flew. They did have neat-looking camouflaged paint jobs, but most of them were patched and scruffy-looking. The pilots that flew them were some of the most daring pilots Roger had ever met. They seemed to ignore ground fire like it wasn't even there. Roger wondered if that took guts, or stupidity.

As they flew north, Roger wasn't looking forward to mixing it up so close to the DMZ. There had to be more enemy up here, because it was right next to enemy territory. Ground fire was more or less expected in this area when targets were attacked. That was a simple fact. Jordan

contacted the Marine unit they were sent to support, but they didn't want the section right away. Jordan suggested the section go in and refuel, and come right back. The Marine liked the suggestion.

The section shot an approach into Vandegrift. It was a tiny airstrip located down in the bottom of a large valley at the southwestern edge of the coastal plain. It was only a few minutes flight time from the DMZ. Neither Ron nor Roger was paying much attention as the crewchief poured fuel into the ship. Suddenly Roger noticed the gauge. They were taking on way too much fuel. Roger yelled for the chief to cut it off. Travis studied the gauge. Then he turned to Roger as the chief and gunner scrambled aboard. "Think we can do it?"

Roger raised his eyebrows. The fuel gauge showed nearly full. "I doubt it. Why don't you try a hover first?" Travis pulled in pitch until the rpm started to bleed off. The ship hadn't even budged. "Think we're gonna have to burn some of that off before we can even move."

"Can't wait that long," Travis returned. Travis told the chief and gunner to get out. Again he pulled in pitch until the rpm just started to falter, then he began kicking the pedals. The ship wobbled a little. Then one skid screeched as it moved ever so slightly. Travis continued to work the controls, until the ship moved a little more. Roger couldn't believe it. After five minutes, a sweating Travis had the ship turned around. There was an air strip at Vandegrift, and the refueling area was simply more of the steel planking that jutted out to one side of the runway. Travis called the tower for clearance to take the runway. He added that they might need it a while. The tower operator cleared them with a snicker.

Travis continued to work the controls. He finally managed to get the overloaded Huey sliding along the runway. They taxied to the very end of the runway before Travis turned the ship around. Before them lay over a thousand feet of steel runway. It looked like a long way to the other end. The heat waves shimmered from its surface.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Ready?" Travis nodded as he wiped the sweat from his face. Roger used his floor switch and came up on the tower frequency, "Griffin One Zero for takeoff." The tower cleared them. Roger forgot to switch his mike back to intercom. "OK, big Ron, she's all yours."

Ron put the cyclic forward, pulled in pitch, and began kicking the pedals. The ship inched forward, and began to

slide. As they started down the runway, Roger monitored the rpm, calling it out to Ron. They had used over half the runway, but they were gaining speed. Now the runway appeared much shorter to Roger. He was beginning to think they couldn't make it. He continued to call out the rpm to Travis. "Sixty-five hundred,.....sixty-four hundred,.....sixty-two hundred....." The ship began to gallop as the rotor tried to lift the overloaded fuselage. It would rise up, and fall back. They were now coming to the end of the runway. "Six thousand," Roger called out. And then they lifted off. When they dropped back to the runway, they gained a few rpm back. They lifted again. "Six thousand...", Roger called out again, and then looked ahead. It was too late. They were out of runway. It was either fly now, or abort on the grassy field before them. Travis continued to hold the power in. They were flying, but it seemed like staggering as the rotor strained against the load.

All during the ride down the runway, Roger had been transmitting on the tower frequency when he thought he was talking only on the intercom inside the ship. As they passed the end of the runway, the tower operator's voice came over the radio, "Good luck, six thousand."

Roger switched the radio to intercom. Travis concentrated on flying the drunken beast as they skimmed the top of the grass. They reached about five feet of altitude, and Travis brought the ship over a single lane road that ran along the valley floor in line with the runway. They approached a low hill. Just as they were approaching the crest of the hill, they met a large truck coming over the hill from the other direction. They were so close, Roger could see the driver's eyes were round with fright. They barely passed over the truck, and continued up the valley. As they continued to gain airspeed, Roger knew now that they were going to make it. As they reached forty knots airspeed, Travis turned the ship over to Roger. Travis then leaned back, and wiped the sweat from his face.

"I'll bet Jordan thinks he's lost us," Ron said.

"Well, I'll bet he has to go in for gas before us," Roger said.

Ron smiled, "I'll bet you're right."

43: Morals Versus Standard Operating Procedures

Cobras began coming into the unit the last part of April. Major Brown took the first one. He painted "66", his call sign, on it in large red numerals. The crossed cannons were also added on the sides. This had been carried on all the C-models as the unit identifier, along with the picture of the griffin on the nose of each ship. The griffin was painted on the sides of the Cobra. Major Brown added one touch to his ship that was not found on any of the others. This was the letters, "ARA", painted in white on the bottom of the ship. Brown was proud of his ship, and his unit. The Battery had already received a Meritorious Unit Citation for support in difficult situations. To a career officer like Brown, this was a feather in his cap. It didn't mean a whole lot to most of the pilots, but they were happy for the recognition. It at least meant they were doing a good job, and that, more than anything else, made them feel worthwhile.



Major Ed Miller with the first Cobra in C Battery.
(Identified as Major Brown in the story)

The 1st Platoon continued to fly the old, reliable Charlie models. They were proud of their ships. The crewchiefs worked especially hard on the C-models. The crews realized that the pilots were squeezing every bit of performance that was possible from the ships, and the crews did their part to help in this effort.

Support at FSB Airborne was a day-to-day affair. A midafternoon attack there brought Roger's section from Camp Evans in support. When Roger tried to make contact with the FO from the infantry unit, he was told that the radio had been lost. He was requested to come up another frequency. When Roger dialed in the new frequency, he could hear infantry units talking on it. He knew that this was not an artillery channel, but he tried to make contact with the unit he was supposed to call anyway. It was SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for the ARA to operate only on artillery channels. This left the infantry channels clear for the grunts to use. The grunts answered Roger's call. As the voice on the radio explained the situation, it became clear to Roger that they needed some fire on the enemy near their position. The FO for the unit had been killed, and his radio had been destroyed, explained Roger's contact.

Roger keyed the mike, "Have you ever directed ARA fire before?"

"That's a negative," returned the ground unit.

"Well, it isn't that tough. If you can mark your position, and then give me a heading and distance to the target, I'll put in a marking pair of rockets for you to adjust from."

"Roger that, Griffin. I think I can manage that."

Just then another voice broke in on the same radio channel. "Griffin aircraft working this push (radio frequency), will you please identify yourself?"

Roger didn't know who was calling, but he quickly identified himself by his call sign, Griffin One Zero Hotel. Before the unidentified voice could return, the infantry unit, whose call sign was Blue Fox, called Roger again.

"Hey, Griffin, can we get on with the show? We're taking a lot of casualties down here, and we need your fire. Over."

Roger quickly answered, "Roger that, Blue Fox. How about some more smoke at your position. Over."

The strange voice came on the radio again. "Griffin, you can't work on this channel. You'll have to go back to the artillery channel."

Roger shook his head. "I understand what you're telling me, unidentified voice, but the circumstances here don't permit that. The Foxtrot Oscar and his Romeo (the FO and his radio) have been lost. Over."

The radio boomed, "Griffin, this is Fox Two Zero, and I'm telling you that you can't use this radio channel."

Roger answered quickly, "Look Fox Two Zero, I don't think you understand the situation here. If you'll clear the channel, I'll get on with my job, and we can talk about SOP when the mission's over."

Fox Two Zero's voice turned angry, "Griffin, do you know who you're talking to?"

"Matter of fact, I don't know, and I really don't care. I've got an unusual situation here, and I'm going to handle it the best I can."

"Griffin, I'm giving you a direct order. I want you to clear this channel."

Roger was now angry. "Look Fox Two Zero, I'm going to shoot this mission, and you can just get the hell off my radio. If you have a problem, then I suggest we get together later when I'm back on the ground." Roger paused for a second, then keyed the mike again, "Hey, Blue Fox, you still with me?"

"Roger that, Griffin. We're popping smoke."

Roger and his crew looked for the first signs of the smoke coming up through the jungle canopy. As they rolled in over the target area, the radio crackled to life again.

"Griffin, this is Fox Two Zero."

Roger was now thoroughly angered, "Dammit, Two Zero, buzz off, will you?! I'm gonna shoot this mission no matter what you have to say. So clear the damn channel!!" Yellow smoke was drifting up through the jungle. "Blue Fox, we've got yankee smoke."

"That's us, Griffin. The bad guys are just to the east of us."

"Roger, Blue Fox. Can you give me a distance?"

"Uh, yeah. How about a hundred yards? Over."

"OK, Fox, we're inbound on the run. Tell your folks to get their heads down. We might get a tree burst."

As Blue Fox answered, the sound of automatic weapons and explosions could be heard over the radio. "We've already got our heads down, Griffin."

Roger lined up on a large tree that rose slightly above the canopy. It was a little farther than one hundred meters from the smoke that marked the grunts' position, but Roger

wanted a safe margin. He sent a pair of rockets whistling toward the tree, and broke off. "How's those, Fox?"

"Little too far away, Griffin. Ya' need to bring 'em in a little closer. Over."

"Will do, Fox. Give us a minute. We need more smoke on your position. We're going to change our inbound heading."

"Roger. Smoke's out."

Instead of coming in directly over the ground unit, Roger chose an attack heading that brought the ships in perpendicular to their original attack heading. As the section positioned itself to attack from the new heading, Fletcher pointed out new smoke. It was green.

Roger keyed the mike, "Fox, we've got green smoke. Over."

"That's affirm, Griffin. Give 'em some heat will you. We're gettin' the hell shot outta us down here. Over."

"Inbound now, Fox," Roger punched off a pair of rockets. "How's those look, Fox?"

"Right on target! That's it! Sock it to 'em!"

Roger keyed the air-to-air channel, "OK, Echo, you heard 'im. Right on my rockets."

Justin's voice was flat on the radio, "Roger, Hotel. Inbound hot right.....now." Roger could hear the first rockets leave Justin's ship before Justin finished his statement.

"Door gunners cleared to fire. Right side only. Try to keep the fire on the right of the rocket bursts." Roger wanted as much fire on the target as he could get. Roger's crew affirmed the instructions.

After several passes, Roger returned to the radio, "How's things look, Fox?"

"Right on the money, Griffin. We owe you one for this show. Over."

"You want more fire on the same target, Fox?"

"Give us a minute to get organized, Griffin. We're trying to relocate. Over."

"Roger that, Fox. We'll standby." Roger switched to intercom. "It's all yours on the next run, Fletcher. Just be sure they've got smoke out, and you've identified the color before you roll in. We don't want to shoot any of the good guys. In this tall jungle, always give yourself a little margin for error on the distance, too. Especially when you're shooting directly over the good guys. A tree burst really scatters the shrapnel."

Fletcher took control of the ship, "I gotcha."
Roger keyed the air-to-air channel, "How you doing for gas, Echo?"

"Uh, about thirty, maybe thirty-five minutes."

Fox came back on the radio shortly, and once again marked his position with smoke. He had pulled back about a hundred meters. The section continued to fire for him until they exhausted their rockets. Fox gave them an end-of-mission with a heartfelt thank you.

As they flew back to Camp Evans, Roger called Justin. "Hey, Echo, have you ever heard of Fox Two Zero?"

"Sure haven't, but he sounded mad."

"Yeah, I know. But that grunt outfit sounded like they needed the help. I couldn't believe that guy wouldn't get off the radio." Justin only clicked his mike twice in acknowledgement.

Roger was apprehensive when they returned to Camp Evans, but he wasn't going to get time to worry about the incident for a while. There were other missions waiting for them. The section quickly refueled and rearmed, and went out again. This continued throughout the afternoon.

It was well after dark when the section came down for the night. Roger walked into Ops to debrief. Deke's lips were thin as he addressed Roger. "Right after you debrief, you're supposed to see Major Brown."

Roger rubbed his eyes, "Yeah, I figured that, Trowbridge. How'd he sound?"

"He was in here, checking the missions you were flying, and wondering when you were going to get in."

Roger sighed. "OK. Thanks, Deke. Here's the debrief from the last mission."

Roger walked out of Operations, and went directly to Brown's hootch. When he knocked on the door, Brown answered, "Come in."

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Roger said as he entered the hootch.

"Yes, I did. Have you had any supper yet?"

"No sir. We just got in."

"Why don't you go ahead with supper. And you'd better get a shower right away, too. They lit the heater a little early tonight. Then you can drop over later."

"Thanks, sir. I appreciate that."

Major Brown smiled a thin smile, "That's OK, Hunter."

After supper and a shower, Roger again entered Major Brown's hootch. Roger was afraid it was going to be another

replay of the situation he had encountered in A Battery. He had never seen Major Brown chew anyone out. Tonight might be a first. But Major Brown took him by surprise. He offered Roger a beer, and then asked him to sit down.

When they were seated, Major Brown lit a cigarette. "Now, can you tell me what happened out there today? You know the mission I'm talking about, don't you, Hunter?"

"Yes, I do, sir." Roger explained the situation from beginning to end. Major Brown sat quietly, smoking and drinking his beer until Roger was finished. Then he asked, "Do you have any idea who Fox Two Zero is?"

Roger shook his head no. "I thought about that all afternoon, sir. I can guess that he's probably wearing a lot more rank than me."

"That's right, Hunter. He's a light colonel," Major Brown smiled. "I can't fault your performance out there. I think you did the best job you could, given the circumstances. That's what I want from my pilots. I expect you to think independently, and act on what you perceive as your best course of action in any situation. I think you've been doing a good job as a section leader, and I want you to continue doing that job." Major Brown paused long enough to light another cigarette. "I only have one suggestion." He paused again as he took a long drag and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. "If you have any idea that whoever you're talking to might be a superior officer, please don't swear at him, OK?" The major broke into a wide grin as he looked at Roger. "How about another beer, Hunter?"

Roger was relieved. He gladly accepted the beer. The two of them sat and talked long into the night.

The next day, Hunter was assigned to fly with Major Brown. They monitored some of the missions being fired by the Battery, and Brown asked Roger about attack headings and other tactics the sections were using. Roger offered some opinions on attack headings, most notably against targets in steep terrain. These were the most difficult to attack depending on the position of the friendlies and the enemy. They also watched some Air Force jets, "high-speeds", attack a target on the west side of the Ashau Valley. The jets dropped bombs and napalm against the target. Their spotter plane for the mission was an "oscar deuce", a fixed wing aircraft with a push-pull propeller arrangement. These little spotters were called FAC's (Forward Air Controllers). They carried a small pod of willy peter (white phosphorous) rockets on one wing that they fired to mark the target. One

section of ARA was even called on to work for one of the FAC's in the area. Major Brown teamed up with the section for the attack.

When their fuel was almost exhausted, they returned to LZ Blaze for refueling. Brown wanted to monitor the radios, so Roger got out to refuel the Cobra. Roger first attached the grounding clip to the skid, removed the fuel cap, and picked up the fuel nozzle. As he started to insert the nozzle into the tank, the grounding wire had become tangled in the hose and trigger assembly. Just as the nozzle was about to enter the tank, the grounding wire came taut, and pulled the trigger on the nozzle.

Fuel shot against the side of the Cobra, and splashed back into the engine exhaust. Roger looked up in horror! There was a loud pop as the spraying fuel ignited in the heat of the exhaust. Roger expected the rest of the fuel sprayed across the side of the fuselage to catch fire. As he hesitated for a split second, nothing happened. The fuel on the side of the engine compartment began to evaporate. Roger hesitated a little longer, and the fuel continued to evaporate. He couldn't believe his eyes.

It became apparent that the ship wasn't going to burn. Roger felt very foolish. He had a good idea how close the ship had come to catching fire, and it would have all come as a result of a stupid mistake. Since there wasn't anything else to do, Roger began filling the tank with fuel, and thanked his lucky stars that he was still able to do that. By the time the tank was full, even the fuel that had dripped down the side of the fuselage was gone. Roger got back into the ship. He was afraid to say anything to Major Brown. How could he tell him that he had nearly roasted him and the ship with a simple oversight?

Brown almost always carried more fuel in his ship than was otherwise the standard in the unit. Thus, he could stretch his flight time to nearly two hours between refueling stops. This allowed him more freedom in covering the AO, but it also meant that the pilot flying with him had to be sure to urinate at each fuel stop. Roger found this difficult to do sometimes. Especially when they stopped at Blaze, where the refueling point sat atop the ridge, out in front of God and everyone else. Roger found that the most convenient time for relief was during the actual refueling. It took several minutes to tank up the Cobra, and so while he was standing next to the ship holding the fuel nozzle, he would let fly on the ground next to the chopper.

Late in the afternoon, Brown joined a section from the 3rd Platoon that was trying to insert troops on a very small hilltop north of Blaze. It was a single-ship LZ. The first two ships had already dropped their troops and departed, when the third ship came into the LZ. As Roger watched, there was a blast in the LZ. The ship disappeared in the smoke and dust from the blast. When the smoke cleared, the ship was lying on its side. Roger could see the grunts rushing to the ship to extract the crew and passengers. One soldier was trapped under the fuselage, and they couldn't get him out. A Dustoff was called immediately, and it soon arrived at the scene. The grunts tried everything to move the ship off the casualty, but the efforts were fruitless. Major Brown spotted a Chinook coming out of Blaze. He called Blaze to see if he could get a radio frequency on which to contact it. Accomplishing this, the Chinook dropped in over the tiny LZ. A line was dropped to the grunts, and they secured it to the smashed helicopter. The Chinook then lifted the chopper carefully, and the grunts dragged their comrade clear. As the line to the battered chopper was unhooked, the chopper slowly rolled off the edge of the LZ and into the trees below. As soon as the LZ was clear, the Dustoff ship dropped in to pick up the casualties.

The cause of the crash was later determined to be a command detonated mine. An explosive charge had been dug into the LZ sometime earlier by the enemy. Charlie, as the enemy was often called, had then connected wires to the explosive, and run these to another location. He had then waited for the right moment to detonate the explosive. It always seemed that Charlie either tried to get something that would disrupt the insertion or extraction of troops when there were only a few on the ground. Thus, if the problem was not corrected, he could come in under cover of darkness and attempt to wipe out the remaining troops on the LZ. Roger decided that flying the third slick from the end in either an extraction or an insertion was not a good place to be.

The next day back at Camp Evans was a stand down (day off) for the unit. This was one of the first stand downs that the unit had had since it arrived in country. Fifty gallon barrels had been cut in half lengthwise and topped with crude grills to serve as broilers, and the steaks were cooked on these. There was plenty of beer and ice, as everyone in the unit took part in the festivities. A

volleyball net had been set up, and it wasn't long before an earnest game was in progress. It was a nice break from the otherwise steady flow of missions. The other Batteries had agreed to take over C Battery's missions for the day. That night, one of the first movies to reach the unit was shown in the vehicle maintenance tent. It was rather a crude affair, but did provide a little change of pace for evening activities. Otherwise it was poker games, reading books or writing letters. However, the scenes shot with a wide-angle lens were distorted, and the figures appeared tall and thin on the screen. When women were shown, the troops yelled and whistled and generally cut up.



Poker table in 1st Platoon hootch at Camp Evans.

When C Battery first arrived at Camp Evans, there was a field hospital located there. The big attraction of the hospital was the nurses. One evening, Justin took Roger with him to visit the hospital. They met a couple nurses there, but, of course, the nurses were on duty, so there was no carousing. The nurse Roger met had a "near death" ward. The patients were hurt so badly that they couldn't be moved. It was the nurse's job to monitor them in case of difficulties. None of the patients were conscious. Roger

and the nurse talked quietly for an hour. He found out she was from his home state, although they were from widely separated cities. She seemed reluctant to talk about home very much. Roger became depressed as he looked around the ward at the broken bodies. He said good night, and left. As Roger picked his way back to the Battery area, he wondered whether he would ever have a relationship with a woman again. It didn't look like it was going to happen while he was stationed at Camp Evans.

Major Brown came up with another idea to get the pilots from the ARA Batteries to become more closely acquainted. Up to now there had been a kind of jealousy between the units. Brown wanted to foster a spirit of cooperation between the units instead. His first idea had been to trade pilots between the units. This had not worked out at all, and had even been scrapped before it got off the ground. Brown's latest idea was to get the pilots together from the various units for an evening of drinking and general hell raising. The units at Camp Eagle, A Battery, B Battery and Headquarters Battery, had constructed a nice club there. One night, Brown loaded all the pilots he could get into a C-model, and flew down to Eagle with them. About half the pilots from the unit were on board. The others had to stay behind to cover any missions that came in. Roger and Justin were the only pilots from the 1st Platoon that were able to go. Most of the rest of the C Battery pilots were from the 2nd Platoon.

When they arrived, Roger was glad to see some of his old friends from A and B Batteries. He quickly joined them at their table, and began talking over old times. A tradition had already been set by the units at Eagle, that any pilot using their club had to be initiated. The initiation consisted of standing on one's head against the wall, and drinking a full beer while in this position. The C Battery pilots took the challenge in force. There was a great deal of laughing and teasing during the operation, but everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.

Roger found that some of the A Battery pilots had been relocated to Cu Chi, south of Danang, to support some of the 101st infantry there. Roger also looked for Al Hansen at the club, but he had been unable to attend because of duty. Roger had a good time circulating among the A and B Battery pilots. Some of the B Battery pilots had gone to flight school with Roger. They all partied late into the night, and Roger was sorry when they had to leave.

Most of the pilots were pretty well on their way to being drunk when they loaded back on the C-model for the trip back to Camp Evans. Brown was at the controls of the ship, and the maintenance officer was in the right seat. As they took off, the lights of Camp Eagle suddenly disappeared. They had flown into a cloud! The ship immediately became so quiet that only the sounds of the engine vibrations could be heard. A voice from the other side of the chopper announced, "Now, if we crash, do you realize that half of C Battery's pilots would be wiped out in one shot?" Dennis Fraser, a warrant officer from the 2nd Platoon, sat next to Roger on the cargo deck of the ship. As they looked out the window of the cabin door, they could see the navigation lights reflecting from the clouds. Roger turned to Dennis, and mentioned something about what a good time the evening had been. Dennis made a cutting remark about Roger spending all his time with the Dragons and Toros, and not the Griffins from C Battery.

Roger was surprised. "Hey, Dennis, I went to flight school with a lot of those guys, and this is the first chance I've had to see 'em."

Dennis made another cutting remark about Roger's loyalty to C Battery. Roger was hurt by the remarks. He had thought that was the purpose of the trip, to mingle with the pilots from the other ARA Batteries. Dennis didn't seem to think so, and made this very plain to Roger. As the flight north continued, Dennis continued his degrading comments. Maybe it was the alcohol Roger had consumed, but Dennis' riding hurt Roger deeply. Dennis made Roger feel like he didn't really belong in C Battery. When they landed back at Camp Evans and began to unload from the aircraft, Dennis dug at Roger again, and punctuated the jab by spitting at Roger's feet. Roger fell apart. He began to cry as he walked down the hill from the hot spot. He didn't know what to say to Dennis, and suddenly he felt very much apart from the others. He knew he had come to C Battery under less than admirable circumstances, but he felt he had done a good job with the unit. And now, simply because he had sat and joked with the pilots from the other Batteries, Dennis was branding him some sort of traitor. Roger cried hard as he wandered to the deck on the back of the 1st Platoon hootch. He felt very much alone, and wondered if the other pilots in C Battery felt the same way as Dennis. The sobs came hard, and Roger cried for a long time. He waited on the deck until the others in 1st Platoon had gone

to bed before he came in. Then he undressed quietly in the dark, and rolled into his bunk. Sleep came hard, as Dennis' comments continued to plague him. Roger hoped the new day would bring a better perspective.

44: Hamburger Hill

The early part of May opened with plans for a large assault on the Ashau Valley. Preparations for ARA units were quite involved because the ARA had to help prep the LZ's that were to be used for troop insertions along the western flank of the valley. Few enemy positions of either .50 caliber or 37 mm. anti-aircraft weapons were known. Everyone would be largely on their own. Backup sections would be available from Camp Evans. If the action was heavy around the LZ's, then two sections were to standby at Blaze. A FSB had been established on the valley floor just west of the road entry into the valley. It was named Currahee, and was about centrally located north to south in the valley as well.



Currahee. Hamburger Hill just over the top of the parked helicopter (LOH).

Roger was assigned to fly Lt. Jordan's wing for the big mission. Their first LZ prep was located on a large mountain on the extreme west flank of the valley. This

mountain had a commanding view of the valley floor. Work had already started on an airstrip in the middle of the valley to the north of FSB Currahee. This airstrip was to be used for resupply. The morning of May 10th was a busy one. Maintenance had been very busy the night before, trying to get all the ships in the Battery in flyable condition. As aircraft began lifting off Camp Evans, it looked like a helicopter convention was taking place, there were so many ships in the air.

Roger felt that his preparations for the mission were complete. Justin was flying with him that day, and this bolstered Roger's confidence. They rendezvoused in the area of the LZ with the slicks. On the way out to the valley, every fire base they passed was firing. It was the largest single operation that Roger had seen since he'd come in country. Roger could see the shells landing in the vicinity of the LZ on the northwest side of the mountain. A ridge had been chosen for the LZ. One spot on the ridge was covered with tall grass, and that spot matched most closely with the coordinates Roger had been given for the LZ. He and Justin talked it over as they waited for the end of the artillery prep. During the prep, Jordan had almost nothing to say on the radio, so Roger was sure Jordan had identified the same spot as the LZ. The time for the conventional artillery prep to end was quickly approaching, but it seemed to Roger and Justin that Jordan's ship was out of position to fire on the LZ.

As the time was now down to seconds, Roger called Jordan on the radio. "Hey, Griffin Two Zero, have you got the LZ in sight?" There was a long pause on Jordan's end. Roger called again. "Griffin Two Zero. This is One Two Hotel. Have you got the Lima Zulu in sight?"

"Uh, I think so, Hotel. Do you have it pinpointed?"

"Yeah, we got it. Want us to take the lead on it?"

"Uh, yeah, go ahead. We'll slide in on your left side."

"Roger that, Two Zero. There's the end of the arty shoot. We're inbound hot now."

"Gotcha."

Justin nosed the ship over and lined up on the right side of the LZ.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Be sure and put some in the middle, too. Maybe we can knock down some of that elephant grass so the slicks can see the ground." Justin adjusted the inbound heading of the ship slightly, and began to pour

rockets into the LZ. One pair after another left the ship and arced toward the LZ. Justin adjusted his aim to hit the right side of the LZ, and continued firing. They were to dump a half load on the LZ proper, then break off and wait for the slicks to land. That way, if the slicks took fire, the section would have some ordnance left to help suppress the enemy fire.

The slicks began dropping into the LZ, one at a time, with the two gunship escort circling next to them. The gunships continued to pour fire into the sides of the LZ, but there was no return fire. The LZ was cold. Roger was surprised, but then he thought why would the enemy want this particular hill, anyway? Although it did command a view of the central valley, it sat right next to the red line -- the boundary between Vietnam and Laos. Except for the LZ, the entire mountain was clothed in tall jungle. Most of this jungle was the deep green of a healthy rain forest. It had not been hit with defoliant, like much of the rest of the country.

Further to the north, another hill jutted above the others, but it was shaped differently. It had a flat top, and it had been bombed with defoliant. The trees were thin and bare looking. Roger had flown over it one lazy afternoon with Major Brown. When Roger spotted something on the ground, they dropped lower for a closer look. What Roger had seen was an old artillery piece. How long it had been abandoned was anyone's guess, but it didn't look like it had been used for a long time. As they made a second pass over it, Roger and Major Brown wondered how difficult such a target would be to hit. Soon a bet was made, and the attack commenced. They took turns, firing one pair of rockets on each run. Roger found the Cobra flight controls a little tough to manage from the front seat. The controls themselves were an abbreviated set of those in the back seat. Although the visibility was much better from the front seat, the short control sticks made fine control adjustments difficult.

On the fourth pass, Major Brown scored a direct hit, blowing one wheel off the gun. The gun tilted, but remained upright. They tried a couple more runs, but Roger was unable to duplicate the feat. They left the gun, rusting in the late afternoon rays of the sun. Roger wondered if it had ever been used in combat.

When all the slicks had departed the LZ, the Griffin section continued to orbit in slow, lazy circles. The

overcast was clearing, and the thinning clouds held the promise of a little sunshine. At long last, they got an end-of-mission from the infantry unit. Most of the other LZ's put in that morning faced the same situation. No enemy activity. Roger tuned in the ADF to the AFVN, and turned the volume up. He motioned to the gunners to turn on their nav switches so they could hear it, too. The pilots called Major Brown to see if any of the other sections were mixing it up. But all was quiet. It was an eerie quiet. Roger could feel a tingle running down his spine, but he couldn't identify the source of the nervousness. Maybe a let down from the big buildup before the mission, thought Roger. He asked Justin about his feelings.

"Everything's not quite right, Hotel," Justin answered. "I think we're in for it today." Roger listened closely to Justin. Justin seemed to have an uncanny ability to forecast a day's activities. Roger lit a cigarette, and leaned back in the armored seat. He put his foot up on the bottom of the instrument panel, and looked out the window as the valley passed by underneath. Much of the valley floor had been bombed. The craters were of all ages. Some of the fresher ones had yet to fill with water. Those that had filled with water looked like inviting swimming pools from the chopper's vantage point. As they passed over the airstrip, Roger could see a couple bulldozers working on it. There was also a road grader parked in the opening. This was supposed to be an all weather airstrip. When Roger mentioned that fact to Justin, Justin just laughed.

"Come on , Hotel. You've been listening to too many stories of those in the high command. That's what they want us to believe, but I think we've been here long enough to see through that one." Roger silently agreed with Justin, and thought back to the stories that Captain Doan had told him just after Roger had arrived in country. This was the summer season, and the Army was expected to push into the mountains this time of year. Roger wondered if they would abandon it all again when the rains came, as they had in the past.

Major Brown had instructed Jordan to take his section back to Camp Evans. Justin was disappointed. Roger didn't like the sitting around either. As they passed over the edge of the valley, Roger looked back. He had heard stories that President Roosevelt had hunted elephants in this valley many years before. Roger wondered how it had all looked back then. Without the bomb craters, and the defoliated

trees. Without the gashes in the jungle from the roads, airstrip and firebases.

Before they reached Camp Evans, the situation in the valley changed. The ground units were making contact with the enemy. It wasn't long before all of C Battery's ships were in the air. As Jordan's section was shooting its approach to the refueling area, they could see a section taking off from the hot spot at the Battery area. After refueling, they landed at the flight line, and had a mission waiting before they had even rearmed. The ammo personnel were getting a workout today, as they hustled rockets to the hungry ships. Then it was back to the valley.

The LZ they had prepped that morning was now alive with action. They arrived in time to relieve another Griffin section that had just exhausted its ammo. They received a situation report from the other section as Jordan made contact with the FO on the ground. The infantry had moved up the ridge from the LZ, but had run into stiff resistance. Occasionally they could see the blast from grenades or mortars. While they fired the mission, a resupply ship slipped into the LZ. Roger dialed in the slicks UHF frequency as Justin followed Jordan's ship in the attack pattern. As the slick departed the LZ, he called that he was taking fire. Not knowing where the friendlies were around the LZ, the Griffin section was unable to help. The slick took one casualty. One of the gunners was hit.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Looks like you were right, Echo," he said to Justin. "Things could get interesting around here in a hurry." Roger could hear some of the other Griffin sections chattering on the Battery air-to-air frequencies. Everyone was getting into the action, and the action was picking up all around them. Even with all the ground fire, Roger had heard no calls about heavy weapons. Fifty caliber machine guns raised hob with the slow-flying helicopters, if the gunners on the ground had a good field of fire.

The day continued with back-to-back missions. Roger and Justin traded off flying duties. The original LZ they had shot on the ridge on the big mountain continued to be the focal point of the action. They were called on to work that area several times. But later in the afternoon they received a mission further up the valley. Across the valley from FSB Airborne, someone had taken fire from the ridge.



0-2 (Oscar Deuce) FAC aircraft landing at Camp Evans.

A FAC was on station to direct their fire. As he broke off his marking run, he called for cover. Even from where they were, Roger and Justin could see the tracers coming up in the waning light. The little FAC twisted and turned as he strained for altitude. He said he had taken several hits on the pass, but that everything appeared to be OK. Roger got a good fix on the ground position from the muzzle flashes below the FAC. Again Jordan was out of position. Roger requested that he and Justin be allowed to take the lead. Jordan affirmed the decision, and Justin rolled in. As they rolled out of the rocket pass, both gunners opened up. As they rolled out of their second pass, Roger thought he saw tracers coming from a rocky point further along the ridge. He called this information to Jordan, and Jordan passed it along to the FAC.

The FAC gave them clearance to hit the new target. Roger was now flying, and he edged in close behind Jordan as Jordan entered his run. Then Roger backed off on the power, and tried to kill his airspeed by kicking the ship out of trim. When he guessed that Jordan was about to break, he rolled the nose of the ship over. He had started from a

much lower altitude, so his attack angle was much shallower against the ridge. This allowed Roger to stay on the target longer as the airspeed built much slower in a shallow dive. As Jordan rolled away from the target, Roger and Justin could see the tracers reaching up toward his ship. They were quite close to the target now, but Roger held his fire. Then Justin pointed.

"Just to the left of the large rocks! See him?!" Roger could see the enemy soldier standing where Justin described. He looked like he was reloading his weapon. "Come on, Hotel, give it to 'im," Justin's voice was devoid of emotion. Roger trimmed the ship carefully as he lined up on the target. Just then, the enemy spotted them. He raised his weapon and began firing. Roger hesitated as the distance closed between them. At two hundred yards, he opened fire. The enemy was lost in the smoke trails of the first rockets. Roger fired four pair of rockets, and broke to the left. As he did, Justin was adjusting the gunner's fire on the target.

The section came around again. Jordan was firing off to the right of the spot where Justin had seen the enemy. Again Roger held at a lower altitude to initiate his run. Timing his run carefully, he began the run just as Jordan was breaking. This time, Jordan called out that he was taking fire. The muzzle flashes were now easily seen in the gathering darkness. Again Roger held his fire as the distance to the target closed. As Jordan broke away from the target, the ground fire ceased.

"Come on, Hotel, let's ram those rockets down his throat," Justin said evenly. Roger was going to try to put his rockets right between the large boulders on the bench below the top of the ridge. Suddenly muzzle flashes began winking near the rocks. "Now!" Justin said. Roger punched the kill switch. The rockets sped toward the target. The tracers from the enemy scattered through the smoke trails. Roger continued to fire more rockets. He knew this would be about the last run. The enemy tracers surrounded the ship. They were going by on both sides, above and below them. The flashes from the impacting rockets were walking among the boulders. And then Roger rolled the ship over steeply to the left. The machine guns in the back of the ship covered them as they rolled away from the ridge. As they leveled off, the gunner came over the intercom.

"Wowie!! They sure didn't put up much fire on that last break! You really put it on 'em, sir!"

Roger looked over his seat and smiled at the gunner. Roger knew it had looked good, but they probably hadn't even hit anyone on the pass. The enemy knew their attack heading, and it isn't likely that they would stand out in the open with all that ordnance heading their direction. But Roger was intrigued by the courage the enemy had shown. The enemy had clearly been outgunned, but they had held their position, and fired right into the teeth of the ARA attack. These must be well-trained troops, thought Roger. When he shared the thought with Justin, Justin agreed.

"They could have broken it off anytime," Justin mused. "They must have wanted a helicopter pretty bad."

Enemy activity continued throughout the night. The 2nd and 3rd Platoons carried the war, though. The 1st was behind them on the board, and took it easy that evening. FSB Airborne was hit hard during the night, and ARA ships spent the entire night over it. A "Shadow" was also called out from Danang. The Shadows were a fearsome unit. They flew old DC-3's, but they each had several miniguns mounted on one side of the ship. The aircraft would then circle the target, firing all its guns. The horrendous rate of fire from the miniguns looked almost like a red stream of water coming out of the sky. They were effective, and demoralizing to the enemy. The Shadows normally flew above the artillery flares over the battle area, and were very difficult for the enemy to spot, unless they were firing.

The next day, the ARA was to learn the name of the large mountain where Roger and Justin's section had fired the LZ prep. It was called Dong Ap Bia. Resistance here continued, and the decision makers decided it was a piece of real estate worth owning. Even as early as the next morning, the graceful mountain was beginning to show signs of wear. The Air Force fighters were working one side of the mountain, along with Army artillery. As the bombs and shells did their work, the huge trees were shattered and broken. The ARA continued its support of the grunts on the northwest side of the mountain. The friendlies had departed the ridge, while the bombs and shells pounded it. And another LZ had been established on another ridge to the west of the peak. This was a very sharp ridge, jutting out from the main mass of the mountain, then dropping steeply to the river that marked the border of the country. The river that served as the border between Vietnam and Laos was almost invisible in its deep trench.

It was on this ridge that Roger's section was working. Roger was leading the section. Justin was in Roger's ship, and Bill Jackson, another warrant from the 2nd Platoon, was on their wing. In the early morning, the infantry had been inserted in the LZ, and then had worked their way up the ridge toward the main part of the mountain. They had been hit from behind, as they ran into stiff opposition from the mountain side. Suffering casualties, they wanted Roger's section to help them clear the enemy from between them and their LZ. Without the LZ, resupply was very difficult, and it was nearly impossible to extract their wounded.

As the friendlies popped smoke, Justin set up the attack heading for their first run. As Roger and Justin talked it over, they both wanted to attack parallel to the ridge. But with the position of the friendlies, that was impossible. They couldn't attack into the hill because any long rockets would land right on the grunts. They couldn't attack down the ridge because the angle would be so steep that they wouldn't have time to make a decent firing pass. The only recourse was to hit the ridge at right angles to its spine. They rolled in from the south side of the ridge with the friendlies to their right. Justin picked a spot about halfway between the friendlies and the LZ for his initial aiming point. Both rockets from the marking pair hit trees as they slammed into the ridge.

Receiving an OK from the forward observer with the grunts on their rocket placement, Roger continued to study the ridge. There had to be another way. Roger was afraid that the enemy would simply run to the other side of the ridge when they began firing. Then if the section hit the ridge from the other side, the gooks would merely switch sides of the ridge. This would always put them on the safe side of the ridge from the section.

Thinking this over, Roger called Jackson on the radio. "Hey, Bravo (Jackson's call sign), I've got a way to hit this target, where I think we can do those guys some good." Bravo seemed to listen patiently while Roger explained his idea. When the plan had been laid, the ships positioned themselves. Justin held the lead ship on the south, while Jackson set up on the north side of the ridge. When both ships were in position, they rolled in on their rocket runs at the same time. They were both in sight of each other above the ridge, but they were attacking the target head on. Jackson's rockets pounded the north side of the ridge, while

Justin's blasted the south side. They continued to hit the area of the ridge lying between the friendlies and the LZ.

On the second run, Justin rolled into an easy right break. As the ship canted to the right, the air around them filled with red tracers. "Where is all that fire coming from?" Roger asked. He turned in his seat and looked out the side window. There in the LZ stood an enemy soldier. He was firing an automatic weapon at them, and he was so close that Roger could see the empty cartridges coming out of the weapon. "Damn, Echo, roll it over!! He's right on us!" Then trying to direct the gunner's fire, Roger called over the intercom, "The LZ! The LZ! He's standing in the LZ!" By the time the gunner could react, the target was too far around behind the ship for him to fire on it. Roger held his breath as the tracers zipped past the ship. Tensing, he waited for the pinging sound as the rounds slammed into the ship. But there weren't any. Roger couldn't believe that the gook had missed them from that range. It was almost point blank.

Roger called Jackson, and hatched another plan. On their next run, Roger and Justin acted as the decoy, as they attacked the target from the same heading and altitude. But Jackson had come around behind them, and was holding down below them where the enemy wouldn't spot the ship. Justin rolled in just as he had on the last pass. As the ship approached the ridge, Roger watched the enemy soldiers dash out of the trees into the LZ. "Now, Jackson. Now, ...please!"

Just as the enemy began to fire, Roger heard the scream of Jackson's rockets. The LZ disappeared in a fiery blast of smoke and dust. It had been superbly executed. Jackson had had his timing just right. Roger winked at Justin as he called Jackson on the radio. "Hey there, Bravo. Mighty fine job. Talk about some shootin'!"

Jackson's smooth voice came back over the radio. "Yeah, thanks. Were you gettin' a little nervous up there, Hotel? I thought I heard you say something just as we were lining up."

Roger laughed as he keyed the mike, "Who me? Now why should I be nervous with a shooter like you on the wing, huh?" Jackson's laughter echoed in their ears, as once again the section split to attack the ridge from both sides. As the section continued to hit the ridge, Roger thought about the challenges they were facing. He had a lot of admiration for the enemy. Sure, everyone called them gooks,

slopes, dinks, and a number of other names, but they were tenacious fighters. Roger looked at the mountain. How many of the enemy were holding this mountain were unknown, but they had the Army and Air Force throwing all kinds of stuff at 'em. The enemy had nowhere near the firepower of the US side, yet they were repelling every attack. The US side literally owned the air. The helicopters were susceptible to ground fire, but in most cases the enemy was firing through trees or other obstructions. This severely handicapped them as they tried to hit the moving targets. The Air Force also dropped napalm as well as bombs on the enemy stronghold. At some times during the day, it looked like the whole mountain was on fire from the flaming gasoline.

At night, the enemy probed and harassed the friendlies at every opportunity. Roger wondered what it was like to be on the ground in a battle like this. It was the first pitched battle he had ever seen the enemy fight. Justin had a reason. These were NVA (North Vietnamese Army) troops. If they could achieve a victory here, then it would be a huge boost to their morale. Besides, added Justin, they were really winning anyway just by causing a lot of US casualties. "We can't continue to pour troops into a battle for some forgotten mountain thirty miles from the coast. Sure, we might win the battle, eventually, but then what? Do we plant the Vietnamese flag on it and walk away? The dust won't even have settled in our tracks before they'll own it again. Win what battle? It's only the career officers that are going to get a feather for this battle. But only if they win...."

Roger was surprised at Justin's attitude. It was the first time he'd heard anyone speak those feelings. Maybe they all felt them, but were afraid to voice them. Roger thought back to the night in A Battery after he'd talked to Doan. He was still pursuing the goal that he had decided on that night. That hadn't changed. However the whole thing ended, he would know that he had done his best for his countrymen. Roger pushed the thoughts from his mind. He needed to concentrate on the mission. Daydreaming would end the war quickly,.....for him, and his crew. He looked over at Justin. Justin looked older. The dust from the forward areas was ground into the creases in his face. It made him look much older than his twenty years. His lips met in a thin red line behind his mike. Drops of sweat formed on his

moustache. Roger looked away. I hope it's worth it, he thought.

As mission after mission was fired on the western slopes of the mountain, the vegetation gradually disappeared. Soon Roger's section was replacing Ron Travis' section, and vice versa. As the sections changed places, they briefed each other on the latest happenings. As Hunter's section was again replacing Travis and his team, Travis sounded weary on the radio.

"Hey, Hotel. Glad you got here. We just ran out of ammo. Even the gunners in back are empty. And Sweeper (infantry unit's call sign) just lost another FO. That makes the third one today. That must be a living hell down there. Hope we can get 'em squared away for the night."

"How's the ground fire. Any change?"

"Nope. Same stuff, same places. Watch that bunker opening right about in the center of the slope. We've taken some pretty good licks from there."

"Roger that, One Zero. Appreciate the info." Roger heard Ron tell the FO that another section was taking over, and passed along their call sign to the beleaguered unit. Roger's section set up their attack, and began making runs at the side of the mountain under the FO's direction. The northwest side of the mountain was now almost devoid of vegetation. Small stubs was all that remained of the heavy jungle. It looked more devastated than a fresh clearcut to Roger. They provided fire for a Dustoff that slid into the infantry unit from the downhill side. The Dustoff barely touched down, before it was on the go with a load of passengers. Roger had to hand it to the Dustoff pilots. They were earning every penny of their pay on this hill.

Roger's section continued to fire on the bunkers above the US troops. The bunkers were barely visible, they were dug in so deep. Roger felt helpless attacking them. All they were doing was buying time for the infantry below. Their rockets did little, if any damage. About the only good they did do, was to force the enemy to keep his head down.

When they returned to Camp Evans that night, it was a weary crew that unloaded from the ship. They weren't the only tired ones, though. Everyone in the Battery was flying long hours. The night crews were already preflighting their ships. Meeting on the tarmac, the crews exchanged notes on the situation. The talk was sober and factual. There was little humor displayed, and the groups quickly broke up,

each going their separate way. Roger's crew walked up to the mess hall, where late chow was waiting for them. They ate quietly. Roger watched some of the kitchen help. They were even tired, Roger noticed. One was starting a new pot of coffee, and another worked over the stoves. It was 'round the clock for the whole Battery.

When Roger and Justin entered the shower, Travis and his pilot were just finishing up. "There's plenty of hot water for you," Ron said, turning from his shaving mirror. "I think somebody relit the heater for us."

"That sure was nice. That hot shower is going to feel good tonight."

"Yeah. Just imagine if you had to spend the night out there with the grunts. God, how I hate that orange clay."

Ron rinsed his razor in his plastic basin, "Well, let's not get down on it real bad. We're settin' up a forward area at Currahee. It should be operational tomorrow. That'll cut down on our flight time to the hill, anyway. Say, did you guys hear what they're calling it in the papers?"

Roger already had his shower running, but stepped back into the doorway when Ron phrased the question. Justin just stood and looked at Ron.

"No, what?"

"Hamburger Hill. They named it Hamburger Hill."

"Nothin' like something original," Justin shook his head. "'Course it probably fits. Those grunts are taking it in the shorts out there. They gotta fight both ways. They keep attacking the hill in front of them, and they keep gettin' it from behind. Those gook reinforcements are coming over from across the red line (the border between Vietnam and Laos)."

"Yeah, and everybody knows it, but there isn't a lot we can do about it."

"Well, somebody oughta do something about it," Justin walked into the shower. "This is going to feel good, mates. Nothin' like a hot shower to wash away your worries."

Travis splashed his shaving water across the floor. "Like I said, enjoy it. I think we're gonna spend tomorrow night in the Ashau."

Everyone turned in early that night. There were no card games, and no loud music. There was still a lot of activity in the Battery as crewchiefs and mechanics readied the ships, ammo personnel assembled more rockets, cooks prepared for the next day's meals, and plans and schedules

were hammered out in Operations. But for the pilots, some sleep was important.

The next morning proved Travis wrong. Some personnel changes had been made during the night. Every effort was made by the CO, the XO and the Operations officer to keep the platoons together in the sections. A great deal of teamwork was involved in the missions, and they wanted to capitalize on the coordination. The 3rd Platoon drew the first overnight stay at Currahee.

Roger and Justin were in the same ship, and flew on Travis' wing. Travis had the Battery screw-up with him -- Fred Drake. Roger was glad that Travis had taken Drake. Roger didn't enjoy flying with Drake at all. Neither did Justin.

It was the same story that day at Hamburger Hill. More infantry units were being moved into the action, however. The bombing and artillery from the night before had now nearly bared the ridge on the north of the mountain. Only on the southwest flank was the jungle relatively unbroken. Some ARVN units had been added to the fight. They were located on the southwest part of the mountain, where the fighting was not so heavy. The top of the hill itself had been bombed during the night, and the jungle was thinned considerably there, too.

The rearming and refueling at Currahee worked well, except for the takeoff alley. The landing site was inside the perimeter wire, and takeoffs had to be made over the wire. The landing area was located on the southeast corner of the fire base. The forward operations unit was located in a bunker adjacent to the parking area. A shallow ravine with a meandering stream formed the southern perimeter of the fire base, and ran along next to the parking area. When the ships were departing, one would back up until its tail rotor was hanging out over the stream to give the other ship enough room to take off. The lead ship would plan his bounces so that he would hopefully be entering translational lift just as he made his last bounce over the wire.

One one occasion, one of the ships hooked a skid in the wire as it made its takeoff. A crash was avoided when the alert crewchief saw the wire on the skid, flattened on his belly on the cargo deck, and reached out the door with a pair of dikes (diagonal cutters) to cut the wire. As the valley floor heated up in the afternoon sun, it became more and more difficult to make clean takeoffs. Roger and Justin had to abort one over the wire, when Roger saw they weren't

going to make the second row of concertina wire that formed the perimeter. Flaring the ship, he was able to gain enough rpm to back the ship back over the first row of wire, and cushioned it onto the ground in a single, fluid movement. The tricky maneuver earned a round of applause from Travis' crew.

It was another long day of round trips to Hamburger Hill for the C Battery crews. Luckily, Roger and Justin were able to carry both gunners throughout the day. Other ships had to drop the gunner, and keep only the crewchief/gunner to make the takeoffs out of Currahee. The pilots were pushing their machines and their flying techniques to the limit to get the clumsy ships airborne.

Late in the afternoon, they were flying still another mission against the mountain. If the infantry had gained any ground during the day, it was not apparent to the section. It seemed they were firing at the same targets all day long. As the sun was sinking behind the mountains to the southwest, the crews were looking forward to getting an end-of-mission and returning to Camp Evans. This was the most dangerous time of the day. The pilots were weary, and mistakes were easy to make. The reduced visibility also favored the enemy, as he tried to position himself to place accurate fire on the aggravating helicopters.

As Roger's ship covered Travis on yet another inbound run, Justin thought he saw a puff of smoke from Ron's ship. Then, instead of breaking, Travis continued his rocket run directly over the mountain. The ship wasn't losing altitude, but it wasn't gaining any, either.

"What was that?" Justin asked. Roger just shook his head. He was watching the lead ship closely.

"Looks like he's heading home." Roger called Ron on the radio, but there was no answer. Ron continued to fly in a straight line for the other side of the valley. Roger called the infantry unit to let them know the aircraft had had problems, and were breaking off. Sweeper sounded disappointed on the radio, but he understood the difficulty.

Roger expected Ron to head for Currahee if the problem was serious, but he seemed to be heading toward Evans. Justin turned to Roger, "I don't know what he's doing, but he must think he can get it home."

"I don't know. Maybe he remembers another time when he set one down on a fire base, and caught hell for it."

Justin turned to Roger, "When was that?"

Roger shook his head, "Back in our last unit."

As the limping ship crossed the east side of the valley, it looked like it was gaining a little altitude. Roger tried again to call Ron, but again there was no answer. Justin and Roger talked over the situation. Roger was afraid someone in the chopper had been hit, and this seemed to be Justin's fear, too. But neither of them spoke about this. They were more concerned that whoever was flying the helicopter would get it back to base in one piece. When they reached the river junction near Blaze, the ship turned north along the Song Bo River. The sun had dropped behind the hills, and the last light from it was fading fast.

Justin pointed to the ship ahead, "They're going down."

Roger bottomed the pitch to try to stay with them, but the rotor rpm soon climbed into the red. He kicked the ship out of trim, and laid it over on its side, but he still couldn't lose altitude as fast as the lead ship. It was dropping like a rock. Just then, a long stream of fire shot out of the exhaust of the turbine engine on the lead ship. The flame licked along the tail boom, and engulfed the vertical fin.

The scene took Roger's breath. It looked like the ship falling before them was on fire. Roger keyed his mike, "You're on fire," he called excitedly. Then the fire disappeared, but the lead ship continued to descend into the darkness of the river valley below them. Far below, the river itself looked like a black ribbon, flecked with an occasional sequin of silver. Ron was heading for the river, if Ron was flying the ship.

Justin put out a call to Battery Operations, telling them that one of their ships was going in. He also put out a call on Battery UHF, just in case another Griffin ship was in the air. Roger fought the controls, trying to lose altitude and stay with the lead ship. The radio crackled in their ears. It was Major Brown.

"Griffin One Two Hotel, this is Griffin Six Six. Who's going in, and what's your position?"

Justin quickly filled the CO in on the situation. Brown answered that he would join them as soon as he could. The ship below them was now nearly down to the river. They could see it silhouetted against the river, but it soon slid off to the left, and they lost sight of it. Then the radio came to life.

"All right, Hotel, we're on the ground, and everybody's OK." It was Ron's voice, and Justin and Roger exchanged smiles.

Roger quickly keyed the mike, "All right, One Zero, we're right on top of ya'. Kill all your lights. The old man is on his way to pick you up. If you start taking any heat, just tell us where, man."

"Thanks a lot, Hotel. Everything's quiet so far. We got the security out." Ron's voice sounded tight. Roger could imagine Ron instructing the gunners. Roger moved south along the river, so he wasn't orbiting directly over the downed ship. He wanted to be able to roll in the instant Ron called for fire, and he didn't want the enemy to know exactly where the ship went down.

It seemed to take Six Six forever to reach their position. At last, Roger spotted the lights from the ship approaching from the north. Roger told him to tag onto their tail, and Roger would make a low pass over the stricken ship to mark its position for Six Six. Major Brown didn't hesitate at all. He shot an approach directly into Ron's position. As he landed, a sniper fired on the ships on the ground. Brown's crewchief jumped out of the ship, and opened the fuel drain. Brown's ship was nearly full of fuel, and he wanted to lighten the load so he could get out with the full crew of Ron's ship. Roger and Justin again orbited to the south. Brown had not called for any covering fire. It was dark enough now that he felt the sniper couldn't place accurate fire on them, and he didn't want to attract more attention by having Hotel fire rockets near their location.

From Roger and Justin's position, they couldn't see either ship. A light stabbed through the darkness next to the river. "They're coming out," said Justin.

"Yeah, got 'em," returned Roger. Roger put the ship into a shallow dive in case Brown called for fire as they left the area. But there was no call. Soon Brown's ship had climbed to altitude, and they headed for home. Six Six was on the radio, scrambling another section to come cover the ship. An infantry unit was also alerted. They were to be ferried out in slicks, and would secure the ship for the night.

By the time Roger and Justin had refueled, the security operation was in full swing. Another ship from the Battery joined them as a wing ship, and they headed back to the site where the ship had gone down. Upon arrival, they found a

section led by Kaiser orbiting in the vicinity of the downed ship. Kaiser was already talking to the slicks, and almost had them ready to set up for landing. Roger quickly noticed that they were in the wrong spot. The broken ship was over half a mile from where Kaiser was describing the landing spot to the slicks.

"Griffin Twenty, this is One Two Hotel. You've got those guys in the wrong place. Over."

"Oh, bullshit, Hotel. This is where they told me it was," Kaiser's sarcastic response angered Roger.

"OK, Twenty, have it your way, but you're going to look kind of silly when they can't find the plane." Roger shook his head, and looked over at Justin. Justin was laughing.

"Nice shot, Hotel," Justin said over the intercom. "He's in charge, so let him put 'em down where he wants 'em."

"Yeah, except we'll all look like a bunch of fools if those guys end up a half a day's walk from the ship."

Kaiser's voice came over the radio, "All right, Hotel, if you think you know where that ship is, why don't you let the slickies know."

"Roger that, Twenty." Roger nosed the ship over, and accelerated toward the slicks. He called the slick leader on the radio, and told him that he'd make a low pass over the ship's position. Soon Roger and Justin were leading the parade of slicks down the river. As they passed over the spot, Roger called out, "Mark, mark," to the slick lead. The insertion was an anticlimax to the day. No enemy fire was encountered, and the Griffins were soon given an end-of-mission.

When Roger and Justin walked into the hootch, Ron was already waving around a bottle of scotch. They stopped in their area to take off their flight gear and weapons. Justin had a look of distaste. "I can't believe he's hittin' the sauce already."

Roger dropped his helmet bag, and hung up his .38. "I don't blame him, Justin," Roger said softly. "If it was me, I'd probably be doing the same thing." Justin just shrugged.

Roger walked into the community area, and sat down across the poker table from Ron. "Well, want to fill us in on the details now?"

"Sure can," Ron tipped up the bottle of scotch and took a long drink. "See, it's like this. We was way up north, not too far south of the red line, when all of a sudden ten

thousand Chinese charged us from the trees. All we had for weapons was a .38 pistol, and one hand grenade, and....."

Roger laughed, "All right, knock off the BS. I want to hear what happened in that ship."

Ron leaned toward him, and his eyes narrowed, "What are ya' tryin' to do? Pin something on me?"

Roger leaned back in his chair, "Come on, Ron. Let's hear it without all the dramatics, huh?"

Ron sat up straight. "Yeah, OK." He took another drink. "I honestly don't know what started the whole thing, but we just lost power on that last rocket run. I don't think we took a hit. Something just went wrong with the engine."

"Well, why didn't you answer my radio calls?"

"I, uh, was kind of busy in the cockpit, you know? Well, anyway, and then I decided I could get it home. Everything seemed to stabilize, and I thought it would be OK to fly it home. Then coming north from Blaze, she just lost it all. When we started down, I thought it might be the fuel control unit, the way it acted."

"Yeah. It could have been all right. That could have caused that big blast of flame out your tail." Roger wasn't convinced that Ron was telling the whole story. He wouldn't look at Roger as he was relating the incident.

"Yeah, I imagine that would do it, all right. And then you called that we were on fire. That didn't do anything for my composure."

"Sorry about that, but you should have seen that blast of fire. It probably burned all the paint off your vertical fin. It really reached out there."

"Well, anyway, after that, I knew we were going in. So I shot an autorotation to a sandbar on the river. That's about it."

Roger lit a cigarette. "We oughta know more about what caused it when we get the ship back tomorrow. We did see a puff of smoke from your engine on the gun run when things went bad for you. But that was it."

The next day, 1st Platoon supported other operations from Camp Evans. After two days, they returned to Hamburger for another mission. The entire crew was astonished at the change in the mountain. There were trees standing only on the southeast side now. The top, along with the rest of the mountain, was bare. The fighting had spread out around the mountain as well, but the friendlies had yet to take the summit.

Their mission was supposed to be on the northwest side of the mountain. Roger was on Ron's wing again, and Justin was in Roger's right seat. Their infantry contact on the ground surprised them when they contacted him. He sounded out of breath on the radio.

"Hey, Griffins, they got us all. I got one guy on my back, but I....think I'm the only one left.... I'll drop a smoke grenade, and you shoot on the smoke. ...Got it?"

Roger could tell that Ron was aghast at the situation. Ron's voice came clearly over the radio. "You want me to shoot the smoke?"

The breathless voice returned, "Yeah....yeah. Shoot the smoke... The bad guys are after me, and they're gettin' close. ...Shoot the smoke!"

With no hesitation, Ron rolled in and fired on the green smoke that rose from the low trees. Roger only covered the lead ship. He didn't want to fire right on top of Ron's rockets, and he didn't know which way the friendlies were running.

Ron seemed to read Roger's mind, as he called Tango, the unit's call sign, again. "Which way are you headed, Tango?"

"Up.... up the hill Christ! hear 'em screamin'? shoot shoot some more got another smoke grenade here."

As soon as the smoke appeared, Ron rolled in. His rocket blasts obliterated the smoke, but Roger adjusted on Ron's blasts, spreading his rockets across the slope below the smoke. Breaking off the run, both ships waited for another call from Tango. Roger could only imagine the foot soldier alone, running through the shattered jungle, carrying a buddy and the radio.

"Nice shootin' keep it coming move it up the hill a little can't stop now."

Again Ron rolled in with Roger right behind him. Ron's rockets pounded the hill again, and as he broke, Roger's rockets thundered in behind him. As Roger began his break, he spotted smoke further up the hill.

"Hey, One Zero, we got smoke further up the hill. Red smoke."

"Got it. I'm goin' in again."

Both ships made another run, and then held off in an orbit. They waited tensely for another call from Tango. Round and round they went, watching for any sign of smoke. Only static on the radio. Each pilot strained to hear a

transmission, but only the hissing static continued. As they held over the target area, Ron called on the Battery air-to-air channel, and told Roger that he was going to try to reach another unit. Roger and Justin continued to monitor Tango's channel. Soon Ron returned on the air-to-air channel.

"Nobody can raise 'em. We'll hold here for a while. How's your gas, Hotel?"

Roger checked the gauge, "We've got about thirty minutes left." Ron clicked the mike button twice. Roger could hear another Griffin mission in progress on the VHF radio. He turned to Justin. "I'm cuttin' off my VHF. Keep yours on, OK?" Justin nodded in return. Roger turned off the other radios, and concentrated only on Tango's channel.

The ships continued to orbit the area, hoping for a response from Tango. But none was forthcoming. As Roger's fuel approached the critical point, Ron's voice broke the silence. "Well, let's hang 'er up. We're going home."

Roger clicked the mike twice in return, but continued to monitor Tango's FM frequency as they departed the area. Roger knew it was almost fruitless, but there was still a chance. If he did call again, they could scramble another section. The trip back to Evans was very quiet. The crew seemed stunned. They had been listening to the last man from a ... what? A squad? A platoon? Roger wondered how many of them there had been. And what had happened? Had they been ambushed?

That night Roger had a hard time falling asleep. Tango's breathless voice kept ringing in his ears. Roger awoke once in a heavy sweat. He had been dreaming. He was running through the jungle with the enemy in hot pursuit... and he had run out of smoke grenades. Roger sat up in bed. Should they have fired more rockets? He got up and walked outside. The clear sky was covered with stars. Roger shivered, but it wasn't because he was cold. He walked over to the mess hall.

The coffee pot was still on. As he poured himself a cup, he knew he didn't need coffee. What he needed was sleep. Tomorrow would be another day. They would be back in the air, and he would need all his faculties. But just now, the coffee seemed reassuring. Roger left the mess hall and slowly walked back toward the hootch. Entering, he fished around in his flight shirt for his cigarettes. Justin's soft voice scared him so badly, he spilled part of his coffee.

"Havin' trouble sleeping?"

Roger cursed at the burn from the coffee. "Yeah, a little, I guess."

"Me too," Justin said. "Hope tomorrow's a better day."

"Yeah, me too," Roger sighed. Finding his cigarettes, he lit one. The brief flash from the lighter nearly blinded him. Snapping the lighter shut, he waited for his eyes to readjust. Roger picked up his letter writing materials, and walked out to the deck. He sat down at the far end, and again looked at the sky. He thought back to some of the close calls he had had already. Any one of them could have done him in. How had he managed to survive? Why him, and not some of the others? Roger drained the coffee from the styrofoam cup, took another drag from the cigarette, and flipped the butt into the dark. Then he pulled out a pen and paper and began to write in the bright moonlight....

Hamburger Hill

How many stop to listen
In this country full of war,
As they go about their duties
Which have become a bore?

A few? Too many?
How will we ever know?
Can we take the time to ask
Of those who wander high and low?

In the middle of a battle
Is there time to ask the mind,
"I wonder if.....,"
Then the flash, crash, and the blind.

They stumble feebly onward,
Their weapon in their hands,
And the shells come crashing downward
Like a thousand blasting bands.

And as the smoke clears slowly
From the bloody, sodden hill,
Their eyes lift slowly upward
From the mud beneath until

They feast upon the heavens,
And know that God is here.
For, though I know I'm dying,
My loved one's by me, near....

45: Sleeping in the Ashau

Then it was 1st Platoon's turn to remain overnight at Currahee. They replaced the section out there early in the morning. They carried two days of C-rations with them, an ammo box full of coke and ice, and poncho liners for sleeping that night. The day was back-to-back missions throughout. Much of the action centered in the Hamburger Hill area, but there was also action to the south on hill 916. Late in the afternoon, Roger had been unable to take off with both a gunner and crewchief aboard, and had dropped the gunner. Roger always hated to do that. It was like losing a part of your body. With all four of them in the ship, they functioned like a closely knit team. The gunner and crewchief watched out carefully for one another, and the pilots could concentrate on the developments ahead of them.

An infantry unit part way down one side of the long ridge that was topped by hill 916 had come under fire, and had scrambled Roger's section. With the position of the friendlies, the slope of the hill, and the tall jungle, it was a difficult target. Roger decided that they would have to attack along the ridge to get their rockets on the target. The first couple passes went well, as both Roger and his wing ship were able to place their fire where the FO wanted it. On the third pass, the section came under fire. Roger saw only a few tracers cross in front of the ship. The wing ship reported a loud thud as they rolled away from the target on the break. Roger looked over the seat trying to get a visual on the other bird. Roger glanced at the crew chief sitting behind him. The chief was sitting on the bench seat, looking at his hands. There was blood all over the front of his face and visor. He looked up at Roger. He had a puzzled expression on his face.

Roger keyed the intercom. "Carpenter, are you OK?" Roger knew he wasn't, but he wanted to alert Justin to the problem as well as establish contact with the chief. Carpenter made no attempt to click his mike button. But he shook his head up and down. Then the chief looked down at his chest. The front of his chicken plate was covered with blood. The wind from the slipstream racing past the door of the helicopter was blowing the blood everywhere. Roger turned the chopper for Currahee, and pulled in the power. Justin was now talking to the chief. Roger called the

ground unit they had been supporting, and told them they were breaking station with a casualty aboard.

When they approached Currahee, Roger called ahead to Ops there, and explained the situation. By this time, Carpenter was talking to Justin, and kept telling him he was OK. Roger shot an approach into the Med-evac pad, and Justin hustled Carpenter into the tent. Roger was sure Carpenter had been hit in the face. Soon Justin returned, and they hovered over to the ARA parking area. When Justin buckled in, he was immediately on the intercom.

"He's fine, Hunter. The medics were looking him over real good, but the only thing they could find was a little nick under his nose."

"Under his nose? That's what caused all that blood?"

"Well, that's the only thing they could find so far, and they were checking him out pretty carefully. He didn't hurt at all anywhere. It was just the blood that scared the soup out of him."

Roger shook his head, "I can understand that. I was sure he was hit in the face somewhere."

"Yeah, I know. Me too. Honestly, it shook me too, Roger." They landed in the ARA area, and Roger shut down the ship as Justin filled out the log book. Justin turned to Roger, "Say, what about that thud they heard?" Justin jerked his thumb toward the other ship.

Roger looked at Justin, "Holy cow, I forgot all about that. We better check it out."

They joined the crew from the other ship to help them as they began going over the ship. It was the crewchief from the other ship who found the hole. It had come in through the belly of the ship, angled up through the floor, and entered the fuel cell on the right side. The self-sealing fuel tank had done its job. There was no fuel leak.

Justin turned to Roger, "Boy, we did all right today. Kicked the gunner out 'cause we couldn't carry the weight, got our crewchief shot, and took a hit in a fuel tank. Some day, huh?" Justin spit on the ground, and walked off toward the Ops bunker. Roger noticed he was hungry. They had been flying a long time. If they had gotten in earlier, they could have eaten over at the mess tent with the rest of the personnel from the fire base. Roger joined Justin, the other flight crew, and the forward operations personnel at the bunker. The bunker was dug into the ground. Then sandbags had been used to raise it about two feet above the

ground. There were two layers of sandbags on the top of it, and a small gun position had been fashioned on the corner facing the perimeter.

On the edge of the bunker, Roger noticed a claymore mine that had been taken apart. "What's with the claymore?" Roger asked.

The group turned toward him with a look of surprise. "We use it to heat the C-rats," someone said. Roger turned the claymore over. The explosive charge had been removed from the back of it. One of the ammo personnel handed Roger a small, white cube.

"Here you go, sir. Instant hot C-rats."

Roger took the white cube, and turned it over in his hands. It looked almost like clay, or white bread dough.

"Don't worry about it, sir. It won't explode unless you put an electrical charge to it. It lights easy, burns clean, and is guaranteed to produce hot C's in about two minutes or less."

Roger had never heard of using the explosive, C-4, to heat C-rations. Roger wondered who had first tried burning the stuff. Must have been a risk-taker. Roger learned that this knowledge was widespread among the infantry troops. Just the dumb pilots hadn't learned the trick yet. And the forward operations personnel were happy to share their knowledge. Roger was soon heating his C-rations over the burning C-4. And they were right. It didn't take long. Roger went through the accessory packet in his box of C-rations carefully. There were two packets of coffee, and a packet of cream. Polishing off the last of his meal, Roger heated some water in an abandoned cracker tin for coffee. The lid from the can wasn't completely removed, so it could be used for a handle. As he brewed his coffee, darkness stole across the valley. Roger took his coffee up on top of the bunker, and sat down in the fighting position constructed there. He lit a cigarette, and looked toward the darkening sky. Stars were already beginning to show.

As Roger was finishing his cigarette, the man in charge of the forward operations area, Sergeant Clay, joined him.

"Nice night, huh?" Clay asked.

Roger sipped his coffee. "Yeah, it really is pretty out here. Too bad we have to be here in the middle of a war."

"Oh, I don't know," Clay disagreed. "If it wasn't for the war, I probably would have never seen this place. The living conditions aren't the greatest, but every place I've

ever been carries its own special brand of beauty. This place isn't any different. I can think of a lot of places that are worse than this right now."

Roger had to agree with him. "You're right, Clay. I guess sometimes we're just too close to the war to stop and appreciate that fact."

"Yeah. I felt the same way when I first came out here. But this place kind of grows on you. First off, there isn't much brass around. The officers from the artillery outfit keep pretty much to themselves, and don't hassle us. And the only duty I've got is keeping track of you wild pilots. Not that that's always easy, but unless we get hit, I get the evenings pretty much to myself. I like to come out here on top of the bunker this time of night. Things usually quiet down while everybody takes a break from the war for chow. Even the gooks have to do that, too, ya' know. At least that's the way it has been so far. We've been hit a couple times since I've been here, but so far we've managed to hold 'em off."

Roger and Sergeant Clay continued to talk into the night. At length, Clay excused himself and left Roger alone. Roger wanted another cup of coffee. That instant stuff in the C-rations wasn't so bad. He dropped off the top of the bunker and went inside. In the first room, about ten by ten feet, a lantern was burning. Roger felt in his pockets for his other packet of coffee. Clay watched him.

"Lose something?"

"My other packet of coffee. Thought I put it in my pocket."

"Hey, don't worry about it, sir. We got a lot of that here. See that box over there? Help yourself."

Roger followed Clay's pointing finger, and took a box down from a niche in the bunker. It contained a lot of castoffs from the boxes of C-rations. Clay explained that it was understood that anytime anyone had something left over, they would drop it in the box. Roger fished out a coffee packet. "Got any more of that C-4?"

Clay reached under a small table constructed of spent rocket boxes, and produced a small ammo can. Opening the can, Clay reached in and removed a block of C-4. He tore off a corner of the white substance, and handed it to Roger. As Roger started to leave, Clay stopped him. "Better fire it up in here, sir. They don't like any lights outside after dark." Roger quickly understood, and faulted himself for not thinking of that.

While Roger heated the water in the small tin, he looked around the bunker. A narrow opening led from one side of the room. Roger motioned toward the door, "Is that the sleeping accommodations?"

Clay laughed. "As long as you brought your own blanket. There's no cots or anything. We just wrap up in a poncho liner, and sleep on the ground. I prefer to sleep in here, though, so I can hear the radio if anything comes up."

Roger nodded. His coffee water hot, Roger rose. "Think I'll go back outside and enjoy some more of the fresh air."

Clay laughed again. "Things do get a little close in here. Especially since there's no way to shower out here. I guess we've just gotten used to it."

"No apologies necessary, Sergeant," Roger said, and left the bunker. The air felt a little chilly, and Roger retrieved his poncho liner from the chopper. He again sat down in the fighting position on the top of the bunker.

Alone, his thoughts wandered over the day's events. He thought about Carpenter's close call. The only plausible explanation they had been able to come up with was that a round had come through the open cargo door on one side of the chopper, nicked Carpenter's nose, and continued out the other open door. Well, they don't come much closer than that, Roger thought. He sipped the coffee, and pulled the poncho liner up around his shoulders. He was tired. Off in the distance, he could see flares lighting the sky over FSB Rendezvous. He yawned. Then he squirmed around on the sandbags to find a comfortable position, and lay down. He went to sleep almost instantly. A couple hours passed.

Roger's eyes flew open, and he was instantly awake. Tracers filled the black sky above him, and they looked close. This was no dream. Roger rolled over wondering whether he should run for the chopper and try to get it off the ground. Currahee looked like it was in the middle of a fire fight. Roger crouched against the sandbags in the fighting position. As he was about to dart for the chopper, he noticed that all of the fire was going out, and none was coming in. As Roger looked around behind him, it looked as if the whole perimeter was firing. Just as quickly as the fire started, it stopped. The entire perimeter fell silent at exactly the same instant. Roger wondered what was going on. He slipped down into the bunker.

"What was that all about?" he asked Clay.

Clay's puzzled expression broke into a grin as he realized what Roger was talking about. "Oh, you mean the mad minute?"

"The,..what did you call it?"

"Mad minute. It's a nightly affair. Sometime during the night, chosen at random, the entire perimeter opens up for a minute. If any gooks are thinking about taking us on, this might give 'em second thoughts. Or if they're already sneaking on us, this makes 'em think that they've been discovered, and they fire back. Then we know they're close, and we can really put the bad-bad on them. Works like a charm. From what I heard about fire base Airborne, they discovered two imminent attacks with mad minutes. If it hadn't been for the mad minute, they wouldn't have known the gooks were on them until they came rushing at the perimeter."

"Oh," Roger yawned sleepily. "So there's only one per night?"

"Usually," Clay replied. "Once in a while we have two, but I think that's when the owner of the ammunition company that makes our bullets has an over supply on hand. Why? Did it scare you?"

Roger's heartbeat was beginning to return to normal, and he smiled at Clay. "Yeah, you might say it scared me."

Clay laughed softly. "Were you sleeping on top of the bunker?"

Roger nodded. "Think maybe I could use another cup of that coffee."

The next day was quiet. Few missions were flown, and it was a nice break. The flight crews laid about with their shirts off, soaking up the sun. After lunch, Roger was watching slicks land just down the edge of the perimeter. They came in one at a time, landed for a few moments, and then took off again. With nothing else to do, he wandered down that direction. As another slick landed, he saw that it was being loaded. Roger's stomach turned over. They were loading body bags on it, and they were full. Roger turned around and walked back to the ARA area.

Another section from C Battery had come in that morning. They had brought a load of sodas and ice for Roger's section. Roger had tried some of the water, but unless it was made into coffee, it tasted terrible. Roger had used one of the forward operations person's steel pot to wash and shave that morning. The air crews didn't normally

carry that equipment. They were expected to get airborne in the event of an attack.

By that evening, Roger felt grimy. The dirt and dust had worked its way into his Nomex flight uniform. Combining with his sweat, the grime made the cloth felt greasy. As things settled down for the evening, Roger decided to sleep in the bunker that night. There wasn't much to do after dark, so everyone turned in early.

The sleeping room in the bunker was crowded. It was about seven feet wide. Thus, everyone slept with their head toward one wall, leaving a narrow walkway at their feet in case someone wanted to go out during the night. With the forward operations personnel and the flight crews, everyone slept shoulder to shoulder. Roger had laid out his poncho liner about in the middle of the room, but had talked with Clay for about an hour before he went to bed. Most of the others were already ahead of him.

Roger had been lying in the absolute blackness for about ten minutes when he heard the scritch-scratching of tiny feet on the poncho liners off to his left. At first he couldn't identify the source of the noise, but he quickly realized that it was a rat. It was coming closer as it crossed the sleeping bodies. Roger felt it run across his stomach, and continue on its way. Suddenly Roger realized that Davis was sleeping off to his right somewhere, and Roger knew that Davis was absolutely scared to death of rats. Roger wondered if Davis would wake up. A blood-curdling scream echoed in the confines of the sleeping bunker. Roger knew the rat had reached Davis, and Davis had awakened. Roger pulled his feet up to his chest and rolled against the wall of the bunker nearest his head. The scream had awakened everyone, and they were all trying to get through the narrow door in the blackness. There was cursing and shouting as some tripped and stumbled over the others.

Roger couldn't help it. He began to laugh. The more he tried to stop, the harder he laughed until he could feel the hot tears streaming down his cheeks. The excitement subsided, and Roger was finally able to choke out the words that it was only a rat.

A voice in the dark that Roger didn't recognize spoke, "Only a rat? That's what all the commotion was about? Damn. We must have a bunch of pansies out here tonight."

The others began returning to the sleeping area. A flashlight with a red lens was turned on so poncho liners

could be relocated. As the group began bedding down, comments and jokes were passed around.

Roger asked to no one in particular, "Is Davis in here?"

"No, he isn't. Took his poncho liner, and headed for the chopper. Said something about him and rats not sharing the same bed."

Roger chuckled, and rolled over on his side. Once more the bunker quieted, as everyone settled back. Soon the heavy breathing of sleeping bodies again filled the bunker.

The next day, the 1st Platoon was rotated back to Camp Evans. Of all of them, Davis was the happiest to leave Currahee. He, being the eldest in the flight crews, said that he was too old for this kind of duty.

It was nice to return to Evans and hot showers. In fact, it seemed that Camp Evans was becoming more civilized. A USO show was scheduled for the next night. It was to be held in C Battery's hangar, and everyone was excited about it. That evening at dusk, a Chinook helicopter arrived carrying the USO troop. There was to be a live band and singers. All during the preceding day, the talk centered on this activity. The prospect of seeing women was almost too much to bear. The hangar was crowded in preparation for the show. The performers were in their second number when the air raid siren went off. There was a mad scramble as the hangar evacuated. It had only been some mortar rounds coming in, but that was enough to dull the enthusiasm of the USO troop. They called it a night, packed up their gear, and flew off in the Chinook. Everyone was bitterly disappointed. This was the first USO show to entertain at Camp Evans, and to have it shut down by a few mortar rounds was a stinging disappointment to the men who had gathered for the show.

In lieu of the show, the pilots of C Battery started a hot poker game in the 1st Platoon hootch. The game lasted until the wee small hours in the morning. Roger had been playing when he suddenly felt cold. At first he tried to shake it off, but the feeling persisted. Finally, he could take it no longer. He tossed in his hand, and rolled into his bunk. Justin came over a few minutes later to check on him.

"How you doing, partner? You still feeling crummy?"

"Yeah. Can I have your blanket? I'm freezing to death."

Justin felt Roger's head with his hand. "I think you got a fever, man." He walked back into the community area. "Hey, Ron, I think we got a sick pilot over here."

Ron came over and sat down on Roger's bunk. "You feelin' kind of rough?"

"I don't feel bad. It's just these chills. I can't get warm."

Ron scoured the neighboring bunks for more blankets, and piled them on top of Roger. He sat with Roger for a few minutes, then returned to the poker game.

Soon Roger began to sweat. He felt like he was burning up. Justin returned to check on him again. "Jesus, Roger, I thought you said you were cold. You've kicked all the blankets off."

"Cold? You must be kidding. Now I'm burning up."

Justin called to Travis. "Hey, Ron, I think you should get the doc. Roger's burning up with a fever." Ron joined Justin, and studied Roger.

"The doc's not here. He's down at Eagle for a couple days. The best we could do is a medic or something from over at the Med-evacs."

Roger stalled them off. "I don't think a medic will help. How about if you can find me a couple aspirin?"

Ron quickly located some, and brought some water.

"Here, my friend. See if these don't do the trick, huh?" Roger gratefully accepted the pills.

The fever and chills alternated several times in the next couple hours. Then the symptoms disappeared. By the next morning, Roger felt fine.

46: Night Battle for Fire Support Base Currahee

Missions in the valley continued, as did standby at FSB Currahee for the C Battery pilots. Each platoon took its turn for a couple nights staying at the fire base. Back at Camp Evans, it was Roger's section that was on hot status. A new pilot had joined the 1st Platoon. He was a captain, and Travis had assigned him to Roger's ship. Justin and Davis were assigned the wingship in the section. The new captain, Art "Red" Riley, was a heavysset Georgian with bright red hair. He was a very likable person, with an easy smile. The first night he joined the 1st Platoon, he and Justin teamed up to short sheet Travis' bed. To Red, rank meant only that it was his job to give the orders. Otherwise, he was just one of the troops. He was very easy to work with, and seemed to fit right in with the other members of the platoon.

After supper, the 1st Platoon hot section preflighted their ships, and prepared for the night. The evening started out quietly, with no missions at all. Roger hated to sleep when he was on hot status as a section leader. He hung around in the Ops bunker with Deke Trowbridge. Deke was well educated. From the Great Lakes area, he had finished college before he had been inducted into the service. Always having a yearning for electronics, he had opted to enlist and take electronics training in the Army. When C Battery was forming, Deke had started in the electronics and radio repair shop, but was soon appointed to Operations because he could write well. Deke had a good radio voice, and rarely became flustered by any situation. He had a good working relationship with the pilots in the unit, and he seemed to get along well with everyone. Deke was quiet by nature, and generally reserved in manner. He was already balding, and looked much older than his twenty-five years. Deke's glasses added to his studious appearance.

As Roger sat on one corner of the desk in the Ops bunker, the field telephone rang. Deke quickly answered, and began writing on a pad of paper. He cradled the handset to his ear, and motioned to Roger that it was time to crank. As Roger started out the door of the bunker, Deke called out, "Currahee!" Roger waved as he ran out. As Roger reached the ships in the darkness, he called out to Justin, "Currahee, Echo!"

"Gotcha. All right, crew, let's get on with it."

"Main rotor's untied," came the call from Justin's crewchief.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

The night reverberated with the screaming of the turbines as they came up to speed. Soon the pounding of the rotor blades joined the whine of the turbines from the two ships. Red started the C-model as Roger donned his helmet and chicken plate. Soon Roger heard the hiss of the radios in his earphones as the radios warmed up. The flash from the rotating beacons on the two ships cast eerie shadows over the hot pad.

Roger called Evans tower for takeoff clearance as Red buckled in. Roger checked the crew in the back seat, and received thumbs up from both the gunner and crewchief. He pulled in the pitch, and brought the ship to a hover. After a final instrument check, he nosed over and headed south off the pad. The rotorwash stirred some dust and strands of grass in the glare of the landing light. Then the dust disappeared, and they were on their way. They climbed quickly in the cool night air as they headed toward the mountains. There was no moon that night as they headed into the blackness of the mountains.

As they crossed the first ridge, Roger attempted to contact the section from Currahee on the UHF radio. "Griffin at Currahee, this is Griffin One Two Hotel, over."

Jordan's voice came over the radio. "Hi, Hotel. This is Twenty. We're really in it tonight. They're knocking hell out of this place. What's your ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival)?"

"Probably two zero minutes. How's the weather out there?"

"Weather's fine, but we'll have to break station before you get here. The attack's coming from the south side mostly. They hit us with mortars before we were in the air. Things got a little exciting on the ground! We've expended almost all of our ammo now, and we're going to have to come back to Evans to reload and refuel."

Roger acknowledged the transmission, and checked the engine gauges. He was pulling as much as the old Charlie model would put out. There was no way to hurry any faster. He keyed the intercom, "Hey, chief, is Justin staying with us?"

The wind rushing over the crewchief's mike garbled his transmission a little. "Yeah, he's right on our tail."

Roger checked the instruments again. He was holding about eighty knots airspeed. The cooler air at night made the rotor more efficient. He wouldn't have been able to hold this speed in the daytime. As they approached the valley, Roger could see the lights from two approaching aircraft.

He called Jordan on the radio, "Is that you coming out of the valley, Twenty?"

"Roger that, Hotel. We're out of bullets."

Passing over the edge of the valley, Roger called the forward operations at Currahee. "Griffin Seven Zero. Griffin Seven Zero, this is Griffin One Two Hotel, over." There was no answer, so Roger waited a minute and tried again. This time, Clay answered.

"Glad to hear from you, Hotel. Things are not going well tonight."

"How's that?"

"Things are not going well. We took one helluva mortar barrage. One direct hit on our bunker. Good thing you weren't sleeping on top of it tonight. Your contact here is Blue Leaf." Clay passed the frequency in code for the ground contact. Roger acknowledged the transmission, and Red dialed in the new frequency on the FM radio.

As they approached Currahee, the tracer fire from both the fire base and the attackers was clearly visible. Flashes from the guns and explosions briefly lit the black landscape. Roger contacted Blue Leaf on the radio. Blue Leaf wanted the section to hit the southern perimeter of the fire base. He said that they were now shooting point blank across the stream on the south side. Roger acknowledged, and set up the section's attack heading with Justin. They would attack directly over the fire base. The perimeter was clearly defined by the outgoing tracers. Roger called Justin to make sure that he had monitored the radio traffic about the situation and the attack pattern.

"Right on your tail, Hotel," Justin answered.

Roger rolled in on the first run. He drove in close. As the perimeter passed beneath the ship, Roger punched off three pair of rockets, and started to break.

Justin's voice came over the radio, "Break hard, Hotel. Break hard! They're on ya'."

Roger rolled the ship over steeply to the left. He had cleared the gunners to fire, and the chatter of their machine guns rattled through the aircraft. Red tracers whizzed by the ship on all sides as Roger held the steep turn. He could hear Justin's rockets slicing the air behind him, and the blasts as they hit the ground. The second and third passes were about the same as the battle raged below. Roger could see muzzle flashes from the enemy weapons that were nearly on the edge of the perimeter. It did look like Currahee was in for it tonight.

As the section began another pass, Roger heard the CO calling him on the air-to-air channel. "Griffin One Two Hotel, this is Six Six. What's the situation out there?"

"It looks like they're making an all-out attempt to overrun the fire base. I think we might be in this one for most of the night."

"I understand. As soon as I can get more support, I'll let you know."

Roger acknowledged the transmission, checked his fuel gauge, and called Echo (Justin) for a status report on his ship. The enemy tracers continued to greet them as they broke from another firing pass.

He turned the ship over to Captain Riley for the next run, and called Justin on the radio. "Hey, Echo, try to conserve your ammo. Like shoot only one pair on a pass, or just use the door gunners. We've got to wait out that other section arriving, OK?"

Justin's voice was cool as he came back on the radio, "Gotcha, Hotel. We'll make it last."

As Roger turned his attention back to the ship, Riley was on a firing run. As they crossed the perimeter of the fire base, Riley punched off a single pair of rockets. Roger began to lean to the left, anticipating the break. But it didn't come. Instead, Riley punched off a second pair of rockets. Not expecting them, Roger didn't have one eye closed, and the flash from the rockets nearly blinded him. As he reached for the mike switch, Riley punched a third pair of rockets. As they streaked away from the aircraft, Roger could see them passing through some trees directly in front of them. Roger grabbed the controls, and rolled the aircraft into a climbing left turn. As he pulled in the power, he could hear Justin's voice.

"You're way low, Hotel, and you're taking heavy fire....." The rest of Justin's transmission was lost in the whoosh of rockets being launched from Justin's ship.

The explosions from Justin's rockets felt like they were right underneath Roger's ship. The blasts seemed to push them upward, they were so close. Roger knew they had gotten too low on the last pass, but he hadn't realized how low they were.

As they turned and headed back for Currahee's perimeter, Roger keyed the intercom, "How many night missions have you fired, Riley?"

"How many? This is my first one," Riley answered.

Roger's heart fluttered. No wonder he'd made the last run that way, thought Roger. Roger explained to Riley that a standard run at night consisted of firing one to three pair of rockets. After the setup and target determination, the rockets were fired in quick succession, and the break was initiated as soon as the last pair left the tubes. That way both pilots know what to expect, and they can have one eye closed during firing. This was all new to Riley, and he listened eagerly to Roger's advice. Roger couldn't believe that this was Riley's first night combat mission. What a night to start him out, Roger thought.

As the section continued to make passes, the attack abated on the ground. It was decision time. Roger called Justin, and asked his fuel status. Justin had the same as Roger. If they were going to have enough fuel to return to Camp Evans, they were going to have to break station now.

Roger called Six Six. "Hey, Six Six. We're about bingo on fuel if we're going to return to Evans. How far out is our replacement section?"

Six Six was slow in responding. "Apparently we've got a problem with them getting off," he said.

Roger's breath came hard. He didn't want to leave the firebase uncovered, but he had a tough choice to make. "Six Six, we have to leave now if we're going to make Evans, or we can stay another in the air another twenty minutes, but we'll have to land at Currahee. Over."

There was a pause, and then Six Six called back. "Okay, Hotel, I understand what you're saying. I want you to stay as long as you can. But it's your decision to land at Currahee. I don't know if the other section can reach your position in twenty minutes. Use your judgement."

Roger called Justin. "What do you say, Echo? Break now, or we gotta land at Currahee?"

Justin's voice bolstered Roger's confidence as he responded, "Hotel, we're right behind ya' wherever ya' go."

Roger looked down at the firebase. They had no other help. This night it was the two aircraft above them. Apparently no other firebases could reach them for supporting fires, and anything from the Air Force would be way too long in getting there.

He called Justin, "OK, Echo, be stingy with the ammo. We'll wait for the other section as long as we can." Roger was hoping that the other section would arrive before they had to go into Currahee for fuel. That way the new section could be firing and would cover them during the refueling.

The opportunity for them to return to Camp Evans was now past, and they were now committed to landing at Currahee. Roger called Clay at the forward operations center.

"Seven Zero, this is Hotel. I know your ground commander doesn't want any flares up tonight, but we're going to have to land at your location. We don't have enough gas to make it back to Evans. I want you to set it up with the artillery here to have two mortar flares ready. One for me, and one for Echo. We'll be coming in with our lights off, so when we each call for our flare to land by, I want it in the air when we call. Can you set that up for me?"

"Wait one. Can't believe you're coming in here," Seven Zero responded.

There was a short pause, and then Seven Zero came back on the radio. "That's a negative on the flares, Hotel."

Roger thought for a second, and keyed the mike, "OK, but tell 'em we're landing, and if we can't see we'll just shoot for the center of the firebase, OK?" Roger knew this was where the command bunker was, and it was pretty likely that the base commander didn't want helicopters landing on his "house".

"Wait one," Seven Zero said. "I'll pass that on."

A minute or two passed, and Seven Zero was back on the radio. "Hey, Hotel? You've got your flares."

Roger called Justin. "OK, Echo, here's the story. We'll make one more pass, and dump all of the rockets we got left, just outside the perimeter of our landing area. Then I'll go in. When I'm on the ground, call for your own flare. Be sure you're blacked out on the outside, and your instrument lights are turned down. When you're about to land, call and I'll turn on my nav lights so you won't run into me when you land. Tell me as soon as you're down, so I can shut 'em off." Roger paused. He hoped he wasn't making

a big mistake. The choppers would be easy targets on the ground if the enemy decided to hit them. "Good luck, Echo. I'm startin' the last run now."

They needed to land north into the fire base. As soon as Roger made his last pass and fired the rest of his rockets, he brought the ship around and set up his approach. On short final, he called for the flare. Instantly, a small mortar flare blossomed over the ARA parking area at the southeast corner of the fire base. Roger shot his approach, and landed the ship. Tracers were still visible along the perimeter, but to Roger's relief, it seemed that most of them were going out of the perimeter and not into it. Justin followed Roger's lead, and landed next to him. The chiefs and gunners jumped out and began to refuel the ships.

Roger sat tensely and frequently turned up the instrument lights enough to see the fuel gauge. It seemed to be taking forever, and the needle inched up very slowly. As Roger was wondering how long they'd been on the ground, he saw the crewchief crawling past the nose of the ship. Roger couldn't figure out what he was doing. He was supposed to be refueling. Roger looked in the back. The gunner was also out of the ship. Then Roger noticed another figure crawling by the right cargo door of the ship. It was an infantryman low crawling with an armload of rockets! Roger couldn't believe his eyes. The rocket storage area at Currahee was located between the two rows of concertina wire. That meant that the infantry was crawling outside the first perimeter to the rocket pit, picking up rockets, and crawling back to the ships with them. Roger was amazed at their courage.

Roger's original intention was to refuel only, and get out of Currahee as quickly as they could. Now it looked like they would be rearmed as well, if they could ever get refueled. The needle on the fuel gauge seemed to be barely moving. It must be just because I'm scared, thought Roger. Fear magnifies time, and that must be what is going on here.

As last the crewchief tapped Roger on the shoulder, and gave him a thumbs up signal. Roger was relieved. The waiting was driving him nuts. All during the time on the ground, Roger and Riley hadn't spoken at all. It was as if they were waiting waiting for what? The end? A fiery blast that would engulf them and the entire crews of both ships? And the brave soldiers that were even now dragging rockets to the idling aircraft? And all for what? The defense of a fire base in the Ashau Valley that ten

years from now, only a few people could even remember? Roger pushed the thoughts from his mind. He was still pursuing his goal. This was only a part of that goal. One more day. One more mission...

Roger called Justin to make sure they were ready. Then he picked the chopper up to a hover, turned on his landing light, and made his takeoff to the north. Justin quickly followed. As soon as they were in the air, the crewchief keyed his intercom and began to explain what had happened on the ground at Currahee.

"Sorry it took so long, sir, but we had some problems. The refueling hose was so full of holes that I couldn't get any juice in the tank. So I grabbed some empty shells from the machine guns, and stuck them in the holes."

Roger began to laugh. "Is that what you were doing when you were out crawling on the ground?"

"Well, yes, ...sir. If we couldn't get any fuel, we would have had to stay down there..."

Roger looked over at Riley, and shook his head. "Welcome to the dark side of flying in Vietnam, Riley." Then he laughed nervously.

Riley keyed the intercom, "Sure is exciting, Hunter. Do you do this often?" Roger and the crew all laughed. This Riley character was something else.

Again they hit the targets identified by the FO on the ground. Six Six had now arrived on station, and told Roger that another section was on its way from Camp Evans. Roger's section took sporadic fire, as it continued to make pass after pass over the fire base. Soon they exhausted their rockets. Roger told Six Six about the courage of the grunts of Currahee, reloading his ship when they had only gone in to get fuel. The section continued to make runs on the targets, but the only ammunition they had left was for the M-60's. The gunners continued to fire until they, too, were out of ammunition. The section arrived from Camp Evans just as Roger's section was departing. Roger's section was the last ships to land at Currahee that night. As the fire fight continued, the ammo dump containing the rockets was hit. It blew up, and started the large fuel blivots on fire as well.

The Griffin aircraft covered the fire base all night, shuttling back and forth from Camp Evans. The next morning, Major Brown asked Roger if he'd like to fly with him. Roger accepted. After breakfast, they headed out to Currahee. As they landed, Roger was amazed at the damage. Rockets, and

pieces of rockets were scattered everywhere. The only identifiable objects in the refueling area were the metal ends of the fuel blivots, and the burned pumps. Cleanup was progressing, as the ground crew from C Battery and the grunts picked up the pieces of the rockets. They were throwing them into a large bomb crater, where a demolition team would later destroy them.

Roger also learned from the ground crew that Sergeant Clay had been wounded during the attack. The mortar round that landed on top of the forward operations bunker hit directly on a seam in the steel planking. It split the seam open, and Sergeant Clay had been directly under the blast. A piece of shrapnel opened a large cut right on the top of Clay's head. Clay refused to leave his post, and remained on the radio to coordinate the ARA attack. Roger learned that Clay had been wounded before Roger's section arrived on station that night, and he hadn't said a word about it to Roger. Sergeant Clay was later decorated for his actions that night. Roger was proud of the scruffy sergeant.

The next couple days, 1st Platoon was based at Camp Evans. Roger was glad they didn't have to return directly to Currahee. Poker games were the highlights of the evenings, as the 1st Platoon had the best card table in the Battery. Conversation at the poker table sometimes turned to stateside subjects.

Travis was fingering his cards. "You guys hear about Robertson?"

"No. What's our honorable clerk up to?"

Travis tapped his cigarette on the ashtray. "He got emergency leave back to the states today."

Roger studied Travis, but Ron didn't look up. Roger pictured the Battery clerk, hunched over his typewriter in the major's office. Very slender, always outgoing, and friendly to anyone who happened into the office. If he engaged them in conversation, it wasn't long before he brought out a picture of his bride. Robertson married her before the Battery left the states. She was very good looking, and Robertson was deeply in love with her. About as deeply in love as a nineteen-year-old could be, thought Roger.

Travis cleared his throat, and laid down his hand. "He threatened to go AWOL if the old man didn't give him leave. His wife wrote him a 'Dear John' letter."

Roger immediately felt sympathy for Robertson. "That's too bad," Roger looked at his cards without seeing them. He

thought back to his divorce, and how the first news had shaken him. His mind began to wander as he thought about Janet.

"Hey, Hunter, you gonna play, or what?" Jordan's voice washed the memory from Roger's mind.

"Huh? Yeah, sure. What's the bet?" Roger looked at the others around the table. This news made them all wonder about back home. Their expressions mirrored their concern. It wasn't much later that Roger and Justin gave up the game. They had both lost. Not too unusual for Roger, but very unusual for Justin. Justin slapped Roger on the shoulder as they got up from the table.

"How about a cup of coffee, Hunter?" Justin asked.

"Sounds good. Doesn't look like our night at the table, huh?"

They left the hootch together, and started across the open area toward the mess hall. Together they heard the swooshing rattle of rounds going through the air. As one, they both hit the ground as the rounds passed high overhead. They listened as the rounds continued far over Camp Evans, finally losing them in the noise of the camp around them. Roger turned his face toward Justin.

"Feel a little foolish, Cook?" Roger said with a grin.

"Yeah. Sure do. Those were friendlies, weren't they?"

"Yeah, they were. Do you suppose anyone saw us flatten out?"

Justin rolled over on one side and looked around. "I don't think so. If they had, they'd probably be laughing by now."

"I suppose so..... Ready?"

"Yup, sure am." Together they jumped up and continued walking to the mess hall as if nothing had happened. As they reached the mess hall, Justin began to giggle. It was catching, and Roger joined in. As they reached the coffee pot in the mess hall, they were both laughing so hard that they could hardly keep their cups from spilling. The night crew in the mess hall only watched them.

Justin nudged Roger in the ribs, and glanced toward the cooks. "It's OK. They just think we've had too much to drink." Again Roger laughed. They walked outside, but instead of returning to the hootch, headed up the hill to the hot spot. There they sat, and drank their coffee. Roger lit up a cigarette.

Justin began to talk of home. "I was in a military school before I joined the Army. My folks had a lot of

money, and they thought that would be the best thing for me. Funny how parents think. They thought it would make me grow up some, I guess. That's why flight school was so easy for me. I was already used to that kind of discipline and harassment. I don't know if they really intended for me to become a soldier. I haven't written to 'em yet since I've been over here. I don't think they know I'm a pilot, either."

"Are you kiddin', Justin?" Roger couldn't see Justin's face in the dark, but Justin sounded very serious. Roger found it difficult to understand Justin's feelings toward his parents. Justin was one of the best pilots Roger had ever met. He wasn't showy, or a braggart. He took the job very seriously, and Roger always felt more comfortable with Justin on his wing. Roger couldn't count the number of times that Justin had probably saved his bacon. And it had never been done with a bad comment. Even the night they landed at Currahee. Justin had never mentioned that night again. Justin didn't have much truck with the braggarts and show-offs, either. As likely as not, he'd con them into a game of gin rummy, and proceed to take them for as much as they were willing to give. Roger looked for the word to describe Justin's attitude. Finally it came to him. Professional. Justin was a professional soldier. Come to think of it, Roger mused, Justin would likely be a professional no matter what he did. Some of the new pilots in the unit considered Justin arrogant. Roger didn't feel that way, and probably the new pilots wouldn't either, once they got to know Justin. He and Justin had shared some hairy times in the cockpit together. That was where you got to know someone. Especially when the chips were down. Like the time in the POL area at Evans, when they had nearly crashed on that dark, rainy night. And the engine failure near LZ Ann. Through it all, Justin had remained very cool and collected.

The two of them continued to talk, long after the coffee cups were drained. A cool breeze stirred the grass around them, and the smells of Vietnam swept over them. The smell of diesel and outhouses, damp sandbags, and urine. It was almost as if the whole country was rotten. Roger knew he would never forget that smell, even if he lived to be a hundred. Justin agreed that it was the one thing they would probably never forget. After all was said and done, they would still remember the smell. Even after the dead were forgotten, and the names of the living were lost to the

ravages of time. But they spoke no more of home or family. Nor did they speak of the right or wrong of the war. It was a job they were assigned to do.

It was now June, not that Roger kept track of the months or the days as they passed. As a matter of fact, almost none of the pilots knew what day of the week it was. Paydays seemed to come occasionally, but these were usually mixed in between missions and odd hours, so they were hardly noticed. The pay wasn't all that great, anyway. Roger was getting just over \$500 per month, and \$110 of that was flight pay. Not much pay considering the hazards. Roger mentioned this to Travis.

"Well, they pay you for getting shot at. That's another thirty bucks a month, you know. That's the item down there in the corner of your pay slip. Think they call it hostile fire pay, or some such thing." Travis concentrated on the poker hand he was playing, and didn't seem to offer any more sage advice.

The days of the weeks and months ran together. The pilots didn't even know what the local time of day was. Most of them had their watches set to Greenwich Mean Time so they only had to look at their watch to log the proper times in the aircraft log books. If they had their watches set to local time, they would have had to convert it to Greenwich Mean Time before they logged it. At first, this is what they had done. But the long days and long nights confused them. It was just easier to set the watch on Greenwich time, and adjust to daylight and dark and meal times.

When there was a lot of action, there was no such thing as regular, anyway. Their unit was on call 24/7, and you simply slept and ate when you got a chance. The mess hall was absolutely great in supplying them chow, no matter whether it was at a regular meal time, or the middle of the night. When missions were back to back, they would send something to the ships during re-arming. Deke, the Operations clerk would alert the mess hall when ships were coming in.

Days of the week weren't noted, unless a pilot was a church goer. Most of them weren't. Services were held every Sunday somewhere, but sometimes the pilots were on duty. If they weren't on duty, the morning was a good time to catch up on sleep. But there was one reminder of the days of the week. At least for Monday. That was "big pill day". On Mondays, the large malaria pill had to be taken. It was given out at breakfast. Some of the airmen still had

problems taking the pill. It often gave them the trots. Some of them had adjusted to the pill quite nicely, but others had all kind of difficulties. Small, white pills were taken all the other days of the week. All to combat malaria. Travis complained that the disease was probably easier to take than the horse pills on Monday. Everyone agreed with him, but everyone took their pills. Mallory had it down to a science. If he was scheduled to fly that day, he would take half his pill with breakfast, and the other half with supper. He took a lot of teasing, because everyone accused him of taking only half his pill and throwing the other half away. Mallory always stated that this wasn't the case.

Travis even offered a reward to the other pilots in the 1st Platoon if they could spot Mallory throwing away his other half. An intricate spy network was set up, but no reward was ever paid.

As a diversion, some of the pilots began building model airplanes. It all started when someone bought a plastic model at the PX with a real engine. It was one of those ready-to-go jobs, with lines that stretched from the plane to a plastic control handle held by the operator. The plane flew in a circle around the operator who controlled its flight by raising and lowering the control handle.

Roger had worked with model airplanes when he was a kid -- not that many years before..... When this one crashed, he did the patch work on it, and cleaned the engine. It wasn't long before a care package arrived for one of the pilots that was chock full of models, engines, and other parts. The craze began. Soon all the pilots were building and flying models.

Just flying them in circles soon became too tame, and two operators flew them at the same time in the same circle. Then a new idea was hit upon by Bobby Wonder.

"How about some combat?" he asked.

"I've seen 'em do it back home, but they had crepe paper streamers on 'em," one of the pilots replied.

"What about toilet paper?" Bobby asked.

The intent was to trail a streamer from each model. The object was to clip the opponent's streamer with the propeller of your model. The toilet paper proved useless. It tore loose before the model could make one complete circle.

"Scrap the paper," Bobby challenged. "Who'll go plane against plane with me?" The game was born. The simplicity

was that there were no rules. Anything was legal, including cutting the opponent's control lines with your propeller.

The aerial battles were fierce, if short-lived. More time was spent repairing and rebuilding the little models than flying them.

As Roger stepped out of the hootch one afternoon, he noticed Bobby working over one of his models. Bobby's constant companion was "Short", a typical Vietnamese dog, that Bobby had adopted. No one knew where the mutt came from, and nobody asked. One day he was just there. When Bobby wasn't flying, Short followed him everywhere.

Roger approached the two of them. "What's the problem, Bobby?"

"I dunno. Can't seem to get this motor started."

"Might be the battery," Roger offered as he squatted down to get a closer look.

"Yeah, could be," Bobby disconnected the battery leads from the model's engine, and studied them for a moment.

"Can we test it?" As Bobby asked the question, his expression lit up as if he already had the answer. Bobby reached over and touched the leads to Short's nose.

The reaction was immediate as Short's ears shot up, and his feet scrambled for traction in the dirt. As short disappeared in full flight around the hootch, Bobby looked back at the battery leads.

"Nope, Hunter. Think the battery's OK."

Other diversions also occupied the pilots when they were on the ground. Reading books and writing letters were very popular. Many bought cheap guitars to learn a few chords, and make noise that resembled music. But, when things got dull, there was always the practical joke, and the competitiveness of a gang of nineteen-year-olds. It was difficult to believe these young men were making life-and-death decisions one day, and acting like a bunch of teenagers the next.

One of the most unique creations was exhibited just before lunch on a typically hot day. Again, Bobby was the instigator. As the 2nd Platoon pilots left their hootch, Bobby, Captain Riley, and Paul Grimes huddled in the doorway of the 3rd Platoon hootch. Suddenly a loud pop was heard, and a tennis ball whizzed past the 2nd Platoon pilots.

Dean Strickland located the source of the missile as they all ducked. As he ran toward the 3rd Platoon hootch, it's door swung open.

"Fire!"

Strickland ducked nimbly aside as another tennis ball shot past him. "All right. What have you guys come up with now?" Dean grated.

"Our very own bazooka, zoomie," Riley replied.

"Well, either you show me your secret weapon, or I'll smash all your tennis balls!"

"OK, OK," Riley relented. "It takes three of us to operate it, but it works pretty well, huh?"

Dean looked at the contraption. It was several soda cans taped together. "How does it work?"

Riley explained the weapon. Both the tops and bottoms were cut out of several soda cans, and they were taped together. On one end, the bottom was left in the last can. Holes were punched all around the bottom of this can. Another can with similar holes punched in the top was taped on next.

The affair was loaded with a tennis ball, lighter fluid was sprayed into the end can, and the whole tube was shaken hard. Then it was quickly aimed, and a burning lighter was introduced under the end can. With a pop, the lighter fluid ignited, and shot the tennis ball out the long end of the tube.

"Isn't that kind of hazardous?" Dean asked.

Riley shrugged his shoulders. "Well, yeah...., sort of. Could be.... We blew one apart. It depends on the mix of the lighter fluid and the air, I guess. That's why it takes three of us to fire it. Actually, it's less hazardous than fire missions, Dean, and it's fun to watch 2nd Platoon pilots when they come under fire. We thought we might learn some new battle tactics!"

Dean shook his head, and walked toward the mess hall. "You 3rd herd guys are nuts. No wonder you guys get more kills....."

Although a lot of missions continued to be flown, the conversation sometimes ran to what the pilots could expect when they returned to the states. Roger would have a year left to serve when he returned, if he kept his original DEROS (date to leave Vietnam). He would likely be sent to Fort Rucker as an instructor pilot. He wasn't looking forward to that kind of duty. Since he had been flying in Nam, he had realized how little the pilots fresh out of flight school knew. Not just about combat, because they weren't expected to know combat tactics. But about flying in general, and emergencies in particular. It had been Roger's job to train many of the new pilots who arrived in

the 1st Platoon, and he had seen first hand some of the bonehead stunts they had pulled.

That night Travis' aircraft had gone down on the Song Bo River was a classic example. Shortly after the incident, Drake had packed his gear and left quietly for another unit. Not much was said because C Battery had still been in the infusion process, and Drake was one of the pilots who had shipped over with the Battery. Roger had wondered if it was just coincidence, or if the two events were related. Late one evening, Roger and Travis were discussing the incident. Roger wondered aloud about the flame that had shot out of the engine just before the ship had gone down.

Travis took a long pull on his ever-present bottle of scotch before he answered. "You're right, Hunter. There was something that happened. I don't know what caused us to lose power the first time when we were hittin' the target. Nor do I know what happened the second time over the river when we lost all the power. But I thought it was a fuel problem. And you know the procedure for that. Roll off the throttle, move the fuel control from automatic to manual, and roll the throttle back on slowly. Well, I rolled the throttle off, and had Drake throw the switch into manual. I was rolling the throttle back on, when he threw the switch back into automatic. Jeez, you can imagine the rush of fuel that the engine got. No wonder we shot flame out the back! I couldn't believe that dumb dirt farmer had done it. But by then, it was too late to change anything. The engine was shot, and we were going down. If I hadn't had to fly the ship, I probably would have killed Drake right then and there. But he was lucky. I needed both hands on the controls."

But Drake was the exception rather than the rule. Most of the pilots in C Battery were above average. Roger didn't rate himself among the better pilots. He was probably more cautious than the average for the unit. Major Brown had told him after one harrowing mission that it was better to bring the crew back in one piece, than toss it all away in a mess of scattered debris over the jungle. Returning meant that one would have the chance to fight again, and Brown valued experienced pilots. Roger had taken this message to heart, and so far was noted as one of the pilots that could usually avoid taking very many hits.

Thinking about the dangers he had faced so far in country, and the dangers that he would face as an instructor pilot back in the states, Roger decided to extend his tour.

He had learned that a six-month extension would release him from active duty when the tour was over. Sure, he had had one engine failure so far, and he had taken a couple of hits. But this was about the busiest part of his tour. He knew that during the next rainy season, the forward elements would be pulled back, just like they had been the previous rainy season. That meant living at Camp Evans, not in the field.

Roger dropped over to the Headquarters hootch after lunch one hot afternoon, and the clerk helped him fill out the paperwork. As Roger left the office, he wondered how his folks would take it. Most importantly, he wondered if they could understand his reasons for the extension. He had now survived over six months in country. Although one of his crew had been hit, he hadn't lost anyone yet. And he felt as if he had a great deal more control over his destiny as a section leader in an ARA Battery than he would as one of a great number of instructor pilots in the stateside Army. In addition, he wasn't anxious to return to the southern US to live. That was the location of most of the Army's training bases. So why not extend? Even though he wasn't getting rich on the pay, there was little opportunity to spend it in country. He now had all the bills paid off from his divorce, and from here on, his pay would build him a good stake for college when he returned home. Especially since his earnings were tax free!

Besides the six-month extension would also give him a thirty-day leave. He would be able to go home for a good Christmas. And he still had his R&R to take. Roger wanted to go to Hawaii, but he realized that was almost impossible. Hawaii was largely reserved for the married personnel. Well, if not there, then where? He could go to Hong Kong, Thailand, Kuala Lumpur, the Philippines, or ... Australia. Now there was a place that sounded interesting. He had never had a chance to travel before. And what were his chances of getting to Australia if he didn't go on an R&R? Not very good. Roger decided then, that Australia would be the place. He wanted someplace that he could forget about the war. How could he forget looking at slanted eyes? Roger's mind was made up. But he didn't want to go too early. He would try for it at about the nine-month mark. It would be a nice break.

Cobras were now replacing some of the Charlie models in the Battery. Roger hadn't yet qualified in a Cobra, but Travis had said that Roger might be in the next group to go.

Roger was excited to learn to fly a "Snake", as they were referred to. But not because he thought they were a better aircraft. The C-models took a good pilot to handle them. The Cobras had more of everything, but they didn't require the finesse of the feather-light touch of an overloaded C-model. The Cobras had enough power that it was never a requirement to bounce them off the ground.

One evening late in June, Roger was assigned to the five-minute section. Mortar patrol was required that evening. Roger had been given a Cobra and a C-model as his section. Lt. Delaney was designated as Roger's pilot in the Cobra. The other crew, flying the Charlie model, was from the 2nd Platoon. Gene Downs was the aircraft commander in the Charlie Model. The five-minute section had taken the 3/4 ton truck down to the main flight line while the hot section was out on the mortar patrol flight. The old man was flying along with the hot section. All three ships had completed the mission, and were landing on the hot spot just after dark. Roger was already in the back of the 3/4 ton, waiting for the other pilots from the five-minute section to arrive, so they could return to the Battery area.

The ships on the hot spot had let their engines cool at flight idle for a couple of minutes, and were just now shutting down completely. The turbines whined their last gasps as the fuel was shut off to each one. As Roger watched, something bright and sparkling rose above the three ships on the hot spot. It looked like a skyrocket on the Fourth of July as it hung briefly over the ships, and then seemed to plunge into the Battery area. It hit with a loud bang and a bright flash. Roger instantly recognized it as incoming. It looked like an RPG. As he grabbed his helmet bag, he saw more incoming following on the trail of the first. He also heard the whine of a turbine, as one of the ships on the hot spot was able to recover from shutdown and restart its engine.

Roger sprinted across the flight line toward his ship. The explosions in the Battery area continued. Roger slipped his helmet out of its bag, and jumped into the front seat of the waiting Cobra. He waited impatiently for the sound of the turbine to begin its whine as explosions continued to rip the darkness behind the ship. Roger looked around, but he was in the ship all by himself. He wondered what was taking Delaney so long. He jumped out of the ship, and yelled for Delaney. There was no answer. Roger ran down the flight line looking for his pilot. Roger hadn't seen

any incoming rounds hit near the flight line. He spotted someone crouched in a shallow depression just off the flight line. Roger stopped, and called out Delaney's name breathlessly. Delaney raised his head.

"Dammit, Delaney, what are you doing down there? We gotta get that ship off the ground!" Roger turned and ran back toward the Cobra. As he reached it, he heard the yell, "clear", from the wing ship. They were already cranking up. Delaney reached the ship as Roger buckled into his seat. Roger yelled 'clear' as Delaney climbed into his cockpit.

The blasts from the Battery area continued until the whine of the turbine drowned them out. Roger strapped in, and plugged in his helmet cord. Time moved very slowly as the engine caught, and began to come up to speed. As soon as he heard the hiss of the radios, Roger called Evans tower for takeoff clearance. There was no hesitation by the tower operator as he responded to the call. Delaney picked the ship up to a hover. Roger made an instrument check as they began moving forward.

"Head for the perimeter just south of our area," Roger said over the intercom to Delaney. Roger cut the instrument lights on his panel way down. As Delaney brought the ship over the south perimeter of Evans, Roger scanned the ground ahead in the dark. Then he called base artillery, and asked for flares. As the first flare popped, Roger spotted someone running down a rice paddy dike off to his left. Roger attempted to engage the turret to follow the target, and with a sinking feeling realized that the gun system wasn't turned on.

"Delaney, bring the weapon system hot. I think I just saw a gook running down a dike off to our left." Roger twisted in his seat in an attempt to keep the running figure in sight. But in the swirling shadows of the flare, Roger lost the target. Roger then called Six Six to find out if they had clearance to fire in this area. Six Six said that they were clear to fire. Delaney brought the ship around, and Roger tried to spot the target. Unable to find the figure, Roger opened fire with the minigun on a clump of brush near where he thought he had last seen the target. As the flares moved closer to their position, Delaney continued to fly back and forth over the area.

Downs called Roger on the air-to-air channel. "Hey Griffin Hotel,, I've got one heck of a vibration."

Roger could scarcely make out the transmission. Downs did have a bad vibration. "Were you hit during takeoff?"

"Naw Think we clipped the tail rotor on the ship ahead when we were coming out of our parking spot. The way this thing is shaking, I'd like to set it down."

Roger keyed his mike, "Go ahead, Foxy. Break. Six Six, have you got us in sight?"

"Roger that, Hotel," Major Brown answered. "What have you got?"

"Nothing now, but I saw a gook running down a dike over here. We'll look around if you can cover us. Foxy's got a bad vibration, and he's gonna land."

There was a slight pause, and then Six Six returned the call. "I've got you now. And I copied Fox's call, Hotel."

Delaney continued to fly over the area, but nothing could be seen. After about a half hour, the ships gave up the search. They fired a few pair of rockets in the vicinity of the sighting, but were unable to get the enemy to respond.

After refueling, they returned to the flight line. The 3/4 ton gave them a ride up to the Battery area. Roger was disappointed that they had been unable to find the enemy. They had apparently been waiting for the hot section to land, and their intent was to destroy the ships on the hot spot just after they landed and shut down. Whether or not the enemy had intended, most of their RPG's landed directly among the hootches in the Battery area.

As the first RPG arced over the hot spot and came abreast of the 1st Platoon hootch, it hit the power line leading from the generator to the 1st Platoon hootch. The shrapnel from the blast had shotgunned 1st Platoon's hootch. Justin had been lying on his bunk, the one above Roger's, when the blast shook the hootch. The broken power line had immediately thrown the hootch into darkness. Justin dove from his bunk to the floor as other blasts shook the area.

Travis slept on the bottom bunk at the other end of the hootch. Above him slept Riley. Travis knew what the blast was immediately, and rolled out of bed onto the floor. Riley was a little slower, but attempted the same maneuver. When Riley dropped, he landed right on top of Travis. The impact knocked the wind out of Travis, and he was unable to say anything. Riley grabbed him, and began to shake him. The harder he shook, the more difficulty Travis had trying to recover his breath. Ehlers slept in the same end of the hootch as Travis and Riley. He was hit in the neck by shrapnel from the same blast.

One other casualty was also caused by this blast. One of the NCO's, a Sergeant Glazier, was just leaving his hootch, and was cut down by shrapnel. The unfortunate sergeant was directly in line with the blast. The medic's hootch faced the NCO hootch, and as the medic grabbed his bag and departed for the bunker, he tripped over the casualty. The sergeant's hand had nearly been severed by the blast. The medic quickly went to work on him. The action saved the sergeant's life. He probably would have bled to death before anyone else found him.

Several hootches were hit in the attack. The ammo personnel were very lucky. Their hootch was hit twice. The first RPG went through the roof, splintered the floor, and hit the ground under the corner of the hootch before it exploded. The blast tore part of the roof off the hootch, but it caused no injuries. The second RPG also went through the roof, hit one soldier a glancing blow as he lay face down on his bunk, and stuck in the rifle rack in the hootch. It failed to detonate, leaving only one wounded in its wake.

As the attack continued, the men of the Battery scrambled to the bunkers. The pilots from the 3rd Platoon reacted quite quickly, and raced to their bunker. Most were in their skivvies and socks as they sprinted the short distance to safety. The platoon leader, Captain Jack Nelson, was the last to reach the bunker. Very heavysset, Nelson had to wait his turn to enter. Finally, he pushed the others in front of him into the bunker, and attempted to dive in on top of them. As he did, a blast erupted behind him, and he took a small piece of shrapnel in the buttocks. This propelled him even further into the pile of humanity in front of him as he screamed in terror. As they unsorted themselves, someone asked who had been hit. In the darkness of the bunker, no one answered.

The 1st Platoon also ran to their bunker after the initial explosions. In the dark, confusion reigned until a nose count was taken in the bunker. Ehler's neck was checked, and the wound was found to be only minor. Duane had not even noticed it until he had rested in the bunker for a few minutes. Travis had two broken ribs, but now he didn't know they were broken. He only knew they hurt.

When the all clear sounded, C Battery came out of the bunkers, and began to inspect the damage. A demolitions team was called to remove the unexploded RPG's. The wounded were taken over to the med-evac area. One of the first was Sergeant Glazier. The medic had remained with him

throughout the entire attack. It was the end of the war for him. The medic was afraid that Glazier would lose his hand. One of the tail fins from the aerial grenade had nearly severed his wrist.

Roger rejoined his platoon as they inspected the hootch. It was then that the shrapnel was found sticking in the board above Justin's bunk. It's path was traced from the holes in his mosquito netting. It must have passed nearly between Justin's feet, sailed the length of the bunk, and imbedded itself in the hootch framing just inches above Justin's head. The roof had several holes in it, and the plywood wall nearest the blast looked like a shotgun had fired at it at close range. Luckily, no one had been in the bunks opposite Roger's and Justin's, or they would have been hit. Pieces of shrapnel were found throughout the hootch in the following days.

The enemy attack was the talk of the unit for the next few days. Everyone kept recounting how lucky, or unlucky, the unit had been. Only seven casualties were reported in all, and most of those were minor wounds. Captain Nelson even reported his wound in the tender part of his backside. As humiliating as it was, he never talked of the Purple Heart he received for the encounter.

Then it was 1st Platoon's turn to go back to Currahee. They stayed their three days, but there were no assaults on Currahee.

When they returned, travel orders had been cut for two of them. Travis was gong on R&R to Thailand, and Hunter had the coveted orders for Cobra school. There were three others that would be going to Cobra school with Roger, and he was happy for that. The night before they left, they all stayed up late to celebrate. Travis killed his bottle of scotch, while most of the others drank beer.

48: Vung Tau and Cobra Transition

With their travel orders in hand, the five pilots were flown to Phu Bai to catch a ride south. Travis was leaving from Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon, while those going to Cobra transition school were headed for Vung Tau. Vung Tau was on the coast, not far from Saigon, so they traveled as a party to Bien Hoa. They landed there late in the evening. As they departed the C-130, Travis was already looking for a bar. It didn't take them long to find one -- the Bien Hoa Air Force Officers' Club.

As they entered the wooden double doors of the club, they felt the rush of cool air from the air conditioning. The inside of the club was dim after the bright sunlight outside, and it took their eyes a minute to adjust. As they stood there, the bartender was mixing a drink for a customer at the long bar at the far wall.

Travis held his hand to his ear, "Did you all hear that?" The others looked at each other expectantly, but no one said anything.

Travis, his eyebrows raised, grinned widely at them. "That, my valley chums, was ice in a glass. A real glass! And real ice! I can hardly wait oops!" Travis stopped suddenly, and held out his arms to keep the others from passing him. "Listen again." They all strained their ears, but failed to hear what Travis had heard. As they started to move, Travis held them back. "There, did you hear it that time?"

Then Roger understood, "It was a toilet flushing!"

Travis turned to him, "That's right! We must be back in civilization! Yahoo!" Ron then made a bee-line for the bar. The others followed close behind. Ron quickly ordered a double scotch. Jordan ordered a whiskey sour. As the orders for drinks continued, Roger hesitated. He finally ordered a beer. He hadn't drunk hard liquor for so long that he was afraid to try it.

With drinks in hand, they picked a nearby table, and sat down. Quietly, they savored the atmosphere of the club. They marveled at the long mirror behind the bar, the heavy carpet, and the chrome chairs. It was like living in another world, compared to where they had been. As they began to unwind, they couldn't help overhearing an Air Force pilot at the table next to theirs. He was telling his companion about a mission that had taken him over the Ashau

Valley. He went on at length about the hazards of the Ashau until Travis could take no more. The others watched with smiles as Ron slid his chair up to the other table. Ron took a long drink of his scotch, and brought his glass down hard on the table. The two Air Force pilots were a little surprised at the interruption.

With a great display of mock modesty, Travis began, "I couldn't help overhear the description of your last mission. You know, I can understand how you feel about the Valley. It is a dangerous place, you know. Lots of anti-aircraft weapons and such. By the way, might I direct your attention to the next table?" Travis indicated the other Army pilots with a sweeping wave of his arm. "See these fellows seated behind me? Each and every one of them is a veteran of over twenty-five missions into that same valley over which you flew today. As a matter of fact," Travis pointed to Roger, "Hunter and I just yesterday returned from two nights in the Valley. See, we sleep out there at a fire base. But that's only so we can get to our targets more quickly" At this point, the storyteller got up and strode out of the club. His partner remained behind.

The Army pilots all laughed as the first Air Force pilot left. The other Air Force pilot was asked to join the group. He hesitated at first, but then slid over to their table. He listened in awe as the group related first one war story, then another. Soon he ordered a round of drinks from the bar, and the stories continued. The Air Force pilot even stayed with the Army pilots through dinner, and more drinks after. As the hour grew late, he even helped them locate the transient officers' quarters. Again, Roger was amazed by real beds with mattresses and box springs, even though they were on bunk beds. Roger took a lower bunk, and was happy to roll in after a long shower. He had marveled at the concrete floor in the shower, real mirrors, and hot and cold running water with real faucets.

Several hours later, the air raid siren sounded at Bien Hoa. Although there weren't many transients present, those that were in the building quickly evacuated their beds and raced for the bunkers. Roger was awakened by the incoming, but didn't have the foggiest idea of the bunker's location. So, with no flashlight, he elected to stay in his bunk. The only casualty suffered by the transients in the raid was one sprained toe, as someone found a bunk support in the dark during the mad race to the bunker.

The next day, Travis parted ways with the rest of the group, seeking Tan Son Nhut and the shining bird to liberty. The others caught a flight to Vung Tau on a Chinook.

The arrival in Vung Tau was anticlimactic after Bien Hoa, but the C Battery pilots were anxious to get out on the town. They checked into their hotel, named the Pink Panther. From what Roger knew about French architecture, the city seemed to abound with it. The hotel where they stayed was more of a French villa than a hotel. It was two to a room, and the rooms were quite small. Two single beds occupied the main room. The bathroom was something else. Upon arrival, Roger's roommate walked into it, and let out a cry of surprise.

Roger rushed to the door, and looked in, "What's the problem? We got snakes? Or women?"

Dean Strickland was a warrant officer from Pennsylvania. He stood with his back to Roger looking up. Roger also looked up. A huge shower head hung ominously above Dean.

Roger tipped back his hat, "Wow! That is some shower head, huh?"

Dean turned around, "Yeah, but look at the rest of it." He stepped aside so Roger could get a better view. The sink was right behind Dean, and the commode was located next to it.

"How about that," Roger commented, "You can go to the head and shower at the same time. That is somthin' else." The entire bathroom was tiled with large square tiles. There was a drain in the floor. A sign was tacked to the bathroom door. It proclaimed, "Non-potable Water". Roger read the sign. "Oh great, and we can't even drink it."

Dean stepped back into the main room, "Well, the price is right, anyway."

"I wonder what we are paying for this thing."

"Oh, I don't know. French villa in the center of one of the greatest recreation areas in South Vietnam. Less than a mile from the beach. Entertainment nightly close at hand. Probably in the neighborhood of one hundred dollars per night."

"I wonder if that's Army script, or American greenbacks?" Roger said disgustedly.

Dean only laughed. "Does it really matter? We might as well enjoy it. These were probably top-notch accommodations twenty years ago."

"Maybe when the French had this country. I can't imagine Americans being too excited about that shower setup."

"Are you kidding? That's all part of exotic foreign travel. We can't complain too loudly, anyway. After all, it is a personal shower."

Roger had to admit that Dean had a point. They showered, and readied for a night on the town.

At the Pacific Hotel, they found a large bar. They spent most of the afternoon in the bar, although none of them drank heavily. The next day marked the first day of their training, and none of them wanted to be in bad shape for that. The next few days were like a vacation for the C Battery pilots. Although the training was intensive, they had their nights free, and they lived them to the fullest.

In every bar there were lots of Vietnamese girls. Whenever men entered the bar, the girls immediately joined them at a table. Their hands were everywhere, and they constantly pleaded with their companion to buy them "Saigon teas". Saigon teas were merely Coke and ice, but the prices were about a buck apiece in military script. The servicemen in Vietnam were not allowed to carry US dollars, greenbacks, but carried MPC (Military Payment Certificates) instead. The script was in the same denominations as US bills, and there was even paper money printed in coin values. MPC was changed from time to time to avoid counterfeit operations. It was locally called 'funny money' by the troops who carried it.

The tea girls made their money by getting the servicemen to buy drinks, and as long as the servicemen bought "teas" for the girls, they continued to accompany the servicemen. It was the same in all the bars in Vung Tau. Vung Tau was not only a training site, but it was also an in-country R&R center. Thus, there were a lot of servicemen with a lot of money out for a good time. In the evening, the bands began, and in some bars the tea girls danced with the GI's. Being an officer, even a warrant, had its advantages, because the tea girls knew that the officers generally carried more money. Thus, it was more profitable for the tea girl if she could hook up with an officer. It was like every man's dream -- having a horde of girls scrambling to spend time with him. It also led to some delicate situations as GI's sometimes became attached to one girl. Finding her with another GI after some heavy drinking sometimes led to fights.

To keep the situation in check, both military MP's and Vietnamese police, commonly called 'white mice', patrolled the area heavily. From what Roger could learn, the nickname, "white mice", originated from the way the Vietnamese police dressed -- white, hat or helmet, white gloves, and sunglasses. Some parts of the city were off limits to servicemen after certain hours, and there was a general curfew for all. Landing in the Vung Tau jail was not a pleasant experience, according to the briefing received at the training school, and it was especially frowned upon for officers. If they were to conduct business after hours, they were supposed to use discretion. This was sometimes difficult after a heady night of carousing. Traveling in pairs or more was encouraged. It was claimed that the enemy also used Vung Tau as an R&R center, so there was little to fear in terms of enemy action. It was friendly action, between different branches of the service, or between the troops and Vietnamese 'cowboys' that was deemed dangerous. 'Cowboys' was a term applied to local Vietnamese that sometimes ran in groups, and were not too fond of the Americans ravaging their women.

One of their first evenings in Vung Tau, Roger and Dean visited a bar just off the main street. It was somewhat quieter than some of the other fancier bars. The two of them just wanted to spend a quiet evening out on the town. They weren't looking for female accompaniment, either, which grew old quickly in the Vung Tau style. Drinking and talking quietly was a welcome diversion when the stuttering report of automatic weapons fire shattered the atmosphere. Dean and Roger found themselves on the floor under the table. Roger peeked up to see what the other patrons were doing, and found that everyone else had done the same thing. Roger began to laugh, and Dean soon joined in. The reactions to gunfire were almost universal, no matter the race, creed or religion. Soon, other heads began to pop up. It wasn't long before the bar returned to normal.

Roger and Dean partied late the next night at one of the more popular drinking establishments. Although the tea girls were not supposed to meet with GI's after hours, they sometimes did. It was all right for them to pair off during business hours, and even disappear for a while, as long as the proprietor got his cut. If the girls free-lanced, he was cut out, and that wasn't very popular. Roger and Dean hooked up with a pair that were sharing the same apartment in the off-limits side of town. As the evening ensued, and

the glasses were refilled many times, the girls got down to business. The assigned meeting place was decided upon for the night. Dean and Roger left shortly before closing hours, thinking they might have a hard time finding the right streets.

The plan worked well, until Dean got nervous later in the evening at the girls' apartment. He decided that it was time to return to the Pink Panther. Roger tried his best to talk Dean out of it, as Roger felt it would be much safer to negotiate the route early in the morning. But Dean was adamant, and the pair quietly left. Roger estimated they had to cover fifteen or twenty blocks. During a narrow escape near the center of town, the two pilots separated quite unintentionally. Dean took a back alley, while Roger hid near a small cart as a jeep carrying white mice passed nearby.

Roger waited for Dean to appear, but after several minutes passed with no Dean, Roger decided to head out alone. Between the Pink Panther and the downtown area was a park that covered several city blocks. Roger cut through the park, thinking it was better to stay off the streets. He ran into a herd of cows in the darkness, and spooked them. From almost out of nowhere, a pair of headlights cut through the darkness. Roger looked in the direction of the headlights, but he already knew it was the white mice. He ducked against a tree in the park. He could see that the two occupants in the jeep were wearing white helmets. That was the badge of the white mice. If it had only been MP's, Roger might have tried to bribe them. But he wasn't at all sure how the white mice would handle the situation.

Roger guessed that he had about five blocks to cover now. He watched the jeep as it slowly cruised the perimeter of the park. When it reached the far side, he broke from his cover and sprinted toward the hotel. As he left the park, the white mice spotted him. Roger cut through an alley to confuse his pursuers, and ran on toward the hotel. The trip through the alley had thrown them off a little, and gave Roger just the edge he needed. As he sprinted the last block to the Pink Panther, he heard the jeep round the corner behind him. It was now a race, and Roger thought he was sure to win, except ... he had forgotten about the gate at the hotel. It would now be closed. But there would be a guard there. Roger hoped the guard would be understanding. His heart pounded in his chest, and his wind was ragged as he approached the gate.

"Hey, ... open the gate!" Roger yelled as he approached. He could see the guard stop, and look in his direction.

"Don't screw around! The white mice are after me! Please, open the gate!" Roger was now almost at the gate. He could hear the jeep roaring behind him. At first, the guard at the gate hesitated. Roger hoped he wouldn't give him any trouble. Then the guard opened the personnel entrance. Roger sprinted through. As he passed the guard, he said, "I'll be right back, mate. Just don't let those mice in here!" Roger ran up the stairs to the second floor, and hid in a doorway.

Peeking around the corner, he could see the jeep stopped in front of the gate. Roger could hear the gate guard speaking to the white mice. He kept insisting that he didn't understand what they were saying. Nice twist, thought Roger, who had seen a reversal of that situation several times. At length, the jeep left, and Roger went downstairs to his room. Sorting through his traveling bag, he found what he was looking for, and headed back toward the gate. When he reached the gate guard, his breathing had almost returned to normal.

Roger held out the bottle of whiskey, "Here. This is for you. Thanks a lot for the help, man. That was a little close. Uh, ...say, there might be another guy coming along in a few minutes. Do him the same favor, will you?"

The gate guard took the bottle, and quickly hid it in the guard shack. "Thanks a lot. I wasn't sure what the heck was going on at first. If you hadn't had such good English, I don't think I would have opened the gate."

Roger reached into his pocket for a cigarette. "Smoke?" he asked the guard.

"Yeah, thanks. How far had those guys been chasing you?"

Roger lit both cigarettes. "From the park. I almost lost 'em when I ducked into an alley, but they spotted me again."

The guard chuckled. "No problem. But you might leave a note in the shack if it's gonna happen again."

"Well, this was sort of unplanned."

"I understand," the guard grinned.

"Say, pass it on to your buddies, will you? We might have this problem again, and it would help if you would warn 'em. We'll make it worth their while."

The guard leaned closer to Roger, "Are you a pilot?"

"Yeah. We're from up in I Corps. All the villages are off limits to us, so we don't get much of a chance to fool around."

"I get your drift, sir. And I'll pass the word along."

"Thanks a lot, soldier. G'night."

"G'night."

Roger walked to his room. It seemed pretty empty without Dean. Roger hoped that Dean would make it. Roger undressed, and fell into bed. He needed some sleep for the next day's training.

When Roger awoke the next morning, the sun was shining on the slats in the door of the room. He rolled over. Dean was curled up on his bunk. He still had his clothes on, and they were covered with mud. Roger chuckled to himself. At least Dean'd made it.

The next week was busy with the training in the Cobras. Their IP's called them 'Snakes'. Roger found that the Cobra handled quite differently than the Charlie model Hueys. But it wasn't anything he couldn't master. He had only one serious problem. On a return flight from the training area, Roger was flying from the front seat. His mind was wandering as he watched the white sand of the beach pass beneath them. Suddenly the IP cut the throttle. Roger downed the pitch, and jammed the right pedal to the floor, like he would do to trim the C-model. The Cobra shuddered as there was a loud thud behind Roger. Then a second one. It took that long for the IP to recover from his shock. The IP overrode Roger on the pedals, and brought them to neutral.

A shaken voice came over the intercom, "Do you know what you just did?"

Roger knew that whatever it was, it was something serious. That loud noise probably had a lot to do with it, too. "Negative," Roger answered.

"That's called mast bumping. When you lose power in a Snake, and you drop that right pedal to the floor like you did, you can get into it. You can also do it if you get into a negative G-force situation. Like when you roll over into a dive, if you do it quick enough. Anyway, the highest number of strikes that's been recorded when the pilots walked away was three. We just had two."

Roger was unnerved. He hadn't realized that they had come that close. As he reached for the mike switch, he could feel the hair on his neck rise. "I understand what

you're saying," he said softly. "Sort of like baseball. Three strikes, and you're out."

"Something like that," the IP returned. They flew the rest of the way back to the training field in silence.

As their training wound down, they had a lot of fun with the IP's. Many of them had never worked in a line unit in country, and they were anxious to hear the stories of the pilots. The talk around the bar in the Pink Panther in the afternoon was lively with war stories.

One afternoon, the bunch was just coming into the bar after training. Roger was one of the first ones to enter. The bar was empty except for one lone figure sitting on one of the tall stools. He was wearing civilian clothes. He turned to Roger as Roger placed his order. Roger couldn't help but notice the blonde hair and striking blue eyes. Roger smiled, and commented on the blonde hair. The young man smiled a warm smile. It wasn't long before Roger engaged him in conversation. His name was Gene Lindsay, and he was from the Midwest, but he had visited Washington State. As Gene began to talk of his relatives that he had in Washington, Roger gasped, and turned to the bar maid.

"Say, could you give my cousin and I another drink?" Roger asked.

Gene looked closely at Roger. "Cousin?" he asked.

Roger smiled, and swirled the ice in his glass. "Yeah, that's right, Gene. I knew I had relatives in the Midwest, but I'd never met any of 'em before today. I can tell you who all your relatives are in Washington, 'cause they're mine, too."

Although the two of them found it hard to believe, it was true. They were cousins. They spent the entire evening together, swapping stories, and discussing the people they knew. Roger made Gene promise to meet him the next afternoon so Roger could get a picture of him. Roger wanted to surprise his folks with it. He knew they would be both pleased and surprised. Roger's dad had helped Gene's grandfather build his house.

That was the high point of Cobra transition school. It seemed like no time at all before the C Battery pilots were headed back for I Corps. The training had been a nice diversion from the day-to-day life in combat. On the day they left, Roger had to buy another hat. He had run into a soldier from New Zealand in Vung Tau on their last night there. The 'Kiwi' had persuaded Roger to trade, after they had nearly fought. Roger had mistakenly taken the man for

an Australian, and had called him an 'Aussie'. The New Zealander had immediately taken offense to the comment, and challenged Roger on the spot. Tempers cooled quickly, however, as reason prevailed, and explanations were traded. The New Zealander joined them for a night on the town.

The return from Vung Tau brought the newly transitioned pilots back into the real war. Again it was daily missions against an enemy who was never seen, and rarely heard. Those pilots already transitioned flew both Snakes and C-models with equal ease. Roger liked the additional power and carrying capacity of the Cobra, but he still hated to lose the additional eyes of the crew behind the pilots. He didn't feel as comfortable in the Cobra, and it was always nice to be assigned to one of the old Charlie models. Although the Charlies were tired and patched, the crews were especially proud of them, and worked very hard to keep them in the best condition possible.

Overnights were still being held at Currahee, but as July gave way to August, it was apparent that the forward areas were going to be abandoned once again. Two sections still stood by at Currahee by day, and they were usually busy. One of the high points of the day of standby at Currahee was the flight out to the fire base in the early morning. It had become a habit to fly low level along the Song Bo River on the trip. In the Cobras, it was also a time to test the turret weapons. And what better way to test them than on live targets? Alligators were sometimes seen, and it was considered great sport to fire on them with the minigun from the turret.

On one of these trips, Roger was flying in the front seat of the Cobra with McCallister in the back seat. As they cruised along the river at treetop height, Roger watched the banks closely for signs of alligators. Spotting one slipping off the bank, Roger swung the turret onto the target and squeezed the trigger for the minigun. A single round fired from the weapon before it jammed. Roger immediately switched to the thumper trigger, and squeezed it with his thumb without thinking. The recoil from the 40 mm. grenade launcher surprised Ed McCallister into thinking the ship was taking fire. Ed rared back on the cyclic, standing the ship on its tail to avoid what he thought was enemy fire. The sudden change in attitude of the ship took Roger by surprise, and the sighting station slipped from his hands. As it did, it cracked him sharply across the knees. As Roger attempted to recover his grip, Ed leveled the ship quickly. The sighting station whipped upward and caught

Roger a sharp blow on the chin. Roger swore as the taste of salty blood filled his mouth.

Gaining control of the sighting station, Roger raised his right hand high in the air so Ed could see it, and calmly gave Ed the finger.

Ed keyed the intercom, "What's that for, Hotel? Did we take fire down there, or what?"

Roger shook his head as he looked at Ed in the rear view mirror. "That was the thumper, meathead!"

"The thumper?? Jesus, I thought we were taking fire. Why didn't you use the minigun?"

"I did, but it only fired one round and then jammed."

Ed began to laugh. "Yeah, and what's that blood on your face?"

Roger quickly wiped his mouth with the back of his flying glove. "The sighting station got away from me with your avoidance-of-fire tactical maneuver."

Ed's wide grin filled the mirror, "Bucked you off, did it?"

"Yeah, but not before I got the 'gator, Ed."

"Next time let me know before you open up with the thumper. I even spilled my coffee back here."

Another of the missions taken on by C Battery was convoy cover. Trucks laden with supplies from Camp Eagle had to cover the road built between the camp on the coast, and the fire bases located near the Ashau Valley. Tanks and APC's (Armored Personnel Carriers) accompanied the convoys, but they liked air cover and its quick response to attack. However, with all the hours the unit was flying, Major Brown had decided that convoy cover could be accomplished by a single ship, rather than a section. If trouble was encountered, the single ship would do what it could while scrambling out another section to help out. These convoy missions were the most boring affairs with little to do but fly circles over the convoy as it crawled along the dusty road below.

On one particular day, Roger and Tim Davis had received the dreaded mission. They were assigned a Cobra, and loaded up with as much fuel as they could carry. This would allow them to remain over the convoy without relief for a longer period. They had been circling for about an hour, when a problem appeared. Roger had just put out a cigarette in the ashtray when he noticed smoke curling up from under the instrument panel. Thinking that his cigarette was probably still burning, he opened the ashtray to check it. But the

smoke wasn't coming from the ashtray, and now it was really pouring forth. Tim hadn't yet noticed smoke in the front seat because of the air flow through the cockpit.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Hey, Tim, I got smoke back here, and I can't tell where it's coming from. How about you taking the ship while I get on the circuit breakers?"

Tim's excitement showed in his voice as he answered Roger, and took control.

Roger began trying to pull out the circuit breakers to isolate the cause of the smoke. As he did, the smoke continued to pour into the cockpit, making it difficult to see and breathe. The circuit breakers were located in a panel just outside the armor paneling on the left side of the cockpit. The panel was set down low enough that it was difficult to reach, and the circuit breakers themselves were almost impossible to pull out using only one hand. Twisting around in the seat, Roger was able to get both hands to the panel, and he began pulling out the breakers. Sweating heavily, he managed to get some of them out, but the smoke was getting worse.

Roger keyed the intercom again, "Hey, Tim, I'm shutting off the electrical power. Those breakers are a bitch to get out, and it's getting awfully smoky back here. If you want to get my attention, bang on the canopy, huh?"

"Will do," Tim responded.

Roger cut the electrical power, and continued to work on the circuit breakers. The smoke began to clear from the cockpit, and Roger rested his arms once or twice as they began to cramp from the awkward position. At last, the final breaker was out. Roger turned the electrical power back on. Smoke began to fill the cockpit once again. Roger swore, and turned the power back off. Feeling a change of power in the engine, Roger looked outside the cockpit. Tim had the ship set up for a landing at Blaze. Roger yelled at Tim, and took control of the ship. Roger didn't want to land at Blaze. Maintenance would be hopping mad if the pilots set the ship down at Blaze for an electrical problem. Roger wanted to take it back to Camp Evans. Climbing out above Blaze, Roger turned on the electrical power again. As soon as the radios warmed up, he put out a call for anyone on the Battery frequency.

Griffin Six Six answered the call, and Roger quickly explained the situation. Roger would need another ship to replace them on the convoy cover, and they would be heading back to Camp Evans via the Song Bo River. He noted that

they would be out of radio contact because of the electrical problem. Major Brown acknowledged the message. Roger then climbed higher to give them more altitude in case of other problems. Roger was aware that problems rarely come one at a time. The additional altitude would give them plenty of time to turn on the radios and put out a distress call if anything else went wrong.

As they were crossing over the last ridge of mountains before they entered the coastal plain, Roger was feeling very good about his decision to continue on to Camp Evans rather than landing at Blaze. It was then that the engine noise changed pitch slightly. Roger looked down at the tachometer. The rpm was dropping slightly. Roger watched closely as it dropped a little, then stabilized. Then it began to drop again. Roger thumped the gauge in frustration, but the rpm continued its downward fall.

Roger looked over the console at the back of Tim's helmet. Then he yelled, "Hey, Tim, we're losing rpm. Looks like we're going in...."

Tim screamed, and braced his hands against the sides of the canopy as Roger lowered the pitch to initiate the autorotation. Tim continued to yell, but Roger ignored him as Roger trimmed the ship and switched on the electrical power. They were now descending rapidly, but they had probably thirty seconds before they would land. Roger was glad for the extra altitude he had gained earlier. As the radios warmed up, he put out a call.

"Any Griffin on this frequency, this is One Two Hotel, over."

"Go ahead, Hotel. This is Six Six."

"Roger, Six Six. We lost the engine, and we're goin' in. Our present position is about two and a half miles southeast of Camp Evans. We're setting up on a big rice paddy. I'll call when we get on the ground."

"Roger that, Hotel. Say again your position."

Roger repeated their location, and receiving acknowledgement, cut the electrical power again. Then he concentrated on the autorotation. This would be his first with a loaded Cobra. Roger knew it would sink faster than the unloaded ones used in practice. He also knew the Cobra was more unstable on the ground than the C-models, and rolling it over when they touched down was a very likely possibility. As the descent toward the rice paddy continued, Roger tried to determine any wind. There didn't appear to be any, so he set up to touch down on his present

heading. He looked the paddy over carefully, trying to pick the smoothest spot for the touchdown. He selected an area near a tree line on the west side of the paddy. The paddy itself was dry. One of those that had been abandoned with the relocation of the rice farmers closer to the coastal villages.

As the ground appeared to reach up to meet them, Roger pulled initial pitch, and brought the nose of the ship up to slow their ground speed. As he held the flare, Roger realized that he had started the maneuver too high. Unless he reserved all the rest of the pitch, he wouldn't have enough left to cushion the touchdown. Roger steepened the flare, and their forward movement almost stopped. As the ship began to drop, Roger leveled it, held steady for an instant, and just when it appeared they would smack the ground, pulled the rest of his pitch. The Cobra touched down heavily, and rocked forward. Then it settled back and steadied. Roger let out a huge sigh. They were down, and he hadn't rolled it up!

Tim was scrambling out of the forward cockpit as Roger turned on the electrical power. Tim jumped around to the other side of the ship, and popped open the ammo bay door. He then grabbed Roger's M-16 from the compartment, and slammed a magazine into it. Roger called Six Six, and informed him that they were down safely. Then he turned to Tim who was standing on the ammo bay door right next to Roger. Roger looked at the M-16 and began to laugh. Tim looked at Roger like Roger had lost all his marbles.

"What's so damn funny?" Tim demanded.

Roger continued to laugh, and pointed to the M-16. "Who are you figuring on shooting with that thing?" Roger asked.

Tim's expression clouded. "What do you mean, who am I gonna shoot with this thing? The bad guys, of course."

Roger laughed harder. "Then you better turn that magazine over so the bullets are in the gun." Tears came to Roger's eyes as Tim turned the M-16 over and looked at the magazine. He had managed to jam it into the weapon upside down. Tim looked at Roger with disgust, and jumped down from the ammo bay door. Landing on the ground, he removed the magazine, and reinserted it right side up. Then he disappeared from Roger's view as he slid underneath the aircraft.

Roger pulled his helmet part way off so he could hear, and looked around. They were sitting in an open rice paddy

in full daylight. He still chuckled about Tim's mistake. After all, Tim was on his second tour in Vietnam, and he should certainly know how to handle an M-16. Roger heard the distant sound of a helicopter. Looking west, he could see one circling. He turned the electrical power on again, and called on the radio. It was a ship searching for them, and Roger gave them a heading to the downed aircraft. Soon the rescue ship was overhead.

The rescue itself was anticlimactic. Roger found it humorous when the maintenance officer from the unit, Dean Christian, jumped out of the rescue chopper with belts of M-60 ammo draped across his shoulders and carrying an M-60. Roger likened it to a John Wayne movie as the rescuers advanced on the Cobra.

Later that evening the maintenance officer came to the 1st Platoon hootch to describe the problems with Roger's ship. The electrical fire had been caused by a short in wiring that was not protected by a circuit breaker. The insulation had melted off several wires, but the damage wasn't serious. The loss of power resulted from a combination of factors. First, Roger had run the fuel seriously low. Roger could understand that. Without electrical power, the fuel gauge had been inoperative, but he had thought they should have had ample fuel to reach Camp Evans. Christian explained that was true, except for the fact that some of the fuel tank lining had deteriorated. The pieces of liner in the bottom of the tank had plugged the fuel line when they were sucked into it.

Roger shrugged it off. No one was hurt, so it was just another day. Something that added a little excitement to an otherwise boring convoy cover mission. To Tim, it was a little more important than that.

"Look, Roger, I'm gettin' too short for this kind of crap. The next time I'd just as soon set it down at the nearest fire base, and let maintenance come out there to fix it."

Roger turned to Christian. "Well, what's your opinion, Dean?"

Christian looked down at the floor. "I guess it's up to you guys who are doing the flying."

Roger angered slightly. "You mean to tell me, Dean, that you wouldn't have been the slightest bit upset to come down to Blaze to fix an electrical problem in that ship? If it hadn't been for that bad fuel tank, we'd have brought it right in to your shop."

It was clear Christian didn't want to answer the question. Dean turned and looked at Travis. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and with a helpless gesture, said, "What can I say? We got it back in one piece, anyway."

Ron lit a smoke, "Yeah, we understand, Dean. Just be sure that's what it says in your report. Thanks for coming by. Are you checking the rest of the fuel tanks to see if they're in the same shape as Hotel's?"

"Yeah, we're gonna check 'em. We got to, anyway. They had a problem down at B Battery last night. Seems they were rolling a ship off the line into the hangar down there, and someone heard something banging around in it. Anyway, they found a hand grenade in the fuel tank with the pin pulled and tape wrapped around the spoon. It wouldn't have taken too long for the fuel to destroy that tape, and when it did, that ship would have simply disappeared. That really gives me the willies."

Travis stood up. "Nothing like a little sabotage to keep maintenance on its toes. Oh well, life was getting a little boring around here, anyway."

Christian turned and left the hootch. The pilots just sat there quietly for a few moments as they thought about what he had told them. Travis broke the silence, "Anyone for supper?"

The next week was quiet. Few missions were flown, and the pilots began to go stir crazy. As the boredom increased, the pilots began to get on one another's nerves. Preparations for flying suffered during these "dry" periods. Sitting out hot and five-minute status was truly boring, because the pilots had to stay ready, waiting for the missions that never came. Maintenance began catching up on the problems with the aircraft, and soon just about everything worked on all of the ships.

A poker game was underway in the 1st Platoon one evening, when they heard the hot section cranking for a mission. Roger was assigned with Travis to the five-minute section. As they heard the first section go, they prepared to take over hot status until the first section returned. While they were getting their gear ready, the field phone in the hootch rang. Ehlers answered it.

Ehlers listened for only a second before he called out to the others. "Five-minute section's got a mission! Travis, your Charlie model is on the hot spot. The other ship's in the pit!" The pilots scrambled to get going.

Roger was pulling on his boots as Travis ran out the door of the hootch. Grabbing his helmet bag and shirt, Roger ran to catch up.

By the time Roger reached the hot spot, Travis already had the ship running. Roger jumped in, and buckled his seat straps. Jerking on his helmet, Roger could hear Ron talking to the tower for takeoff clearance. As Roger pulled on his gloves, Ron sloppily pulled the ship up to a hover. Roger looked over at Travis, and the realization dawned. Travis was drunk. The ship wobbled at a hover. Roger checked the instruments quickly as Ron nosed the ship over for the takeoff. Dust blew up in front of them as they left the hot pad. It was a poor takeoff, and they weren't gaining any altitude. They crossed the road south of the hot pad with dust still boiling about the ship. Roger lost his sense of direction in the dust. Then they were clear of the dust, but Roger wasn't sure which way they were headed. There was a large tower near the perimeter to the south of the hot pad, and Roger knew they didn't have enough altitude to clear it. A light pole went by on their left. Roger strained his eyes to catch sight of the tower. It passed by on the right.

Roger got on the controls, and keyed his mike, "Say, Travis, don't you think I'd better fly tonight?" It was obvious to Roger that Ron wasn't in any shape to fly, but Roger tried to phrase it so the crew in the back seat wouldn't understand that Travis was drunk.

"Naw, I got it, Hunter," Travis responded.

"Look, Travis, I'm gonna fly or I'm getting out." Roger knew that Travis became belligerent when he'd been drinking, and that looked like what was happening now. Roger knew it would take a threat to shake him. But Travis wasn't convinced.

"I can handle it fine, Hunter."

"Then I'm gettin' out right now, Ron. You're not in any shape to fly, and I'd just as soon take my chances jumping now as riding with you tonight."

Roger watched Travis, but there was no response. Roger unplugged his helmet and unbuckled his seat straps. Then he opened the door. He checked the altimeter and the airspeed. They were less than one hundred feet in the air, and their airspeed was only about twenty knots. Roger figured he could survive that. He swung the door open, and set his feet. Roger felt a hand grab his shirt. He turned back

into the ship. Ron released his shirt, and motioned for him to plug in his helmet. Roger plugged in.

"Maybe you're right, Hunter. Why don't you fly?"

Roger keyed the intercom, "Thanks, Travis."

The mission was fairly routine. An infantry unit had been hit in their NDP (Night Defensive Position). They were located on a ridge about twenty minutes flight time from Evans. The section fired rockets on all sides of the defensive position. Receiving an end-of-mission, they returned to Camp Evans. All during the mission, Travis and Roger didn't speak to each other. When they returned the ship to the hot spot, Travis got out and walked to the Ops bunker. Roger filled out the log book. When he completed it, he snapped it shut and tossed it up on the dash. Roger was disgusted that Travis had tried to fly in the shape he was in. He should have gotten someone to replace him. As Roger slid out of the armored seat, the crewchief was watching him, as if he expected Roger to say something.

Roger slipped off the chicken plate. "Hope that's the only one we have to fly tonight," he said to the chief. He grabbed his helmet and gloves, and turned toward the hootch. Their section was back to five-minute status since the hot section had returned ahead of them. The poker game was still going strong. Roger watched for a moment, then went over to the mess hall for a cup of coffee. When he returned to the hootch, he didn't go in, but sat on the sandbags outside, sipping the coffee. Roger hadn't noticed Ron drinking that evening. He wondered if Ron was doing it on the sly. It was hard to tell when Travis had been drinking. He held his liquor well, but nobody could fly a helicopter when they were drunk. And Travis had almost refused to recognize that fact. That was what bothered Roger the most. Travis had known he was on five-minute status, and he shouldn't have been drinking at all. Roger pushed the thoughts from his mind, and entered the hootch. As he undressed, the poker game was breaking up. Roger rolled into his bunk, and lay there a long time before sleep finally overtook him.

The next morning, Major Brown caught Roger after breakfast. "Say, Hunter, how would you like to go to armament school down in Vung Tau? We've been having a lot of trouble with the turret weapons on these Cobras, and when we're out in the forward areas we need someone that can work on them. I'd like to send you down for the class, unless you have some objections."

It was the way he said it that caught Roger's attention. What Brown said made sense, all right, but why me, thought Roger.

It was as if Brown was reading Roger's mind. "Look, after that trip you and McCallister had, I thought maybe you'd like a break. I'll cut the orders for two weeks, and you can spend it how you want. What do you say?"

Roger realized that Major Brown was giving him a vacation. And this just wasn't an opportunity that you turned down. "It sounds fine to me. When do I leave?"

"The clerk is cutting orders for you right now. If you get with it, you can probably catch a flight south today."

As Roger packed his gear, he began to look forward to the trip. He knew that Justin and Davis were now in Vung Tau at Cobra transition training. It just might be a good time.

It was no trouble at all catching a ride to Phu Bai, but sometimes the going got a little tougher from there south. Roger didn't want to have to land in Danang. When he stopped at the control tower at Phu Bai, he asked about flights going south. Roger knew he could catch a regular flight at the terminal, but the rides were more interesting if you could catch a hop with other pilots. One pilot was standing at the counter, making out a flight plan. He turned to Roger.

"You can catch a ride south with me. I have to stop in Danang, but if there aren't enough passengers to fill the seats there, I can give you a ride all the way to Bien Hoa."

"Thanks," Roger said. "I really appreciate that." Roger had never been in a U-21 before. They were looked upon as an executive aircraft in the Army. They were mainly used to transport higher ranking officers and VIP's. Roger walked out to the ship with the pilot. The U-21 carried several passengers, and each seat had a window. The seats were plush compared to the nylon ones in the Chinooks. Roger settled into a rear seat. Soon the twin-engine ship was flying down the runway. It took only a few minutes to reach Danang.

As passengers approached the ship from the terminal at Danang, Roger watched with apprehension. He counted the empty seats, then the passengers. It was going to be close. But there was room. Roger settled back with a sigh. It wasn't going to take long to reach Bien Hoa at this rate.

By early afternoon, Roger was carrying his travel bag into the terminal at Bien Hoa. When he asked about hops

over to Vung Tau, the clerk said that they had just had a call from a chopper that was headed that way. The clerk pointed out the pad to Roger, and called to hold the ship for him. Roger trotted across the parking area. The chopper was ready to go, but it was empty except for the pilot. Roger jumped into the right seat in the cockpit, and yelled his thanks to the pilot. Soon they were airborne on their way to Vung Tau. The pilot had his colored visor down on his helmet, so Roger couldn't see his face. The pilot pointed to a pair of headphones and mike hanging on the back of Roger's seat. Roger put them on. Then he noticed the pilot looking at him. A grin spread across the pilot's face as he keyed his mike.

"And what was your class in flight school?"

Roger looked at him closely. Even through the visor the face looked vaguely familiar. Roger couldn't honestly remember his class number. "I was a yellow hat. Fourth WOC," he said.

"Yeah, you're right about that," the pilot offered his hand. "I can't remember your name, but we were in that class together." Roger took his hand. The pilot slipped up his visor. Roger smiled. It was Parker.

They were busy catching up on who they had seen, and where they were, when the strip at Vung Tau loomed before them. Parker expressed his sorrow that they couldn't spend a little more time together, but he had only to pick up some parts and get back to his unit. Roger told him that he knew how that went. They shook hands warmly as they separated.

Roger turned around. As he walked away from the chopper, he realized that it had taken him less than a day to cover Vietnam from nearly one end to the other. That was a new record for him. He now had two weeks to spend before he returned to C Battery. The armament class didn't start for a couple days. Roger thought about heading for Saigon, but he didn't know anyone who was stationed there. Without someone who knew their way around, it wasn't that fun to go joyriding by yourself. Roger shrugged, and walked to the edge of the airfield. He soon caught a ride into Vung Tau.

He knew the C Battery pilots here for Cobra transition would be staying at the Pink Panther. He decided to head over there to see if he could get together with them. He caught a ride on a deuce-and-a-half to the Pink Panther. He asked about a room when he entered the hotel's office. He showed a copy of his travel orders. The clerk didn't even question the early date, and assigned Roger a room.

By the time Roger had showered, the transition trainees were coming into the hotel. Roger headed for the bar. Justin and Tim Davis were surprised to see him.

"What are you doing here?" Tim asked.

"I decided to hell with the war. I liked it down here so much when I came down for training that I decided I'd like to work here. When they heard that one of the C Battery extraordinary pilots wanted to work here, they just couldn't pass me by."

Tim was taken in by the line, but the gleam had already entered Justin's eye. Justin took a long pull on his drink. "Yeah, and where ya' going to work? You sure didn't come down here to train Snake pilots."

Roger laughed. He could always count on Justin to come right to the point. "Yeah, you're right, Justin. I just came down for some armament training."

"Great! How long is the class?"

"One week is all, but the old man signed me out for two weeks."

"Jesus, have we got an oversupply of pilots up there now for the first time ever?"

Roger laughed. "No, it wasn't that. Maybe because it was my good looks that convinced him. Couldn't just send any old pilot down here to Vung Tau, you know."

Justin and Tim both laughed. Tim ordered a beer for Roger, and he sat down at their table. After supper, Justin and Roger took off for town. Roger pointed out some of the bars he had visited when he was in Vung Tau for Snake school. Justin and Roger browsed some of the shops along the main street in town. They entered a clothing store. The proprietor appeared to be Jewish, but Roger wasn't sure. Soon they were engaged in a lively conversation as Justin checked out the clothes. The proprietor invited Roger and Justin out to his place on the bay for dinner the next evening. It took them a little discussion to figure out where the place was. Then Roger realized it was in the off-limits part of town for Army personnel. Roger thanked him, but declined the offer. The proprietor seemed disappointed, and tried to change their minds. They were finally able to leave when another customer came into the shop.

As they walked up the street, Justin turned to Roger, "Why did you decline that invitation?"

"I don't know. I think we could have done it all right, without getting caught, but there was just something

about the invitation that didn't set right with me. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe. But I sure didn't catch it. Imagine, a seafood extravaganza on the beach at Vung Tau. Probably complete with women, too."

"Yeah, if you don't mind slant-eyes."

"Think I'm picky, with seven months in the boonies behind me?" Justin said sharply.

"I just think we can do that good for ourselves, Justin. And we don't need to depend on some store owner for his hospitality, and our safety."

"OK, so where can we do as well for ourselves?"

"Follow me, young stud pilot," Roger led the way down the street.

That evening, Justin had done as well as Roger had predicted. They met up with the same girls Roger had stayed with when he was down for Snake school. Justin's date never let on, and Roger would never tell him. Things worked out quite well, because Justin wasn't near as jumpy as Dean, and didn't mind staying in an apartment that was considered off-limits to transient personnel. Roger noted other uniforms when he and Justin entered the girls' apartment building. That meant that the local GI's were living in this part of town, and that it was probably as safe as their hotel. They just couldn't wander around in the streets after curfew. But they couldn't do that at their own hotel, either. Even with all the convincing that Roger applied to his own mind, he still slept very lightly at night. And he woke with the first bird singing in the morning.

The days were filled with the intricacies of the Cobra weapons systems. The students were nearly all officers, and the instructor was a platoon sergeant. He had a good time teaching the class. The brains to the armament system was all electronic, though not very sophisticated. There were numerous relays located throughout the ship that could malfunction, causing a variety of symptoms. These were covered quickly during the class.

The main emphasis focused on the turret weapons. The 40 millimeter grenade launcher, and the minigun. The grenade launcher was nicknamed "the 40," the "chunker" or the "thumper" depending on which unit the student was from. This was a difficult weapon to disassemble. It was driven by an electric motor, and worked on a cam action that caused the barrel to move in and out. Care was taken to rotate the

gears in the right direction when clearing it, or it would fire.

The minigun had six barrels, and used a similar cam action to fire each succeeding barrel as the entire barrel and bolt assembly rotated. It could also be fired by rotating it manually. Training consisted only of clearing the weapon, and simple disassembly.

Training also covered the test sets used to troubleshoot the weapons systems. One of the most valuable assets of the class was learning where to go for help. Names and locations were provided where the students could get support in case of unsolvable problems.

The week of training passed all too quickly for Roger. The girls with which the pilots stayed became a little too demanding toward the end of the week. When Justin left to return to C Battery, Roger also moved out. He met another girl he liked, and spent the next couple of days with her. But it wasn't to be. Roger felt lost without Justin's companionship, and knowing no one else in Vung Tau, he caught a flight back to I Corps from Bien Hoa on a C-130.

The war still centered around the Ashau Valley when Roger returned. And it wasn't long before the last of the C-models left the unit. Roger was sorry to see them go. They had so far carried him through a lot, and he knew he was going to miss them. Like losing an old friend. A good friend.

C Battery was called on to fly cover for the Bob Hope show that was given at Camp Eagle. That also meant that C Battery would be covering A and B Batterys' missions. But a chopper full of C Battery personnel got to attend the show. The pilots felt it was a good tradeoff. The enlisted personnel were always working their tails off, and the pilots were the ones getting all the glory. It was nice to turn it around for a change. But A and B Battery did a nice turn, too. They gave C Battery the night off before the day of the show. It was a great evening as the pilots partied until way late. Some of them overdid it a bit, though. Captain Nelson had more than his share that night, and he looked in rough shape in the morning.

Nelson was assigned to mortar patrol at Eagle for the show. That meant a lot of hours in the air. He did all right for the first couple hours, but then he couldn't hold on. He got sick in the aircraft. But he kept the crewchief happy. At least he didn't vomit all over the floor. Nelson used his helmet instead

Holes in the ships were becoming more common. A lot of missions were flown up near the DMZ in support of the Marines or the Vietnamese units. And the pilots felt that the enemy troops in that area had better training in shooting at aircraft. Several "whistlers" were recorded. Whistlers occurred when a ship took rounds in the rotor blade. During shutdown, as the rotor blades slowed, the holes in them would whistle. Patches also began to appear quite regularly along the tail booms and tail fins. A few holes in the canopies were also recorded, but so far none had been very serious.

As training of the new pilots in the unit continued, there was a lot of trading around among the crews. Roger and Justin found themselves flying together once again. It was in a Cobra, though, but it was nice to be together again. They could trade off flying in the front seat so the

day wouldn't become boring for either of them. Roger felt very comfortable in the front seat with Justin in the back.

The two of them were coming out of the mess hall together after breakfast. Justin seemed a little preoccupied as they walked up the hill to the hot spot.

"What's up, Justin? You seem awfully quiet this morning."

"Huh? Oh, ... I don't know. Just something about this morning."

"What do you mean? You feel OK?"

Justin waved his hand, "No, it isn't that at all. It's just well, I guess I don't feel right about today. I don't know. I can't explain it."

"Come on, Justin. Maybe it was a little too much poker last night."

Justin laughed at this remark. Justin rarely drank anything stronger than beer. And when he was playing cards, he usually didn't even drink beer. "No, it's something else. I just don't feel right about today. Just a gut feeling."

"You mean like a premonition?"

"Maybe...."

The pair reached their ship. As Roger went over the outside, Justin checked the log book, and the interior. With everything checked, Roger joined Justin on the ammo bay door.

"Still can't shake it, huh?" Roger asked.

"Nope. And I probably won't be able to until the day's over."

"Boy, I'm sure glad you don't get depressed, Justin. With a mind like yours, that could be a real problem."

Justin just grinned and shook his head. "Leave me alone, cowboy," he said with a chuckle.

All too soon, they were scrambled on a mission into the mountains. Justin handled all the shooting on this mission. The friendlies were down in a hole, and the wind was blowing hard. As Justin maneuvered the ship to get ordnance on the target, the updrafts and downdrafts tossed the chopper around like a cork. It wasn't long before the lap and shoulder harness began to wear on Roger's skin. He tried to tighten them up to slow the chafing. During one especially rough inbound pass, the master caution light flickered. Roger looked at the detailed caution panel just in time to

catch one of the hydraulics system's lights flashing off. He keyed the intercom.

"Got a flicker on the master caution. Showed the number one hydraulics."

Justin's voice was calm, "Yeah, I got it. Pedals feel a little erratic, too. Maybe the fluid's a little low. This rough ride isn't helping any."

Roger was impressed by Justin's shooting. He placed the rockets right on the target the FO was identifying. Roger knew he couldn't do as well in the rough air. When the mission ended, Justin climbed up above the mountains for the trip home. The air smoothed out, and Roger thankfully loosened his straps. Justin watched him in the rear view mirror.

"Say, Hunter, how about flying for a minute so I can do the same?"

"You gettin' a little raw back there, too?"

"Ummm-hmmm. I'm already bleeding through my shirt."

As they landed on the hot spot, the crewchief was there to meet them.

"How'd it go, sir?" the chief asked.

Justin arched his back, and stretched his arms. "Pretty rough air up there today. How about checking the hydraulic levels. We got a flicker on system number one, but we were bouncing pretty bad."

"Will do, sir," the chief jumped to satisfy the request.

Roger completed the log book. "That Jenson is some chief, isn't he?"

"Couldn't ask for anyone better," Justin returned.

The chief jumped up on the ammo bay door. "Say, were you guys taking some fire on that last mission?"

Justin twisted around in his seat. "The grunts didn't say anything about it. Why?"

The chief pointed to the stubby wing on the right side of the ship. "Well, there's a nice, neat little hole right there."

"How about that?" Justin returned. "This thing got worms?"

The crewchief swore, and walked off to call maintenance.

Roger walked around the ship and inspected the hole. "Well, didn't hit nothing of importance, Justin. Besides, it's on your side."

"Yeah, right. My side. Just how do you tell which is my side, and which is your side?"

"It's easy. Your side is the one with the holes in it." Roger walked down to Ops to get a coke and debrief.

When he returned, there was a TI (Technical Inspector) from maintenance checking out the battle damage. He OK'd it in the book, and the crewchief taped the hole with hundred-mile-an-hour tape.

Shortly thereafter, Roger's section was again scrambled. This mission was further north, but it was only on the edge of the mountains. Again the grunts were down in a steep valley, but the gusty winds had dropped off considerably. Even though it was an easier mission to shoot, they took considerable ground fire on the first passes.

"Must be doin' something right, Hunter, 'cause we're pissin' 'em off."

"Yeah. Right on, cookie. Lay the heat to 'em on the next pass, huh?"

"Can you tell where any of that fire is coming from?"

"Nope. Too bright to see any flashes. You seen any tracers?"

"Not a one. Think they finally got smart about usin' those?"

"I doubt it. Every ammunition manufacturer thinks a guy with an automatic weapon can't hit anything without tracers."

Justin nosed the ship over for another inbound run. "Cover that ridge on the right with the turret, will you? I got a feeling that's where it's coming from."

"Wilco," Roger answered.

As they broke up and to the left from the firing run, Roger could hear the blades pounding hard. He fired the minigun at the tree-covered ridge on the right. Just then, a loud slap was heard by both pilots.

"What was that?" Justin asked.

"Wasn't me," Roger answered.

"Then it must have been another one of those worms, huh?"

"Yeah. Want me to cover the ridge on the other side this time?"

Justin chuckled. "Sure, why not. That grunt FO doesn't even know whether it's day or night, let alone where that fire is coming from."

"Well, it might be kind of hard to tell with your head in the sand," Roger countered.

When they returned to the hot spot again, the TI that Justin had called for was waiting for them. They all began going over the ship as soon as it was shut down. This time there was a hole through one of the skid tubes.

Roger and Justin walked down to the mess hall for lunch.

"Well, you got rid of that bad feeling yet?" Roger asked.

Cook just grinned. "Don't let it bug you. I shouldn't have said anything about it this morning."

"But you did say something about it, and look what's happened so far. Both times up we come back with holes. I think I got the wrong stick buddy today," Roger shook his head. Justin just laughed at the remark.

As they were finishing lunch, they were again scrambled. This was the same unit they had fired for first thing in the morning.

"Hope the wind's died down some out here," Justin commented as they approached the target.

"I'm sure it has. If it hasn't, we'll both be hamburger by the time we finish this one, anyway, and we won't give a darn."

The unit had moved up the finger ridge they were on, nearly to the point where it connected with the main ridge above them. They wanted fire on an adjacent ridge.

"Piece of cake, cookie," Roger said dryly as Justin rolled in on the first run. The whoosh of the rockets drowned out a comment from the wingman. As they rolled into a left break, Roger hosed the ridge with the thumper.

Justin was on the radio to the wingman, "What was that you said, Bravo?"

Ehler's "little-boy" voice vibrated in Roger's earphones. "Think the FO said we were takin' fire on that last pass."

Justin returned his call, "Yeah, I heard 'im. Did you see any tracers on your pass?"

"Not a thing," Ehlers answered.

The FO on the ground then asked Cook to fire on another target. As they orbited above the grunts, Roger looked over the mountains to the west. The Valley wasn't far off. He could see one of the abandoned fire bases on a high ridge. "Isn't that old FSB Eagle's Nest?"

Justin leveled the ship. "Yup. That's it. We had a helluva mission up there one night. They were gettin' hit pretty hard, and there were these little fluffy clouds hanging over the fire base. Between those clouds and their darn parachute flares, it was a tough mission. Think we ran about seven sorties out there that night. I didn't think those dinks were ever going to give up."

Their attention turned back to the current mission when the FO said he had new smoke out. Justin identified the color, and listened to the target description. This was on the ridge on the other side of the grunt unit.

As Cook set up the attack, he keyed the intercom, "Do you suppose that guy's a little confused, or what, Hunter?"

"I thought I heard him say he was taking mortar fire. Probably can't figure out where it's coming from."

"You're probably right," Justin entered a shallow dive on the target. As the ship rolled away in the break, both pilots heard the pinging of rounds through the fuselage. Justin called Ehlers. "Hey, Bravo! We're takin' it in the shorts!"

"Hang on. I'm on 'em." The whoosh of Ehler's rockets cut his transmission short.

Roger and Justin were busy watching the instruments, as they headed outbound for the next run. They could hear the impact of Ehler's rockets as they pounded the ridge. All the instruments showed green as they set up for the next run. They continued to pound the target with rockets and turret fire to the joy of the FO. They were giving him a good show, and he loved it.

Again they had a TI at the hot spot when they landed. Again the holes were determined not to be serious, and again they were taped over. As Justin and Roger watched the crewchief apply tape to the holes, Justin turned to Roger.

"How about you flying the next one from the back seat, Hunter? Maybe it'll change our luck. I think the chief's gonna shoot me if I bring this thing back with any more holes in it."

Roger laughed. "Anything to make you happy, compadre. Can't do any worse. That's for sure." The crewchief finished the taping, and grimaced at their remarks.

"You guys think it's funny, don't you? You know how long it's gonna take me to patch those holes tonight? And we don't have a spare aircraft anywhere."

Justin's interest perked, "We don't have any spares today?" He turned and punched Roger in the shoulder. "Hear

that? They don't have any spares today. Maybe if you can get a few more holes, we can ground this bird and take the rest of the day off. What do ya' say?"

Roger just shook his head, and waved Justin's comments off. "I never thought I'd hear you say that a few more holes in our ship could be a good thing, Cook. What are you, courtin' disaster today?"

"Well, I told you this morning that I didn't have a good feeling about today."

Again they were scrambled. This time Roger was in the back seat, with Cook in the front. It was the same infantry unit, too. Roger was getting so he didn't even like their call sign. When the section reached the target, the grunts were on top of the ridge. And they were still being bothered by enemy mortars. Roger set up the attack on the FO's target, and rolled in.

"At least we're shootin' at some different trees this time, Cook."

"Yeah, guess we killed all the trees on that other ridge. We get to go after some fresh ones this trip."

They were working the ridge over well, when the thud of rounds hitting the aircraft again rang in their ears.

"Dammit! That's it, Hunter! Lay the bad-bad on those yahoos, will you?" Justin was angered by their consistency to draw hits.

"Well, they never hit us on the first pass yet. Maybe we oughta just dump it all on one run, huh?" But Justin failed to rise to Roger's attempt at humor. It was clear Cook had had enough. Roger knew Justin's shoulders had to be hurting him something fierce. When Roger buckled into the back seat, the shoulder harness straps were stained with blood. And the sweat pouring into those abrasions probably didn't make them feel any better. It was really funny, Roger mused, that of all the time he had spent in the air with Justin, this was the first time that Justin had neglected his humor. They finished the attack in silence. Each pilot doing his job, and knowing just what the other was going to do.

Teamwork in the cockpit was something that came slowly. It started with adopting procedures that remained the same from day to day, and flight to flight. Many of these were boring little tasks, and it was easy to become careless after hundreds of repetitions. But Justin and Roger continued to check each other, sometimes making it a game. They had discovered that humor made the routine more

livable. And close teamwork in the cockpit tended to prolong life in combat.

As they landed in the refueling area, prior to returning to the Battery area, Roger jumped out to refuel. He grabbed the nozzle, and turned to the ship. As he looked back along the fuselage, he nearly dropped the refueling hose. One of the huge clamshell doors on the side of the Cobra was popped open at the bottom. For a moment, Roger just stood there, stunned, looking at the door. While the top of the door appeared to be secure, the bottom of the door stood out from the fuselage over two inches. It was the rear door, and opened toward the back of the ship. How it had kept from blowing off, Roger couldn't imagine. And if it had, it would very likely have taken the tail rotor with it. Without the tail rotor, Roger could only gasp. It would have taken the rear gear box and part of the tail rotor driveshaft, and without those, the Cobra would be out of CG (Center of Gravity) limits. That meant a long, tumbling descent to earth with nothing a pilot could do. Roger had heard of only one pilot who had survived such a crash. That ship had struck the side of a steep ravine in heavy jungle that had cushioned the impact. Roger continued to stare at the door.

Then, like a zombie, he moved to the fuel cap, removed it, and began to refuel the ship. Completing the refueling, he walked around the stubby wing, and studied the latch on the clamshell door. Directly beneath it was the entry hole of the bullet. It had entered at an upward angle, probably just clipping the inside of the latch. Roger pushed the door back into place, and refastened the latch. It seemed to hold securely. Roger climbed back into the cockpit. Justin was studying him in the mirror.

"See a ghost, Hunter?" Justin said as Roger plugged in his helmet.

"Uh....yeah. Maybe two of 'em, Cook. Like you and me."

A puzzled expression crossed Justin's face. "What do you mean?"

Roger told him about the clamshell door, as they flew over to the Battery area. Also Roger called ahead to Ops, and asked them to have a TI standing by.

"Again, Hotel??" had been Deke's response.

"'Fraid so, buster," Roger said between clenched teeth.

When they landed, the waiting TI was accompanied by Mister Greg Christian, the maintenance officer. He walked

stiff-legged up to the ship as Roger and Justin removed their helmets. "Hear you two have been having a wonderful day. What are you trying to do, ground this bird?" The stub of a toothpick bounced in his mouth as he addressed them.

Roger leaned out of the back seat of the Cobra. His eyes narrowed to slits, and his lips were tight and thin as he spoke. "Look, Christian, I don't need any of your sewer humor right now, if you don't mind. This is the fourth time we've been shot up today, and if you don't mind, we just aren't full of goodness and laughs right now." Justin had climbed out of the front seat, and now stood just behind Christian's shoulder. Roger continued, "I want you to take a close look at this flying piece of tin. I think that last round went through our air screen, and if it did, I want this Snake grounded. Got that? And if you assure me it's fine to fly, I think my co-pilot is going to come down with a sudden fever, and I'm going to ask for you to accompany me on the next mission. Got it?"

Christian was taken aback by Hunter's cutting remarks. "OK, OK, we'll look it over carefully, Hunter. If anything looks bad, we'll pull it into the shop."

Roger dropped to the ground with his helmet in his hand. He turned to Jenson who was up on the wing, inspecting the bullet damage. "One more thing, Jenson....."

Jenson turned to him, "Yes, sir?"

"Get some paint remover, and wipe that damn bull's-eye off the bottom of this thing, will you?"

Jenson's face broke into a grin, "You bet I will, sir!"

Roger reached back into the cockpit, and retrieved his gloves. As he was stuffing his gear into his helmet bag, Jenson let out a yelp.

"Hey, Mister Hunter! Souvenir for you!" Jenson leaned off the wing and placed a small object in Roger's hand. Roger looked at it. It was a bullet, minus its jacket. Roger looked up at Jenson. "It was right here on the engine deck, sir. And you were right. It did tear up the air screen."

"Thanks, Jenson," Roger handed the object to Cook, and walked off down the hill toward the mess hall.

Cook looked at Christian, "Guess that does it for us for the day, huh?"

Christian nodded. "Yep. In this ship, anyway. We won't have any more ships until tonight."

"Thanks, Dean," Justin tossed the bullet in the air, and caught it with a flourish. "Be seein' ya'." Justin followed Roger off the hot pad. He caught up with him before they reached the mess hall.

"Don't be too upset, Roger. I think they can do without us for the rest of the day. I mean, I know they're going to be missing the very best that C Battery has to offer, but," his voice trailed off.

Roger stopped and turned to face Cook. Cook suddenly noticed how drawn Roger's face was. The small creases around his eyes were etched in sweat and dust, and he looked much older than his twenty-odd years. His eyes had taken on that clear, depthless look of the old combat veterans. His sweaty hair was plastered to his forehead. But Roger smiled back. Swiftly, Roger grabbed the front of Justin's shirt with his fist.

As Roger pulled Justin close, he spoke very softly, "Just you be sure to tell me if you ever feel again like you did this morning, will you? Give me your word on it." Roger released his grip, and walked away. Justin just stood there watching him go. Maybe he's just tired, thought Justin. It's been a long war. Today didn't make it any shorter. How long can our luck last? Four missions, and shot up every time out. That isn't good odds. Think I will say something about it if I feel the same way again.....

51: First R&R to Sydney, Australia

The evening meal was quiet as the pilots mulled over the events of the day. They had lost another ship. Both pilots survived in good shape, but it had been close. Usually when this occurred, the pilots were quiet. They realized how close it was to their number. There were only twenty-four of them when the Battery was at full strength. Plus the CO, the XO, the two maintenance officers, and the operations officer, but they usually didn't fly many combat missions.

Roger left the mess hall by himself. He was tired. The missions never seemed to end, and he was getting tired of flying them. All the holes in the ships lately. It was only a matter of time until someone bought the farm. More likely a careless mistake, and maybe not even combat related. Of course, the record book would show a combat loss, but Roger knew that accidents were logged the same way. Battle casualties were acceptable. Accidents were not.

Roger's sense of humor was lagging. The close comraderie was wearing thin. The long hours in the cockpit were beginning to tell on the pilots. Ron was drinking more, if that was possible. Comments were a little sharper, and Roger had even heard some of the pilots criticizing one another behind their backs. That wasn't good. Didn't do much for morale.

Roger sat down to write a letter when he reached the hootch. A few letters coming in always made a guy feel better. And to receive 'em, it didn't hurt to write some.

Ron and some of the other pilots entered the hootch, and started a game of poker. They asked Roger to join them. He laid his letter aside, and sat down at the card table. Ron had his ever-present bottle of scotch beside him. The game was quieter than usual as the pilots played five-card draw, five- and seven-card stud. It was a seven card stud hand when the subject first came up.

There were only three players left in the hand -- Ron, Justin and Roger. Ron was a good poker player, even when he was drinking. Justin was an excellent poker player. There was about ten dollars in the pot. Roger needed a spade to make a spade flush, and there was only one card left to go. Ron bet. Justin raised. As Roger fingered his chips, Ron began to speak.

"If you think you've got it, Hunter, I'll bet you an R&R to Australia."

At first, Ron's words didn't register. Roger looked across the table. Ron's Camel hung from a corner of his mouth, and one eye squinted to avoid the smoke. Ron took a pull from his bottle. "But you've got to bet to stay in for it."

"What are you driving at?" Roger asked.

"I've got an R&R to Australia up for grabs. Winner take the pot, and the trip. You interested?"

Roger studied Ron. He didn't look like he was kidding, but Roger wasn't sure. Roger's first choice would have been Hawaii. But being single, that was out of the question. His next choice was Australia, and he knew that Ron knew it. Roger matched Justin's bet.

As Roger's chips hit the table, both Ron and Justin tossed down their hands. "We fold," Ron said.

Justin snickered a little. Roger looked at him, but Justin's eyes betrayed nothing. Roger cleared his throat. "All right. Just what is going on here?"

All around the table, the pilots began to laugh. Ron leaned forward over the table. "Go ahead and take it, Hunter. It's your pot. We figured you might need a little spending money on your trip to Sydney. In fact....," Ron checked his watch, "You better start packing. You don't have a lot of time to catch your flight."

Roger still wasn't sure that Ron was serious. "Are you guys kidding, or what? I've never bought a pot before in this outfit."

Ron broke the silence. "Boy, you must be gettin' bomb happy, Hunter. You're goin' on R&R tomorrow. To Australia. Or as Ed refers to it, I&I."

Roger leaned back in his chair. "I and I....?"

"That's right. Intoxication and intercourse. And you'd better get some for all of us while you're down there. You're goin' someplace most of us have never been, and we want a first-hand report on everything you see and do. We thought a hefty card-game pot might get you started off on the right foot."

Roger just shook his head as Ron smiled. "Thanks a lot, Travis. I don't know what it cost you to get that for me, but that is nice. When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Travis was right. The next morning, Roger caught a flight south on the first leg of his trip to Saigon. He

couldn't believe he was going to Australia. He still didn't believe it when he reached Saigon and reported for processing for R&R. The paperwork wasn't that heavy, but Roger's shot record was checked carefully. And then he was boarding the "freedom bird" for Australia. Roger found a seat by the window, and sat down.

Suddenly a voice called out, "Hunter! Hey, Hunter!"

Roger looked up, startled. Coming up the aisle was a slender young man with very short hair. The smile stopped next to Roger's seat. "How have you been?" The freckled face, the Texas drawl. It could only be one person. Roger hadn't seen Terry Ragan since flight school. Roger stuck out his hand, and Terry shook it vigorously. "Where the heck are you stationed now?" Terry asked as he took the seat next to Roger.

"I Corps. Where are you?"

"Just outside Saigon. I'm with a med-evac unit. How about you?"

"With an aerial rocket artillery outfit. Like gunships."

"Is that right? Well, have you-all got Cobras?"

"Yeah. Haven't had 'em long, though."

"Hear you guys been gettin' lots of action up there. Been keepin' busy?"

Roger laughed, "Yeah, you might say that. We manage OK, I guess."

Terry slapped him on the back. "Say, that's great. Have you seen any of the other guys?"

"No. Just the ones in my unit."

"You heard about Benson, didn't you?"

"No....."

"He was the first one in our class to buy it. Heard he went down in flames. And Pratt. And Boysen. And.....let's see..... Boy, there's a real bunch of them." Ragan continued listing their classmates. Roger thought back to flight school. Their graduation picture came clearly to mind. As Terry continued to remember name after name, red X's appeared on the picture in Roger's mind. Roger began to wonder how Terry remembered them all.

Roger began to ask about some who he had known well in flight school. "What about Gibson?"

"Haven't heard a word about him, but you remember Grayling? He got a free ticket home. Lost a leg. Fifty caliber took him just below the knee. That was just last month."

Roger wanted desperately to change the subject. This talk was depressing, but he still wanted to hear it, in a strangely curious way. He couldn't believe the list. Roger leaned back and closed his eyes.

"You OK, Hunter?" Terry asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. God, I had no idea there were so many. Guess we're kind of isolated up north."

"Yeah, that's a terrible place to be. I hear the accommodations up there aren't worth a pinch of salt." Terry went on to describe the living conditions in his unit. They lived in barracks, and had a real club. Roger was almost afraid to ask about showers and toilets. They had them all. Terry continued to talk as the plane lifted off. Roger watched out the window as the Mekong River slowly dropped away, winding its way through the rice paddies far below.

The flight to Australia took much longer than Roger had guessed it would. He slept off and on most of the time. Looking out the window late in the afternoon, he saw some small islands in the ocean. The deep blue of the ocean contrasted sharply with the white sand beaches on the islands. Roger wondered if the islands had names. He drifted back to sleep.

When Roger awoke again, the plane was making an approach in the dark to an unseen airfield. Terry was wide awake.

Terry turned to Roger, "Wow, I thought you was goin' to sleep all the way down here. You must have been runnin' a mite short, huh?"

"Guess so. Where we at?"

"We're on approach to Darwin, Australia, mate. See, the planes can't land at the Sydney airport late at night or early in the morning. They just plain shut it down. Guess the people like to sleep there. Anyways, we got a layover here for a couple hours. Then we can fly straight into Sydney and land."

Roger looked around at the others on the plane. Quite a few were Australians.

Everyone debarked the plane at Darwin. The terminal there was huge. And empty, except for their plane load. They weren't allowed to leave the terminal proper. But that was OK for most of them. The place served beer -- Australian beer. With his first purchase, Roger read the label carefully.

"Say, Terry, watch how much of this stuff you drink. It's six percent. That's a lot stronger than we're used to."

Terry laughed. "That's OK. We're on R&R, don't ya' know!?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to start it with a hangover."

"You're probably right, but it sure tastes good, don't it?"

Roger had to agree with him. The beer did taste good. It was much fuller bodied than most American beers.

The wait at Darwin seemed like it would go on forever. The Australians from the flight were really whooping it up. After a couple hours, though, even they cooled down. When everyone reboarded the plane, it was sleep city.

And then they reached Sydney. The first item on the agenda was a briefing. What was good, what was bad. What was off limits, and what was trouble. The briefing officer was a clean-cut type. Probably served his whole tour doing this, thought Roger. He seemed to drone on and on, but Roger tried to concentrate on what he was saying. It reminded Roger of a college professor with a captive class. A clothes rental was available, and the officer suggested that everyone take advantage of it. It was also necessary to book a room somewhere, and pay the entire week's bill in advance. That way everyone would have a place to stay even if they ran out of money. Finally the group was released. As they left the air terminal, Terry jokingly wondered if Sydney was ready for the onslaught.

Roger and Terry headed directly for their hotel. It was called the Astor Motor Hotel, and it was located near Hyde Park. The white exterior looked inviting in the bright sunshine. As they checked in, the desk clerk was very friendly. His easy manner took Roger a little by surprise. After all the demonstrations and war protests in the US, Roger thought the natives here might be somewhat cool toward combatants from the jungles of Vietnam here for only a week to blow off steam.

The two pilots couldn't wait to get to their rooms, and both of them immediately jumped in the shower. As Roger stood in the tile shower with the water cascading from his body, he hoped that he could erase the smell of Vietnam. He scrubbed hard with soap, and washed his hair three times. Then he just stood still and let the hot water wash over him. Roger's skin was wrinkled when he at last turned off the water and opened the shower door. The white terry cloth

towel felt soft against his skin. Roger luxuriated in its soft warmth. It smelled so clean. The mirror was all steamed over, so Roger lay down on the double bed, and lit a smoke. He looked about at the white walls of the room. The wooden doors and furniture. The white bedspread. It was as if it would disappear if he touched it. And then he realized what was different. He was alone. He had the whole room to himself. It was quiet. No constant beat of rotor blades. No scream of turbine engines.

There was a knock at the door. "It's me, Terry."

"OK, just a sec, Terry." Roger slipped on a pair of skivvies, and let Terry in.

"You ready to get something to eat?"

"Give me a minute. I've got to shave." Roger rummaged in his traveling bag for his shaving kit. He pulled out the cheap vinyl case. It was the same one he used every day in Vietnam, and it looked it. Roger took the items out of it, and tossed it in a drawer of the vanity.

"Where to, my friend?" Roger asked when he was ready.

"How about Kings Cross? That's supposed to be where the action is, ain't it?"

"What kind of action are you looking for?" Roger smiled as he asked the question.

The Kings Cross area wasn't that far from the hotel, and they decided to walk. When they reached the section of the city known as Kings Cross, Roger recognized the signs. It was like an upgraded version of 1st Avenue in Seattle. The streets were much cleaner than what he remembered of Seattle, but the bars and street people seemed about the same. They were propositioned several times as they walked along the street. Roger was not above meeting a woman, but he didn't think that he was ready for a whore. For one thing, he was hungry. They continued to walk until they found what appeared to be a little higher class restaurant. They both ordered steak, and found the food to be better than expected. The waitress was nice, and chatted a little with them as they ordered. They ate leisurely, and finished with pie and coffee.

As darkness fell, they again found themselves walking the street. They entered a bar. Terry ordered a drink, but Roger stuck with beer. They watched a go-go girl writhe and gyrate to a popular tune. Roger was sleepy. The long trip, hot shower, and large meal had taken their toll.

"Come on, Terry, let's get out of here."

As they rose to leave, a young woman approached them. "Leaving so soon?" she asked. Roger studied her while she engaged Terry in conversation. Roger walked toward the door, then stopped and waited for Terry. Terry and the woman continued to talk. Then the two of them separated, and Terry joined Roger.

"She's coming with us, Hunter. Hope you don't mind."

Roger grinned. "No, I don't mind at all, Terry. But I am honestly tired, so I'm heading back to the hotel."

Terry almost blushed, and said nervously, "Uh, yeah, that's where we're headed, too." Roger almost laughed at his nervous manner. He wondered if Terry had ever slept with a girl before. The young woman joined them, and they left the bar together. Out on the street, Roger hailed a taxi, and all of them piled in. As they entered the taxi, Roger couldn't help noticing the long, slender legs. Miniskirts were in fashion in Sydney, and Roger liked to look.

When they arrived at the hotel, Terry paid the cabbie, and the three of them walked upstairs. When they reached their rooms, Roger stopped Terry for a moment.

"Nothing against your girl, Terry, but would you give me all your valuables before you call it a night? I'd really feel bad if you lost all your stuff our first night in Sydney."

Terry had a surprised look on his face, but he entered his room and shortly returned with his camera and other valuables.

Roger had his door open. "Don't forget your wallet. Uh, I assume you've already agreed on price....?"

"Uh, yeah...", Terry reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here you go. Don't go runnin' off on me now, huh?"

Roger laughed. "Are you kidding? You'll probably be up a lot later than me tonight, and I'll bet we get up about the same time in the morning."

Terry laughed nervously, "Yeah, guess we will. G'night"

"Good night." Roger entered his room. He was tired, but the shower looked so inviting that he couldn't resist. Again the hot water caressed his skin. He wondered if the hotel was going to lose money on them simply because of all the hot water they used. Roger chuckled.

The next morning, both of the pilots were up with the sun. Roger again hit the shower. He was glad there were

two towels in the room. The one he had used the night before wasn't dry yet. After getting dressed, the two of them headed for the downtown area of Sydney. From their hotel, they crossed Hyde Park on their way to the main city. The park was beautiful. Many flowers were in bloom, and they walked slowly, taking in all the wonderful colors. They watched others walking in the park, and it suddenly struck Roger. The clothes everyone was wearing were so colorful. In Vietnam, it was nearly always o.d. (olive drab) or black. They also watched a couple miniskirts bouncing along the wide walkways.

They both wanted to do a little shopping, and they thought now would be a good time before they spent all their money chasing around. In the middle of one of the busy streets in Sydney, there was a war memorial. It depicted a single soldier in a fighting stance. Though it was probably a World War II memorial, Roger noticed wreaths of fresh flowers on it.

At first they had a little difficulty with the intersections. For one thing, the cars all traveled on the wrong side of the street. For another, they weren't used to traffic lights and crosswalks. As they were crossing one street, a jackhammer started up nearby on a building under construction. Both pilots instantly reacted, running for the cover of a nearby building. It was an instinctive reaction, and Roger collided with an elderly lady carrying a bag of groceries. He knocked the bag from her hands, and her groceries spilled into the street. Very embarrassed, Roger began to pick up the vegetables that were rolling around on the asphalt. The woman began screaming at him, but her accent was so heavy that Roger couldn't understand what she was saying. A very well dressed gentleman approached Roger. Roger saw the shoes stop as he was picking up one of the apples. He looked up to see a stern face looking down at him. Roger rose slowly.

"What's going on here?" the gentleman demanded.

Roger began to explain, then realizing how foolish it sounded, simply said that he was here on leave from Vietnam.

"You're a US soldier?" the gentleman asked.

"Yes," answered Roger.

Without another word, the gentleman approached the woman, and began talking to her. Roger and Terry picked up the remaining groceries, and approached the woman. As the gentleman turned to face them, Roger offered to pay for the

damage to the vegetables and get another sack for the woman's groceries. The gentleman smiled at Roger.

"It's all taken care of, son," the man said warmly. Roger apologized to the woman again, and then turned to the man. "Thank you, too, sir," he said.

"It's quite all right now. I hope you enjoy your stay in Sydney."

"Thank you very much, sir. I'm sure we will."

The incident had shaken both Roger and Terry. They walked along quietly for a time. Then they began entering some of the shops. They had asked a passerby about where to go. The directions were easy to follow, and they soon found a small shopping mall with a large number of shops that specialized in Australian goods. When they had loaded up with purchases, they returned to their hotel.

It was still early in the day, so they returned to the downtown area again. During the noon break, they were astounded by the number of miniskirts on the streets. They came in all colors and shapes. Terry mentioned something about dying and going to heaven. Roger concurred. As the afternoon wore on, they stopped in a pub for a beer.

It was a small pub, but even early in the afternoon, it was already mostly filled. Roger noted that almost all of the patrons wore white shirts and ties. Their shirts were open, and their ties pulled loose, however. Roger had never seen such a lively group in a pub. It reminded him of his college days in Pullman. Most of the Australians he had seen had ruddy complexions, and seemed so full of life.

As Roger and Terry stood at the bar, drinking a glass of beer, a stout man approached them. "Are you Yanks?" he asked. The question and the directness of the approach sent out bad vibrations to Roger. He had heard of the problems in the US with soldiers and protestors. At their R&R briefing in Sydney, there was mention of avoiding protest groups in Australia, but Roger had no idea how the general population felt about the war. He looked toward the door of the pub. There were a number of bodies between them and the door. If trouble came up, it would be difficult to make the door. Roger looked back at the man.

"Uh, yeah, we are," Roger answered unwillingly.

The stout man spun on his heels, and stretching to his full height, called out to the others in the bar. "Hey, mates! We've got a couple of Yanks here from Vietnam!" The attention of all those in the bar turned to Roger and Terry.

Roger tensed. If there was going to be trouble, it wasn't going to be long before it started. The bartender touched Roger's arm from behind, and Roger jumped slightly.

The bartender held two glasses of beer. "'Ere you go, mates," he said, "Compliments of the 'ouse." Roger didn't know what to say. He was confused by their hospitality. He turned back to the stout man. A wide grin confronted him. The stout man raised his glass of beer.

"'Ow about a toast to the Yanks, mates!?" The entire bar raised their glasses and called out, "Hear, hear!"

Roger lifted his glass from the bar, and raised it high in the air. "Thank you all very much," he said. The patrons again raised their glasses and nodded and smiled. Roger turned to Terry. "Can you believe that?" Terry just smiled and shook his head.

They could have stayed all day at the pub. The bartender was firm. He wouldn't let them buy a single beer. Occasionally one of the patrons would step close to them and welcome them to Australia. Roger was overwhelmed by the hospitality. The warm handshakes, the smiles, the nods. Roger wondered how many of them had fought in World War II. And how many of them had sons in Vietnam. There were a considerable number of Australians serving there. Roger had spoken with some that were acting as advisers to the Vietnamese Army units. An adviser's job was a lonely one. He was usually the only English-speaking member of the unit, except for the interpreter. Roger couldn't imagine living among the Vietnamese in a combat situation. Those that served as advisers had a special courage, and Roger admired them for it.

As the two pilots left the bar, Roger reached out to the bartender. He tried to give him a twenty-dollar bill. The bartender chuckled and waved off the offering. "Not in my pub, Yank. Just remember, you're welcome 'ere anytime."

As they walked down the street, both pilots were silent for a time. As they reached a corner, Terry stopped.

"Can you believe what just happened?"

Roger stopped, too, and looked back at Terry. "Do you suppose anyone would believe us if we told them?"

"Not back in the states, from what I hear. If they even suspect you're serving time in Nam, I hear they spit first and ask questions later."

Roger just shook his head, and began to walk again.

Terry quickly caught up. "By the way, Hunter, where are we headed?"

"How about a bus stop? I hear there's a university in Sydney, and I'd like to see it."

"A university?"

"Sure. Why not? We might even be able to meet some class people there. It would beat the riff-raff we were consorting with last night, maybe?"

Terry wasn't altogether sure about this proposal. He hesitated. "Well, OK. I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work out, we can always go back to Kings Cross."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly, Terry."

They checked a bus schedule, and found one that went out to the university. There were only a couple other people on the bus when they got on. One girl was sitting near them. Roger asked her if this bus went to the university. She was very pleasant, and said that was where she was going. She would be happy to show them where to get off.

As the three of them got off the bus, they got a conversation started. The pilots explained that they were on R&R in Sydney, and were interested in meeting a few people. The girl suggested that they accompany her to class.

After the class, their new acquaintance introduced them to a couple other girls. It was suggested that they all go to the student union building for a Coke. The suggestion was gladly accepted. The student who had accompanied them on the bus had another class to attend, so she was unable to join them. The other two girls they met were Jean and Pat. Jean had long, dark hair, and a very engaging smile. She wore a red dress that set off her pink cheeks. As they wandered toward the student union, she asked them if they had plans for the evening.

"Well, no, we haven't," Roger answered.

"Would you like to come home with me for tea?" Jean asked. "I've got to clear it with my parents first, but I'm sure we can work it out."

Roger and Terry readily accepted. Jean called her mother. "Mom, would it be all right if I brought home a couple Yanks for tea?" There was a pause as Jean waited for her mother's reply. Then she turned and smiled, shaking her head yes.

When they reached the student union, they all got Cokes and sat down at a table. As the conversation continued, Roger noticed that the other students at nearby tables

weren't talking. Roger leaned over the table and quietly mentioned this to Jean, who burst out laughing.

"Of course not," she said. "They're listening to your accent!" With this statement, the entire table broke out in laughter.

After Jean's last class, the foursome caught a train for the ride out to Jean's place. Both she and Pat lived in the outlying suburbs of Sydney. There Terry and Roger met the rest of Jean's family. Mr. Johnson spoke with more of an accent than the rest of the family, and it was a little more difficult for the pilots to understand him. When they were introduced, Mr. Johnson took Roger's hand firmly. He was middle age, and had thinning grey hair. He was very outgoing, and gave the visitors a warm reception. Mrs. Johnson was just as friendly. She also had grey hair, and was just as full of questions as Mr. Johnson. Jean was twenty, and had two younger sisters -- Ann, seventeen, and Teresa, fifteen. Ann was thin and excitable with a bubbly personality. Teresa was quieter than the others, very cute, and seemed very intelligent.

'Tea' consisted of lamb roast, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, peas, and 'passion fruit' dessert. No drink was served with supper, but after the meal everyone returned to the living room for coffee or tea. Instant coffee was the norm in Australia, and the conversation was lively while the teapot heated on the stove in the kitchen. The whistling of the teapot produced a very unpredictable result. Both Terry and Roger mistook it for an incoming round, and reacted immediately. Roger dove to the floor under the table, and Terry ran out the front door.

As Roger hit the floor, he knew he had made a terrible mistake. He quickly stood, and apologized to the family, but he was so embarrassed, he didn't know what else to say. Then he rushed out the door, and caught up with Terry on the sidewalk. Terry was standing still, looking up to the sky. He turned to Roger.

"Now that was some stunt, huh?"

"Hey, look, Terry, we both had the same thought."

"Yeah, I know, but I don't think I can go back in there and face those people. Jesus, you talk about embarrassing."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm sure they'll understand."

Terry looked hard at Roger. "Understand?? How can they understand? I'm not sure I can understand it myself."

"Well, we can't just walk away, Terry. They've been really nice to us."

Terry nodded, "You've got a point there, Hunter. We can't just walk away. But I sure feel embarrassed."

"At least you weren't on the floor under the table..."

Terry laughed. "Is that where you were?"

Roger nodded sheepishly. "That's where I was. Right in front of everybody."

Together, the two of them returned to the living room. They apologized to the Johnson's and Pat. Mrs. Johnson knew it was an embarrassing moment for the two pilots, and quickly served coffee around. The conversation continued, slowly at first. A few war stories were shared. Terry and Roger told of funny occurrences that had happened to them. There was also a comparison of words between their use in the states, and their meaning in Australia. The first of these occurred when Roger was describing what he wore when he worked as a logger. When he mentioned suspenders, the assembled girls broke up laughing. Roger's puzzled expression was quickly erased by Mr. Johnson when he told Roger that braces were what Australians used to hold up their pants. Suspenders were what the women used to hold up their nylons. It was very late when the family drove Terry and Roger back to their hotel.

The next day was Thursday, and Roger and Terry slept late. After a long, hot shower and a leisurely breakfast, they again went shopping downtown. They especially enjoyed the miniskirts at Australian Square. Roger shopped for thank-you cards, and they both priced cameras. After drinking coffee at several shops, they caught the train out to the Johnson's. They were quite early for their dinner date, so they decided to play a joke on Jean. They called and said that they had missed the train station where they were supposed to get off. However, they didn't realize that they would have had a hard time getting to where they said they were.

As they walked slowly up the street to the Johnson's house, Mr. Johnson and Teresa drove by, catching them at their game. Mrs. Johnson laughed heartily when she heard the story. The pilots explained that they had done it because they were so early.

As soon as Jean was ready, the three of them -- Roger, Terry, and Jean -- caught the train, and met Pat at 'Town Hall Station'. Jean had made reservations for dinner for the four of them. The restaurant was quite formal, and the conversation began to lag. The topic turned to American

night clubs, and their Australian counterparts. The girls mentioned a club called Martinez Place, and they were off.

Martinez Place was a nice club. It had small, round tables with a numbered lamp on each one along with a telephone. The telephone could be used to call any other table. As they ordered drinks, Pat lit a cigarette. Roger was surprised. It was the first time he'd ever seen her smoke. Terry ordered a screwdriver, brandy for Pat, Jean ordered a Pimms, and Roger had beer.

Roger was anxious to dance, and soon asked Jean. Together they enjoyed the popular music. Jean was a good dancer, and Roger was thoroughly enjoying himself. They hailed a taxi as they left the club, and on the way to Jean's place, dropped Pat and Terry off. Jean invited Roger in when they arrived at her house.

Roger was a little nervous as they entered the house. No one was up, but Jean made coffee for them. They sat in the kitchen and talked until nearly three in the morning. Roger kissed Jean good night when the taxi arrived for him.

The next day, the girls called at 11:00 a.m. Their lecture had been canceled, so the four spent the day at the zoo. Riding the ferry over to the zoo, Roger and Terry both took some pictures. Roger couldn't help noticing Jean's rosy cheeks as the wind blew her long hair about her. Roger and Jean made a date for the movies that night.

After watching "Lion in Winter", Roger again stayed late at the Johnson's with Jean. When he returned to the hotel, Terry and Pat were there together. Roger sat down and had a drink with them before he turned in.

The next day was spent with Pat's family. She had a little brother who enjoyed the game of football. Roger and Terry soon found that Australian football rules differed a lot from U.S. rules! The next day was the last day of R&R for Roger and Terry. They spent the day shopping again, and then out to the Johnson's for tea. It was a wonderful meal. Both pilots were sorry they were leaving. Before Roger left, he told the Johnson's that he would come back again. He hoped in his own mind that this was true. He had enjoyed his stay in the country "down under".

The flight back to Vietnam was uneventful. Again Roger marveled at the small islands in the vast sea below. Then he slept.

After reaching Saigon, the rest of the trip back to his unit was the same old military procedure. Roger was glad to arrive at Camp Evans. Major Brown had been replaced by Major Smart. Smart had come in country with C Battery, but he had been the XO then. He had been rotated to Battalion, but replaced Brown to gain some command time.

Smart's leadership differed from Brown's. Where Brown literally forgot the paperwork, Smart was an administrator. Where Brown was a leader of his men in every sense of the word, Smart only commanded the unit. Smart was not a good combat pilot, and preferred to let the platoon leaders handle the combat flying. That was not to say that he didn't join in on the combat missions, but he wasn't a natural leader in the air. He preferred to tag up with a section, or stand off and observe the action. He did allow his platoon leaders to make decisions, and gave them a great deal of authority, much like Brown had.

Some of the old guard began to DEROS back to the states. First was Travis. He had come over on the ship with A Battery's aircraft, and his time aboard ship counted toward his in-country time. Roger missed him a lot when he left. Tim Davis followed soon thereafter. Suddenly, Roger found himself one of the most experienced combat pilots in the Battery. This fact was not lost on Major Smart, and he began to assign new pilots to Hunter for training. All of the new pilots now arriving in C Battery had received Cobra training in the states.

During the break-in period, Roger tried to spend as much time with the new pilot as he could. He tried to find out about his background, his training experiences, and his goals. He would start them out in the front seat of the Cobra, watching them carefully when the missions got heavy. Then he would let them handle the radio. The next step was to move the new pilot to the back seat, and let him do the shooting while Roger handled the radios. When he felt that they understood the mission of the unit, and could handle the aircraft, he would let them handle everything.

Roger was always nervous when he put the new pilot in the back seat. The pilot in the rear seat of the Cobra had

about a five-to-one mechanical advantage over the pilot in the front seat on the controls. Thus, if the pilot in the rear made a mistake, it was sometimes a battle of strength to take the aircraft away from him.

It was on a mission near the DMZ when Roger was training the "Mexican Man", Warrant Officer Hank Trammel. Hank was from California, and considered himself a hot shot pilot. Roger was in the front seat handling the radios, and Hank was in the back seat, shooting the rockets. The target on this particular mission was down between two high ridges. On the first couple rocket runs, Roger noticed they were taking fire from the ridge on the right. Hank didn't seem to notice. On the third pass, Roger's nerves could stand no more.

"Say, Hank, did you notice any fire on that last run?" Roger asked over the intercom.

"Naw, I didn't see any at all."

"Well, how about taking a look at the ridge on the right on this run, huh?" Roger couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

Roger knew that Hank saw the fire on this run as Hank jerked the ship violently to the left. Roger depressed the floor mike switch. "Saw it that time, huh? Give 'em enough chances, Trammel, and they'll eventually find the range. You gotta keep your head on a swivel up here in these valleys."

Hank didn't answer, but changed the attack heading of the section. When they got back on the ground, Roger discussed ways of detecting fire when they were attacking a target. Hank listened, but reluctantly. Roger wondered if Hank would complete his tour.

Roger was moved to the 3rd Platoon by Major Smart. Only one of the original members of C Battery was left in the 'Third Herd'. Tom Bradford was the original All-American pilot. He had been a crop duster before joining the service. He knew what a ship could do in the air, and he proved that again and again. But he was somewhat careless. He rarely preflighted carefully, and Roger didn't like to fly with him. However, Tom's cool demeanor was shattered when he took heavy fire. His voice would usually rise about two octaves.

The forward support area was moved from Currahee, on the floor of the Ashau, to FSB Rendezvous. Rendezvous was located on the east side of the valley. The artillery sat up on the ridge, while a flat area against the side of the

valley was used as the chopper landing area. This area was also used by the slicks for a staging area.

The rains had begun again, and Roger knew that this was the first step in a long withdrawal from the valley. Support personnel had changed in the armament shop, and the level of maintenance support on the gun systems had dropped with the loss of experienced personnel. Roger was often called upon to dismantle the turret weapons in the field. The miniguns, with their six barrels, were the most troublesome. The rate of fire of these guns was so high, that any malfunction usually caused a wad of twisted and bent bullets. To clear the malfunction, the delinking mechanism had to be removed from the gun, and the barrels had to be cleared. This was a touchy operation in the forward areas. Back at Camp Evans, a bullet catcher was placed over the end of the barrels to stop the bullet if one fired as the gun was rotated. In the field, the bullet catchers weren't available.

This meant that the disassembly was done carefully, even though the gun was pointed in a safe direction. When one of the barrels fired during disassembly, Roger always jumped. Even when he was sure it was going to happen. Bradford always got a chuckle out of that, but he was never willing to break down a minigun himself.

Major Smart assigned Roger as the unit armament officer. Malfunctions in the electrical control systems of the Cobra were common with all of the heat, vibration and humidity to which they were subjected. The mechanical malfunctions were simple problems compared to the electrical problems. Roger finally managed to wangle an electrical schematic of the entire weapons system. It cost him several bottles of whiskey, but one of the NCO's managed to locate one for him in Danang. Roger spent many hours poring over it, trying to memorize the location of the components and understand how they worked together.

The time paid off, though, and he began to bet with the armament maintenance personnel on solving problems. Roger would bet them a case of beer that they couldn't solve the malfunction within two hours. If they failed, Roger, with the help of one assistant, would try to solve it in the same length of time. If he was able to do it, the maintenance section would have to buy the beer. If he couldn't solve it within the required time, then he would have to buy the beer. He began to earn quite a reputation for fixing the

problems on the Cobra, and he became more and more proficient with the test equipment.

Roger's thirty-day leave was scheduled for December. He got the leave for his first extension, and he was looking forward to going home. But he wasn't to leave without taking some bad news with him. One of the pilots in A Battery whom Roger knew well met with an unfortunate accident. Most of A Battery had been moved south of Danang to Cu Chi to support 101st Airborne operations down there. His friend had been in a ship that experienced an engine problem in the air, and upon their return to Cu Chi, had hit hard on the landing. The hard landing caused the rotor blade to flex downward so far that it sheared through the cockpit and decapitated the pilot in the front seat. Roger shuddered when he thought about it. He could only imagine how Johnson felt. He had been the pilot in the back seat when it happened.

There was also bad news about one of Roger's best friends. Al Hansen was listed as missing in action. On Roger's next trip down to Camp Eagle, he hustled over to B Battery, and looked up a mutual friend of his and Al's. Bob Trail had trained with them both, all the way through Fort Rucker. Then Bob had joined B Battery with Al. Roger found Bob in the maintenance hangar.

"Hey, Bob, can I buy you a cup of coffee," Roger asked when he came upon Bob checking on a ship. Bob wriggled out of the cockpit, and dropped to the ground.

"How you doing, Hunter?" Bob offered his hand. "What brings you to the land of the living here in the sunny south?"

"Well, I had to come down for some minigun parts, but I really wanted to stop by and see you."

Bob looked away quickly, then slowly turned back to Roger. "Guess you heard about Al, huh?" Bob's eyes were moist.

Roger swallowed the lump in his throat, and tried to keep his voice steady. "Yeah. I heard you lost one, but I didn't know it was Al. I got a letter from his wife. She's really upset, Bob."

Bob turned away again, and walked out of the hangar. Roger followed. Bob looked out across the flight line. He wiped his eyes quickly. "Yeah, I heard from her, too, Roger. But there isn't much to tell."

"Try me, Bob. I gotta hear it. All of it."

"Yeah, I know," Bob still faced away from Roger. Roger lit a cigarette, and waited patiently for Bob to continue. "I guess it was a bitch of a mission to start with. Apparently there was some of the usual administrative screw-ups when they were tryin' to join up with the slicks for the prep. I heard the timing was off, or something. Anyway, the section Al was with got the LZ figured out, and rolled in to prep it. Evidently Al's ship was hit on the first pass, I think. There wasn't much for forced landing areas there, so they went into the LZ." Bob hesitated and wiped his eyes again.

Roger's lip trembled. He knew he was causing Bob a lot of pain, but he wanted to hear the whole story from someone who would give it to him straight.

"Anyway, the whole crew made it out of the ship fine, and tried to secure their position. Al must have been a little separated from the others. The main man in charge decided the area was too hot, and called off the insertion. But they wanted to get Al's crew out, so a couple of slicks broke off from the flight to go in and pick them up. There was only room enough for one ship in the LZ at a time, so the first one dropped in. Al's stick buddy and both gunners from Al's ship jumped on that one. Well, that gave them a pretty full load, and the pilot started his takeoff. There was a second ship coming in to pick up the rest of the crew -- Al. Well, Al didn't know that.

"He saw the ship leaving with the rest of the crew, and he ran for it. Just as it was taking off, he jumped up and grabbed the skid. The pilot was already committed, and I don't know if he even knew Al had grabbed ahold. The pilot was in the middle of his takeoff, and he kept going. Well, Al tried to climb into the ship. Even the gunner on that side tried to reach him. But he lost his grip and fell... The pilot guessed that they were about a hundred or two hundred feet in the air over the jungle when Al dropped." Bob wiped his nose. The tears now ran freely down his face.

"The pilot didn't figure Al could have survived the fall, Roger. He was pretty sure the fall must have killed him."

"Did they get back in to make a ground search?" Roger's voice was very soft.

"No, I don't think so. The area was full of gooks. It was just too hot for them. I guess they made several attempts to get back in, but, Jesus..." Bob's shoulders

shook with the sobs. Roger put his arm around Bob's shoulders, and they began walking across the flight line.

After a ways, they stopped. Roger lit another smoke. "What did you tell Al's wife, Bob?"

Bob wiped his eyes, and looked at Roger. "About the same as I've told you, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Bob. I had to know."

"Yeah, I knew I'd hear from you. God, why did it have to be him? He was always laughing. Even when the going got tough. He always made it a little easier for everybody else. If he'd only waited for the second slick...."

Roger turned and walked away. The tears didn't start until he left B Battery's flight line behind him. He stopped on a grassy knoll not far from B Battery's area, and sat down. The memories from flight school flooded through his mind, and with them, more tears. A breeze ruffled the grass around him. Roger wiped his eyes and stood up. He looked at the camp around him. Suddenly all of his accomplishments in Vietnam seemed so insignificant. Even the goal he set for himself seemed unimportant. How had he been so lucky? Al had a wife and son, a son that he had never gotten to know, at home. And now he wouldn't be going back to them. Roger kicked the dirt. Damn, damn war, damn goods, he thought. What was it all for? It better be good to cost the life of someone like Al.

Roger faced into the wind. Then he dried his eyes again. That was it. No more tears. Not ever. No matter what they said, or what they did, they could never replace Al. No matter how many medals they handed out, it couldn't change what had happened. And Roger would never forget....

Life in C Battery continued. Living in the 3rd herd gave Roger a new perspective. Considered one of the old hands wasn't too bad a lot of the time. But Roger found the new pilots' attitudes hard to live with at times. He and Justin spent many hours at the card table together. Justin had also signed on for eighteen months. Roger missed having Justin on his wing, but he was sure he would adjust to that. The new pilots wanted combat. Roger was looking only to survive. He continued to believe in his goal, but he sometimes approached it more cautiously than he had earlier in his tour.

It was during this period of time that C Battery began to support CCN missions. CCN stood for Command and Control, North. It was a Green Beret operation out of Quang Tri, up near the DMZ. Their main mission seemed to be intelligence gathering. Indigenous troops were largely used in their operations. These were Vietnamese, though usually Montagnards. These were the 'mountain people' of Vietnam, as contrasted to the coast variety. Usually one or two Green Berets would go out with anywhere from seven to twelve of the indigenous troops.

The ships used to carry the ground troops were Korean era CH-34's, and they were flown by Vietnamese pilots. The CH-34's were old Army helicopters with a huge, bulbous nose. Some of them didn't even have radios, and even for those that did, they weren't much good. Many of the Vietnamese pilots spoke very poor English, so communications were often difficult. Marine gunships accompanied the flights, with the Griffin Cobras in a back-up role. The Marine gunships resembled the old C-models used by C Battery, and were most times armed with fixed M-60's on the hard mounts. They also carried small, five-round rocket pods on each side. They didn't have a lot of fire power compared to the Cobras, but the pilots more than made up for their lack of equipment. They were a fearless bunch, and very proud of their accomplishments.

Since the main mission was the gathering of intelligence, the most important part of the mission was getting the troops in, or back out. They were nearly always out-manned, and could not afford pitched battles. The missions were always across the red line into Laos, which presented a sticky political situation. No one was ever

left behind on these missions. That was the unwritten law. The mountains often presented difficult weather situations, and many times insertions or extractions of the troops had to be postponed due to the weather. There was never any artillery preps for the LZ's, and there was never any worries about shooting up friendly troops, because there simply weren't any around, except for the team itself.

Preparations for these missions were more complete than for the standard run-of-the-mill support missions. Survival radios were a must, along with a survival pack. Canteens and water were carried, plus whatever else the pilot deemed necessary for survival in the 'bush'. One of the new pilots to the unit was Dennis Gladstone. Dennis was blonde, a good-looking stud. He was from the New England area, and spoke with a distinct accent. Roger had first met Dennis when Roger was taking his Cobra transition training at Vung Tau. Dennis was one of the IP's. There were a lot of C Battery pilots taking the training, and Dennis got pumped up about the unit. He finally decided he'd like to join C Battery, and put in for a transfer.

Dennis was a good pilot, and Roger liked to fly with him. Roger usually had the front seat with Dennis in the back. On one of their first CCN missions together, they were armed with fleschette warheads to be used for the LZ prep. The fleschette was a special warhead for the rockets. It didn't hit with a big bang as the HE (High Explosive) warheads did. They carried a very small charge, but were packed full of small metal darts. The pilots commonly referred to this type of warhead as 'nails' because of the darts. Range was critical for this type of weapon. When the rocket reached its peak velocity, at about 300 yards, the small explosive charge in the warhead would detonate, dispersing the metal darts. They were very effective against personnel and booby traps. When the warhead burst, a small puff of red smoke appeared to alert the firer.

On this first mission with Dennis, Roger felt very comfortable with Dennis' flying ability. Dennis was very professional on the radio, rarely chatting, and kept his messages brief and to the point. As the ships attempted to identify the proper LZ, there was a little confusion as to its exact location. Ending up in the lead in the confusion, Dennis rolled in to fire. As they closed with the target, Roger expected the rockets to fire anytime. The ship passed the most effective range for the fleschettes, and Dennis continued to drive right on in. Roger thought maybe Dennis

forgot that they had nails on board, and quickly mentioned this point. But Dennis still held fire until they were almost on top of the LZ.

When he finally punched off the first pair, the red puffs of smoke appeared almost directly over the LZ. To Roger's surprise, the elephant grass in the LZ began toppling like it had been cut with a scythe. Dennis fired several more pair, and then initiated the break. As Roger fired the thumper for cover, Vietnamese chatter blasted his ears. The pilots of the CH-34's had seen the red puffs of smoke, and thought it was enemy fire. It took several minutes to reorganize the Vietnamese pilots, and complete the insertion.

The next week, Roger was again flying with Dennis on a CCM mission. They were extracting a team that had watched a large concentration of enemy troops for several days. When the team was safely aboard the 34's, someone suggested that the gunships attack the troop concentration. An OK came down from higher headquarters on the proposal. The team also passed along that the enemy had had a party the night before until the wee small hours. Once the slicks were well clear of the area, and headed for home, the gunships rolled in. Roger and Dennis were number four in the attack pattern. They followed the two Marine gunships and the lead Cobra. Dennis poured heavy rocket fire on the target, but Roger noticed that their break was very sluggish. The ship seemed to mush through when Dennis rolled it out of the dive. And it seemed to take longer than normal to get back to their attack altitude.

Roger shrugged it off as they began their second inbound pass. Probably nerves, he thought, way out here in the boonies with no friendlies around.

But the second pass was the same, only worse. Dennis had driven closer to the target on the run, and they were nearly down on the tree tops before the ship leveled off. Roger could hear the automatic weapons on the ground returning their fire. This time, the ship refused to gain altitude as they headed outbound.

"Something wrong, Dennis?" Roger asked as he studied Dennis in the rear view mirror.

"Yeah. Can't seem to get any more power."

Roger looked ahead. They were in a huge valley, and they would have to gain at least 500 feet before they could climb out of it. They were headed deeper into Laos as Dennis continued to nurse the ship along.

"Look, Dennis, we can always dump some of this ordnance. We've still got over half a load of rockets and all the turret ammo."

"Yeah. Guess we better do that."

Roger watched the rockets reach out ahead of the ship as Dennis punched off pair after pair. Missiles of death going nowhere in particular was a rather unusual sight. Roger watched them as their motors burned out, and then lost sight of them. He continued looking far ahead to see if he could spot the bursts. Dennis slowly dumped the whole load, over twenty pair. When he quit firing the rockets, Roger fired the 40 mm. to further lighten them. The vertical speed indicator finally registered a climb, and off to their left was a low spot in the ridge. Dennis turned toward it, and they crossed into the next valley to the south. They could turn back to the east here, and at least head in the direction of home. Roger was certain that the engine would fail any second, but Dennis remained calm and quiet.

The lead Cobra called into CCN headquarters about the ship's problem, and escorted Dennis and Roger all the way back to Camp Evans. Upon landing, a mechanical malfunction was identified in the fuel control unit. Roger was again happy to be back. He never did like those CCN missions, anyway.

Shortly thereafter, Roger was flying wing ship on a section that was supporting a CCN mission. The extraction of the team went badly, and the team and slicks came under heavy fire. Roger and the other Cobra attacked the heaviest concentration of enemy fire, trying to distract them from the slicks. Tracers filled the dark sky under a heavy overcast as the section attacked again and again. The Marine gunships escorted each slick in one at a time until the entire team was lifted out. They were later written up for this mission, and Roger received the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) for his part in the mission.

After receiving the medal at an awards presentation, Roger returned to the hootch. Justin dropped in and congratulated him.

Roger was just a little embarrassed. "Come on, Justin, it's not that big a deal, and you know it. It was pretty hairy, but it still won't hold a candle to that mission we shot at Currahee that night we had to land."

"Maybe so, Roger, but I'm happy you got a DFC. That's something to be proud of."

Trammel had just walked into the hootch. "Sure, that and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee back in the real world, you know."

Justin just shook his head. "Come off it, Mex. You might feel a little differently if it was yours."

"Yeah, that might be true. I haven't seen a mission like that yet, but I'll keep looking."

Captain Nelson had come in just behind Trammel.

"Knowing you, Mex, you'll probably get your ass blown out of the sky instead of gettin' decorated with a medal. Come to think of it, you'd still get a medal then, even if it was only a Purple Heart. Awarded posthumously, naturally."

"You'll get your turn, Mex. All you have to do is stay alive long enough," Justin was grinning.

Mex was shaking his head, "I never get in on one of those things. Always seems I'm off, or on some dud mission somewhere else. I'd like to have a chance to earn one of those shiny stars...."

"Maybe you can get your wingman to shoot a few holes in your tail one of these days to give you some excitement," Nelson said with a smirk.

"Hey, did you guys hear about that turret problem we had down in the 1st herd the other day?" Justin was speaking seriously now. "That hambone Jordan darn near shot me down with his turret. There was a problem with the hydraulics, and every time the gunner squeezed the action handles, the turret would swing clear around to the left. And when he pulled the trigger, it would fire. We were coming in on an LZ prep, and Jordan was on our right. His front seat opened up with the mini, and all I saw was a bright red streak across our nose!"

"Didn't he figure out there was something wrong with the turret?" asked Mex.

"Well, yeah, but it took him two long bursts before he did. If we'd been about a half-a-length in front of him on the prep, it would have been the last prep we ever shot. He'd have made swiss cheese of our house, man!"

Roger leaned back on his bunk and laughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean, Justin. You remember when we had the electrical short in the control stick?"

Justin turned to Roger, "Yeah, the day we almost shot down Major Brown?"

"That's the one. Jesus, I started to call him on the radio. We were flying one of the old C-models when it

happened. That pair of rockets looked like they went right through his rotor disk. That was too close!"

"That guy's been lucky all his life, I swear," Justin added.

Roger turned back to Mex. "Say, Mex, if you think you'd like those CCN missions, I'd be happy to trade with you. The most fun I've had up there was playing chess with one of the gooks that couldn't speak a word of English. Maybe you could even join the Marines and fly with the 5th Marine Division along the 'Z'. I hear they want pilots looking for action."

"Those guys up there have been gettin' into some shit, haven't they?"

"Yeah. You know they consider flying CCN light duty?"

"Oh, bullshit, you meathead," Nelson's tone was unbelieving. He turned and left the group.

Roger leaned over and opened his footlocker. "If I get killed, Justin, you get possession of my DFC, OK?" Justin didn't answer immediately, and Roger looked up at him.

Justin's face was somber, "Don't ever talk like that, Roger..... not ever."

After flying a few days of missions around Camp Evans, Roger was again scheduled for CCN. It was another extraction mission, but this one went smoothly. As they were returning to Quang Tri, the Marine gunships were far out in front. The slicks formed a loose gaggle in the middle of the flight, with the Griffins bringing up the rear. Roger was slumped back in his seat, daydreaming, as the countryside passed beneath them. One of the things Roger did like about flying the CCN missions was the countryside. Most of the country in Laos appeared untouched by the war. There were no heavy concentrations of shell craters, and none of the trees were defoliated. The lush green valleys were flanked by jungle covered mountains. The valleys seemed endless. Roger often wondered what it looked like from the ground.

"Hey, Hunter, check that 34. It's dropping out of formation."

Dennis' voice instantly roused Roger. Straightening up, he could see one of the 34's rolling over in a steep bank and spiralling down out of the sky. "What's he doing?"

"Don't know. He didn't call."

Roger unlocked the sighting station, and tightened his shoulder straps as Dennis banked over in an attempt to stay

with the slick. Some Vietnamese chatter came over the radio as the 34 dropped lower and lower into the valley.

"Looks like he's landing on the river, Dennis."

"Wish they spoke English on the radio." Dennis continued to track the errant 34. "They're firing at something."

"Got it," Roger answered. He now held the turret at the ready as Dennis circled the ship on the ground. Roger watched as someone left the 34, and ran along the river bar. "Where's he going?"

Dennis dropped still lower as the two pilots watched the running figure. "Look down next to the river, Hunter. Those dummies stopped to shoot a deer."

"Are you kidding?... You're right, Dennis. I can see it now. Look at those guys waving their arms. They must be excited about getting some fresh meat for tonight." Roger just shook his head and stowed the sighting station. No wonder they hadn't put out a radio call. Roger lit a cigarette. He just plain didn't like these CCN missions.

One of the things that drew Tom Bradford to the CCN missions was the thrill of working with Green Berets. He liked their swagger, and the way they seemed to do things without orders or a lot of administrative overhead. They were always coming up with weapons that no one else could get, and this intrigued Tom. One day he brought a "Swedish K" submachine gun back from Quang Tri. The pilots in the 3rd Platoon gathered around as he showed them the weapon. One of its greatest attributes was its folding stock. Tom had finally found a weapon, besides his .38, that he could carry in the cockpit of a Cobra.

A couple days later, Tom was getting a new pair of fatigues out of his hot box. When he put them on, Nelson looked at him kind of funny.

"Hey, Tom, did you just get those back from the laundry?"

"Sure, why?"

"Well, you got a funny lookin' hole in the back pocket. Those gooks are supposed to sew those up when they launder 'em."

Bradford twisted around to look at his back pocket. "Where's it at?"

Nelson heaved himself off his bunk. "You got holes in the legs, too, and there's even one in the back of your shirt. What the hell's going on?"

Bradford stuck his arms out, and continued to examine his uniform. "Where's the holes?"

Nelson came right up to him and knelt down. "Right here. Jesus, you got 'em in both legs. It looks like bullet holes."

"That must have been some mission, Tom, if you can't even remember how you got all those holes!" Brown chipped in.

There was also a hole in one of the breast pockets. Nelson blurted out, "That one in front matches the one in back, dummy. Looks like somebody shot your shirt."

Brown stepped back, "Boy, it's lucky you weren't in it when it happened, Tom, or you'd have an extra hole to breathe through."

Tom unbuttoned his shirt, and took it off. When they laid it down on a cot, the holes in the front and back lined up perfectly. "Wonder how in the heck that happened?"

"Hey, take off your pants, too. Did you have everything hanging on the same hanger in your hot box?" Nelson asked.

"Yeah, of course they were."

"Well, maybe we oughta check your hot box, too."

Tom jerked off his pants, and when he folded them like they were on the hanger, the single hole lined up all the way through the layers. Then Nelson hollered from back in Tom's area, and the others gathered there.

"Look at this, Tom. There's a bullet hole right through the door of your hot box." Nelson stood pointing at the hole. When he swung the door open, the splinters showed on the back of the door. Nelson stuck his head inside the hot box, and continued to poke around. His muffled voice addressed the group, "And here's where it went out. You know, Tom, that ain't your only uniform that's got holes in it."

Tom turned to the members of the platoon gathered around. "All right, who was the smartass that shot the hole in my hot box?" Everyone looked at one another, but nobody said anything. "Wait a minute," Tom said. "Who isn't here? Where's that crazy Mex? Hey, Hank, are you around here?" Tom called out.

The door at the front of the hootch banged shut, and Hank, the Mex, came strolling in. "Hi, guys. What's going on?"

Tom stepped up to Mex. "You know anything about a hole in my hot box, Mex?"

Hank colored, and stepped back. "Uh..... look, Tom, I.... uh...., I can explain."

"Well, you better make it good."

"It ain't good, but I... uh... can tell you what happened. You know when you got back yesterday?"

"Yeah, go on."

"Well, you left your Swedish K lying on your bunk. I just picked it up to look at it. I took the magazine out, but I guess there was one left in the chamber. It went off. I didn't know it went through your hot box, though." The gathered pilots burst out in laughter.

"Nice, Tom. It isn't every pilot who gets to wear uniforms that were shot with his own gun!" More laughter followed, but Tom was not amused. He threw his shirt down on his cot, hesitated, picked it up, and stomped out of the hootch.

Nelson turned to Hank, "You better watch yourself, Mex, for the next couple of days, anyway. I don't think Tom's too happy about your stunt with his gun." The pilots drifted back to their areas, but they were still laughing. When Tom returned from supper, the giggling continued, along with remarks about bullet holes. Tom couldn't take any more of it. He left the hootch, and went next door to roll dice with Kaiser.

Support was also provided to the 5th Marine Division along the DMZ to the north. Marine gunships did their share for their own, but sometimes the battles just got ahead of them. Then the call went out for the Griffins. When the call came in that hot September day, Roger was the section leader. John Ostrom, a new pilot, was in the front seat of Roger's ship. In the wing ship were Trammel, the aircraft commander, and Tom Johnson, another new pilot from the 3rd Platoon.

Roger had never felt that comfortable around Hank Trammel. Roger had trained him when Hank first arrived in C Battery, but Roger had never gotten very close to him. Hank was a loudmouth, and didn't seem to care a great deal about his fellow pilots. He was a glory seeker, and was often distracted by unimportant details. During Hank's early training, Roger didn't feel that Hank would ever make an aircraft commander, and told the platoon leader so. Roger wasn't sure whether this was ever relayed to Trammel, but from the way he acted around Roger, it very well might have been. The flight north to the target area took about twenty minutes. As they approached the vicinity of the contact, Roger brought the systems hot for the rockets and turret. John couldn't seem to get the turret to work.

"Check the book on it," Roger offered over the intercom.

"Crap. It's written up as inop," John returned.

"Oh well, John, it's a good day for pictures. Did you bring your camera?" Roger asked.

"Naw, never thought about it."

Roger could detect a trace of fear in John's voice. It was the kind that grabbed you by the stomach, and no matter how hard you tried to fight it, it tightened your vocal cords. Then the breathing came a little harder, and the mouth turned to cotton. Roger had experienced it many times in his early days in Vietnam. That wasn't to say that Roger didn't feel it any more. He had just learned how not to show it. It was better to bolster the confidence of a

nervous copilot than to let him see your fear. As long as the aircraft commander appeared to be confident, the newcomer would learn to deal with it. Roger also believed that showing fear was a good way to take lumps. If you went into battle with confidence, then that was how you were going to perform. And if it was your day to get it, why not get it with confidence rather than twisted with fear? It probably wouldn't hurt any worse, either way.

About five minutes out of Quang Tri, the section approached a long ridge. As they came closer, Roger could see a double file of troops walking along the crest of the ridge. A shell burst among the files, and several troops dropped to the ground. Roger could hardly believe his eyes. It was like watching combat on TV. After a few seconds, most of the troops would get up and continue walking along the ridge. Those left on the ground were soon reached by medics. Then a jeep would drive up, and nearby troops would load the prone bodies into the jeep. The jeep would turn around, and head back in the direction it had come. Roger circled the ridge several times to see if he had just happened to see a fluke, but the same process continued. Roger shook his head, and flew on down the ridge.

When he reached the end of the ridge, there were three tanks parked there, facing out in three directions. So far, Roger hadn't seen the Marines fire a shot. Mortar rounds began landing among the tanks. One landed right on top of the tank to the right. Sleeping equipment, C-rations, ponchos and the like were always carried on the outside of the tanks. The gear on the tank that was hit caught fire. Soon the turret of the tank popped open, someone scrambled out, kicked off the burning gear, and dropped back into the turret. This is like a dream, thought Roger.

John was very quiet in the front seat, watching the show. Roger wondered how much combat John had seen. Often the new pilots in from the states had seen more of the Vietnam war on the televised news reports than many of those serving in country. After all, the news reporters went where the action was, while many of the support troops never got out of Bien Hoa or Saigon during their tour. Roger had heard that one of the most popular past times in Saigon was sitting in the roof-top bar above the U.S. embassy, drinking and watching battles rage in the distance.

Roger shrugged off the feeling of spectator, and made contact with the Marine unit on the ground. As he was trying to locate their position, he could hear the automatic

weapons fire over the radio. It sounded like they were in contact, all right. Roger could see that another Griffin section would be needed for this mission. It looked like a pitched battle was developing. It was one of the few that Roger had seen. The NVA (North Vietnamese Army) showed more courage along the DMZ than they did further south. Probably because they were closer to home, and had better support.

The Marine contact didn't want to pop smoke. While Roger circled still trying to identify the friendly position, he noticed a slick flying in a valley between two ridges below him. The slick slowed, then popped up above the ridge further north. As he landed, Roger saw Marines carrying wounded to the bird. The casualties were quickly loaded, and those carrying the wounded scattered immediately. The slick lifted up, and dropped into the valley backwards. Falling into the ravine, the pilot made a quick pedal turn, and the ship was flying off the way it had come. As soon as it departed the landing area, mortar rounds began landing where the helicopter had been sitting.

"That guy's got balls," Roger commented over the intercom.

"Yeah," John agreed.

Roger had now identified the location of his contact on the ground. The FO said he was west of where the slick had landed. His men were pinned down by the mortar fire.

"Say, Griffin, could you shoot up some of the hills to our north? We think those mortars are coming from up on those hills."

Roger keyed his mike, "Will do, Country Six. Which hill do you want me to hit?"

"Take any of 'em. They're all held by the bad guys."

Roger looked to the north. There were over a dozen hills that the enemy could be using to spot from. Roger tried to get the FO to pick one, but to no avail.

"Just use your best judgement, Griffin," the Marine answered. "I can't see a helluva lot from down here, anyway." The Marine sounded tired on the radio.

Roger called Trammel. "Hey, Delta, you got me covered?" Roger had asked Hank to call back to Ops to scramble another section to their location, and he wanted to make sure that Hank was in a position to cover him.

"Yeah, got ya', Babe," Hank returned.

Roger lazily rolled in on the nearest hill to the north of the Marine unit. As he was lining up on it, tracers

suddenly surrounded the Cobra. Roger knew how big fifty caliber tracers looked, but they always froze the blood in his veins when they whistled past. Roger realized too late that it was a fifty firing on them, and they were well within its range. The tracers were passing on both sides of the ship. All Roger could think of was that there were four rounds of non-tracer ammo between every two tracer rounds in a standard belt of ammunition. He couldn't believe that they weren't getting hit. John was so scared that he lifted his feet up on the seat, and tried to hide behind his chicken plate.

Roger wasn't much better. He ducked low behind the instrument panel as his brain raced for a way out of the predicament. Roger hoped that Hank would see their problem, and put some fire on the fifty that was firing on them. Roger continued to drive in on the target. He was afraid to turn or break. That would give the enemy gunner a belly or side shot. Just what he wants, thought Roger. Can't give him that. He'll blast us to pieces.

Roger thought of the turret. It was written up as inoperative, but that didn't mean it wouldn't fire. It might just be the hydraulics that are bad. Roger reached down and flipped the turret selector switch to the stow position so he could fire the turret from the back seat. Then he lifted the guard on the minigun trigger, and slowly squeezed. The ship was now less than 300 yards from the enemy position. The bark of the minigun answered Roger's prayers, and his own tracers reached out to meet the fifty caliber rounds. For a moment, the two gunners were locked in a duel. Roger kicked the tail rotor pedals to spread his fire over the hill.

But this couldn't end in a suicide run. Roger would have to break off, but where? He couldn't overfly the enemy gun. They would shoot his belly full of holes. The idea popped into his head. He would break down between the enemy occupied ridge, and the one with the Marines on it. The enemy gunner wouldn't expect that, and even if he did, it would be difficult for him to train his fire on the diving helicopter. Roger hoped the minigun wouldn't jam as he continued to close with the fifty's position.

At two hundred yards, Roger rolled the Cobra steeply to the right, and released the trigger switch. Kicking in right pedal, the slender Snake nosed over sharply. Only fifty feet above the ground, Roger leveled the ship and swung back for the ridge the Marines held. He knew he might

be flying right through their fire, but he had to get away from the fifty. They hugged the side of the ridge as Roger pulled in power and brought the nose of the ship up. They barely passed over the ridge.

Between the small bushes on the ridge, Roger could clearly see the Marines lying on the ground. As the Cobra passed over their position, they rolled on their backs and waved their approval. Some held up fists while others gave them the thumbs up sign. Roger smiled at their encouragement. They would never know how badly he had screwed up.

As he headed outbound to set up another run, he realized how much he had been sweating. His gloves felt sticky, and he could barely breathe. Roger wondered how John was taking all this in the front seat. Then he began to scan the sky for his wingman.

"Hey, Delta, where are you?" Roger called on the radio.

"Uh,think we're about a mile south of where we last saw you. I got ahold of Operations, and they're sending another section up. Might be a few minutes before they get here, though."

Roger's breath caught. A wingman's first responsibility was to cover the section leader. Hank had said that he had Roger when Roger started that first run. That was supposed to mean that the wing had the leader covered. But Hank probably didn't even have Roger in sight when he'd answered Roger's call. Roger was flat mad, but it wouldn't do any good to rave at Hank on the radio. It was a tactical error. One that had almost been Roger's last. He would make it a point to discuss it with all the pilots in the section when they got back on the ground.

As Roger waited for Hank to join up, he saw the slick approaching the Marine position again. Roger had to admire that slick pilot's courage. That took pure guts going into a position like that with no more cover than he had. And he had only seconds on the ground before the mortar rounds arrived. Roger wanted to meet the pilot, but he knew that would probably never happen.

Roger also thanked the armorer who had loaded up the minigun in his Snake. Even though the system was written up with a malfunction, that armorer had likely saved two lives. Roger's and John's. And he probably hadn't even given it a thought. Roger was shaking a little as he chuckled to himself. It was amazing how things worked out. Roger thought back to the Marines they watched on the ridge only a

couple moments before. Some of them were wounded badly. Maybe they had never seen combat before, and they were already on their way to a hospital somewhere. Fate was a slippery animal. By all rights, Roger and John should have been a smoldering wreck of twisted metal, half buried in a nondescript hillside just a few clicks south of the DMZ. And even if they recovered the bodies, what would the post mortem show? Some bits of bone and flesh tossed into a plastic bag, that would somehow find its way back to the US? But would anyone ever know what had really happened?

Not likely, thought Roger. The letter would begin, 'dear sir, your son was lost in combat on the 27th of August, 1969, just a few miles west of Quang Tri in the Republic of Vietnam....' And for what? That was what the news reporters, and the pictures could never capture. They could never capture the feeling that Roger had when he crossed that ridge, and the Marines below had waved their approval and support. They were one entity then. Sharing their fears and their hopes. Knowing they both faced the same enemy, and they had spit in his face. Well, almost. Roger's mouth was so dry that he couldn't begin to spit. He licked his sweaty moustache with his tongue. Maybe that's what he had forgotten to tell General Zais that day when Zais welcomed C Battery, and made the derogatory comment about Roger's moustache. When all else failed, it did provide a little moisture, even though it was pretty salty.

Roger forced himself back to the mission. He had to concentrate. That slick was coming in again, and Roger didn't want to lose him. The enemy had already lost face in their attack on the Snake, and Roger wanted them to feel that they couldn't beat an American unit at this game called war. Roger rolled in on the same hill, and began punching off rockets. Take that, he thought, as he poured pair after pair into the hillside.

September began giving way to October. Roger met the change of months with mixed emotions. It meant one more month of his tour was gone, but it also put them one month closer to the rainy season. That was the time of year that he didn't like. The clouds closed down, and the wet weather made flying a miserable chore. It was bad enough to fight the enemy, but the weather was an adversary you couldn't beat. It also confined the living space within the Battery. No one spent much time outside in the rain -- unless you were in the infantry. And the long weather stand downs brought short fuses from the close living. The first extended period of rains, clouds and wind was the worst. It was as if someone had cut everyone's space to the area of their personal living space within the hootch.

But it wasn't rainy all the time, and this made the conditions bearable. Major Smart sent Roger and a Spec 4 named Jones south to pick up a replacement Cobra at Vung Tau. They were ferried to Phu Bai by the battalion slick. There they caught a C-130 flight to Cam Ranh Bay. At Cam Ranh was a huge airfield. As they were departing their flight, Roger noticed one of the 'freedom birds'. It was a commercial jet. It had arrived carrying fresh troops for the war machine, and it would be departing with those who had finished their year's tour. Roger looked longingly at the slick, white jet. For a moment he wished that his tour was over and he was in Cam Ranh to catch his last flight home.

Jones broke into his reverie. "Nice lookin' bird, huh, sir? Be kind of nice to just jump on and forget about this place, wouldn't it?"

"My thoughts exactly, Jones," Roger replied. Together the two of them turned and walked to the terminal. They checked at the reservation desk to see what was available to carry them to Saigon. It would be at least a four-hour wait.

Roger turned and walked away from the counter. "Come on, Jones, let's see if we can't find another ride south, huh?"

"Sure. Do you think we can?"

"Well, these wings we're wearing might be good for something."

"If you can get us to Saigon, sir, I think I might be able to do us some good there."

Roger stopped and looked at Jones. Jones had a slight build, and unruly dark hair that was long by any regulations. His dark-rimmed glasses slipped down his nose, and his uniform looked way too big for him. For an instant, Jones looked to Roger like a teenager in ill-fitting Salvation Army clothes who had lost his way in a large airport. Roger grinned at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"My dad used to be stationed in Saigon a while back. He's gone now, but I'm sure some of the guys he worked with are still there. They're all civilians."

"Your dad was a civilian stationed over here?" Roger asked.

"Yeah. He didn't seem to mind the duty much. He lived in an apartment in Saigon. I always was trying to get down to see him, but I never made it," Jones said with a sigh. "He was working for the Air Force."

Roger was able to get them on a military hop into Tan Son Nhut late in the afternoon. Jones used a phone to make one call. When he hung up, he winked at Roger, and briskly rubbed his hands together. "They sure haven't forgotten me. We got us a place to stay, Mr. Hunter."

Roger laughed. "Thanks a lot, Jones. By the way, what's your first name?"

Jones laughed. "Bill. Really William, but I've been called Bill ever since I was a little kid."

A local taxi whisked them to the address Bill had written down. It looked like an office building to Roger. When they went in, a secretary asked them to be seated. Roger noted the Vietnamese secretary spoke very good English. Soon a man in his late forties entered, and shook hands with Bill. Another soon joined them, and the four of them left to eat at a restaurant in downtown Saigon. The food was delicious. Roger felt out of place with his jungle fatigues. The two friends of Bill were both dressed in civilian clothes.

After supper, the four of them took another taxi. They soon arrived at a large hotel. Probably more properly called a villa, thought Roger. When they reached a room, one of the civilians unlocked the door. The four of them entered. It was a spacious apartment by Vietnamese standards. It was complete with a shower and a flush toilet. Roger was amazed that he always checked for these

luxuries now, instead of taking them for granted. The four of them sat around and had a couple drinks.

Before long, there was a knock at the door. Two young Vietnamese women entered when the door was opened. One of the men huddled with the Vietnamese while the other spoke quietly with Bill. Then the two civilians left.

Bill slapped Roger on the shoulder. "Well, Mister Hunter, it's all ours."

Roger looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean, Bill?"

"I mean that my dad's friends have left all this for us. For the night. They won't be back tonight. They've got another place to stay. So what do you say we kick back and enjoy.... huh?" Bill had a huge grin on his face.

Roger motioned toward the two Vietnamese women who had disappeared into the kitchen. "What about them? Are they the hired help, or what?"

Bill laughed. "You might call them that, but be careful. They probably understand English very well. They're our company for the evening. The whole night, Mr. Hunter!"

"If it's just the same to you, Bill, I'd rather you called me Roger. That Mr. Hunter stuff is OK for the war zone, but this doesn't look like it's going to be a war zone tonight." Roger got up and poured himself another drink.

"If you don't like bourbon, there's more junk inside the cabinet there," Bill pointed.

Roger opened the cabinet, and could scarcely believe his eyes. There were bottles of every sort. Scotch, bourbon, rye, and vodka, to begin with. Roger picked out the bottle of vodka. It was Russian. Roger smiled to himself and shook his head. Might as well support their part in this war, too, he thought. "You don't suppose there's some orange juice to go with this?" he asked Bill.

"Sure. In the kitchen. But you don't need to get it." Bill picked up a small brass bell on an end table next to the couch. With the ring of the bell, one of the ladies appeared. Roger noticed that she had changed clothes. She was wearing a brief outfit like a dancer in a bar. Bill pointed to Roger, and said that he needed a screwdriver. The young woman took the vodka bottle from Roger's hand, and smiling politely, returned to the kitchen.

Roger couldn't believe how this situation had developed. It was like a dream. He could already feel the alcohol running through his veins. He hoped he didn't get

too drunk. He stood up and walked over to the window. Swinging aside the curtain, he looked out on an open courtyard below. Even though the alcohol was working, Roger couldn't shake a small knot of fear in the back of his mind. He just couldn't feel comfortable in this country.

He turned back to the room. The other young lady had entered, and Roger noticed that Bill was already busy with her. Roger spoke to the second one as she crossed the room to him. She answered, but in halting English. Roger wanted to forget he was in Vietnam. He wanted to forget that this was a Vietnamese woman he was with. He wanted to forget about the war, the mud, the night missions but he couldn't shake that little voice in the back of his head that kept telling him to stay alert, be ready.

It wasn't long before the young woman led him down a short hall to a bedroom. Roger walked in, and began admiring the double bed when the slender Vietnamese began to undress him. Roger brushed her off, and sat down on a small bench. He looked at her. Her eyes were questioning. She had a good figure. Then again, maybe it was the alcohol. What the heck, Roger thought. She was only doing what she was paid to do. The least he could do was to be nice. He rose, and took her in his arms.

Roger undressed and took a shower. When he returned to the room, she was already in bed. Roger slid in next to her. There wasn't any foreplay. Roger knew he couldn't last. They made love. Roger was almost rough before he caught himself. The alcohol made it easier, but he missed the sound of a feminine voice. Through the barred window, Roger could hear sounds on the street. Traffic sounds, and occasionally, voices.

When his partner got up, and left the room, Roger rolled out of the bed. He searched his clothes for a cigarette. Finding his pack, he looked out the window. The street below was now nearly deserted. In the distance, Roger could hear artillery fire. The Vietnamese returned, and moved close to him. Roger could smell her body. Her skin felt smooth under his touch. He was becoming aroused again. He picked up his glass from the dresser, but she took it from him and disappeared again. Roger sat down on the bed. She returned shortly with a full glass. Roger took the drink and smiled at her. The room was dark, but he could still see her features as she watched him drink from the glass. Again they got into bed, and again they made

love. Afterwards, Roger held her close to him. He was exhausted, and soon fell asleep.

Roger awoke with a start. He sat up. For a minute, he didn't know where he was. Then he felt the warm body next to his. He wondered if she was asleep. He got up carefully, trying not to awaken her. He lit a cigarette and sat down by the window. As he smoked, Roger carefully cupped the cigarette so its glow could not be seen from the street. The artillery fire had stopped. A jeep drove slowly down the street. Roger wondered what it would be like to spend an entire tour in Saigon. He watched from the window for a long time. The night air chilled his naked body. When he could stand it no longer, he returned to bed. The smooth skin of his bed partner warmed him as he pulled up the sheet and pressed close to her.

When Roger awoke again, the sky outside was beginning to color. Roger lay still, and listened to the soft breathing of the body next to him. This might be what everyone dreamed of, Roger thought, but one night was enough. He didn't think he could stand another night. Something about Saigon, the buildings, the winding streets, gave him the willies. He wanted someone with whom he could talk, not someone who would only give him sex. Roger got up and showered. When he returned to the room, she was still in bed. Roger dressed, and walked down the short hall to the living room. There was no TV, no radio, and he could find nothing to read. He would just have to wait until Bill got up.

Roger entered the kitchen. It was small, but tidy. Roger wondered if there was a coffee pot. As he was looking for one, Bill came in.

"You're up pretty early," Bill said as he entered the kitchen.

Roger smiled, "Had a little trouble sleeping, I guess."

"Me too. Got any plans for the day?" Bill rubbed his eyes sleepily.

Roger straightened up. "Bill, I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I just don't feel comfortable here. I mean, it isn't the hospitality or anything. I guess it's just Saigon jitters, or something."

Bill looked at him. "That's OK, Mr. Hunter. I think we feel about the same way. Maybe it's our roommates?" Bill laughed. "Can't get used to being so close to 'em."

"Something like that. I know we've got a week to get this bird picked up, but I think I'd like to see if we can't head out today."

"I'm with you, sir. Don't want to wear out a good thing." With that, Bill disappeared into the other room.

An hour later, they were both showered, dressed, and in a taxi on their way to the airport. By the early afternoon, they were in Vung Tau, going over C Battery's newest addition. It was an old Cobra, but it had all its pieces. Bill pored over the books on the aircraft, while Roger checked the ship thoroughly. All seemed in good order. They signed the proper papers, and loaded into the Snake.

Roger called in to flight following, and filed a flight plan for Vung Tau to Camp Evans, "feet wet". That meant they would be flying the coast all the way north. Topping off with fuel, they were on their way. Late in the afternoon, they landed at Tuy Hoa to refuel. It was an Air Force field, and they required Roger to shut down. There was nowhere to get something to eat, so they returned to the ship quickly, and took off again.

At one point on the trip north, Roger was unable to contact the station to which he had been passed by flight following. He was finally able to reach another station near Danang, and told the flight following station to pass the word back. The sun was just setting as they flew over Danang harbor.

"Might make it back in time for supper, if we push this thing a little," Roger said. There was no answer. Jones was asleep in the front seat. Roger smiled to himself, and flew on.

Earlier on the flight, he had asked Jones to fly. At first Jones had refused politely. When Roger insisted, Jones admitted that he had never learned to fly at all, and had no stick time. Roger calmly talked him through the procedure. Roger explained that Jones wouldn't have to worry about changes in the pitch or power setting. He simply had to control the attitude of the Snake using the cyclic stick. Jones had tried for several minutes, but it was a no-win proposition. He could not maintain level flight. Roger coached and corrected, but gave up when it became apparent that Jones just didn't have the touch required. Roger was tired, and had wanted to take a rest. After Jones' attempt at flying, Roger caught his second wind, and was able to continue the flight without fighting off drowsiness.

As they continued north, Roger checked the date on his watch. October. Hunting season was just getting underway in the Northwest. This was one that Roger would miss. He was sorry to miss it. Not because of his desire to kill a deer, but the time spent in the tall timber by himself was going to be sorely missed. Even in the pouring rain, the timbered hills beckoned to him. Rain kept many hunters in their cars, and Roger liked that. It meant fewer hunters in the brush. In his mind, Roger pictured the clearcuts, the winding roads, and the stands of virgin timber. He missed being out with his father, as they shared sandwiches and coffee on the edge of a road overlooking a steep hillside below. The small talk. The comraderie of being accepted....

Approaching Phu Bai, Roger called in to flight following to tell them he was nearing his destination, and had no more need for their services. Then he switched frequencies, and called Griffin Operations. It was Sorger who took the call. John indicated that he was surprised they were arriving with the new ship so soon. Roger laughed as he thought of the night spent in Saigon. Jones was still asleep as Roger started the approach. Roger tried to set the ship down softly enough that he wouldn't wake Jones. But as they came to a hover, Jones awoke, and looked around sleepily.

"Back already? Boy, that was a quick trip, huh?"

Roger shook his head with a grin as he parked the Snake and began to fill out the log book. "Yeah. Just couldn't resist gettin' back to the war, I guess. They might have missed us."

Jones laughed at the remark as he climbed stiffly from the ship and dropped to the ground. A jeep arrived to give them a lift to the Battery area.

To acquaint new troops with the ARA and what the unit could do, demonstrations were given periodically. A grandstand had been built in the training area just outside the perimeter of Camp Evans. A single ship was used for the demonstration, but the radio chatter and the attacks were patterned after the real thing. After the demonstration, the pilot landed and the troops were allowed to look the ship over and ask questions. Nobody really knows how it got started, but one maneuver that became part of the demonstration was diving the Snake at the grandstand to give the troops a head-on look at the Snake in action.

Justin was the aircraft commander on one particular demonstration. Maybe he was looking forward to the question and answer period. It was then that the pilots got to strut their stuff. Usually a few war stories were thrown in for emphasis. The grunts were suitably awed by the demonstration, and getting to meet one of the pilots from an ARA unit was usually a highlight for them. For whatever reason, Justin lost his concentration in the dive, and waited a little too long to pull out. He was so close to the ground on the break, that he struck the grandstand with the stinger (tail skid) on the aircraft.

Maybe on a different day, it would simply have been brushed off. But not on this one. A full-blown investigation ensued, and while it was being conducted, Justin was grounded. Of course, word of the investigation passed through the Battery like wildfire. When Roger heard of it, he dropped in to see Justin.

"What's this I hear about you trying to take out a grandstand with a skid while the troops were all watchin'?"

Justin looked up from the book he was reading. He was lying on his bunk. For a moment he stared at Roger. Then he laid the book down. "I can't believe it. A full-blown investigation, and there wasn't even an injury. They're makin' a bigger deal out of this than a friendly fire incident."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Any idea when it's all going to die down?"

"Naw, not really. I think they're interviewing everybody in the stands. At the rate they're going, it'll probably take another week. They even took pictures of the ship."

"Was it damaged that much?"

"No. Just that little fiberglass section by the stinger was cracked. And there was a little paint missing off the stinger. I guess the incident itself wasn't that big, but now they're wondering why we were pointing a loaded ship at the stands. One question leads to another, you know."

Roger sat down on the bunk next to Justin. "Sounds like a typical investigation. Battalion must be involved, huh?"

"Yeah. That dumb liaison officer, what's his name, was up here yesterday talking to me. I think that guy's got mush for brains."

"I think the lesson is already clear, and I'm sure that little maneuver is going to be scratched from future demos, so why the big deal? Is someone out to hang someone, or what?"

Justin pushed back his hair, "I honestly don't know, Hunter. It might be something like that, but I just think this is the way Major Smart is going to work. If something goes wrong, I think he'll pursue it until he gets all the facts."

"Have you talked to him about it?"

"Sure. We've met several times, but with Battalion snooping around, he's under the gun. I sure wish I hadn't extended for six months now. That may be one long six months. This grounding has really stretched the days already."

Roger slapped Justin on the shoulder. "I hear what you're saying, but I'm sure it's going to work out OK. After all the publicity dies down, everybody'll probably forget the whole thing. How about joining me for some supper? I'm hungrier than the proverbial bear, my friend."

More and more ARVN's had been moved into I Corps to take over the war effort from American forces. The Griffins continued to support these units the same as they had the American units. The differences were that the calls for help usually had to come through more channels before they reached Operations. Thus, when the section reached the target area, contact had often been broken.

One unique feature of supporting the ARVN's was the adviser. The adviser was usually Australian, and they usually spoke with a definite accent. Almost all of them had a keen sense of humor, and were more than willing to share it on the radio. Sometimes, the accent was so

pronounced that it was difficult to make out a word or two for the Griffin pilots. True to form, the Australian would use a few US slang terms to get the idea across.

To support this effort in the northern I Corps area, and to reduce the response time of the ARA ships, an airfield was pressed into use at Mai Loc, west of Quang Tri. The airstrip was complete with all the modern facilities, like an open, wooden control tower. A poncho served as a roof to keep out the sun, or rain, as the case might be. A field radio was the communications link in the tower. Overnight standby by the Griffins was required, and a tent was set up to house the crews. Tent living wasn't so bad when the weather was fair, but it became a nightmare when the rains came. The floor of the tent became a sea of mud. It was a real trick for the crews to get into, or out of, their cots without splattering mud all over everything. During hard downpours, cots were continually shifted to avoid the worst leaks.

Navigational aids were installed at the field, so approaches could be shot even in rough weather. They weren't the best, but anything helped on a dark and rainy night. On one particularly bad night, a med-evac ship attempted a landing at Mai Loc. During its approach, radio contact was lost. The next day, everyone was alerted that the ship was missing, and to keep an eye out for any sign of it. The search continued for two days before the ship was found. The irony was that the wreckage was located less than a quarter mile from the strip. But it had burned, and the only wreckage that could be identified was its skids. They were stuck in the ground, and stood up like two grave markers at the site. Apparently the ship had been going nearly straight down when it hit. How they got into that attitude before the crash is anyone's guess. The only reassuring aspect of the crash was that the entire crew died instantly on impact. The other side of the coin was that the crash investigation team had one heck of a hard time identifying the crew members. Their coffins contained only a few teeth and bits of bone when they were sent back to the states.

Roger often cleared jams on the turret weapons while at Mai Loc. There were no forward support personnel here that could work on them. One hot afternoon, Roger was dismantling the minigun. He was at a ticklish moment, removing a barrel with a loaded round in it, when he was aware someone was standing behind him. Roger slowly and

carefully removed the barrel, then whirled around to confront the intruder.

It was a Vietnamese who, Roger quickly discovered, spoke no English. As Roger attempted to converse with him in pidgin, he noticed the ill-fitting fatigue shirt, no shoes, and a pair of green shorts the young soldier was wearing. The Vietnamese looked to be about thirteen years old. As Roger attempted conversation, he noticed two other Vietnamese soldiers approaching. They both carried weapons, and came up quietly behind the youngster.

One of them raised his rifle and struck the boy behind the ear, knocking him to the ground. When Roger stepped forward, the other soldier blocked his path.

"Chieu hoi, chieu hoi VC!" he said to an astonished Roger.

When Roger stepped back, the two soldiers jerked the youngster to his feet and dragged him away. Roger stood still, disbelieving what he'd just witnessed. As he watched the two soldiers and their prisoner disappear in the direction of some tents, Bobby Wonder, another pilot, approached him.

"What was that all about?" Bobby asked.

"Can't say I really know for sure," Roger answered softly. "Something about a chieu hoi."

"Yeah?" Bobby turned in the direction of the tents. "Some way to treat a turncoat from the other side, huh?"

Roger shook his head, and turned his attention back to the minigun.

A few days later, Roger was flying as a section leader on an LZ insertion right up near the DMZ on a clear, windy day, as an American unit made an assault. The LZ was on the top of a small hill on a ridge line. It was surrounded by the remnants of trees. The LZ had been prepped, and the slicks were unloading troops, when the third ship into the LZ clipped one of the trees with its tail rotor. Roger was right beside the ship when the accident occurred. The slick pilot attempted to set down in the LZ, but lost control as the main rotor struck another tree. The disabled ship hit right on the edge of the LZ, balanced there for a long second, then tipped over backward.

The ship flip-flopped down the hill, and came to rest in the very bottom of a steep ravine, upside down. Grunts who had unloaded from the first two slicks raced down the hill to help the crew and passengers. As Roger watched helplessly from overhead, a fire started under the aircraft

in the draining fuel and hydraulic fluid. It quickly caught, and began to reach up into the ship. Roger watched tensely as one of the troops staggered out of the ship. He was obviously shaken, but collected himself, and returned to the ship to pull some of the others out. The troops from the LZ reached the burning aircraft and worked feverishly to get the injured out. Roger couldn't believe the courage shown by the troops as they worked to pull everyone out of the burning hulk. Only when they had everyone out did they retreat from the flames. The ship could have exploded at any time, but the first thought of all present was to get the personnel out at any cost.

Roger had witnessed many displays of courage like this by the infantry. They had a comradeship all their own. It was like a code. But it was unwritten, and always happened spontaneously. Back when the Griffins were operating out of FSB Rendezvous, Roger had just landed when a flight of slicks began dropping off troops that they had just returned from the bush. It was a miserable, rainy day. As one of the slicks was landing, the ship suffered a hydraulics failure. The pilot lost control, and the ship pitched over sideways and crashed in a small draw just off the landing area. Immediately the infantry rushed to the scene, and pulled the crew out of the ship. That one didn't burn. All of the crew survived the crash, and Roger watched as the sodden troopers carried the casualties to the landing area, and gently laid them down. A couple medics began working on them, while others helped wherever they could. Soon, a Dustoff arrived to evac them to a medical facility.

Over and over, Roger witnessed acts of courage as those able, helped those who were less fortunate. And each time it seemed the action was automatic. There never seemed any thought for personal safety when another was injured. For all the killing in this crazy war, Roger had seen more mercy and caring than he had ever seen in his life back in the states. Selflessness. Courage. These words took on new meaning as Roger continued to orbit above the LZ, awaiting the arrival of the Dustoff. Tears came to his eyes as his mind replayed the crash. But now it was in slow motion as the ship tumbled down the steep slope. Then the flames and smoke. And up the slope, the infantrymen scrambling down the hill to reach the wreck. In Roger's daydream, it seemed they would never reach the ship in time.

That night Roger couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, it was the same scene again. Finally he got up,

slipped on his shower shoes, and walked out of the hootch. He stopped up near the mess hall, and lit a cigarette, carefully covering the flash of his lighter with his cupped hand. He stood looking toward the perimeter. Why was this single crash such a big deal? Roger began to study his thoughts carefully. It had looked as if everyone had lived through the crash. It probably had been forgotten by most of those involved in it already. Why was it that it should bother Roger so much? This was the question that kept entering his mind. He closed his eyes, and watched it again. The slow approach of the ship. The jerk of the tree, and the yaw of the chopper with the impact of the tail rotor strike. Then the slow descent into the LZ. The brief instant as the chopper teetered on the edge of the LZ. Then its slow, end-over-end tumble down the hill, pieces flying in all directions. Then the action stopped as the ship lay upside down. The tiny flame beneath the ship. Then ... that was it! Roger could again feel the tightening of his stomach. It wasn't so much that there were injured in the chopper, or that they might perish in the fire. It was that Roger was so near to them that he could watch the whole scene, but he couldn't help them. All his skill as a pilot, and all the firepower at his fingertips couldn't help a single one of those on board the chopper. Whether they lived or died depended on the troops from the LZ reaching them in time.

Roger snuffed out his cigarette. With a deep sigh, he returned to the hootch and lay down. He knew the dream would come again, but now he knew why he feared it. And for his part, he again thought of his goal, to keep as many alive as he could. Roger pulled his blanket up over his shoulders. The sound of firing artillery reached his ears. It was OK now. He could sleep.

Although the dream kept recurring, Roger rarely awoke in a sweat with it any longer. The weather even gave them a break as the rains stopped, and the sun came out to warm the countryside.

The Griffins continued to support the ARVN's along the DMZ. The missions were mostly boring affairs. The ARVN's were rarely in contact when the section would arrive on station. As Justin put it, he had never killed so many enemy trees and bushes in his life.

But the enemy was there, just the same. Bradford and Jackson found out the hard way. They were flying a mission northwest of Quang Tri. Up in the flats between Quang Tri

and the Gulf of Tonkin. There was a low cloud cover that day, and they were only two hundred feet above the ground. They were having a hard time finding the unit who had called them for support. As they cruised around looking for the unit, they lost track of their position, not that it would have mattered much. Suddenly a gook jumped up in front of them, and began firing at them with an AK-47 assault rifle. It happened so quickly that Jackson couldn't train the turret on him. Jackson watched helplessly as the enemy reloaded and continued to fire on them as they pulled away. There was no question that they were hit, but the question was, were they hit vitally anywhere? At first it didn't seem so, but then the ship became difficult to control. The caution panel indicated that they had lost both hydraulic systems.

Now, according to the book, that should have been the end of the flight right there. But Jackson and Bradford refused to give up. They fought the controls all the way back to Quang Tri. The clouds were a little higher by the time they reached Quang Tri. Bradford called the tower, and declared an emergency so they would have the field all to themselves. According to Jackson later, this was just so they would have a big audience watching when they splattered the ship all over the runway. They began setting up the approach when they were about two miles out -- a long way out for a helicopter making a landing approach. They were both tiring as they came in over the end of the strip. It took all the strength both of them had to maintain control of the ship. As they came over the end of the strip, they couldn't hold the ship in line with the runway, and began to slide off to the right.

Bradford fought the collective pitch lever to bring in some power. Jackson couldn't believe they were going to shoot a go-round, and try to make another approach. He was so tired now that his arms were beginning to cramp. But make a go-round, they did. As they came in on the second approach, the pilots resolved that this would be their last try. If they couldn't keep it on the runway, well, they would land it wherever it wanted to land.

But this time they kept it lined up. As the Snake slid to a stop in the middle of the strip, both of them let out a big scream. Then, as the pilots celebrated, the tower operator's voice came over the radio. "Griffin aircraft on Quang Tri strip, you'll have to move your ship. I've got other traffic in the pattern."

Jackson wiped the sweat from his forehead as he looked back at Bradford. "Can you believe that guy's gall?" he asked.

Bradford keyed his mike. "Quang Tri tower from Griffin. If you want this damn ship moved, you can come down here and carry it away on your back. We ain't got no hydraulics, and you can't hover one of these without hydraulics. Understand?!" With that, Bradford clicked off the radios, and shut down the ship.

Later that afternoon, the ship was sling-loaded back to Camp Evans by a Chinook helicopter. When it was dropped off in front of the maintenance hangar, most of the unit gathered to check it out. Some forty-two holes were counted in the ship, including both entry and exit holes. It had been hit from one end to the other, but both pilots hadn't been touched. A single round had done the damage to the hydraulics. There were two separate systems in the ship, so it could still be flown if one was damaged. But the two reservoirs for both systems were located right next to each other just behind the cockpit. One round had clipped the main hydraulic lines coming out of both reservoirs.

After this incident, Jackson's name of "magnet ass" continued to follow him wherever he went. Ships in which Jackson rode took more hits than the rest of the Battery put together. But Jackson was never hit. However, when some of the new guys in the unit found out about the nickname, they were afraid to fly with him.

It was a sunny day full of missions that brought fatigue and hunger to the pilots of the 3rd Herd. Most of the pilots had flown much of the night and were still covering missions well into the day. Little Bobby Wonder was finally spelled after noon. He stopped in the hootch to drop off his gear before he went to the mess hall for lunch. As he came into the hootch, Tom yelled at him. "Hey, Wonder Woman, guess what?? The good ol' US of A just put the first man on the moon!" Tom had been listening to the AFVN radio station.

Bobby stopped in mid-stride as he dropped his flight gear on his bunk. "Is that right, Tom? Say, that's neat." Then he turned to Roger, "What's for lunch, Hunter? Anything good?"

Roger just shook his head. "Nope. Chili today, but you might like it. It's pretty hot." As Bobby walked out the door, Roger turned to Tom. "Did you notice how impressed he was. About the man on the moon, I mean."

Tom looked after Bobby, "Yeah, well, it is kind of exciting, isn't it?"

"Do you think we'll get to go home on account of it?"

Tom clicked off the radio. "No, I suppose not. It is kind of neat, though, isn't it?" When Roger didn't answer, Tom finally got up and walked to the door of the hootch. He stopped and turned back to Roger. "Are we a little screwed up around here, or what?"

Roger put down the book he was reading. "What do you mean, Tom?"

"Well, we just put a man on the moon, and nobody seems to care about that. Doesn't that strike you a little strange, man?"

"Not really. Should it? Do you suppose that he cares that we lost two slicks on an insertion yesterday? Don't take it so serious, Tom. It's just that Bobby and I have been here long enough that our priorities are a little different than yours."

"Different is right, Hunter. You guys are crazy!" Tom left the hootch.

Up in the same area where Bradford and Jackson got shot up so badly, enemy action continued. On a clear day, one of the sections reported that there was a Communist flag flying on the other end of the bridge over the river that marked

the center of the DMZ. During one of the usual evening conversations in the hootch, the subject of the bridge and the flag came up. Paul Mallory, a warrant officer in the 2nd Platoon, was keenly interested in the conversation. He had never seen a North Vietnamese flag in person. He even wondered aloud if anyone had ever taken a picture of it.

Bradford laughed when the subject came up. "Sure, but from where you'd have to take the picture, it would look like a postage stamp."

Mallory cleared his throat. "Do you think someone could get close to it?"

Bradford laughed again. "Sure, what a picture that would make. Something nice to send home as a souvenir, I guess." With that, the subject was dropped. But the flicker of interest in Mallory's eyes didn't die so quickly.

It was nearly a week later, when Mallory returned from a mission in that area. He had three bullet holes in the vertical fin of the Snake he was flying. Over beer that evening, the story came out. Paul had been unable to resist the temptation of getting a picture of that flag. After they had flown the mission, he had flown low level through the DMZ to the bridge. His wingman had waited patiently south of the DMZ while the section leader took his best shot. Mallory had popped up off the deck, rounded the flag, snapped a picture, and took off south along Highway 1. The enemy at the bridge had come alive when they heard the Snake approach. It was on top of them before they knew what it was or what it was doing. Mallory had figured his advantage of surprise would give him more time. The enemy gunners had found their target, but they didn't do any serious damage. Holes in the vertical fin were easy to patch.

One of the most unfathomable characters in the 3rd Platoon was Bobby Wonder. Bobby was a warrant officer from California. He enjoyed a luxuriant childhood as the son of well-to-do parents on the fringe of the Hollywood jet-setters. Bobby joined the Army when he found his other choice was to be drafted. He had experimented with drugs, wild cars, and wild women before the Army got ahold of him. He was a heavy drinker on occasion. He loved flying, and the bravado that went with it, as any twenty-year-old would. As liberal in his thinking as Bobby was, everyone felt that he would likely tolerate almost any kind of behavior.

It was a surprise, then, when the 3rd Platoon learned that Bobby caught one of the other pilots from the Platoon,

Hank Trammel, out smoking pot one night. Even though Hank flipped the weed into the darkness, Bobby saw it happen. He read Hank out, and threatened him with exposure if he ever caught him doing that again. Bobby made it clear that if Hank wanted to smoke dope, he could just darn well do it with another unit. The Griffins wouldn't tolerate this behavior, and Hank had best straighten out or he could pack his bags.

Bobby had a passion -- listening to loud music. At night, he would put on his earphones, turn up the volume on his Panasonic receiver, and play the guitar while listening to the popular sounds of the "Bee Gees". With the 3rd Platoon at the bottom of the flight assignment ladder one night, Bobby began to pursue his usual. The other members of the 3rd Herd left to play poker in the 2nd Platoon hootch next door. As they left, they waved to Bobby, who was working his way through a bottle of Jack Daniels.

There was an ex-officio member of the 3rd Platoon who did not fly with the rest of the pilots. His name was Fred, and Fred was a rat who lived in the hootch. He had been adopted by the pilots as their mascot. Fred didn't seem to bother anyone, coming out only at night to clean up the crumbs dropped on the floor. Fred slept on some boards left up on the rafters of the hootch. His normal route from sleeping to living area was down the corner two-by-four in Bobby's area, and from there, a straight line to the community area in the hootch where most of his eating was done. Thinking that everyone had left the hootch, Fred set out to make his nightly rounds.

The poker game in the 2nd Platoon was running at a feverish pitch, when the sound of gunfire broke the composure of the players. It sounded like shots had come from the 3rd Platoon hootch. The players quickly left the poker table, and rushed next door.

When the screened door on the hootch was opened, there sat Bobby on his foot locker. He had his guitar in his lap, and the half-finished bottle of Jack on the floor next to his feet. He was shirtless, but he still wore his western style gun belt and holster. In one hand a cigarette still burned, and in the other was his .38 pistol, a small wisp of smoke twining upward from the barrel. Bobby was looking at the floor of the hootch near his bunk. Further examination by those choking the door revealed bullet holes in a ragged line across the floor starting by the two-by-four in the corner and ending by Bobby's cot.

Everyone was strangely silent, as Bobby looked from the floor to the door. He took a drag on his cigarette, squinting tightly. He blew the smoke out through his nose, and gestured toward the floor.

"Missed 'im," he said.

"Who?"

"The rat, that's who," Bobby answered angrily.

Tom was pushed into the room as others continued to join the gaggle of pilots at the door. "You shot at Fred?"

"Fred? Was that Fred I shot at?" Bobby's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, Jesus. No wonder he was movin' so slow. He must have never expected an ambush in his home territory." Bobby's speech was so slurred that he was difficult to understand. Bobby slipped his smoking pistol back into its holster. Then he began to strum his guitar.

Tom pushed his way back through the group in the doorway. "Is everyone crazy in this outfit?" he asked of no one in particular. "I gotta sleep next to a guy that shoots at rats running across the floor!? No, I don't. I'm puttin' in for a transfer tomorrow as soon as the clerk's boots hit the orderly room floor. That is all the crap I'm gonna put up with...." Tom's voice trailed off as he walked back toward the 2nd Platoon hootch. "Guy can't even have a peaceful poker game without some crazy" the hootch door banged shut behind him.

The other pilots in the door looked at one another.

"Do you suppose he'll hurt himself?"

"I don't even think he knows where he's at."

"Don't worry about it. He'll sober up by morning. That's all that counts."

"Think we oughta take his pistol away from him?"

"And what good would that do? He's already emptied it. There's six holes in the floor, dummy."

"You're probably right. He's too drunk to reload."

"What if the ol' man hears about this?"

"I don't think that will happen, do you?" The question hung in the air. It had come from the 3rd Platoon leader. Mumbling amongst themselves, the group broke up. As they walked away from the hootch, they could still hear the chords on Bobby's guitar.

In November, the weather began to settle into the rainy season in earnest. Most every day was cloudy, and the temperature dropped enough to make the hootches chilly in the evening. When Roger first joined A Battery, he came

across a yellow silk parachute. He found that this was very comfortable for sleeping in the heat and humidity. The only nightwear was a pair of boxer shorts. Roger always feared an attack at night, and he didn't want to have to hunt for something to wear to the bunker. But as the weather turned cooler, Roger slept on real sheets, fully dressed, with a blanket over the top. Everyone in the Battery continued to sleep under mosquito netting.

It was in November that the hurricane hit the coast of Vietnam. For days it rained steadily, only broken occasionally by a downpour. Most of the canopies on the Snakes leaked, and it wasn't unusual to sit in a damp seat most of the day on missions. Hanging helmets from the hooks in the roof of the canopy was a "no-no" because if there was a leak above the helmet, it would fill with water. While a helmet full of water over the head was enough to cool anyone's enthusiasm for a fire mission, the water also raised Cain with the electrical connections to the speakers in the helmet. And breaking in new helmets wasn't considered a good idea, especially if the present one had served faithfully for a long time. New helmets never fit right until they had a couple hundred hours of flight time on them.

The hurricane also effectively cut the supply line with the southern part of the country. Highway 1 was flooded in many places, and the supply trucks couldn't get through. Essentials, like food, could be flown in, but the nonessentials that were sold at the PX, like beer and cigarettes couldn't be purchased at any price. Even rusty cans of soda became a luxury. The cans of tobacco and cigarette papers, and cigarette rolling machines reached almost unbelievable prices. If anyone could find a reason to go south to Danang, they carried a long list of items that were to be purchased for their friends.

The bad weather also complicated the missions. Besides the discomforts of wet cockpits, the clouds pushed the ships lower to the ground, and the rain on the canopy reduced visibility. This was bad enough in the daytime, but at night, it was very difficult to see anything. And there were always a few low hanging clouds that were below the general cloud level. Flying into one of these was a real thrill. Suddenly there was nothing. Dark as the inside of a cow's belly, was the way that Gladstone described it.

But these minor drawbacks didn't stop the Griffins from completing their missions. Just made them more exciting.

For one thing, the grunts couldn't understand why the Snakes shouldn't fly in this weather. After all, the grunts had to live out in the bush, weather or no weather. And the enemy was still there. The clouds didn't stop the mortar rounds, or the small arms fire at all. Nor did it stop the orders from above that said the mission would continue until South Vietnam was safe from aggressors.

It was on one of these weather nights that a mission was called in from the field. A grunt outfit was under attack, and they wanted some help from the Griffins. Roger was leading the section that miserable, rainy night. Neither he nor the other pilots in the section were excited about trying to get up in this kind of weather. When Trowbridge took the call at Operations, he looked at Roger and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't kill yourself trying to get out to 'em, huh, Hotel," he said.

Roger walked outside the Operations bunker. It was going to be a tough one, he thought. He turned to Trammel, who was flying his wing. "Let me go up first. If it isn't too bad, I'll call, and you can join up."

Trammel looked down at his feet. "Whatever you say, Hunter, but we can scratch it, you know."

"Yeah. I know we can. But we have to make the effort to help those guys. They reported clear over their position."

"I'll bet," Hank spat the words, and walked away.

As Roger started the ship, he had an idea. If it was really clear over the friendly position, then the clouds had to stop somewhere between Camp Evans and the friendly position. Roger called Ops over the radio. "Hey, Griffin Five Zero, let's try something. Why don't you try to get the arty on the horn and see if they can't walk some flares out of Camp Evans toward the target. I'll try to follow the flare line out."

Trowbridge rogered the transmission, and soon ran out to the ship with a radio frequency in his hand. "I got these guys on the land line. Here's their radio frequency. They think your idea's the craziest thing they ever heard of. But they don't mind trying it. Good luck, Mr. Hunter."

Roger winced. Trowbridge almost never called Roger by his last name unless there was a superior officer present. There was certainly none out on the hot pad that night. A shiver ran down Roger's spine. He thought of the loss of the Cobra a week before. They had been returning from a

mission down by the Ashau, when bad weather overtook them. When they hit clouds, the section separated to avoid a collision in the dark. They were in constant radio contact for about a half hour as they tried to find their way back to Camp Eagle. Then the second ship failed to answer radio calls. An intensive search was started the next day, and ships in the area on other missions were alerted to look for signs of the missing Cobra. But nothing had been found. The ship had simply disappeared. Two pilots and a half million dollar aircraft were gone as if they had never existed. None of the pilots in C Battery had known the pilots personally, but they felt the loss. It was one thing to die in combat.. But it was another thing entirely to be missing in combat. To die had a finality about it. To be missing was to be in limbo. Roger thought back to Al's disappearance. He was still listed as missing. Missing. Roger hated the word. Remembering back to his childhood, Roger's mother was always berating him for losing things. Maybe that was the problem. They didn't have enough mothers in Vietnam to look for the missing things that the boys here couldn't find. Mothers were notorious for finding things lost by little boys. Even nineteen-year-old boys. A drop of water from the canopy found Roger's neck, and jarred him back from his daydreams.

Roger lifted the ship off the ground, and made his takeoff. It had quit raining, but there was a light mist in the air that reflected badly from the landing light. As soon as the ship cleared the hot pad, Roger switched off the landing light. He also switched off the rotating beacon that reflected from the mist. The latest weather report said clouds at fifteen hundred feet. Needless to say, Roger didn't believe that. At less than a thousand feet, the lights of Camp Evans began to dim. Roger quickly leveled off, and contacted the artillery unit that Trowbridge had given him.

He reported his position over Camp Evans, and his altitude to the FDC (Fire Direction Center) that would direct the artillery fire. Roger said that he could hold a speed of eighty knots, and gave them the heading he wanted to fly. The FDC seemed anxious to cooperate. Roger remembered what they had said to Trowbridge. Well, maybe it did seem crazy to them, Roger thought, but we'll never know if it works unless we try it.

Roger saw the first flare pop out in front of them. Holding eighty knots, Roger flew toward it. Just as they

were approaching it, another flare burst ahead. Roger held on that one now. The pilot in Roger's front seat was Captain Ron Dodge, the Operations officer. He didn't have a lot of combat time, and Roger was unsure of him. He had never flown with him in any sticky situations. He was a nice enough guy, but the countryside of Vietnam was littered with nice enough guys.

Roger keyed the intercom, "Can you still see the lights of Evans?"

"Uh, no, I can't." Ron had a high-pitched voice. Sounded more like a thirteen-year-old kid than a twenty-year-old pilot, thought Roger.

Roger keyed the mike again, "Well, look, Ron. I'm going on instruments in case we fly into heavy clouds. You keep an eye on the flares, and tell me what heading to fly to follow 'em, OK?"

"Yes, I'll try to do that. I can just see another one up ahead. Come around five degrees to the right."

The guy seems to be picking it up right fine, thought Roger. He eased the ship over to the new heading, and pulled in a little more power to try to keep up with the flares. They saw only one more flare after that. After holding the same heading for a minute, Roger called the arty unit to say they'd lost the trail. Roger said they'd return to Camp Evans and try again. Roger had the beacon at Evans tuned in, so he simply followed the needle back. Dropping down to nine hundred feet, Dodge reported that he could see the lights of the Camp again.

Roger chatted with the FDC again for a minute, explaining that he had lost the line of flares. Roger wanted to hold the same airspeed, so the arty unit said it would adjust the timing of the flares.

Again they started out following the flares. The first couple went OK again, but then they didn't see another one when they thought they should have. Suddenly a flare burst right in front of them. Roger nearly flew right into it. He rolled the ship steeply to the right to avoid a collision with the parachute and canister of the flare. Going from the bright flash of the flare to the blackness of the night nearly disoriented Roger. He tried to push his senses into the background, and believe only what he could see on the instruments. His hands were sweating furiously. Roger wanted a cigarette badly, but he knew he couldn't smoke now. Smoking did bad things to night vision for one thing, and it would only be a distraction that Roger could do without in

the cockpit at the moment. He tried to recover the ship smoothly, but his muscles were so tense that he moved the controls in little jerks.

Roger again set his course back to Camp Evans. This time Ron couldn't see the lights of the camp from 800 feet. Roger swore under his breath. That meant the clouds were probably dropping. How far, and how fast were they coming down? Roger pushed the ship down to 600 feet. Still no lights. They had to be over the camp, didn't they? Roger checked the frequency on the beacon. It looked fine.

Roger checked the fuel. They had been airborne over half an hour. That meant they had less than an hour left. Roger called the FDC. He told them it had been a nice try, but it didn't look like it was going to work. The clouds had dropped, and he was giving them an end-of-mission. Roger then called Trowbridge at Ops to relay to the grunts they wouldn't be coming out. He also told Trowbridge that the clouds were coming down, and he would be shooting a GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) into Camp Evans.

Roger dialed in the GCA frequency on the UHF radio. "Evans GCA," the voice answered.

Roger keyed the mike. "Yeah, this is Griffin Three Zero Hotel. I'm orbiting above Camp Evans right now, and I was wondering if you could help me get down through these darn clouds."

"We'll sure try, Griffin. I think we've got you on the scope now. Would you make a right turn to heading zero four five for confirmation?"

Roger confirmed the heading, and made the turn. The radar crew made a positive identification, and gave Roger another heading. They continued to vector the ship to the north of Camp Evans, to set up the radar controlled approach. Roger remembered from briefings and instrument training here in Nam that he was now talking to the ASR (Aerial Surveillance Radar) group. This group would set him up for the approach, and then pass him to the GCA group proper. They would bring him right in to the runway. Roger tried to keep his voice calm during the radio transmissions, but his mouth was dry. Hard to believe I've got a dry mouth with all this water surrounding us, Roger thought. His hands were sweating through his flight gloves, and the plastic control handle felt slippery in his grasp.

Soon the ASR person passed Roger off to the GCA. Roger dialed in the new frequency on the UHF radio. When the tone stopped, Roger called.

"Good evening, Hotel. I've got you on the scope now. If you don't hear a transmission after five seconds at any time during the approach, initiate a missed approach, and contact the tower on the proper frequency. Any questions?"

"This is Hotel. We roger all."

"Thank you, Hotel. Maintain your present heading. You'll intercept the glide slope in about twenty seconds. What airspeed to you want to hold on approach?"

They sure are being polite tonight, thought Roger.
"Uh, sixty knots."

"Roger, sixty knots, Hotel. Ten seconds from glide slope intercept. You no longer need to respond to any transmissions.... Intercepting glide slope, slightly right of centerline..."

Roger corrected the ship to the left slightly to bring it back on the centerline of the approach path, and noted his new heading.

"Slightly above glide slope, on centerline."

Roger dropped the pitch slightly, and noted his rate of descent. Roger keyed the intercom. "Looks like it's gonna be thick all the way down, Ron. Keep your eyes peeled for anything. I wanta take it all the way down on the first try."

"Sounds good to me," Ron raised the thumbs up gesture high above his head in the front seat.

The GCA controller kept issuing instructions as the approach continued. Roger's muscles refused to relax. His movements on the controls were jerky no matter how hard he tried to smooth them out. He continually checked the altimeter. They were now at about two hundred feet above the ground, and Ron still hadn't seen anything. Roger's breathing became labored. He wished that he could turn the ship over to Ron for a moment, so he could stretch and shut his eyes.

As the approach continued, Roger slowed to fifty knots, then to forty. They had to be nearing the ground now. The GCA controller's voice droned on. The ship's airspeed continued to bleed off. They were now down to thirty knots. Suddenly Roger realized the controller had stopped transmitting.

Roger keyed the radio mike, "Hey, keep talking!!"

"I thought you were on the ground, Hotel. Look out your window!"

"It's right under us!" Ron's high-pitched voice was higher than normal.

Roger looked down. The wide center stripe on the runway was just off to their left. Roger set the ship down. When he looked around, he couldn't see a thing. He thanked the GCA controller, then switched to the tower frequency.

"Evans tower, this is Griffin. We're down on the runway, but we can't see a thing. Can I sit for a couple minutes while we wait for a break?"

"Roger that, Griffin. Stay as long as you want. I don't think we're gonna have much traffic in here tonight!"

Roger managed a grin. "Thanks, Evans. Why don't you join us? We can have a party right here in the middle of the strip."

"Sure would like to, Griffin. Maybe another time, huh?"

"You bet. And I'll buy. That was a nice job you guys did, bringing us in through that fog."

"Thanks, Griffin. I'll pass the word along to the radar guys."

"Do that, will you? We'll send a little something over for your off-duty time, if we ever get this thing parked."

"Sounds great."

Roger forced himself to breathe deeply. This was the first for-real GCA he had ever shot. Suppose they would call it zero-zero conditions back in the real world. But here, it didn't matter, as long as the ship and crew got down in one piece.

Roger called Operations on the radio. "Hey, Five Zero, this is Hotel."

"Yeah, go ahead, Hotel. I was wondering what happened to you."

"We're sitting out in the middle of the runway right now. It's so damn foggy we're afraid to move the ship. As soon as we can, we'll park it over here off the main runway."

Roger and Ron waited for about ten minutes before a light breeze moved the fog around enough that they could see to hover. After they parked the ship, Roger waited a few minutes longer to see if it would clear enough that they could fly back to the Battery area. But the fog remained with them, so they shut it down, and walked home.

When Roger walked into Ops to debrief, the radio operators were changing shifts. Roger took the one coming off shift with him back to his hootch. Roger rummaged in his foot locker, and pulled out a fifth of whiskey. He handed it to the radio operator. "Take this over to the

radar guys' hootch, will you? And tell them it's from the Griffins. You might hang around for a drink if they open it..."

"Thanks, sir. I'll run it right over."

"Thank you, specialist. Don't break a leg running around in the dark, huh?"

The radio operator smiled, "Not a chance, sir. Might break the bottle, too. The leg would heal, but we'd lose the whiskey."

Roger laughed as the operator left.

Captain Nelson came up behind Roger. "What was all that about?"

Roger turned to face him. "Just sending a little something over for the radar guys. They brought Ron and I down in zero-zero, Jack. The GCA troop even quit talking. He thought we were on the ground."

"It was that thick?"

"Yeah. I'm glad we didn't have two ships up there tonight. That could have gotten a little hairy."

The poor weather alternated with periods of overcast and broken clouds. The missions near to the coast continued, and the Griffins were busy flying support. On one such mission in the mountains, Roger and Paul Grimes, another warrant officer, were flying Bill Jackson's wing on an extraction. The LZ was on a small hill top that rose up from a long ridge. The clouds were only about two hundred feet above the top of the LZ. With the slicks going in and out, it got kind of crowded with both Cobras trying to cover the extraction. Roger finally broke off, and flew lazy circles below the other ships participating in the mission. On each circle around the LZ, they were only a couple hundred feet above the ridge each time they crossed it. As the slicks made their pickups, Roger counted the remaining slicks. On extractions, the enemy would usually strike when there weren't many troops left on the ground. The slicks waiting to make pickups were holding in a circular pattern off to the north of the LZ.

Even with things going so smoothly, Roger was alert. It had been drilled into him that he should never get complacent with a helicopter. You just never knew when one of them would give you trouble. One of his flight instructors had told him that if you ever trusted that chopper one second, that would be the time that it would cross you. Roger had tuned in the ADF to the AFVN radio station, and he and Paul were listening to some of the

popular songs. Paul was quite relaxed in the front seat. He had the sighting station for the turret weapons resting on his lap as he smoked and listened to the tunes.

As they were crossing the ridge, Roger thought he heard automatic weapons fire. He slid his finger up inside his helmet to pull the ear pad away from his ear so he could hear the sounds from outside the ship more clearly. As he did, he could hear pinging sounds as rounds hit the fuselage of the Snake. Then there was a loud bang, and a little dust flitted through the air of the cockpit. Roger nosed the ship over to get clear of the area, and kicked in a little right pedal to put the ship out of trim. He was hoping to throw off the enemy gunner's aim.

He keyed the intercom. "Hey, Paul, you OK?" Roger asked. There was no answer. Roger craned his neck to look over the instrument panel separating them. He couldn't see the top of Paul's helmet. Roger looked around the right side of the instrument panel. Paul was lying over to his right, and his head was resting against the canopy. Roger keyed the radio.

"Hey, Echo, (Jackson's call sign), I just took some hits, and my front seat is down. Will you check me out for leaks, now?" Roger had seen only a small break in the jungle canopy where he could shoot a forced landing if the engine failed. Otherwise he could land up on the LZ if he was leaking badly.

Jackson's voice was calm and even on the radio. "We'll be right on you, Hotel. How many times were you hit?"

"Don't know. Several, anyway. One came through the cockpit, and I know the front seat's hit. Looks like he's out cold, and I can't get an answer from him on the intercom."

"Oh, damn. We're coming up on your left now. Just fly her steady, man."

"Roger, I'm with you," Roger watched as Jackson checked first one side of the ship, then swung underneath and came up on the other side.

"Looks like you're OK, Hotel. We don't see any leaks."

"Roger that. Say, get me the med-evac freq, will you? I'm heading for home."

"Right. I'm scrambling another section for the extraction. We'll follow you in."

"Thanks, Echo. I like your company." A lump rose in Roger's throat as he thought about Grimes in the front seat. Roger checked again around the right side of the instrument

panel. Grimes hadn't moved. Probably caught one in the face, Roger thought as he flew on for Camp Evans. They were only about fifteen minutes away, but the time was passing much too slowly for Roger. Paul was just a little more than an arm's length away, but there was nothing Roger could do to help him, other than get him to camp as quickly as possible. Roger had pulled in all the power he could urge from the turbine. The exhaust gas temperature was right up in the top of the yellow now. Any more power, and Roger risked an engine failure.

Jackson's voice broke Roger's thoughts. "Hey, Hotel, the med-evac frequency is A-12." Roger wrote the code on the canopy in grease pencil. Then he quickly opened his code book and looked up the frequency. Just as he began to dial it in on the UHF radio, Paul's voice came over the intercom.

"Roger. Roger! What the hell's going on?? Are we in a spin?"

Roger keyed the intercom. "No, no, Paul. We're fine. You've been hit, and we're heading for the med-evac right now."

Paul's questioning voice surprised Roger. "I'm hit...??"

"Yeah, you've been out for about five minutes, Paul. Can you see any blood?"

"Blood? Hmmm, let's see...."

Roger watched as Paul moved around in the front seat, trying to examine himself.

"I don't see any blood anywhere, Hunter."

"Come on, Paul. I know you're hit. Christ, you were out for a long time."

Again Paul squirmed around in the front seat. He even unbuckled his shoulder harness and raised up to check the seat underneath him. He sat down again. "Honestly, Hunter, I don't see a drop of blood up here."

"Well, do you hurt anywhere?"

Paul stretched his arms above his head and moved around some more. "Well, my ears are ringing, but other than that I don't hurt anywhere."

Now Roger was totally confused. He knew Paul had been out for several minutes, and now Paul was telling him there was nothing wrong. Roger couldn't believe it. He figured Paul must be in bad shock, and was just refusing to recognize his wounds. But with all his moving around, Roger

hadn't been able to see any blood on Paul, either. This was really strange. Roger began to doubt his own sanity.

Roger keyed his mike. "Echo, Paul's come around in the front seat, and he can't find anything wrong. I'm heading into the Battery area." Roger switched his radio select switch to FM, and called Operations. "Five Zero, this is Griffin Three Zero Hotel."

"Go ahead, Hotel. What's going on up there?"

"I'm coming into the hot pad. I want a medic and a jeep to meet us there. I think my front seat's been hit, but he keeps saying he's OK."

"Roger, we'll have the jeep and medic waiting. How far out are you?"

"About five minutes."

"Roger."

Roger keyed the intercom again. "Hey, Paul, how about looking for the bullet hole? Can you find where it came in or went out, or whatever?"

Again Paul's head began bobbing around the cockpit. Then he let out a yelp without keying his mike, and pointed to the windshield in front of him. "Here's where it came out, Hunter! Right in front of me!!"

Roger shot a fairly hot approach into the hot pad. There were several people waiting to greet them, and Roger could see the jeep idling next to the Operations bunker. As soon as the skids touched, the crewchief had the canopy door on the front seat open, and the medic began checking Paul. Roger brought the engine down to flight idle, and took off his helmet so he could hear the conversation. Shortly, Paul got out of the ship with the medic still hovering around him, checking him out.

As Roger shut down the engine, the crewchief let out a holler. He had found the entry hole. It was just where the turret met the fuselage of the ship. Another crewchief jumped into the front seat, and together they lined up the hole. It lined up directly on the face of the chief sitting in the front seat. At the same time, the medic found a deep crease under Paul's chin. They continued to discuss the path of the bullet into and out of the ship. It had obviously hit something and ricocheted. Then the chief in the front seat had an idea. He lifted the sighting station off its bracket, and checked the bottom of it. There was a deep dent in the bottom of the sighting station.

The riddle had been solved. The sighting station had been lying in Paul's lap. The round had hit the bottom of

the sighting station which had slammed into Paul's chin. The blow had knocked him out, and the bullet had harmlessly ricocheted out through the canopy. Upon further examination, the medic also found shrapnel in Paul's right leg that had come from the floor of the ship when the round blasted through it. Paul hadn't seen the entry hole because he had had his foot on it when he was searching the floor. The round itself had come so close to Paul's foot that it had creased the sole of his boot.

They also found several holes in the tail boom of the ship, but those rounds hit nothing of importance. Roger filled out the log book as the crewchief and a technical inspector examined the damage. In the end, the holes were covered with tape, and Roger was assigned a new pilot for the rest of the day.

When the platoon came off duty that evening, they sat and teased Paul about his Purple Heart. To date, he was the first pilot who had ever been KO'ed by his own sighting station in a Snake! The laughter and jokes lightened their mood, until it was time to hit the rack. Roger walked outside by himself as the hootch settled in for the night. It was a black night with a solid overcast. A steady wind blew from the mountains. Roger lit a smoke, and walked over to the bank above the main runway at Camp Evans. He stood there for a long time watching lights in the camp.

He had been so afraid that Paul had taken a round in the face. And there had been nothing he could do. If Paul had been seriously wounded, he probably would have bled to death before he could have received medical attention. He would have died within inches of Roger's grasp, and there would have been nothing that Roger could have done. Roger thought back to the crash of the chopper near the DMZ, and the helplessness that he had felt then. He wondered if he would dream tonight. He was afraid to go to bed for fear that the earlier dream would reoccur.

The next day, Roger got a break from flying combat missions. He was scheduled to fly south to Phu Bai with Major Dasher. A Battery had experienced a friendly fire incident, and Dasher was supposed to interview one of the grunts who had been hit. They landed near the field hospital, and walked across a wide parking area to the hospital proper.

The hospital itself was nothing more than a group of quonset huts. As they approached, a med-evac chopper came in and landed next to the nearest hut. As wounded were

unloaded, Roger could see other choppers making an approach into the open field. It looked like there was some heavy action somewhere. Roger followed Major Dasher into the reception area for the wounded.

"Why don't you wait here, Hunter, while I find out where our man is at?"

"Yes, sir," Roger answered. He stood at the end of the long reception room. It had tables lined up in the middle of the room. The wounded from the choppers were brought into this room, and laid on the tables. A couple tables away, Roger watched as two women examined one of the casualties. A bag of plasma hung from a wire hanger next to the table, and the tube ran into the prone figure's arm. He still had his jungle fatigues on. One of the women, the one who looked like she was in charge, was walking around the table, noting the wounds. The other was following behind with a clipboard, making marks on a sheet of paper as the first woman spoke. To Roger it looked as if they were taking inventory of all the soldier's parts. The soldier on the table was unconscious. Mercifully, thought Roger, as he watched the process continue.

He knew they were probably determining the seriousness of the wounds, so treatment could be prioritized, but it seemed to be taking a long time. And through it all, it didn't seem the soldier was receiving any treatment at all. Roger thought back to hospitals in the states that he had visited. It seemed there was always a flock of doctors and nurses surrounding any emergency case that was brought in. They seemed to get in one another's way as they worked on the patient. Here, it was too laid back. Casualties continued to pour in. When Major Dasher returned, the line of tables was almost full of bodies. The two women were still inventorying the parts. They had nearly worked their way to the other end, when Roger followed Major Dasher out of the room.

The smell of the hospital was thick about them as they turned and twisted through the corridors. They pushed through a large double door and entered a ward. Beds were lined up on both sides of the room. Major Dasher stopped before one of the beds and read the chart attached to the foot of it. The occupant of the bed was in a reclining position and had several tubes sticking out of his body. His face was stitched in several places, and one arm was bandaged heavily. There were also bandages on his chest and stomach.

Pity swept through Roger as he looked at the broken humanity before him. Roger guessed the patient couldn't be more than twenty years old.

Major Dasher introduced them, and explained their mission. Dasher wanted to know all the details of the incident, including weather, vegetation, battle situation, etc. Roger felt out of place standing in a hospital ward, asking a wounded young man what had happened to him. Roger's only purpose for being there was to act as a witness to the proceedings. This was according to regulations. He would have to sign on the bottom of the form that he had been present when the casualty was interviewed.

The soldier freely told his story. It had been a night operation, and they had been under heavy attack when the Cobras were firing. At the end of the description, Major Dasher asked him point blank if he had been hit by friendly fire from the Cobras. Unblinking, the patient cleared his throat.

"Let me put it this way, Major," he said. "If it hadn't been for the Cobras, I wouldn't likely be alive right now. We were under heavy attack, and I don't rightly know what I got hit by. It could have been rockets from the Cobras. Then again it could have been mortar rounds from the gooks. Let's just say it was mortar rounds, and let it go at that, huh? I have no reason to try to push this thing. It happened, and all the paperwork in the Army isn't going to change that, is it? When we were in the bush, we always knew that we could count on you flyboys when we got in the thick of it. I don't want to see that change. I still got friends out there that have a lot of time to do yet....."

As they prepared to leave, Roger moved up close to the soldier. He reached out and took the patient's hand. "I'm really sorry about what happened, however it happened, troop. Thanks for being so understanding. Take care of yourself..." Roger didn't know what else to say. He could only think of the tables in the receiving area of the hospital as they filled up with more young men like the one lying before him.

When Roger turned, Major Dasher was already gone. Roger hurried to catch him. There was no conversation as they walked back to their Snake, and cranked it up. As the hospital fell away behind them, Roger could still see the patient lying before them.

The intercom crackled alive with Major Dasher's voice.
"Not a very pretty sight was it, Hunter?"

"No sir," Roger returned.

The flight back to Camp Evans passed without further conversation. As Roger watched the countryside slide beneath the ship, he vowed to be even more careful on future missions. It was hard to believe that most of the pilots in Vietnam were only twenty years old, and they were making life and death decisions for themselves, their crews, and the men on the ground daily. Roger recalled some of the missions he had fired. Those at night were especially bad. Low clouds and smoke from the battle often reduced the visibility, and obscured landmarks. It was easy to get confused about the target, as a section made run after run in the black Vietnam night. When the enemy was returning fire, the target was more easily identified. But there were even times when Roger hadn't been absolutely sure. He had just fired where he thought he ought to. He drew a deep breath. Face it, he thought. You've just been plain lucky so far.

On Thanksgiving day, the cooks in the Battery made a special effort to decorate the mess hall with crepe paper and fold-out turkeys. They made a large sheet cake and decorated it with fancy frosting. Roger knew they had worked hard at the preparations, and made sure he complimented them as he went through the serving line that day. As he sat down across from Paul Grimes, Roger noticed Paul was saying grace. Until this very minute, Roger had never noticed anyone doing that since his arrival in Vietnam. It seemed strangely out of place. Roger picked up his fork and dug into the turkey and dressing. There was even cranberry sauce.

As he forked the first dressing into his mouth, he again looked across the table at Paul. It was then that Roger noticed that Paul seemed much older than his twenty-two years. He could pass for thirty, thought Roger. He wondered if he looked the same. Maybe it was the stress. Roger had noticed lately that his pants no longer seemed to fit him very well. He wondered how much weight he had lost. Paul's face also looked gaunt and thin. Roger guessed that Paul had probably dropped thirty pounds since he had joined the unit. 'Course maybe Paul had had a few extra to start with.

Roger looked around at the other pilots. All of their faces seemed drawn and lean. And their eyes. They had taken on that dull, lackluster appearance. Roger started. He had noticed the same look on those in the hospital at Phu Bai. Was that what they were all coming to? Roger swallowed hard, but the lump of dressing didn't want to go down. He took a big drink of milk to force it down. As Roger studied the assembled pilots, he noticed the room was very quiet. Not the usual banter and teasing. Maybe they were all thinking of home, Roger guessed. He knew it would be easy to do. He was so close. It was less than two weeks to his thirty-day leave. That was his bonus for extending for an extra six months in Vietnam.

As he again looked around at the faces, he wondered if it was all worth it. He had been here almost a year now. He still had another half year to go. Many of the faces that used to sit at these tables were gone. They hadn't actually lost that many pilots, had they? No. Most had gone during the infusion process. But Roger could recall

the names of some of them who would likely never fly again. They had simply disappeared from the table, and the hootches.

Roger forced himself to focus on the plate of food before him. It was excellent chow. He would be spending his next Christmas back in the states. Now there was something to look forward to. And it wouldn't be in some drafty mess hall, either.

With the weather down around them, the pilots of C Battery found whatever they could to pass the time. Poker was again the big sport in the evenings. It was the days that were so hard to get through. The crowded living conditions didn't make it any easier. Supplies were having a hard time getting north with all the bad weather. The fingers of Roger's leather flying gloves were completely gone, and there were large holes in the palms. Justin had told him it was because he was so nervous on the controls, and to prove his point, had produced his own gloves. They were full of holes, too, but at least Justin could get his fingers in the gloves on the first try when he put them on.

They had harassed the supply officer as much as they could, and even he was unable to come through with replacement equipment. This was getting serious to Roger's platoon leader, and he threatened to ground his entire platoon for equipment safety violations. The old man just laughed, and told him to go ahead and try it. There was nothing anyone could do. Just be patient, the old man had said.

Then one night Roger was playing cards in the 1st Platoon hootch. As they quietly played the hands, a fixed wing aircraft passed over the camp. Soon it passed over a second time. It was Justin who first noticed it.

"What do you suppose that guy's doing, flying around tonight? Doesn't he know that he's disturbing me in the middle of an important hand?"

"Oh, he's probably just lookin' for a place to land," commented Ehlers.

"You're right!" Justin sat bolt upright as if he'd been hit with lightning. "That's perfect. Who's on duty up in Operations tonight? Anybody know?"

"Probably Trowbridge. He almost always has the night shift, ya' know."

Justin had a great idea, and he leaned over the table to share it with the group. "You know what? We've got a PRC-25 (field radio) here in the hootch, and it's already

set on Ops frequency. Why don't we pretend we're the pilot of that ship and that we're really looking for a place to set down?"

Ehlers leaned back in his chair. His slight frame and sandy hair set off his boyish looks in the gleam from the bare bulb hanging above the table. "Are you kidding, Justin? Who would believe a cock and bull story like that?"

"Trowbridge would. Let's tell him our UHF radio's out so we can't contact the tower.... Oh, come on, you guys! Where's your sense of adventure?"

As the bored minds latched onto the scheme, support grew. Soon there was a scramble from the table to find the radio. It took only a few minutes to replace its battery, and get it working. After a bit of testing, Ehlers was chosen to be the pilot of the ship because he could disguise his voice better than any of the others. Making up a call sign, Ehlers keyed the handset on the radio.

"Any station, any station, this here's Cyclone One Two. Can anybody hear me?"

Trowbridge's voice immediately crackled in response. "Cyclone, this is Griffin Five Zero. I read you loud and clear. Over."

"Roger, Griffin. Boy, am I glad you answered. I'm about out of gas, and I need to land this thing. And I'm not sure where I am."

"Well, I don't know if I can help, but I'll try....."

"Uh, roger that, Griffin. What's your location?"

"I'm at Camp Evans."

"Is that in I Corps, somewhere north of Hue?"

"That's affirmative," Trowbridge's voice was calm and smooth.

"Well, I'm pretty low. Can you hear my engine?"

"Uh, I have to go outside. Wait one, please."

Justin began laughing. "Now you've got him, Duane. Keep it up!"

The others quickly shushed Justin for fear Trowbridge would hear him on the radio when Ehlers talked again.

"Cyclone, this is Griffin. Over."

Ehlers keyed the handset again, "This is Cyclone. Go ahead Griffin." The fixed wing over the camp had played its part by making another pass while Trowbridge was outside the Operations bunker.

"Roger, Cyclone. I'm sure I heard your engine. You are now right over Camp Evans. You can contact their tower on UHF frequency..."

"Whoa! Wait a minute, Griffin. My UHF set is out. That's part of the reason I'm lost now."

Ehlers continued to play Trowbridge along, threatening to land on the hot spot, and then the helicopter parking area for the Battery. Trowbridge became more and more upset as the conversation continued, and he was unable to get Cyclone to understand his instructions. The fixed-wing ship over Camp Evans cooperated as its low passes continued along with the conversation between Ehlers and Trowbridge.

When it finally appeared certain that Trowbridge was going to call the Operations officer, Ehlers finally let on that it was all a joke. The pilots in the 1st Platoon were laughing so hard that most of them were lying on the floor of the hootch. This would go down as one of the best stunts ever played on Griffin Operations during the entire war.

Justin blinked back his tears of laughter. "Can you just see the look on the face of that bald-headed specialist?!! Hee! Hee! Hee!" As he tried to stand, laughter again broke out among the group, and Justin fell back against one of the hot boxes bordering the community area in the hootch. Jordan was laughing so hard, that he tipped his chair over, and nearly brought the poker table with him.

As the laughter subsided, Ehlers staggered out the back door of the hootch. Reentering with an armload of beer, he began tossing cans to the prone pilots. "Here, have a drink, Griffins. The Cyclone is buying tonight!" The laughter was so loud that it attracted pilots from the 2nd Platoon hootch next door.

Even though everyone was sure that the old man had heard about the joke the next day, nothing was ever said about it. There was a question that went around the next evening, though, that suggested all radio transmissions in the unit might be monitored. The 1st Platoon pilots really laughed over that one. They suggested that Army intelligence might spend the next four years trying to figure out who Cyclone really was. They tried to persuade Ehlers to write a letter to intelligence, explaining his predicament that dark night over Camp Evans. Duane merely smiled, and let it go.

On the first of December, 1969, Charlie Battery, 4th of the 77th Artillery, fired its two hundred thousandth rocket. The announcement was heralded by the leaders of the Battery, and the Battalion, as a measure of its success against the enemy in Vietnam.

As the announcement was made in the pilots' meeting, Justin turned to Roger who was sitting next to him. "Now, can you believe that? That's really something. I wonder what old John B. Taxpayer would say to that? 'Keep up the good work, boys,'" Justin snickered and slumped down in his chair.

Roger whispered back, "Just one of the high points of your tour, chum."

Justin covered his mouth, but Roger could clearly hear the high-pitched giggle. Roger just shook his head. It was amazing the things that were considered funny, Roger thought. He looked around at the other pilots. Maybe we're all going insane, and we're so close to the situation, that none of us can realize it.

Reality came back late that evening. Roger got into a pot limit poker game with some of the pilots from the 1st Platoon. When the play got serious, there were only four left at the table. Ostrom, Gladstone, Delaney, and Roger. Ostrom was a very good player, and was holding his own. Gladstone just never could seem to take the game very seriously, but did play quite well. Delaney was extremely serious about the game. Delaney and Roger had never gotten along all that well. Ever since Roger had been assigned to train him as a section leader, and the training didn't go smoothly, Delaney had pursued a personal vendetta to discredit Roger. So far, he hadn't gotten anywhere, but he had been especially competitive with Roger in tonight's poker game.

Ostrom was dealing, and the game was seven-card stud. The betting had started early in the hand. It was apparent that Delaney was holding some good cards. Roger had a chance for a flush, and was staying in as the cards came around. Gladstone finally folded on Ostrom's bet, with only two cards to go. Delaney raised the ante, and turned to stare at Roger. Delaney had a pair of kings showing, and the way he was betting, Roger guessed that he held 'trips'. Roger now had four clubs, but they were well hidden, with two in the hole. They were all in a row, too, but the highest one he held was a six. Roger also had a pair showing, but they were small.

Roger finally matched the bet, and play continued. As the next round of cards was dealt, Delaney bet again. Roger only called, and Ostrom folded. That left only Roger and Delaney in the game, with one more card to go.

Ostrom slowly dealt the last card to each player. The last ones were face down, and Delaney was already counting the pot to see how much he could bet. In a pot limit game, anyone could raise the amount of the pot. There was about forty dollars in the middle of the table now. Roger very slowly checked his last card as Delaney raised forty dollars.

While Roger had played a lot of penny-ante poker in his life, he had never played the game for this kind of money. He didn't feel comfortable playing for this much cash. It took the fun out of the game for him. And this game had degenerated into a personal battle between himself and Lieutenant Delaney. Roger lifted the edge of his last card. It was the seven of clubs. He had his flush. And then he realized what he held was a straight flush! There was no way that Delaney could beat him now, unless Delaney held a higher straight flush. His show cards made that impossible.

"Are you gonna bet, Hunter, or is the price too steep for you?" Delaney growled.

Roger looked at Delaney. Roger knew Delaney couldn't win, but Roger hesitated. He didn't feel like sticking it to Delaney.

"Gonna let me buy it, Mr. Hunter?" Delaney said, and leaned back in his chair to pull on his moustache.

Roger couldn't believe Delaney's arrogant air. Roger counted his money in his wallet. "There's your forty, Delaney, and I'm raising you a hundred and twenty." Roger had bet as much as he could.

Delaney's expression froze for an instant. He quickly leaned forward and looked again at Roger's cards. Then the arrogant expression again spread across his face. He ceremoniously pulled out his wallet. He slowly counted the bills. He matched Roger's raise, and raised the entire pot. There was now over seven hundred dollars on the table.

Roger could raise one more time. He looked at Ostrom. Ostrom caught the glance, and nodded. He wants me to stick him, thought Roger. But I just can't do it. "I call," Roger announced crisply. Roger didn't even have enough cash on him to match Delaney's raise. "I don't have the cash, but I'll make out an I.O.U. if you want it."

"I'll take an I.O.U.," Delaney spoke slowly.

What a son-of-a-bitch, thought Roger. I know I'm gonna beat him, and he still thinks he's an untouchable.

Delaney rolled over his hole cards. He had a good hand -- a full house with kings over. "What have you got, Mr. Hunter?" said Delaney, his voice full of confidence.

Roger nervously turned over his hole cards. As he did, he slid the tiny clubs together in a line. Delaney blanched as he realized what Roger held. Delaney slammed his fist down on the table. He glared at Roger for an instant, then rose quickly. As he did, his chair tipped over. Delaney didn't stop to right it, but stomped from the hootch.

Roger sat back in his chair, and looked at the pile of bills on the table. It was the most money he had ever played for in a single poker pot.

Ostrom clapped him on the shoulder, "Way to go, Hunter! I knew you could do it!"

Roger swept the money into a heap in front of him. He had won, but he wasn't sure it was worth it.

Gladstone spoke very softly, "Nice hand. Very interesting. Too bad it broke up the game."

Roger collected his money, and walked into Justin's sleeping area. Justin was lying on his bunk, reading. As Roger entered, Justin let the book fall to his chest. "Congratulations, Hunter. It sounded like a big pot."

Roger just smiled. "You've always been a better poker player than me, Justin. Guess it just goes to show you that someone very average can hit the big time with a lot of luck."

Justin laughed. "It's just your hidden talent, Hunter. Everybody's got to have something, and we all know that you can't fly worth a darn..." Justin's laughter took the sting out of the jab. It made Roger feel better, too.

"If we had a bar here, Justin, I'd buy you a drink."

"Just you remember where all that money came from when you get back to the states on your thirty-day leave, cowboy. Have one for me then. That's all I need."

Roger slapped Justin's leg. "Thanks, Justin. I like your style." Roger left the hootch.

The sun was hanging low over the ocean as Roger looked out the window of the airliner. It didn't seem like thirty days had ever passed so fast in his life. It had been a good leave, simply because he had touched real life again. Flush toilets, real showers, but most of all, the quiet of the rural Pacific Northwest. Roger had had trouble sleeping the entire time, and that bothered him. But there had been no dreams. At least none he could remember. He rarely slept more than two hours at a stretch, and he sometimes awakened covered with sweat. But he remembered no dreams.

He laughed to himself as he thought of some of the dates he went on. He wondered if his dates even knew he was wearing long underwear... It had been so cold that he had to do something, or shiver all the time. It was hard to get close to a woman. He had been away for a long time. Much longer than he had imagined. And life had been going on as it always had for those who weren't in the war. It was like it was passing him by, and he was powerless to stop it.

His folks were happy to see him. His dad looked thin, but he still retained his sense of humor. They had spent some fine evenings together, eating desserts his Mom had whipped up and playing cribbage or pinochle. There had only been one tense moment. That was when his Mother showed him an article she had cut from the local paper. It listed him as being decorated for bravery in action. Roger would straighten that out with the Battery clerk when he got back. He thought he had made sure that there was to be no publicity released for any of his actions. Sure, he had received a few medals, but as he thought back on the actions he was decorated for, he could see nothing that he hadn't seen on the part of many others. They had simply done what had to be done. If someone wanted to write it up, then that was their business.



Medals

Roger's folks introduced him to one of the nicest guys Roger had ever met. His name was Tom Long. Roger's folks had moved from Shelton while Roger was still in college. Tom was working with Roger's dad, and they had formed a close friendship. Tom was raised in farm country south of Chehalis, and he loved to hunt and fish. When Roger first met Tom, they talked long hours about fishing and hunting exploits. Then they began doing a few things together, and became close friends. Tom spent many evenings with Roger and Roger's folks while Roger was home on leave. Tom was a good pinochle player, and the fourth in the group was appreciated by all. Tom was still going to college, and his student deferment was keeping him out of the draft. Roger told him to stay out of the war if he could.

Roger took a deep breath, and looked around at the others on the plane. There were some very young faces among them. The Warrant Officer sitting next to Roger looked about nineteen. It was his first trip over. When they had been on the plane about four hours, he spoke to Roger. The

first questions always dealt with the service -- what you did, where you were stationed, and how much time you'd spent in Nam.

"This is my first trip over," he was saying. "Have you ever been over before?"

Roger smiled. "Yeah. I've been there a year, but I extended so I'm going back to finish up my six months."

The look on the young warrant's face showed surprise. "You've already been there a year? And you're going back?"

"Yeah. At least it's not a second tour. The weather will start improving before long, and things will be a little easier."

"Where are you stationed?"

"Up in I Corps."

"You fly slicks?"

"No, Cobras."

The conversation continued. Roger waited for the inevitable questions about the close scrapes and the hard times. He fended them off, keeping the conversation light. This young pilot was going in as a repo (replacement), and he wouldn't even know where he was going to be assigned until he reported in. Roger felt sorry for him. It was bad enough to be a new guy, but not to know anyone where you were going had to be hard. Roger let him carry the conversation.

Then came the questions on what he should know -- what were the do's and don'ts. Roger explained that these would be covered when he reached his new unit. Standard operating procedures varied so much from unit to unit, that Roger couldn't offer much advice. Roger did tell him that knowing his in-flight emergency procedures could save his life. That stopped the questions for a while, as the young warrant thought about it. Roger took the opportunity to try to get some sleep. He hated these long airplane rides, ... especially when this one was taking him back into combat. He wondered how many new faces would greet him in C Battery.

Roger didn't really mind the standard fire missions as much as he hated the ones that required the tough decisions. He remembered one north of Hue, in the area known as 'Street Without Joy'. Roger's section was given a hot contact mission there when they were returning from another mission. Arriving on station, the grunts popped smoke, and Roger identified their position.

"See that church 100 meters to our north? Over," Blackjack, the radio contact, said.

Roger spotted the church, "Yeah, I got it. Where's the target from there?"

"That's the target, over."

Roger couldn't believe what he was hearing. This church was the nicest looking building in the small village below him. He recalled from somewhere that often the villagers ran into a church when a battle erupted around them. He hesitated, then keyed his mike. "Are you saying the church is what you want me to hit? Over."

"That's affirmative, Griffin. Over."

Again Roger hesitated. "Hey, look, man. I'm not gonna blow that church away. Not unless I get clearance from my highers."

"We took fire from that church, Griffin."

"Yeah, I hear you, but it might be full of women and kids, too, ya' know." Roger's mind was in a turmoil as thoughts rushed in. He just couldn't force himself to roll in on a church in the middle of a small village without more proof that it concealed enemy troops. "How about if I just hang in close while you assault it?"

The radio crackled again, "Griffin, that's where we took fire from. Over."

Roger made his decision. "I hear you, Blackjack, but I'm not gonna fire on that church unless I get clearance from my highers. I'll hold over your position while you call it in."

"You mean you won't fire on the target? Over."

"That's affirm, Blackjack. I won't fire without liaison confirmation. I've got about twenty minutes on station before I run out of gas, so if you're going to get clearance, you best get with it."

There was a long pause before Roger was given an end-of-mission.

Forcing these thoughts from his mind, he tried to recall all the details of his leave. But it was more or less a blur. The days merged into one another. Roger dated an old high school friend. They had some interesting evenings together, but no flaming passion. Roger just couldn't get interested.

The more Roger thought about it, the more that he realized he had enjoyed his leave in Australia much more than he had the trip back to the states. Sure, it had been great to see his folks, and Tom, but he could have missed the rest of it. It was an uneasy situation. There was a lot of protesting going on, and emotions about the war ran

high. Roger was never sure where people were coming from, so he usually avoided the questions when he was asked what he did.

Roger dated another girl he knew in college. She had been going with Doan the last that Roger knew. She was living in Seattle. He called her when he was just passing through, and she wanted to see him. They spent the afternoon together, and she invited him to a party that night. As they arrived at the party, the smell of marijuana was heavy in the air. That bothered Roger. He had never fooled with drugs at all, other than alcohol, and he didn't feel comfortable in their presence.

"Look, Sherry, I'm not sure I want to stay here," Roger said when they had entered the door.

She looked at him unbelievably. "Why not?" she asked, letting go of his hand.

"It's about the drugs."

"Come on. It'll be a great party."

Roger hesitated. "Naw, I don't think I wanta go in. You go ahead if you want."

"Are you serious?" she asked him with a toss of her head.

Roger had made up his mind. "Yes. Very serious. You go ahead if you want. Seriously."

She looked into the room. "Well, it's your choice."

"Yeah, I know. Have a good time. Maybe we'll get together again sometime." Roger turned and left. He could remember looking up at the starry sky over Seattle. He walked slowly back to his car. Everything probably would have been fine. What was it that had made him stop? His fear of knowing nothing about drugs? Or was it his fear of getting busted at a drug party? Roger shrugged off the thoughts, and drove away.

As he sat on the plane, Roger laughed to himself. Maybe he should have stayed. And maybe he should have gotten busted for drugs. At least he wouldn't be returning to Nam now. But it probably would have just delayed the inevitable. Even now Roger's chances were better than ever. With the experience that he had, he should be able to handle most of the problems. There was just the chance that his number would come up. There was no denying that. But, what the heck, if it came up, it came up. You could even get killed crossing the street back home....

When the plane landed in Japan for refueling, Roger got a haircut and a shave. It was one of the first times that Roger had ever been shaved, and he liked it.

When the plane landed at Cam Ranh Bay, Roger wished the young warrant good luck. "Just keep your eyes and ears open all the time, and never trust that hunk of metal underneath you," were his parting words.

As Roger approached the reservation counter in the depot to see about flights up north, he recalled his landing at McChord Air Force Base when he had arrived home on his thirty-day leave. Roger had wanted to call his folks so they could come pick him up, but it was dark when the plane landed, and Roger had no idea what time of day it was. The sun had come up, and it had set again on the flight across the Pacific. And he had slept a lot of the trip, so he didn't even know what day it was.

When he picked up the phone, he dialed the operator. "Can you tell me what time it is?" he had asked.

"Certainly. The time now is six oh five," she had answered.

Roger thought that over for a second, and then wondered if it was morning or night. "Is that a.m. or p.m.?" he asked. He couldn't remember how long they had been flying in the dark.

The operator seemed a little flustered by his question. "Well, that's p.m., of course."

Roger laughed to himself. Of course, he thought. "And could you tell me the date?" He might as well set his watch all at one time.

"The date? Well, yes, ... it's ... uh, Wednesday."

"No, not the day of the week. The date. Can you tell me the date?"

"Well, sure Where are you calling from, anyway?"

Roger laughed aloud. "Tacoma, but I just got back from overseas, and I slept most of the trip."

She didn't seem to understand, but she did give Roger the date. Then he placed the call to his folks. As Roger recalled that conversation with the telephone operator now, he should have realized that it marked the beginning of a strange thirty days. It seemed that he walked in a different world throughout his leave. Now as the smell of Vietnam filtered through his nostrils, he knew he was back. Back to something he understood. Maybe not in the overall political view. But he knew what his job was, and he knew

he was well equipped to do it. Roger stepped confidently to the counter, and asked about flights north.

60: Mayday for the Little Bird

Not all that much had changed in the unit since he'd left. He received a rousing welcome. Everyone was interested in the real world, and they asked countless questions about what was going on back in the states. For their part, the other pilots briefed Roger on current actions. They were still supporting the ARVN's up along the DMZ. CCN missions (those flown for the Green Berets out of Quang Tri were called Command and Control North) were still being covered. But it seemed that they were encountering more and more NVA (North Vietnamese) enemy troops. They were getting to be better shots, too. Shortly before Roger had returned, three ships had been shot up. One had taken two hits in the canopy, but neither pilot had been injured. Another ship had been hit in the landing gear, and another received a couple holes in a rotor blade.

Roger took the news in stride. North Vietnam seemed intent on winning this war. Roger was convinced they were prepared to fight a long time to win it. From the sound of the situation, they might be committing more seasoned troops from the north. Or maybe C Battery was just coming up against better-trained troops. Either way, it meant keeping your mind on what you were doing, or pay the consequences.

Grimes was still bunking next to Roger in the 3rd Platoon. Paul was especially anxious about news from the Northwest. His wife was living in Tacoma. In the first few evenings after Roger's return, Paul and he lay awake talking about the real world. Roger couldn't answer many of Paul's questions about Tacoma. Roger hadn't spent that much time there. He had called a girl to whom he had gotten very close while attending school at WSU, but she had told him that she was planning to get married. Roger felt bad about that because he had really liked her. He was sure that she was the girl he should have married, rather than Janet.

A few days later Grimes was flying with Jackson when they took a .50 caliber hit in one of the blade grips on the main rotor. The hit shook the whole ship, but it took them a long time to even find where they had been hit. The maintenance personnel tried to tell them that they were imagining it. But their persistence paid off.

One night all the field phones in the pilots' hootches began ringing at the same time. Trowbridge was going crazy in Operations. The Battery had been alerted that the enemy

was making a major drive across the DMZ. Electronic sensing devices had picked up movement all along the border north of Quang Tri. The units in Quang Tri were calling for all the help they could get.

The pilots rolled out of bed, and began making preparations. This was it. The big one. So far, the enemy had rarely stood and fought, but it looked like this was the showdown. Some of the pilots were very excited. Here was their chance to meet the enemy in the open, just like in the movies. This would be firing on targets that could be seen, not hidden by layers of jungle. The excitement was catching, and ran through the entire unit.

C Battery was committing every ship that the maintenance team could get in the air. Roger was even assigned to his own ship. Old number 604. It had arrived in the unit with a lot of problems from the maintenance area in Danang. It had been sent up to replace one of the lost aircraft. The crewchief assigned to it was Alan Rowland. Alan was very conscientious, and worked hard on the ship. It was a pleasure to Roger when he reached the ship early in the morning for preflighting, and Alan snapped him a smart salute.

The two of them had worked out a deal. If Alan saluted Roger with his left hand, Roger had to return the salute with the same hand, or it was up to Roger to furnish a case of beer to Alan. Alan tried all kinds of tricks to earn the beer, and Roger paid his share. Roger liked Alan. Besides being a good crewchief, he had a wonderful sense of humor. Roger managed to get Alan up in the air a couple times to fire the weapons on the Snake. Alan enjoyed those flights, and they shared some good times together.

Alan was excited his ship was going north. He had just replaced the attitude indicators the day before, so the ship was now rated as night-flyable. The other attitude indicators had been unreliable, and the ship had been restricted to daytime flights only.

As Alan watched the pilots spreading out across the flight line to preflight their ships, he turned to Roger.

"Wow, what's on for tonight, sir? A turkey shoot? Looks like a lot of ships are going up."

"Every one we've got flyable. They think they've got a couple thousand dinks crossin' the DMZ in a major assault. Probably somebody read their meters wrong, if it runs true to form, but we've got to launch, anyway."

Alan tucked a rag in his pocket, and helped Roger with his armor. "She'll do you right tonight. She's in good shape, sir. 'Specially with those new attitude indicators. I got rid of all the bulbs in the sighting station, too."

Roger smiled. Alan always gave his very best to deliver a good, clean ship. As Roger swung up into the cockpit of the Snake, Alan helped the pilot in the front seat with his armor and straps. When Roger was settled in the damp cockpit, he looked around at the other ships. Those pilots were settling in, too. The cry came down the flight line, passed from crewchief to crewchief. "Crank 'em!"

Roger cleared his throat. "Clear!" he called out. Alan echoed the call, and the big turbine began its low-pitched whine as the starter engaged. Alan climbed up on the steps, and leaned over to Roger in the cockpit.

"Good shooting, sir."

"Thanks," Roger yelled back above the slap of the rotor blades and the whine of the engine. He wanted to reach out and tousle Alan's blonde, curly hair. Instead he gave Alan a thumbs-up signal. Alan returned the sign, and brought the canopy door down and locked it. Roger pulled on his helmet as he went through the warm-up check.

The intelligence turned out to be a bust. The entire Battery flew to Quang Tri, landed, and hung around for about an hour before the whole fiasco was called off. It was about two in the morning when the Griffins returned to Camp Evans.

A few days later, Roger was assigned to cover a small, observation helicopter on an intelligence gathering mission. Many of the LOH's were now Bell choppers. Jet Ranger was the common name. The ship Roger was covering had only two personnel on board. About a half-hour into the flight, the little bird spotted some spider holes on a small ridge. Roger watched apprehensively as the passenger on the small chopper fired M-79 grenade rounds at the holes in the side of the hill. At one point, Roger even warned him on the radio that they were taking an awful chance.

"Just havin' a little fun," was the reply.

Roger tried to hold the Snake in a position to cover the little ship, but it kept changing directions so often that it was almost impossible to keep him covered. It was obvious to Roger that the pilot of the little bird hadn't done much of this type of flying.

As the ship made another pass along the hillside, it appeared that it began to disintegrate. Pieces flew off the side of the ship. It held its position for a second or two, then settled slowly. As it lost altitude, it clipped a tree with its rotor blades, and then it began to fly apart. For an instant, it held in the top of the tree. Then as the rotor blades broke apart, the ship rolled over and dropped to the ground upside down. Roger could see one of the crew clinging to the top of the tree that had been sheared off in the crash. The other crew member was lying next to the wreckage on the ground. Roger switched the UHF radio to the guard channel, and put out a mayday call. As he made a low pass by the tree, the crew member hanging there waved at the Cobra. There was no movement by the crew member on the ground.

The station answering Roger's call on the guard channel noted all the details of the situation, and said that help was on the way. It wasn't long before a FAC was over the area. It was now growing late in the afternoon, and Roger was running short on fuel, as the rescue attempt proceeded. An Air Force "Jolly Green Giant", a huge rescue helicopter, was brought in. As he attempted to get close to the wreckage, he suddenly rared back and rolled away from the hill. His radio call was confusing, but the message to Roger was clear. They had taken heavy fire as they tried to approach the wreck site. One of the pilots was hit, and another crewmember was injured seriously. As the Jolly Green departed, Roger could see it was trailing smoke from one engine.

As Roger waited for further developments, he scrambled another Griffin section to replace him on station. His fuel situation was critical. Since he had seen the figure in the top of the tree wave, he had noted no further movement. Maybe he's trying to remain still so the bad guys won't see him, thought Roger. At least that was what he hoped.

Roger was replaced by the section he had scrambled, but as soon as he had his ship refueled, another ship tagged up with him, and together they returned to the site of the crash. It was now too dark to see any of the crew from the wrecked ship. A small combat assault force had been assembled, and the slicks were now forming up for the insertion. There was a small clearing less than one hundred meters from the wreckage that was going to be the LZ. The slick flight commander decided to try to land two ships at a

time. There were two sections of Griffins on station to support the assault. The chatter on the radio was heavy as the slicks maneuvered into position.

The Air Force continued to direct the operation, and Roger felt a lot of time was wasted explaining the situation to them. As the maneuvering went on, the precious daylight slipped entirely away. Just as darkness was falling, the slicks made their assault in a light rain. The first two ships approaching the LZ took heavy fire, and had to break off the approach. Both of them had several wounded aboard, but both ships were able to limp off into the darkness. Even on their approach, Roger hadn't seen a single enemy tracer. Then it began to pour rain which added to the visibility problems.

Roger's heart was in his throat as he thought of the crew of the little bird. He knew that the one in the tree was alive after the crash, even though he may have been hurt badly. And now it didn't appear that they were going to be able to get him any help. Typically American, thought Roger. According to his estimate, over a dozen casualties had been taken in an attempt to get to the crew of the downed ship. But everyone refused to quit. The slick commander chose another LZ, and the grunts were inserted there. Their force had been cut down from the loss of the two slicks, though, and they weren't able to move on the ground. The Griffin sections continued to fire support for the small assault force throughout the night in the rainy darkness. After another refueling, Roger's section was relieved for the night as another Griffin platoon took over.

As Roger landed 604 on the flight line, Alan was there to meet the ship. Roger was really down. He could have touched the crew member from the Jet Ranger in the tree. Alan climbed up to the cockpit. As he looked at Roger, his expression was sober.

"Bad night, sir?" he asked softly.

Roger looked up from the log book. "Uh, yeah, Rowland. We lost a little bird on a recon mission."

Alan shook his head. "What about the crew?"

Roger looked away as he completed the entry in the log book. "They were alive after they went in, but.....," Roger's breath caught. He took a deep breath. "But we couldn't get to 'em The area's pretty hot. They shot up a Jolly Green that tried to reach 'em." Roger turned to Alan, and slowly closed the log book. "The ship flew fine, chief. You did a good job on it."

Alan studied Roger for a moment. "Thank you, sir. I know you tried to get 'em out." Then Alan jumped down, and caught the rotor blade.

Roger rubbed his face with his hands. It had been his job to cover the Ranger..., and now they were gone. Roger knew that by morning, it would be too late to save them. The gooks would find them in the dark. He looked at the dark instrument panel for a long time. Someone approached the ship.

"Last taxi to the hootches, Hunter."

Roger waved off the flashlight. "It's OK. I'll walk." The flashlight disappeared. Roger heaved himself up and out of the cockpit. The armor chicken plate swung heavily against his thighs. He unhooked the velcro fasteners, and pulled the armor up over his head. He reached up and dropped it into the seat of the ship. Then he collected his gloves, helmet, and helmet bag from the cockpit. Dropping to the ground, he slid his .38 around to his hip and pulled up his pants. As he reached for the canopy door, there was a voice behind him.

"I'll get it, sir."

Roger didn't even look around. It was Alan. He still had to run his postflight check, and clean up the records on the ship. Roger said "Thanks," and walked away from 604.

Most of the other pilots had already eaten when Roger reached the mess hall. There weren't any late dinners left. The cook on duty apologized, and offered to cook up some eggs. Roger thanked him, and poured himself a cup of coffee. He still had to go up to Ops to debrief the mission. He walked into the pilots side of the mess hall, and sat down. Roger looked up. The CO was standing in the door of the mess hall.

"Mind if I join you, Hunter?"

"No, not at all, sir."

"Pretty rough show out there?"

"No, not really, I guess. Just feel bad about losing the little bird."

"What happened?"

Roger knew that the question would come eventually. He explained to Major Smart what had occurred, and he concluded that they should have been able to get the crew out. With a little quicker reaction, the assault force should have been in before dark. That would have given them half a chance to reach the wreckage.

Smart was realistic. He was sensitive to Roger's feelings, but he explained the difficulties of mounting an assault on such short notice. Roger knew he was telling the truth, but he felt that he hadn't done enough. Maybe he should have tried to reach the crewman in the tree.

Smart shook his head. "No. Then what happened to the Jolly Green would probably have happened to you. And then we wouldn't have had anyone out there that even knew what the situation was. That would have ended those guys chances for sure."

The cook knocked on the wall as he entered the pilots' side of the mess hall. "Your eggs are ready, sir."

"Thanks a lot, cookie. I really appreciate the hot meal."

"You're welcome, sir. If you need anything else, just holler."

Roger nodded, and began to eat. Smart rose from the table. "I think you did every thing you could, Hunter. You've had a long day. Try to get some sleep." Smart left the mess hall.

The assault force reached the wreckage the next day. Both crewman were dead.....

61: Night on the Bunker Line

All of the officers in Charlie Battery were required to perform other duties besides flying. One of the most hated was officer of the guard for a sector of the perimeter. In that capacity, the sector officer had the responsibility for about fifteen bunkers along the southern edge of Camp Evans.. The bunkers were usually manned by four men each. The usual practice was for two to stay awake while the other two slept.

Near the center of the sector, a large guard tower rose into the darkness. Beneath it was an underground bunker that housed the communication center for the sector. It was in this bunker that the sector officers usually spent most of their time. But Roger didn't like spending his time in the bunker. He took his responsibility on the perimeter very seriously. There were too many stories of the enemy slipping into camps unnoticed, and killing sleeping troops before anyone sounded an alarm.

As Roger climbed the wooden ladder on the guard tower, the rain poured down. It was a miserable night, but one that was perfect for the enemy. Visibility was terrible. Even from the tower, Roger could barely make out the nearest bunkers on the line. Two men manned the tower. They shared a starlight scope, which Roger found intriguing. They showed him how to operate it. It provided much better night vision than the naked eye, but it was like looking at a ghost scene. Everything appeared in a florescent green and black, and the rain distorted the shapes. He shared a smoke with the two privates as they took turns scanning the perimeter.



Bunker line at a base perimeter.

About midnight, the rain let up. Roger climbed down from the tower, and entered the bunker. He checked with his commo (communications) person, and told him he was going out to check the bunker line. He would be heading west toward the end of the runway. There a steep gully divided Roger's sector from the next sector of the perimeter. Roger was always careful that he made at least one visit to this part of his sector during the night. It seemed to keep the troops on their toes a little more if they found the sector officer out there on the line with them.

Roger stopped at each bunker along the line. He would chat briefly with the guards, finding out where they were from, and how long they had been in Nam. As he approached the last bunker, it was nearly two a.m., and Roger noticed there wasn't any movement on the bunker. This was a little out of the ordinary because each bunker would normally call ahead to the next bunker on the field phone to alert the guards that the sector officer was coming.

Roger stopped and studied the bunker. It was almost eerie in the darkness. The rain had stopped a couple hours before, and most of the guards on the bunkers behind him had

been out on the roof. The hair on the back of Roger's neck tingled, and he stole a glance behind him.

Nothing but darkness. Roger neared the bunker cautiously. Reaching its outer wall, Roger listened at one of the openings. He could hear nothing. Carefully he climbed the ladder to the top of the bunker. Peeking over the edge of the sandbags on the top, he could make out four shapes lying in various poses around the top of the bunker. Roger remained very still, and watched the figures carefully. He could tell two of them were breathing.

Then he climbed on top of the bunker and went over to the nearest figure. Checking the sleeping troop, Roger carefully lifted the troop's M-16 from the sandbags next to him. Moving slowly, Roger collected each troop's rifle, and then sat down on the sandbags next to the ladder. Roger coughed loudly. One of the troops sat up, and looked around. Seeing Roger, he stealthily kicked the troop next to him.

"Good evening, sir," he said as he stretched his arms.

"Good evening," Roger answered. "Kind of tired tonight?"

"Oh no, sir. Just a quiet night is all, I guess." The second troop was now sitting up.

"Wake your buddies," Roger said flatly.

The troop who had awakened first tried to feign surprise. "Why, sir? They're not on duty now."

"Is that right? Are you on duty now?"

"Yessir. Me and George."

"Well, if you've been on duty, can you tell me where your weapons are?" Roger's eyes never left the troop's face.

The guard looked around quickly before he spotted the M-16's between Roger's legs. "Right between your legs there, sir."

"That's right. And just how did they get there?"

"Well, uh"

Roger cut him short. "Don't make it any worse than it is right now, troop. You and your buddies were all asleep. Your only job out here on guard duty is to stay awake. All those guys in the camp right behind me are depending on you to stay awake and warn them in case of trouble. You oughta be ashamed of yourself." Roger picked up the field telephone, and called the commo bunker. When his assistant came on the line, Roger told him to ring these guards' unit.

When the connection was made, Roger found himself talking to the infantry company's clerk. Roger explained that he wanted to replace some people from the unit that were assigned to guard duty. The clerk became flustered.

"I don't have the responsibility to do that, sir."

Roger was patient. "I realize that, so you're going to have to get someone with that responsibility."

"You mean you want me to wake up the First Sergeant??" the clerk was flabbergasted. Apparently no one awoke the First Sergeant.

"Yes, that's right," Roger said. While Roger waited for the First Sergeant to come to the phone, he turned to the guards on the bunker. "You might as well gather your gear. You're going back to your unit."

A gruff voice came on the line. "What the hell's going on here? What's this about guard duty? I thought I sent enough troops out there tonight."

"You did, Sergeant, but there's a little problem. Some of the ones you sent seem to think that this isn't a serious job out here. I caught four of 'em sleeping, and I want them replaced."

"You what?" There was a long pause. "Are you bringing formal charges against them?"

"No. I don't think that's necessary, Sergeant. I think you can handle the discipline any way you see fit."

The voice on the other end of the line had turned very serious. "Thank you, sir. I'll see that you get some replacements, ASAP."

"Thank you very much, Sergeant. Good night." Roger hung up the field phone. He knew that every one of the bunkers had been listening to the conversation. As he looked at the troops gathering their gear together, Roger fought back a twinge of pity. They could have all been dead, and then how would he have felt? As he climbed down the ladder, he stuck his head into the bunker. The smell of marijuana smoke still hung heavily in the musty air inside. Roger shook his head. What they did on their time didn't bother him, but he expected them to pull their share when they had work to do.

A jeep arrived shortly with the replacements. The rest of the night went smoothly. As the first grey streaks of dawn began to cross the sky, Roger eased himself down the ladder on the tower. At precisely 8:00 a.m. he was relieved. It was time to get some breakfast.

The next day, Red Cross packages arrived in the unit. When the XO passed them out, he explained that the Red Cross was trying to boost the troops' morale. The packages were addressed to specific individuals. The XO explained that the names had been furnished to the Red Cross and given out to those who wanted to do something for the "boys overseas". Roger looked at the flat cardboard box he had received. It had an envelope taped on top of it. Roger opened the envelope and read the message. Although the writer, obviously female, didn't specify her age, Roger guessed it was someone in her early teens. She asked a few questions about where he was and what he was doing. She hoped that he would enjoy the cookies. Roger looked again at the box. He cut the tape holding the box together, and slowly opened it. A dozen cookies had been carefully laid on a sheet of wax paper in the box. Another sheet of wax paper had been placed over them. Roger lifted the wax paper. There were one or two cookies left. The rest had been devoured by ants that were still in the box. Roger carried it outside carefully, and set fire to the box. As he watched it burn, emotions rose very close to the surface.

Roger admired the girl who had sent the cookies. There was no way she could know how they would arrive. But he was a little disappointed with the Red Cross. Now he would have to lie a little when he wrote back to the girl. Roger sat down on his cot, and pulled a tablet and pen from his foot locker. He described where he was, and told her that he flew helicopters. He added a few lines about the countryside, and concluded by thanking her for the cookies. He shook his head as he told her how good they were. Then he carefully addressed the envelope, and folded the paper into it.

Bobby Wonder's luck ran short on him that week. He was in the front seat of a Snake with Trammel in the back when they took fire on a support mission. There was a bang, and both of them knew a round had come through the cockpit. Bobby looked around, and found the exit hole in the front windshield. As the mission continued, Bobby suddenly realized he was sitting in a damp seat. He reached down the back of his pants with his gloved hand. When he pulled it out, the glove was covered with blood. He raised it, and waved at Trammel in the rear view mirror.

Trammel's eyes bugged out when he saw Bobby's glove. Then he lost his cool. He began shouting on the radio, until Bobby was able to calm him down.

"It's not that serious, Hank. Just take me back to Evans, huh?" Bobby asked.

It was not a glorious wound, even though Bobby got a Purple Heart for it. The ironic twist was that he was hit by his own bullet. It was one of those freak occurrences in combat that are never planned for. The round that hit the ship was from an AK-47 (an enemy automatic rifle), most likely. It came through the left side of cockpit, and passed through the collective control lever. Then, guided by fate, it hit the only opening in the armor seat in which Bobby sat -- the slot for the seat belt. It opened the slot slightly when it passed through, and hit the back of Bobby's western style pistol belt. The belt was full of rounds for Bobby's .38, and the AK round hit one of them. It then ricocheted off the inside of the armored seat, passed by Bobby's waist, nicked him on the wrist, and exited through the canopy. However, the .38 round that was struck, discharged straight down into the armor seat below Bobby. Striking the armor plate there, it reversed direction and hit Bobby right in the butt.

The wound was serious enough that Bobby was sent to Danang for recovery. It had hit him in a very tender spot. But as much as the other pilots teased him about it, Bobby never showed the wound to anyone. He showed off the nick in his arm, but wouldn't even speak of the rest of it.

Shortly after his return to the unit, Bobby was sent on R&R. Roger was sitting on his cot the day Bobby returned. As Bobby bounced into the hootch, Roger looked up from his book.

"Just got back, huh? You must have had a good time."

Bobby turned to look at Roger, "And just how would you know that?"

"Well, unless you put some toilet paper in that plastic pill bottle you've got in your pocket, you're going to advertise to everyone in the unit what you caught on leave."

Bobby's face began to color, then he turned away. For a second he just stood there, and then turned back to Roger. "How would you know what those pills are, Hunter?"

Roger laughed, and winked at Bobby. "I've listened to a few of the medics, Mr. Wonder, as they like to tell stories on you wild pilots. What the hell. It's an occupational hazard, Bobby. It's just that you don't have to advertise it unless you want to."

Bobby shrugged his shoulders, and began unpacking.

Then it was Gladstone's turn. Gladstone, the IP from Vung Tau who had trained many of the Griffins in the Cobra. The ace pilot whom everyone respected. Dennis stopped a bad one. He was in the back seat of a Snake, and had a new pilot in the front seat. Tracy Pratt was a lieutenant who had just arrived in the Battery. Everyone thought it was a mistake that he had even been sent to the unit. Tracy wasn't even rated in Cobras when the incident happened, but he kept his cool. He managed to fly the crippled bird into the hospital pad at Quang Tri, and very likely saved Gladstone's life. He had trouble setting it down from the front seat, but the medics at the hospital waited patiently for him to bring the Snake to rest. Little did they know that the armament system in the ship was still hot when Pratt brought it to earth.

Gladstone got an early trip back to New England. The crewchief who had to clean the ship knew it was a bad hit. Blood covered everything in the back seat when the ship was returned to the unit. The details of Gladstone's wounds were never discussed among the pilots in the unit.

Roger was very nervous. It was looking as if everyone's luck was running short -- all at the same time. Most of the pilots were superstitious about little things around the aircraft, and personal rituals were doggedly followed after Gladstone's loss. Roger checked for his St. Christopher's medallion every morning. So far it had served him well. He hoped it would carry him for another five months.

It was sometime along in February that Major Smart assigned Roger as the armament officer in the unit. That meant that he had responsibility for the maintenance of the weapons systems on the ships. Malfunctions in the electrical control systems of the Cobra were common with all of the heat, vibration and humidity to which they were subjected. The mechanical malfunctions were simple problems compared to the electrical problems. Roger finally managed to wangle an electrical schematic of the entire weapons system. It cost him several bottles of whiskey, but one of the NCO's managed to locate one for him in Danang. Roger spent many hours poring over it, trying to memorize the location of the components and understand how they worked together.

The rocket systems were relatively trouble-free. The relays and counters in this system were pretty much straightforward. The most frequent maintenance on the rocket system was the replacement of the pods themselves, when too many individual tubes wouldn't fire.

The turret system was something else. It was an electronic nightmare. In Roger's opinion, the whole turret system had been over-designed. The expensive sighting station in the front seat was seldom used. Most pilots adjusted turret fire by watching tracers from the mini-gun, or the bursts from the 40 millimeter fire. It was sometimes discovered that the light bulb in the turret sighting station had burned out, and no one had written it up because it wasn't used.

The time Roger spent studying the schematics paid off, though, and he began to bet with the armament maintenance personnel on solving problems. Roger would bet them a case of beer that they couldn't solve the malfunction within two hours. If they failed, Roger, with the help of one assistant, would try to solve it in the same length of time. If he was able to do it, the maintenance section would have to buy the beer. If he couldn't solve it within the required time, then he would have to buy the beer. He began to earn quite a reputation for fixing the problems on the Cobra, and he became more and more proficient with the test equipment.

Some of the problems were simple to fix, and once the solution was found, modifications were made to the other

ships to keep the problem from occurring on them. An example of these was the sophisticated ammo counters for the turret. These were rarely, if ever, used. For the counters to function, electrical cables had to come from the ammo bays for the two turret weapons. If these cables had become worn, or were damaged, which happened often during fast reloads, the turret weapons wouldn't work. Once the armament section discovered this, Roger had the attaching plugs on the ends of the cables on all the ships cut off, and the ends were taped to the bulkhead of the ammo bay.

Morale of the armament section had become something of a problem when Roger took over the assignment. His first step was to check on recent promotions, grades in the shop, and who could qualify for promotion. Next he considered other ways to improve morale. He wanted to take armorers up to test the systems on which they'd worked. This not only gave them a little flight time, but showed them first hand the frustration faced when the weapons malfunctioned in the air. Making up his list, he approached the CO, and, to Roger's surprise, was granted permission to try his ideas.

When Roger was working nights, the CO often let him off combat flying duties as long as there were enough pilots to go around. It was during this period that Roger essentially became the CO's pilot. It was easy duty as far as flying went, even though he worked hard on the weapons systems. His skills with the systems became so widely known throughout the Battalion that the CO called Roger into his office. He offered Roger a direct commission to a 2nd Lieutenant if Roger would be willing to sign on for another six months in Vietnam. Roger laughed at the offer.

As the availability of the weapons systems went up significantly, Major Smart was pleased. He complimented Roger, and again offered him a direct commission to a 2nd Lieutenant. Roger again refused.

"Look, Hunter, I would offer you a direct commission to a 1st Lieutenant if I could, but I can't. I talked with the Battalion commander yesterday about your work. Here's what he offered. He'll create a Battalion armament officer position, promote you to a 2nd Lieutenant, and move you down to Camp Eagle, if you'll accept."

"Look, it isn't that I don't appreciate what you're doing, sir, but that would mean six more months on my tour over here. And what would it mean when I got back to the states? I'm supposed to get out when my tour over here is done now. A promotion would mean more time in the service,

right?" Roger wasn't anxious to stay with the Army any longer. He felt that he had spent his time, and he was ready to end it when his time in Vietnam was up.

"Well, what would you consider a fair offer?"

Roger thought this over carefully. "Tell you what. Make that a 1st Lieutenant, at Battalion, and guarantee me no more combat flying. If you can do that, you got yourself a deal."

Major Smart laughed. "I'll try it, Hunter, but I think that's too much."

Even though the CO tried to meet Roger's conditions, it was never approved at the Battalion level. Roger was actually happy that it wasn't approved. He was now down to 145 pounds, and was ready to return to the states. He was tired of living in the dust, or the mud, and sleeping under a mosquito net. He figured that eighteen months was long enough. He thought back to his goal that had been established in his first months in country. He felt that he had done his share.

One clear day, the phone in the hootch rang. Roger immediately awoke to answer it. He had worked the entire night on a difficult electronics problem on one of the rocket systems. It was Operations on the horn. Major Smart wanted to fly up to Quang Tri to deliver some paperwork. Roger quickly dressed, and grabbed his flight gear. It was only an admin flight. He picked up his M-16, then decided to leave it. He had to stop in the mess hall for something to eat before he went down and preflighted the ship. Roger hustled out of the hootch.

The trip to Quang Tri was boring. It was just a joy ride. While Major Smart was making the visit, Roger took the ship over for refueling. He grabbed a troop from the unit they were visiting to accompany him during the refueling process. It was early afternoon when Roger and the CO started back to Camp Evans. On their way south, they heard a section talking about a strike mission.

Smart immediately picked up on their conversation, and asked if he could join the section. A FAC had spotted some bridges along a road on the far side of the Ashau Valley near the Laotian border, and the Griffin section was going out to shoot it up. Smart's addition made it a three-ship section.

When they reached the first target area, the FAC rolled in and marked the first target with willy peter rockets. It was a very crude bamboo bridge. It took several passes

before someone in the section scored a direct hit, and blew the bridge to pieces. Another bridge was spotted further up the road, and the section attacked that. The further they went, the more targets they saw. The FAC continued to accompany them, monitoring their progress. No enemy fire was encountered, and the section became braver as it hit each new target.

The road wound down a steep slope, and widened into a small opening at the bottom of the hill. Along the slope several bamboo bridges were found, and the Griffins speedily dispatched them. During one of the attacks, Smart made his break over the small opening at the base of the hill. After they passed over the opening, the Major keyed his intercom.

"Say, Hunter, I think I saw something down there. I'm going to make another pass." Smart brought the ship around in a slow circle, and began to cross the opening again. Something raised the hackles on Roger's neck as they began the second pass. For one thing, they were going very slow. For another, they were just above the trees. As they crossed the opening, Roger heard the automatic weapon open fire on them. It was a very slow-firing machine gun. Then Roger could hear the rounds tearing their way through the ship.

"We're hit!" Roger called over the intercom. At first there wasn't any response by Smart. Thinking Smart had been hit, Roger grabbed the controls and checked the rear view mirror. Smart looked as if he was stunned. "Let's get out of here!" Roger yelled over the intercom. It seemed a long delay before Smart responded by nosing the Snake over and pulling in the power. As he did, Roger noted the master caution light was on. Checking the caution panel, his heart stopped -- the transmission oil light was on. That meant a no-go situation. Without transmission oil, they had only one to two minutes to set the Snake down. Otherwise the transmission would freeze up -- and the rotor would quit turning. Helicopters aren't noted for flying very well without freely turning rotor blades.

The realization that they were going to have to set the ship down didn't set well with Roger. He advised Smart over the intercom of the transmission oil problem. "We got one to two minutes, sir," he said evenly. With Smart's response, Roger could hear the fear in his voice. Smart called the section leader to advise them of the problem. They immediately responded, and said they would follow the stricken ship down.

Roger went over the situation in his mind. They were near the "red line," the Laotian border, without a friendly troop on the ground within ten miles. They were going to have to go in. This was the spring of the year when the enemy had been rebuilding his resources for the summer offensive in the coastal area. The fresh roads indicated that a lot of troops and equipment had been moving into the area they were now over.

At first, Smart followed a stream as he left the area where they had taken fire. He soon abandoned the stream. For an instant, this seemed strange to Roger. They could have found a decent landing area along the stream. Then he realized that along the stream was also where the enemy would be. Even with the stress that Smart was under, he was still thinking. As they veered away from the stream, they approached a relatively flat area covered with bamboo.

Up ahead, Roger could see one tall, dead tree standing above the bamboo. Smart was flying right for it. Suddenly Roger realized that Smart hadn't seen it. "Look out for the tree dead ahead!"

Smart rolled the aircraft sharply to avoid the tree, then leveled it up. "Well, what do you think, Hunter?"

Roger looked below them. It was solid bamboo. They couldn't see the ground at all, nor could they tell how tall the bamboo was. Deciding that it was better to go in with power in the bamboo rather than look for another area and have the transmission freeze, Roger answered, "Looks fine to me."

Smart called the other ship. "Griffin Two Zero Delta. Have you got us? We're going in now."

"Roger." Ron Baker was the aircraft commander in the lead ship. His voice sounded clipped and tense.

Roger watched the bamboo rise up to meet them, as Smart brought the ship to a hover. Then they began to descend into the lacy fronds. As they settled, Roger held his breath. It was an eerie feeling as the cockpit dropped into the sea of green beneath them. Then the main rotor blades contacted the bamboo, and Roger's whole world turned green. For an instant, it was like being inside a rotary lawn mower. Then the skids hit the ground. Roger held the sides of the armored seat. The ship lurched to the left. It felt as if it was going to tip over. Roger's mind was racing. He remembered the position of the survival knife in the cockpit. If the Cobra rolled onto its left side, he would

have to break out the canopy to get out. Then the ship rocked back to its right and steadied. They were down.

Roger popped open his canopy, unbuckled and jumped out. He tore off his helmet, and tossed it back into the seat. The bamboo wasn't nearly as thick on the ground as it had seemed from the air. The soil felt soft beneath Roger's boots, as he hurried around to the stubby wing on the ship. He wanted to check the damage. It was possible it was only the oil sensor. But as he reached the wing, his heart sank. Oil was streaming down the side of the ship. They had lost their transmission oil, all right. This ship wasn't flying anywhere without some major repairs. He signaled Smart, and Smart cut the engine.

Turning back to the front of the ship, Roger tried to listen for any noises. But the rotor blades hadn't stopped turning, and they and the tail rotor were still swishing through the bamboo. Roger dropped down on the ground next to the turret. As thick as the bamboo was, he knew that he would have better visibility close to the ground. But even then, he couldn't see more than about thirty feet in any direction. He pulled out his .38, and then remembered his M-16 back in the hootch. Roger swore under his breath. When he had dropped to the ground, his chicken plate had bounced against him. Roger decided to take it off. When he was laying it aside, Smart came around the nose of the ship.

Smart had the survival radio in his hand, along with his .45 and pouch of .45 ammo. Roger reached up and took the radio out of Smart's hand. It was a two-piece affair, one of the old models. The radio proper was hooked to the battery pack by a heavy, vinyl-covered wire. Roger pulled out the antenna, and called the Griffin ships orbiting above them.

"Delta, this is Six Six, on guard. How do you read? Over."

"Gotcha lima charlie (loud and clear) Six Six. How me?"

"Five by five (very good), Delta. How long 'til you can get us out?"

"Call's already in. Think it'll be about ten mikes (minutes)."

"Thanks. Be in touch."

"Roger, Six Six."

Roger checked his watch. It was now two in the afternoon. Baker said they could expect a slick to come for them in about ten minutes. Roger looked around. Ten

minutes was going to be a long time. Roger estimated they had landed only three hundred yards from the enemy who had shot them down. Three hundred yards wasn't very far, but Roger also doubted that the enemy had seen them crash.

Roger looked around at Smart. He was sitting on the stubby wing of the Snake. He had his .45 pistol lying on his leg, and was fooling with his ammo pouch. Roger watched for a minute before he realized that Smart was taking .45 rounds out of the loaded magazines and putting them in his pocket. This seemed awfully strange to Roger. He studied Smart's face. Smart was very pale. Roger thought he was scared until he looked at Smart's face. That enemy, fear, was written all over it. Roger forced himself to breathe evenly. Sure, he was scared, too, but he had to control it if he was going to have a chance to get out of this mess.

Roger again surveyed the ground around him. Looking closer, he suddenly realized there was a foot print in the soft soil about six inches from his face. Roger started. It was a small footprint. Not like one from a child, though. About the size one would expect from a Vietnamese man. A chill ran down Roger's spine. A large black ant ran across the front of the radio. Roger smashed it with his fist. Great act of defiance, my friend, Roger thought. Wouldn't it be ironic if it was his last?

Roger checked his .38 pistol. It had six rounds in it. And if it came down to it ...? Roger had already decided early on in his tour that if it came to capture or death, Roger would prefer death. Now it was down to the real decision time. He turned the .38 over, studying it. Yes, that was it. Five for them. One for him. If there was a God, Roger hoped that He would forgive him.

Smart called softly to him. "What's keeping that slick, Hunter?"

"Don't know," Roger answered dryly. "They said it was going to be ten minutes." Roger checked his watch again. Two minutes had passed. It had seemed more like a half-hour. The soft soil felt warm beneath his stomach. He was almost lying in the shadow of the Cobra. He looked around again. This was the closest he had ever been to the ground in a hostile area since he had arrived in country. What a place to die, Roger thought. A non-descript chunk of Vietnam's countryside. But he didn't want to buy the farm here. Not yet.

Smart shifted position on the wing. "Hunter, I've been shot down in this country before, and I don't like it any

better this time than I did the last time." This fact was new to Roger. "Ask them again how long it's gonna be."

Roger complied. This time Baker said it would be about twenty minutes. Roger passed the information along to Smart.

"Tell them to come in and get us. We can't wait another twenty minutes down here." Smart seemed to be doing better than he was. Some of the color had returned to his cheeks.

"Delta, this is Six Six. Can you come in and get us?"

"Think we can, Six Six. There's a bomb crater about a hundred meters off to your sierra (south). We can pick you up there."

Roger winced. That was a hundred yards closer to the enemy position. An ear splitting blast cut the air, and Roger ducked instinctively. Then he realized it was only the airborne Griffins firing some rockets off to the south of their position. He clicked on the radio. "We like the bomb crater, Delta. See you there."

"Roger dodger, Six Six."

Roger passed the information along to Smart. Then he hesitated. He didn't have a compass, and it would be terribly easy to get turned around in the bamboo. He keyed the radio again. "Hey, Delta, could you give me an o'clock off the aircraft? Might have a little trouble with directions."

"Gotcha, Six Six. Three o'clock."

"Thanks." Roger stood up slowly. Smart was looking at him, and Roger pointed off to the three o'clock position from the aircraft. Smart nodded yes, and slipped down off the wing. Roger led around the nose of the ship, and began slipping through the bamboo. He stopped once, and looked back at the Cobra. It wasn't very far away, and already it was hard to see. Roger headed out again.

Smart followed Roger for a short distance, then took off to the right out through the bamboo. The sudden movement surprised Roger, and he crouched down. He couldn't figure out what Smart was doing. Then he shook his head. If that crazy bastard wants to find his own way to that bomb crater, then let him, thought Roger. I know which way I'm going with the sun, and I've got the radio. Making sure he was heading in a straight line, Roger continued through the bamboo. Soon, the bamboo stems began to get shorter. Must be approaching the bomb crater, thought Roger. He kept moving until the bamboo was barely waist high. Then he

stopped for a moment, and peered through the bamboo toward the opening. Just then he heard a crashing sound behind him. Smart came racing up the trail Roger had just made. Smart ran right past Roger and out into the opening of the bomb crater. He ran up on the dirt berm around the crater itself, and didn't stop until he reached the other side.

Roger waited, watching Smart. If there's any enemy around, they'll sure as heck fire on him, thought Roger. Might as well sit tight for a second to see if he draws any fire. When nothing happened, Roger called Baker on the radio.

"We're at the crater, Delta."

"Roger. We're on our approach right now."

Roger hustled out to the crater, and quickly studied the ground. "Shoot right to me, Delta, but don't set it all the way down. Ground's pretty soft," Roger called over the radio. Then he positioned himself just off the berm of the crater so Baker could set the skids of the chopper right on the berm.

As the chopper approached, Roger could hear his heart beating. Now was the time. If that chopper didn't draw any fire, they were home free. If it did, well then things were in a bad way. The dinks would know their exact position, and it would probably be E&E (escape and evasion) time. The Cobra continued its approach, and reminded Roger of a huge dragonfly. Soon Roger could see Baker's face in the sloping canopy. Roger leaned against the rush of air from the chopper's rotor blades, and squinted his eyes. Baker brought the nose of the ship right up to Roger's chest, and touched down lightly on the berm of the crater.

Roger ran around to the right side of the ship, and popped open the ammo bay door for Smart. As he did, Roger caught the finger of his glove in the door's latch. Swearing to himself, Roger jerked the finger loose. Then he ran around to the other side of the ship, and opened the other ammo bay door. Settling himself on the door, Roger raised his hand with a thumbs up signal so the pilots could see it. As the ship began to lift, Roger held on to the thin wire that supported the door. He still held his .38 in his hand.

As the ship cleared the bamboo, Roger let out a sigh of relief. They had made it out, and they hadn't even taken any fire. He quickly pulled off his gloves, and lit a cigarette. He was shaking so badly that he could barely hold it. As he snapped his lighter shut, his flight gloves

blew off the door. Roger watched them as they dropped out of sight to the jungle far below.

The ship began to pick up speed, and the slipstream caused the collar on Roger's jungle fatigues to slap against his face. Roger cupped his cigarette, but was only able to smoke a part of it. He tossed it away, and tried to tuck his collar into his shirt. Squirming around, he checked the countryside passing beneath him. It certainly was different, viewing it out here in the wind. Roger looked around. They were almost across the Ashau Valley. An Army artillery spotter plane, commonly called a Bird Dog passed by at the same altitude, heading for the Valley. Roger waved as it went by.

The pilot in the Bird Dog banked steeply, and brought the little ship around so it was flying parallel and in the same direction as the Cobra. Roger waved again. Then he saw that the pilot of the Bird Dog had out his camera. Roger reached up and thumped on the canopy of the Cobra. Catching Baker's attention, Roger pointed to the Bird Dog. Again he waved. Hope he's gettin' some good pictures, thought Roger. Might even have a chance to make the front page of the Army newspaper ...! After a couple more pictures, the Bird Dog pilot waved, and broke off to continue his mission.

Roger began studying the ground beneath him again. The thought of an engine failure, and what he would do, crossed his mind. Probably jump when they approached the canopy, he thought. Then he pushed it from his mind. He just felt a lot more vulnerable on the outside of a chopper, than on the inside. It wasn't long before he could see Camp Evans in the distance. It sure was nice to be out of the mountains.

Several times on the way in, Roger tried to get Baker to slow down. Roger's collar wouldn't stay tucked under his shirt, and when the airspeed got too high, the collar would whip his face again. Roger would raise his hand high enough that the pilots could see it from the cockpit, and give them a thumbs down sign. They understood and the ship would slow, but the airspeed would quickly rise again. Roger didn't know it then, but Baker was running dangerously low on fuel.

When they arrived at Camp Evans, Baker shot his approach into the hot spot next to the Operations bunker. Roger could see a small knot of people waiting for their arrival. As the ship touched down, Roger lifted his feet off the skid. Roger jumped off the ammo bay door, and

quickly turned and closed it. Smart did the same. As the ship lifted off for the refueling area, Smart and Hunter were greeted warmly by the assembled troops.



Cobra approaching Camp Evans with rescued pilots. (Photo courtesy of Terry Halladey)



Approaching the landing spot (Photo courtesy of Terry Halladey)

After the hubub, Roger walked slowly to his hootch. He had no sooner arrived than Smart came busting through the door with a fifth of scotch in his hand. Although Roger didn't like scotch, he and Smart proceeded to finish the entire bottle.

The next morning, Roger was awakened by someone shaking him. It was the Battery clerk. "Get up, sir," he was saying. "You've got a flight to catch."

Roger didn't feel he was in any shape to catch a flight anywhere, and besides, he couldn't think of any flight he was supposed to catch. "What flight? Where?" was all he could ask.

"You're going on R&R, sir, and you have to catch the courier south!" The clerk urged Roger into his clothes, and helped him throw his traveling gear together. Almost before Roger knew it, he was on another helicopter, heading toward Hue, and an R&R to Sydney, Australia.

The courier flew Roger to Phu Bai, where he was able to catch a flight all the way through to Saigon in one shot. For this he was grateful, as his head felt like a balloon. What a way to start an R&R, he thought, as he tried to sleep on the trip. Since he had been through it all once before, the processing for the R&R flight was old hat. It was early the next morning when Roger was winging his way south for Australia.

He had finally controlled his throbbing headache with aspirin, and now he lay back in his seat going over the events of the last few days. Bobby had been wounded. Gladstone was gone. It seemed to happen so quickly. One day they were there, and the next they weren't. That's the way it was in the air war. Roger couldn't imagine how it was in the infantry. It was there that the grunts had to watch each other as they lay wounded and the life slowly ebbed from them. Roger supposed he could cope with that if he had to, but the air war certainly gave one an antiseptic view of the whole mess.

As a pilot, he didn't have to deal with the aftermath of firefights on the ground. There were no broken bodies, and equipment fragments to pick up. If a ship bored in, it was the grunts who made the scene to pick up the pieces. The only aviators who were involved from that point on were the accident investigation team. To the other pilots in the unit, those lost were simply gone. Wiped from the face of the earth as if by magic. Their gear was packed, and sent home, and that was that. Soon a "new" guy arrived to take their place, and the training started all over again.

Roger looked around at the others going on R&R. On this flight there were no familiar faces. He wondered about his classmate, Terry Ragan, from flight school who had accompanied him to Sydney on his first R&R. If everything had gone well for him, he was probably back in the states by now, training new aviators. Roger didn't think he could handle that. That was one of the reasons he had extended in Vietnam. To get away from the training of new pilots for the war. It was probably glorious at first, telling the war stories that the young trainees wanted to hear. But it would soon grow old. So would living at a training base, carrying the stigma of a serviceman that was only

temporarily stationed at any one place for a short period of time.

Roger would have less than five months to go in country when he returned from Sydney. But the watchword among the pilots was "three months". It seemed that more pilots were lost in the first three and the last three months of their tour than during any other period. The first three months were easy to explain. They hadn't yet learned what it took to survive. The last three months were more difficult. Complacency? Sure, that was part of it. But maybe it was more than that. As pilots tended to approach their DEROS date, they became more nervous and afraid. They lost the confidence that gave them the edge to do their job the way they knew they should. And they had seen too much. They lost the confidence that it was always going to happen to the other guy. And therein lay the key. It was their own personal approach to battle that probably did a lot of them in. Roger rolled over in the seat, and tried to sleep.

The briefing in Sydney was a carbon copy of the earlier one. To Roger, it seemed like a movie that was being watched for the second time. As soon as they were released, Roger made for his hotel room. When he reached it, he picked up the phone. After a long pause, he dialed the Johnsons'. Mrs. Johnson answered, and was happy to hear from him.

"You must come out for tea," she said. Then she asked if Roger could remember the right trains to take. When he hesitated, she quickly gave him a rundown. He thanked her, and hung up the phone. He would have plenty of time for a shower, before he had to catch the train.

Roger arrived at the Johnsons before any of the girls or Mr. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson met him warmly at the door with a great hug. Roger was a little surprised. Entering the house, he joined Mrs. Johnson in the kitchen while she finished preparing tea. He had been sitting at the small table in the kitchen for what seemed a long time when he noticed a coffee pot sitting on the kitchen counter. When he called attention to it, Mrs. Johnson blushed.

Roger laughed as Mrs. Johnson explained that she had purchased it in anticipation of his coming. He had teased her about making instant coffee on his previous visit, explaining that back where he had come from, making instant coffee was considered the mark of a second-rate cook. As the conversation continued, Roger began to relax. He looked out the kitchen window at the carefully tended yard, and the

flowers. The freshly painted fence framed the flower garden. It was almost as if he was seeing it for the first time.

As the family arrived home, each one greeted Roger with enthusiasm. Mr. Johnson had a firm handshake and a warm smile. After tea, the girls started on their homework while Roger and Mr. Johnson sat in the living room with cups of coffee. Roger was still somewhat tense. He couldn't seem to shake the feeling that he was a little out of synch. Mr. Johnson noticed Roger's nervous manner.

"You've had a rough time of it lately, eh?" he asked.

Roger looked closely at him, but there was nothing behind the remark. "Yes. I was shot down two days ago," he said, and looked away. Then he turned back to Mr. Johnson. "It's been a lot tougher lately. I guess I feel like I'm trying to catch up with the rest of the world, or something." Mr. Johnson nodded, and carried the conversation for a time.

Mrs. Johnson finished in the kitchen about the same time the girls finished their studies. The whole family gathered in the living room. Roger tried to keep on subjects close to the family, and asked a lot of questions about school of the girls. As the hour grew late, Mr. Johnson rose.

"It's that time," he said, taking his coat from the closet.

Roger rose quickly, feeling as if he might be intruding on some planned activity.

Jean took his arm. "No, it's fine. You're coming with us."

Roger looked at her warm, brown eyes. Her complexion was even more beautiful than he remembered. "Only if you're sure I'm not intruding," he said.

With that, the whole family and Roger piled into the car. As they drove into Sydney, the conversation loosened. There were a few jokes, some teasing, and much laughter. With Jean beside him, Roger could smell her perfume. It felt wonderful to have such a beautiful woman sitting so close. For a time, Roger paid no attention to where they were going. But soon Mr. Johnson pulled up in front of Roger's hotel. Roger was somewhat surprised, but thought maybe they were meeting some friends of the Johnson's at the hotel. When they entered, Mr. Johnson asked Roger to accompany him to the desk.

When they reached the desk, Mr. Johnson spoke to the clerk. He was checking Roger out of the hotel. Roger was speechless. He meekly handed over his room key, then realized that he had the rest of his gear in his room. Retrieving the key, he went upstairs, and quickly packed. Returning to the lobby, Roger joined the family with his small traveling bag.

On the way back to the Johnson's house, it was explained that it had been a family decision to have Roger stay with them. Roger was truly touched by the hospitality, and felt very close to this Australian family who had taken him in.

Roger was given one of the girls' bedrooms. Jean had a test the next day, so she turned in early. When Roger lay down, the bed felt so soft, and the smell of clean linens filled the room. He fell asleep almost instantly, but awoke less than two hours later. For a few minutes, he tossed and turned, but finally gave up, and got up. Tiptoeing to the kitchen, Roger put on the coffee pot. He found it on the counter, filled and ready. He sat down at the table, and lit a cigarette. As he was filling his coffee cup in the darkness, Mrs. Johnson appeared in the doorway. She was wearing her house slippers, and Roger hadn't heard her approach. He spun around as he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and spilled his coffee.

Mrs. Johnson turned on a small light over the sink, and cleaned up his spill. Roger apologized, but she would have none of it. Together, the two of them sat at the kitchen table. Mrs. Johnson had seen the change in him, too, and this bothered Roger at first. But from her conversation, she was only concerned about him. Roger enjoyed her company, and their discussion ranged far and wide. The time passed quickly as they talked. As the first streaks of dawn began to reach across the sky, Mrs. Johnson bid Roger a good night, and returned to bed.

Roger followed her example a short time later. As he lay back on the bed, it was like a dream. He was afraid to go to sleep for fear that it would all disappear. But fatigue had the upper hand, and Roger slept.

It was a relaxing week for Roger. He spent time in the library, reading about Australia while he waited for Jean to return home from class. While Sydney was a large city, it was very clean as Roger compared it to the large cities he had visited in the states. He enjoyed walking around, and looking at the color of the city. Nearly everyone Roger met

was friendly to him. He just couldn't get over that. There had been little of that on his Christmas leave to the states. What was the difference? He thought about the question some, but finally let it drop.

The weekend came, and the Johnson's took Roger with them on a picnic to the beach. Roger enjoyed the sea, and the sand. Mrs. Johnson had packed mostly canned items, and strangely enough, Roger found the pickled beets the tastiest of all the items offered.

When Jean came home from class the next day, Roger was waiting for her on the front porch. She bounced up the steps, and Roger smiled.

"Hi, Jean. How was your day?" Roger asked.

"Classes were fine, Roger, but I heard some disturbing news."

"What was that?"

"A helicopter pilot on leave from Vietnam killed a girl."

"Really? When did it happen?"

Jean went on to explain that she didn't know when it happened. She had been telling some of her friends about Roger when the subject came up. She even remembered the pilot's name.

Roger stiffened as she recalled the name. It sounded so familiar. Was it one of his classmates....? Or maybe someone in his sister company at Fort Wolters?

Jean hesitated, "Do you know him, Roger?"

Roger's stomach tightened. He really didn't know for sure. He looked away. How could something like that happen in Australia? Where everyone treated him so well. What a memory we're leaving around the world, thought Roger. "I don't know, Jean. The name sounds so familiar.....I,...I just don't know."

Jean's eyes filled with tears. Then she leaned against him. "I'm sorry, Roger. I shouldn't have said anything about it. It's just that I felt so sorry for him. He must have gone through some terrible times to cause him to do something like that..."

Early the next week, Roger took Jean out to dinner at the Top of the Mark, an exclusive restaurant in downtown Sydney. He had made reservations for the two of them. Afterward they went to a movie titled, "The Battle of Britain." It traced the trials and tribulations of England's Spitfires as they protected the country from the German Luftwaffe. Much of the film was dogfights in the sky

over the English countryside. It was a little too close to home for Roger. Afterwards, he and Jean talked about the film. Occasionally, Roger would catch her studying him.

"Am I a little too quiet tonight, or is something wrong?" he asked softly.

She shook her head and smiled at him. "You've lost weight," she answered as she sipped her Coke. "It's been bad lately, hasn't it?"

Roger looked away. Now what do you say, he thought. Jean took his arm, and rubbed his shoulder. "You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want. I think it's swell that you came back. Mum and Dad really like you, you know." Her accent sounded so sweet to Roger.

He smiled, and put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't have enough time to tell you how it is. Let's just say I've been very lucky. Your letters have helped. That movie we just watched, didn't. We should have picked anything but a war film." He smiled at her.

As they rode home in the cab, Jean snuggled close. She felt so warm against him. As they rode out to Jean's house, thoughts tumbled through Roger's mind. One thing came through loud and clear. No matter what happened, he would not make love to her. He found it hard to believe the faith the Johnson's had in him. They had known him less than two weeks, and they had opened their home and their family to him. He had only a few days left, and he didn't want to leave anything behind him that he would be sorry for later.

The lights were out when they arrived at the house. Everyone had gone to bed. Roger and Jean sat for a long time in the kitchen, talking, in the dark. Roger stood up at last, and kissed Jean good night. She pressed against him. Her body felt soft and smooth to his touch. Roger fought his desire. She rubbed his neck as they stood in the moonlight from the window. He pulled away from her.

"It's not that I don't want you, Jean, but you really need to get some sleep."

"Yes, I know," she answered. "Good night, Roger."

"Good night."

Jean turned and slowly walked from the kitchen. Roger watched her leave. Then he sat down and lit a smoke. When his heart had slowed, he stubbed out the cigarette and went to bed. He slept soundly that night, waking only once as songbirds greeted the new day.

The morning Roger was to leave, he tried to think of something that he could do for the family who had treated

him so well. The only thing he had was money. He knew they would never accept it if he offered. Checking his wallet, he counted out eighty dollars. Then he quickly tucked it into the drawer where he had kept his clothes. He hoped they wouldn't be offended. He was sorry to leave the warmth and closeness of this family.

Roger slept off and on during the return flight to Vietnam. He reached Camp Evans late in the afternoon of the next day, making good connections on a flight north to I Corps. He was surprised to find that a new commander had taken over the unit in his absence. Roger wondered what effect that would have on his status as armament officer. The day after he returned, there was a stand down to celebrate the arrival of the new commander. A small trailer full of beer and ice was provided. A crude game of softball was started, and a volleyball net was strung. The steaks came later.

As Roger sat quietly on the sandbags next to the broiling steaks, his crewchief, Alan, approached.

"How was the R&R in Australia, sir? Lots of poontang?"

Roger laughed. "Yeah, lots, Rowland. I tried to smuggle one back for you, but she wouldn't pass customs."

Alan pushed back an unruly blonde curl. "Where do you think I oughta go on R&R, sir? Would you recommend Sydney?"

"If you want to go someplace where the people will appreciate you, that's where you should go, Alan. They're really nice to GI's down there. Won't even let you buy a beer!"

"Now that sounds like my kind of place!" Alan rubbed his hands together.

That night, Roger was just finishing his shower when Major Dasher entered the officers' washroom. Roger decided to ask him about his situation with respect to armament duties. The question was no sooner out, than Roger quickly realized that Dasher was giving him no breaks.

"We're short of pilots, Hunter. Until that situation changes, you'll be back flying like everyone else in this unit."

Roger's heart sank. He didn't want to go back to combat flying. He'd had enough. He would gladly trade the late hours on the armament systems for no more combat flying.

About a week later, Roger was eating lunch in the mess hall, when there was a commotion outside.

"What's going on?" Johnson asked of someone as they came in.

"The old man and the XO just crashed coming out of POL."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Naw, they both walked away from it."

Roger turned to the maintenance officer at the next table. "Bet they had the new ship, that one rigged for the 20 mm. cannon."

The maintenance officer studied Roger for a second. "Yes, that's the one they were assigned today. How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess. Bet they were overloaded. Have you checked the property book on that bird? With all those stress panels and bracing, that ship's a lot heavier than the others."

"Really?"

"You bet. When I was assigned to it, and it was hot, I'd always kick off a couple pair of rockets to shed a few pounds. With the heat and humidity today, they could easily have been overloaded when they came out of the refueling area with a full load of fuel."

"I'll check that when I get over there. Got any other ideas, Hunter?"

Roger turned back to his plate. "No. I've already said more than I should have, I suppose." As Roger finished his statement, he noticed that the room was very quiet. He looked up, and noticed that some of the pilots in the room were looking at him. He turned, and was surprised to see the old man standing right behind him.

The room remained quiet as everyone waited for Major Dasher to speak. Roger's face reddened, and he quickly turned back to his meal. "Sorry, sir," Roger said. "Guess everyone's entitled to his opinion."

"That's right, Hunter, as long as it's just an opinion." Major Dasher quickly left the room to get his lunch.

Justin leaned over and tapped Roger on the shoulder. "Nice goin', Hunter. Talk about timing. With a touch like that, I'll bet you're a real hit with the ladies, too!" Justin laughed, and some of the other pilots joined in.

Roger finished his lunch quickly, and left the mess hall. Boy, I've really blown it with the new commander, thought Roger. For the next few days, Roger avoided the major when he could.

It was an overcast day, and a big insertion operation was underway. All of C Battery's aircraft were put into the air to cover the LZ preps. Missions continued throughout the day. Bradford was now getting short, and he was

assigned to Roger's front seat. Roger was the section leader. On his wing, Jackson was the aircraft commander, and Grimes was in Jackson's front seat. It was quite an assembly of the old timers in the unit. Roger felt comfortable flying with the lot of them. Each and every one had already shown that they had what it takes to fly in any conceivable situation.

One of the first LZ's they prepped was located on a small hilltop. Roger picked a parallel attack, and the two Snakes roared toward the LZ side by side. Roger had the right side, and Jackson had the left. Soon rockets were whistling toward the target. As Roger approached his break, he suffered a hang fire. A hang fire occurred when a rocket motor ignited, but the catch in the rocket pod didn't release the rocket. This particular hang fire was an unusual one, as a rocket on each side of the Snake hung at the same time. It was like a jet assist as the ship lunged forward. Roger tried to keep it pointed in the general direction of the LZ as it slewed from side to side. The airspeed climbed dangerously. Roger jerked the pitch up and down, trying to shake the rockets loose, but it was to no avail. They were now closing on the LZ and approaching red line on the airspeed, and Roger had to break off with the thrust from the rockets still pushing them hard.

As they rolled into the break, Roger brought the nose of the Snake up. As he did, both rockets released at the same instant. To Roger's horror, he watched them as they streaked for the line of slicks that were lining up above them on their approach to the LZ. Roger held his breath as the pair of rockets sailed through the slick formation, barely missing two ships.

"Holy shit! That was close!" exclaimed Bradford. "How fast were we goin' when you started the break?"

Roger looked at the airspeed indicator. "Oh, about a hundred and sixty, I guess."

"We red line at one seventy, you know," Tom was watching him in the rear view mirror.

"Yeah, I know. So what the hell could I do? I tried to shake 'em out."

"Isn't that just typical? Try to shake 'em out, and they won't go. Then you start to break, and they take off like a couple of scalded cats! Sure glad we missed the slicks!"

"Me too," Roger nearly choked on the words.

The section circled until the slicks had dropped their troops. The LZ was cold. As they checked in with Ops on their return to Camp Evans, they were told to refuel at Sally FSB.

"What's the problem, Five Zero?" Roger asked as the message came across the radio.

"Got fuel contamination here. Nobody can use the POL area until they get it cleaned up."

On approach to Sally's refueling area, it looked like a real traffic jam. There were helicopters everywhere trying to get some fuel.

Bradford keyed his intercom, "Boy, this is gonna be a mess of 'wop wops'. Looks like the whole world is tryin' to get some gas here."

Roger saw that there was an open spot at the very end of the refueling area closest to them. He shot his approach, and landed next to the canister that held a refueling nozzle. Jackson was landing very close to them at another nozzle. He was watching his rotor clearance closely as he eased his ship close to the nozzle. After Jackson landed, Roger rolled the rpm down to flight idle, and got out of the ship.

When Roger hit the ground, he put down his clear visor on his helmet, and began refueling the ship. He felt the rotorwash from another ship making an approach to the refueling area. It was blowing strongly underneath the ship, and Roger snuggled up close to avoid the dust and dirt that was blowing around.

In an instant, Roger found himself lying on the ground. It felt like someone had hit him in the head with a hammer. He couldn't see, and fuel burned his eyes. The realization hit him. Something had gone terribly wrong! Fearing fire, Roger jumped up and ran, even though he couldn't see where he was going. Whatever had happened, the ship was sure to burn or explode, and Roger wanted to get in the clear. Tripping, he fell to the ground. Roger flattened against the earth, waiting for the explosion that he was sure would come. When a few seconds passed with no blast, he began to wipe the fuel from his eyes in an attempt to see. Though his vision was blurry, he could see that he was lying in a slight depression with a thousand-gallon fuel blivot! As he rose, he mumbled to himself, way to go, Roger, you can really pick the safe spots! Whirling around, Roger could see that Bradford was still in the front seat of the Snake.

Roger ran back to the aircraft. Wreckage littered the ground.

Reaching the nose of the ship, a wide-eyed attendant was looking at the ship. Roger screamed at him, "Hey you! Get me a grounding wire!" The attendant just stood there, slack-jawed, looking at the carnage before him. "Don't just stand there! Get me a grounding wire!" Roger screamed again. The attendant took one last look, and turned and fled. Roger never saw him again. Roger wanted to get the ship grounded as quickly as possible to keep it from blowing up. Stumbling around the aircraft, he reached the open canopy for the front seat.



Collision at Sally.

Bradford was just sitting there, looking around. "My God! I've never seen anything like it ...," he was saying.

"Are you all right?" Roger asked, but Bradford didn't seem to hear him. Must be in shock, thought Roger. He quickly unbuckled Tom's harness, and jerked him bodily from the ship. He forgot to unplug Tom's helmet, and nearly tore his head off getting him out of the Snake. Standing outside

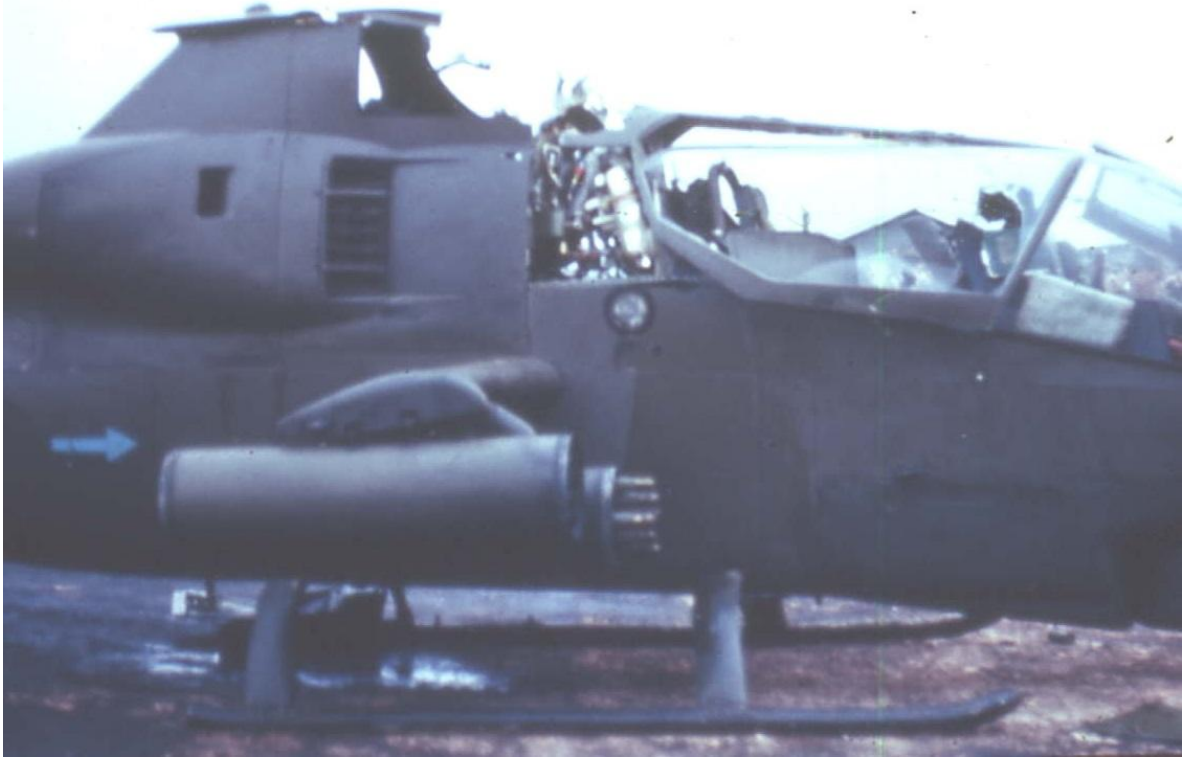
the ship, Roger looked Tom over. "Any hurts, Tom?" Roger asked as he looked closely at Tom's eyes.

"Naw, I'm fine," Tom leaned to one side. "Well, except for my knee." Tom pulled up his flying trousers. A large patch of skin was missing just below his knee. Roger looked into the cockpit. The fire extinguisher had broken loose from its mounts, and was lying on the floor.

"Must have been the fire extinguisher, Tom. It's the only thing I can see that might," Roger stopped in mid-sentence. He had forgotten to shut off the fuel and electrical switches in the cockpit. Quickly he ran around to the other side of the Snake, jumped onto the steps, and shut everything off. Then he looked anxiously for the attendant he had yelled at. With the aircraft not grounded, Roger was afraid the rockets might go off from static electricity. He walked back around to Tom.

Bill Jackson and Paul Grimes were standing next to the nose of the other ship. Roger waved, and Bill waved back, and called over to them, "Wow! Could you believe that?!"

For the first time, Roger looked at the two Snakes. He could scarcely believe the sight before him. Neither of the two ships had rotor blades! They were gone. Between the two ships lay one rotor system, complete with transmission attached. Roger looked across to Jackson's ship, 092. There was a gaping hole where the transmission should have been, and the ship leaned drunkenly toward the tail. There was another transmission leaning against the side of Jackson's ship. Roger wondered where it had come from. He walked back along his own ship. It's transmission was gone, too. The mounts, twisted upward at a grotesque angle, looked like they had been torn loose by a giant hand. The skids were spread, and his ship looked as if it was squatting down. Roger looked down toward the tail. The tail rotor and ninety degree gearbox were gone. There was oil splattered all over the side of the ship. Then he saw the tail numbers.



Where Roger was refueling when the accident happened.

Through the oil splatters, he could make out 153. Roger wanted to cry. Here before him stood all of a crewchief's hard work. Bent, battered, and in pieces. It was unbelievable that neither ship had burned. Roger's head hurt. Jackson came up to him.

"Did you ever see anything like it in your life, Hunter?"

Roger turned to face him, "You OK, Bill?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Think Grimes has a concussion. His eyes are all funny."

Roger looked to where Grimes and Jackson had been standing. A knot of onlookers was beginning to form. They moved warily as they approached the wreckage.

Jackson caught Roger's look. "It's OK. Some medics took Grimes. He'll be OK, Roger. What the hell have you got all over the front of your uniform?"



Rotor system lying between the ships.

Roger looked down. His flight shirt and pants were soaked with fuel. "Oh. JP4. I was refuelin' when it happened Say, Bill, just what did happen?" Roger looked around for another aircraft.

Jackson's face twisted into a wry smile. "I think we parked a little too close."

"What!?"

"Yeah, I think our blades were overlapping when I parked. But see, we were a little above you because of the slope of the ground."

Roger looked, and had to agree with Bill. The ground did slope slightly.

"Then some slick made a low approach over us. Think his rotor wash set our blades to oscillating, and, and, well, they meshed, sort of. And the rest is history," Bill spread his hands before him, taking in the whole scene. His gesture was comical. It was as if he was directing the scene on a movie set.

"Were you still in the ship, Bill?"

Bill laughed. "Nope. I had just gotten down, and was walking around the end of the wing." Roger looked again at the transmission lying against the side of Bill's ship. There was a huge dent just aft of the stubby wing. Bill pointed at the transmission, "That thing went by so close that I could have touched it. And then there was shit

flyin' everywhere." Bill gestured wildly over his head. "I've never seen anything like it."

Bill Baker approached from behind them. "Are you guys OK?"

Both Hunter and Jackson turned around. "Yeah, we're fine."

"You had us worried for a minute. When that rotor system took off."

Hunter and Jackson looked at one another. They turned back to Baker. "What rotor system?"

Baker pointed to 153, "It must have been that one. We were refueling up ahead in line when we saw it go over us like a big frisbee." Jackson and Hunter exchanged looks. "It headed way up that way," Baker pointed toward the other end of the refueling area. "Then it kind of stalled out, and started back down toward us. I had a new guy with me, so I told him he had the ship, and I unassed it. But then the rotor banked off over that way. When it went over those tents, I lost sight of it. It must have hit out in the rice paddies."

A lieutenant approached them. "Who do these belong to?" he asked.

Roger grinned, "Well, we were flying 'em, but they're up for sale now. Why, you wanta make an offer?"

The lieutenant glared at them. "You guys sure screwed up my refueling area."

Roger hardened. "You know, lieutenant, you don't have any grounding wires in your POL (refueling) area. That's a safety hazard, you know. And if we don't get these birds grounded, there's a chance that all those rockets on board might just take off on their own accord. You think you might be able to scrounge up a couple to hook onto these birds?"

The lieutenant's eyes widened, and he took a step back. Then he turned on his heel, "Damn aviators," he muttered.

The three pilots began laughing. Soon tears were streaming down their faces as they held each other up. The onlookers began pointing at them.

Baker choked back a sob, "They must think we're crazy!" That set them all to laughing again.

It wasn't long before they were escorted over to a medical area to be checked for injuries. They made Roger sit outside the tent because he was still soaked in JP4, and smelled rather strong.

By the time the pilots were interviewed by the accident investigation team, it was growing late. Grimes had rejoined them by this time.

"I'm hungry," Grimes said.

Roger hadn't thought about food, but now he was hungry, too. "I could have gone a long time without you mentioning food, Grimes."

Soon the Battalion H model arrived to take them back to Camp Evans. The wreckage had been surrounded with plastic tape, and guards had been posted to keep the souvenir hunters out of the area. Curious onlookers still gazed on the scene. As Roger boarded the slick, he turned for one last look at the ships. He still couldn't believe that they could walk away from wreckage like that with no serious injuries. Thank you, God, he thought.

When the slick reached Camp Evans, it was beginning to rain. When the survivors walked into the mess hall, a cheer went up, and each was presented with a bent beer can in recognition of their accomplishments for the day. Laughter and jokes followed, as they related their stories of the accident.

After supper, the pilots moved to the 1st Platoon hootch. About an hour later, the celebration stopped cold. The Operations officer walked into the hootch, and when he motioned for silence, the partiers settled down. He had a very serious look on his face as he began. "I hate to spoil your party, but I knew you'd want to know. They asked for volunteers to go down and guard those ships until morning. Two crewchiefs volunteered, along with a forklift driver. They had a forklift down there, and they wanted someone to run it in case a ship tried to land at the refueling area tonight. The driver would start the forklift and turn its lights on so the pilot making the approach could see the wreckage. Well, the volunteers took off in Battalion's H model shortly after you guys arrived. Nobody's heard from them since, and it's been almost two hours. We think they're down somewhere. The weather's too bad to get a ship in the air tonight, but you might want to turn in a little early, because we want everyone lookin' for 'em at first light." With that, he turned and left the hootch. The pilots sat stunned, and looked at each other. After a long silence, they began to quietly drift away.

The forklift driver had been one of Bradford's closest friends. Roger's crewchief had volunteered, too. Bradford got up and walked silently to his end of the hootch. Then

the others could hear him swearing, and throwing things on the floor. Captain Riley, who was now in charge of the 1st Platoon, left the others to join Bradford. The few pilots left could hear Bradford's sobs as Riley tried to console him.

Grimes looked at Roger. "I'm sorry about your crewchief, Hunter. Maybe we can find 'em at first light."

Roger finished the beer in his hand in one gulp, "Maybe...."

It was a ship from A Battery that spotted the wreckage the next morning. There wasn't much to see. The H model had bored into a hill and burned. All on board probably died instantly. Bradford was grounded, and was assigned to accompany the forklift driver's remains back to the states. Bradford took the death of his friend hard. The other pilots avoided him until he left to escort the body back to the states.

Roger sat quietly on his bunk, trying to compose a letter to Alan Rowland's parents. It was so hard to know what to say. Indirectly, Roger felt responsible for Alan's death. Roger closed his eyes and could see Alan so clearly on the day of the steak feed less than a week before. He remembered Alan brushing back that unruly blonde curl of his. Through teary eyes, Roger managed to complete the letter. He knew it couldn't begin to sweep away their grief, but he wanted them to know that Alan had done a good job and was appreciated.



SP4 Danny Hanks (Alan Rowland in the book).

When Roger lay down on his bunk that night, sleep refused to come. He finally got up, and walked outside the hootch. The night was overcast, but the rain had stopped. He smoked several cigarettes before he returned. That night his dream of the crash of the slick near the DMZ returned. But in the flames Roger could see Rowland's face. He smiled, and seemed to be saying something, but try as he would, Roger couldn't make it out. He awoke in a heavy sweat. He sat up in the darkness of the hootch. He tried to light a smoke, but his hands were shaking so badly he dropped his lighter.

Roger got angry with himself. So what? he thought. There's nothing I can do to change it. Maybe that old saying, 'only the good die young' is true. He felt around on the floor under his cot and located his lighter. It felt comfortable in his hand. He lit his cigarette. There was no way that he could right all the injustices that had occurred in this stupid war. So why even worry about it? Then the little voice in the back of his mind came to him. 'Because you care, and somebody else cares, too....' Roger shut it off. If this continued, he would never be able to fly tomorrow. And fly he must, thanks to Dasher. Flying

would require all his concentration.... if he was going to live. He smashed his cigarette in the small tin-can ashtray next to his bunk. Sleep came slowly, but it did come. Along with the dream

65: Visitor in the Dark Hootch

As March gave way to April, the weather improved steadily until the Griffins were fighting the dust again instead of the mud. By now, almost all of the C Battery pilots who had come in country with the unit had DEROS'ed. One of the few left was Justin. Roger flew combat missions steadily through April, until Major Dasher had a change of heart. Then he put Hunter back on armament repair duty. Roger was elated. With all the new guys in the Battery, he felt uncomfortable in the air. Even though the old hands had trained them, it just wasn't the same. The togetherness was gone for Roger. The new guys had never seen the Ashau Valley in the summertime. They hadn't flown around the clock, trying to save the survivors of Hamburger Hill. It would never be the same.

The next week brought more bad news as Bobby Wonder earned his second Purple Heart. He was in the back seat of a Snake on a support mission when a round caught him in the back of the knee. Bobby's quick thinking saved his life. Immediately Bobby had realized the seriousness of the wound. The bullet had cut the large artery in the back of his leg, and blood was spurting everywhere. Knowing he could expect no help from the front seat pilot, Bobby grabbed his camera, and used its strap to put a tourniquet on his leg before he passed out. The tourniquet kept him from bleeding to death before the front seat could get the ship back to a Med-evac pad.

For this wound, Bobby went south to Danang. When he returned at last to the unit, he had only three weeks before his DEROS date. The CO let him live out his last three weeks on the ground, and for that, Bobby was grateful. His smile and catching humor were gone. As he packed his bags to leave the Battery, Roger wondered how long it would take Bobby to recover his lost sense of humor.

Roger was still assigned as the armament officer, and his combat flying requirements were very low. One night, the entire 3rd Platoon was gone when Roger returned to the hootch after dinner. There was little to do. Roger went down to the 1st Platoon hootch, and talked with Justin until he grew tired. Then he returned to his hootch, and went to bed. Roger didn't know how much time had passed when he was awakened by the squeaking of the hootch door nearest him. Wide awake in an instant, Roger was afraid to move. Whoever

had entered the hootch was sneaking quietly across the floor toward his bunk.

Roger didn't know if it was a "friendly" or an "enemy," but he was afraid to move for fear he'd give himself away for sure. If he didn't move, they might not see him in his cot. As he listened to the cautious footsteps, Roger tried to make himself part of the cot. With his dusty mosquito netting over him, whoever it was might not even notice him, if he lay still. Roger knew it wasn't a pilot. They always banged through the door no matter what time of night it was. This had to be someone else. But who?

The footsteps passed Roger's cot, and continued down the central walkway in the hootch. After they had passed what Roger considered a safe distance, he allowed himself to breathe a little and consider his next move. If it was the enemy, there might be more of them. Roger strained his ears to see if he could hear anyone else moving around the outside of the hootch. All appeared quiet.

Roger slipped his hand out from under his mosquito netting and up the wall to where his .38 hung from a nail. Easing the snap open on the holster, Roger removed the .38, and quietly swung to the end of the cot. He lifted the mosquito netting, and pointed the .38 down the walkway. His thumb eased the hammer back. There was a sharp, metallic click as the hammer reached full cock, and Roger called out, "If you're American, you'd better say some words in English real quick!"

A sudden movement in the walkway was followed by stammering and stuttering. "D.d.d..Don't sh .. sh ..sh .. shoot! It's it's me, ... Sergeant Black!"

Roger recognized the voice, and lowered the barrel of the pistol. "OK, it's all right, but what the heck are you doing, sneaking around here in the middle of the night?"

Sergeant Black turned on his flashlight, and sat down on the floor of the hootch. His breath was coming in great gulps. He couldn't seem to get his voice to work. "I... I ... Jesus!"

Roger uncocked the pistol, and swung his feet down on the floor. "Are you OK, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Uh, just let me catch my breath, huh?" There was a pause. Black was still sitting on the floor with his flashlight. "You scared the ever-lovin' shit outa me, Hunter!"

Roger chuckled. "Well, what did you expect? You come sneaking in here like some Charlie. Why didn't you just walk in like everyone else?"

"I thought you might be sleeping. I didn't want to wake you up. I just came in to post the aircraft availability for tomorrow. Do you always sleep that lightly?"

Roger laughed. "Hardly. But then, like I say, nobody ever comes sneaking in here. If you'd come walking in like you owned the place, I probably would have slept right through it all."

Sergeant Black gained his composure, and his breathing returned to near normal. He pulled himself erect. "I gotta go. Good night, sir."

"Good night," Roger answered. "Hope I didn't scare you too bad." Sergeant Black left the hootch by the far door without another word. Roger replaced his .38 in its holster. Then he lit a smoke while his nerves settled down. Roger wondered what he'd have done if Sergeant Black hadn't answered as quickly as he had. Roger wasn't sure. The end of his cigarette glowed in the dark. The night was strangely silent. Not even any artillery fire in the distance. Roger stubbed out his cigarette, and slipped back under his mosquito netting.

At breakfast the next morning, Roger found he'd become something of a legend. He couldn't believe the unit was making such a big deal of it. Sergeant Black had put out the word that none of his people were to enter any flight platoon hootch unless there were lights on, and someone was up. Roger felt the eyes of some of the new arrivals on his back as he left the mess hall. He chuckled to himself. They must think these old timers like me are half nuts, he thought. He had never even fired his pistol during his whole tour in Vietnam.

As Roger's tour drew to a close, he was happy to see the days pass quickly. He worked hard on the armament systems through the nights. Sleeping was a lot easier in the daytime. If there weren't weapons systems to work on at night, Roger had a hard time. He couldn't seem to sleep more than two hours at a stretch.

Just after daylight one morning, the sound of explosions woke everyone in the 3rd Platoon hootch.

"What's that?" someone asked.

Roger rolled over, and peered over the plywood half-wall of the hootch. He could see smoke over the 105 artillery battery on the west perimeter of the camp. "Just the 105 battery. Go back to sleep," he said. A moment later the air raid siren went off. Some of the new pilots in the 3rd Herd jumped out of bed to run for the bunker. Roger simply lay on his back and watched. As one of them grabbed his steel pot, he spotted Roger lying calmly on his cot.

"Aren't you coming? That was the incoming siren."

"Yeah, I know it was, but everything that's coming in has already hit. It's daylight out there, and the gooks won't keep shooting in the daytime." Roger's matter-of-fact attitude surprised even himself. It was like he was outside his body watching this strange conversation. "They'll blow the all clear any minute now." The new guy left the hootch in the direction of the bunker, shaking his head. Roger just smiled, and rolled over.

The push into the mountains was on again, and Charlie Battery was covering its share of the action. Airborne in a Snake, Roger was in the front seat. He was flying in the wing ship of a section that was covering an insertion. The troops were being inserted on one of the steep ridges that rose up from the coastal plain. The LZ was not really a landing zone. It was simply a spot that had been picked on a map by those designing the mission.

The slicks weren't landing to drop off the troops, but were using rope ladders instead. To unload from a chopper using rope ladders was a tricky proposition. Two grunts would climb down at the same time on each of two ladders hanging from opposite sides of the slick. Reaching the bottom of the ladder, they were supposed to jump off at the

same time to keep the chopper level. Then the next two would repeat the same maneuver.

The LZ was cold, and the Griffin section simply orbited the slicks as they unloaded. Roger was watching the operation closely, as it was the very first time he had seen rope ladders used. Several choppers had already unloaded when the one now hovering over the drop-off point belched a cloud of black smoke. It immediately began to lose altitude. To keep from crashing into the trees, the pilot dove over the edge of the cliff. As it cleared the last trees, Roger could see that one of the grunts on the rope ladders had hung on rather than dropping off, as his partner had done. The slick was now autorotating, and the pilot had picked a forced landing area far below on the grassy coastal plain. The pilot in Roger's back seat stuck right beside the slick as it continued its descent to the plain. Roger watched the grunt hanging on the rope ladder. Wonder if he knows enough to jump when they get close to the ground, thought Roger.

He didn't. As the slick flared to slow his ground speed, the grunt on the ladder hit the ground hard. As the slick stopped its forward airspeed, and settled to a landing, the grunt came rolling up beside the fuselage. He was all wound up in the rope ladder, and Roger could see the grin on the gunner's face on the near side of the slick. He jumped down from his gunner's position to help untangle the grunt. The pilot in the slick gave Roger's ship a thumbs-up signal. Roger signaled back, and shook his head up and down. It had been a nice landing.

As the Snake pulled up and away from the slick, Roger's back seat came over the intercom. "That was some ride. Bet that grunt won't forget that one for a while."

Roger smiled, "No, he probably won't."

Roger's last mission in country was one of those where nothing goes right. It was a terrible mission to end eighteen long months in Vietnam. Roger was the aircraft commander in the wing ship. Two of the three radios in the lead ship on the mission weren't working. This meant Roger had to communicate with Captain Nelson, the commander in the lead ship, on the FM, the same radio they were using to talk to the grunts they were supporting. This made it difficult to communicate the two ships' tactics as they attempted to hit the target selected by the infantry unit. And then, to top it off, Nelson decided he was going to play recon ship to impress the grunts.

Roger was angry. Cobras weren't noted for their recon ability. There was also another section of Griffins orbiting above the whole show. They had dropped in when they received an early end-of-mission while working for another unit. They called Roger to see if they could be of assistance. Roger welcomed them, but was unable to get Nelson to understand they were standing by. The grunts loved the low-level show by Nelson, but it rubbed Roger against the grain because of the poor radio communications. If Nelson requested covering fire, and the grunts were talking on the radio, Roger wouldn't know that Nelson needed help. All in all, Roger was simply disgusted with the mission.

When they got back on the ground, Captain Nelson had some harsh words for Roger. Roger took them silently. He figured it wouldn't do any good to argue. Nelson already had him tagged for a short-timer's attitude. Maybe Nelson would have to learn the hard way that Snakes are not meant to do recon. Roger remembered the crew in the Jet Ranger that were so intent on their shelling of some spider holes that they never saw the gook who greased them. The vision of the crewman hanging in the tree came clearly into focus as Nelson continued his tirade. Roger finally turned and walked away. It was hopeless.

His action was interpreted as an act of disloyalty by the other pilots in the unit. With only days to go, Roger didn't really care. He had over a thousand hours of combat flying in Vietnam. Not a lot of hours for a slick pilot, but it was a lot of hours for an ARA pilot.

On his last night in Vietnam, Roger was invited to a poker game in the NCO hootch. He accepted the invitation gladly, and played cards until the wee small hours in the morning. When he stood up to go, he dumped his winnings in the middle of the table, and asked Sergeant Black to be sure that all of it was turned into whiskey for those Roger was leaving behind.

The next morning, the Battalion slick picked up Roger at the "hot spot" near the Operations bunker. Roger looked back over the Battery area as they lifted off. Memories rushed in, and blurred his vision. As he thought of Rowland, he realized that Rowland's last minutes of life were spent this very same way -- riding in a slick. Roger blinked back the tears, and looked around for other aircraft.

The slick dropped him at Phu Bai, where Roger had to outprocess from the Division. As he reached the outprocessing clerk's counter, he handed over his orders. The clerk went quickly through his folder, checking the forms.

"Have you received all these decorations?" the clerk asked, pointing to the printing on a form.

Roger pulled back from his daydream. "What?"

"Have you gotten all these here decorations?" the clerk tapped the form with a pencil.

Roger glanced at the form. What difference does it make, he thought. "Yeah. Got 'em all."

The rest of the outprocessing took only a short time. It wasn't long before Roger was boarding a plane at Phu Bai.

The flight to Cam Ranh Bay seemed very short. Roger was directed to the outprocessing center. When he approached the desk, the clerk working there asked for his orders. Roger produced a copy. As the clerk read his orders, Roger looked around, noting the casual atmosphere of the place.

The clerk cleared his throat. "It's too bad you weren't here a couple days ago. I could have sent you home early, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the rules say that we can't keep anyone beyond his DEROS date. But if there's space available, there's nothing that says we can't send someone home a couple days early. I had some room then, but I guess you'll have to go tomorrow. You'll have to get a bunk for the night, sir." The clerk instructed Roger on the sleeping accommodations.

As Roger lay on his bunk that night, many thoughts began running through his head. Up to now, he had been so busy that he hadn't really thought about going home. A lieutenant stopped by his bunk, and asked him if he'd like to share a beer. The offer was too good to pass up. Besides, Roger thought, maybe a couple beers would help him sleep that night.

The lieutenant was finishing his tour, too. He had been stationed in the Central Highlands. Roger listened for a time, but after a couple beers, he tuned out. He had heard enough of Vietnam, the war, and the war stories. Now what he wanted most was some sleep.

The troops ready for departure from Vietnam were called out at various times as aircraft became available to ferry them back to the states. Their DEROS dates were checked,

and those with the earliest dates were allowed to go first. Roger waited throughout the day, and late in the afternoon, he was called for a departing flight.

It was after dark when Roger had completed his final outprocessing and was approaching the "freedom bird" that would take him home. Roger paused for only a moment during the loading process. He took a couple deep breaths, and the smells of Vietnam filled his senses. He looked up at the stars above him, and he thought of those who would never return.

They had given all they could. That was all anyone had ever asked -- that they do their job. Even though Roger wasn't sure what the war was trying to accomplish, he knew that he would never forget those with whom he'd served. Everyone had been an individual, and had had to face the fear of combat in their own way. Each one had to deal with their own thoughts of the war of Vietnam, and set their own personal goals. The thoughts of those he knew well tumbled in upon him. He could remember clearly the smile on Rowland's face the day of the steak feed. The day before he died. And Al Hansen's smiling face. A finer pilot Roger had never met. Lost near an LZ somewhere near a nameless village south of Danang. After all, it was only the people that counted.

From this day forward, every time Roger would see an American flag, he would remember those that rose to the call of duty, for whatever reason. They may not have agreed, but they felt it was their duty to serve. To give the best of themselves to those who fought alongside them.

It was over. Roger turned to the boarding stairs, and unconsciously kicked the dirt from his boots as he climbed them. It was over. He was going home.

Glossary

- ADF - automatic direction finder. It was a navigational aid in the aircraft that could be tuned to non-directional beacons (which included AM radio stations like AFVN) to help the pilot locate his position.
- AFVN - Armed Forces Vietnam. This was the military service radio station in Vietnam. Played popular music.
- airburst - when a shell exploded in the air before it hit the ground or something else relatively solid.
- air-to-air - when two aircraft were talking between themselves, this is the radio channel they used.
- AIT - advanced infantry training. Followed basic training.
- ammo - could mean rockets, bullets, or anything else that could be fired from a weapon.
- AO - area of operations. Geographically where a unit normally operated.
- APC - armored personnel carrier. Sort of like a tank, except it didn't have a big gun, and it carried infantry inside.
- ARVN - Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This was South Vietnam's army.
- APU - auxiliary power unit. This was a gas engine and generator usually on a small trailer or cart that was used to start the aircraft instead of using the aircraft's own battery.
- ARA - aerial rocket artillery. This is what the 4th Battalion, 77th Artillery was called. The units consisted of helicopters carrying rockets as their primary weapons. All armed helicopters serving as weapons platforms were called gunships by the infantry, whether they carried rockets or miniguns, or whatever.....
- ASAP - as soon as possible.
- Ashau - the Ashau Valley, located in the northwestern corner of Vietnam.
- ash and trash - mission consisting of delivering rations, paperwork, or other paraphernalia to a location.
- ASR - aerial surveillance radar. It was used to vector aircraft into an airfield during poor weather.
- autorotation - what a pilot did with a helicopter when the

engine quit. The objective was a controlled crash that the crew could walk away from.

AW - automatic weapon.

AWOL - absent without leave.

Battery - this was an artillery unit, comparable to an infantry company.

berm - a mound of dirt around a fighting position.

BCT - basic combat training.

blivot - a rubberized container; usually for fuel.

boonies - or bush, in Vietnam was anywhere outside a post, rear area, firebase, or some other "civilized" place.

BOQ - Bachelor Officers' Quarters. Where the single officers lived.

bunji cord - a rubberized shock cord, used for hanging the doorgunners' M-60 machine guns in the cargo door openings of the Charlie models.

buy the farm - to die or be killed.

C's - see C-rations.

care package - goodies from home.

Cav - short for 1st Air Cavalry. Also called "pony soldiers" for the horse head patch they wore.

CCN - Command & Control North. This was the name of the Green Beret unit in Quang Tri supported by the ARA and the Marines.

CG - center of gravity

Charlie - shortened from Victor Charlie, which was phonetic alphabet for Viet Cong.

Charlie model - UH-1C helicopter. One of the family of Huey helicopters. It was designed as a weapons platform.

chieu-hoi - an enemy who changes sides voluntarily.....

Chinook - Chinook helicopter. It was larger than a Huey and had twin main rotors - one on each end of a bread-loaf shaped fuselage.

chunker - slang for the 40 mm. grenade launcher.

C-model - short for Charlie model Huey helicopter.

claymore - claymore mine. Housed in curved plastic for weatherproofing, this little jewel had ball bearings on the concave side, and the back was packed with plastique explosive. It was detonated with a "cricket", a hand-held clicker that produced an electric charge to detonate the explosive.

CO - the unit commanding officer.

comeshaw - trading, or bartering supplies, normally outside usual administrative channels.

commo - communications

concertina wire - coiled, springy wire that was placed around defensive positions, such as firebases, to slow down enemy assaults.

conex - the slang term applied to conex containers - large, steel boxes, about six feet by six feet by six feet that were used to ship equipment from the US to Viet Nam.

co-pilot - in the helicopters, the co-pilot was the second-in-command, and normally flew from the right seat in the C-models, and the front seat in the Cobras.

C-rations - Canned rations furnished in the field.

crewchief - crewmember responsible for the maintenance on the aircraft. Also acted as a door-gunner, manning one machine gun on the C-models during missions.

cross-check - the supposedly orderly progression of the pilots vision across all the flight and engine instruments. The cross-check was used constantly when the aircraft was being flown on instruments.

collective - commonly called the pitch control, or just pitch, it controlled the pitch in the rotor blades to make the ship climb. It was controlled by the pilot's left hand.

cyclic - or joystick, it controls the tilt of the rotor disk. It attaches to the floor directly between the pilot's feet and rises just above his knees.

deadhead - an empty return flight.

delinking feeder - part of the minigun. It stripped the belt links from the bullets. It was a constant source of irritation, as malfunctions created a real mess.....

DEROS - the date a serviceman was supposed to leave country when his tour ended.

DFC - Distinguished Flying Cross. A medal awarded for aerial heroics, or stupidity, depending on the situation.

dink - slang for Vietnamese person.

DJ - disk jockey.

DMZ - Demilitarized Zone, it marked the boundary between North and South Vietnam.

Dragon - call sign of A Battery, 4th of the 77th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division. The Dragons were the Griffins sister unit, as were the Toros which were B Battery.

dress-blues - an Army officer's dressiest dress uniform.
The only time most warrant officers wore it was when they graduated from flight school.

duffel - or duffel bag, it was the large, round bag in which Army personnel carried most of their belongings when traveling between duty stations.

Dustoff - the radio call sign of med-evac helicopters.

eggbeaters - a slang term for helicopters.

end-of-mission - when this message was received from the infantry being supported, the ARA section could return to base.

enroute - on the way, or headed for your position.

ETA - estimated time of arrival. When you think you're gonna reach wherever it is you're headed.

FAC - forward air controller. These were Air Force pilots who flew little "push-pull" fixed-wing aircraft, and coordinated aerial attacks.

FDC - fire direction center, where calls for artillery support were coordinated with available artillery resources.

fixed-wing - a "regular" airplane with a rigid wing was call a fixed-wing, as opposed to a helicopter which was called rotary wing.

fleschette - a rocket warhead which contained thousands of little darts, rather than a high explosive.

FM - frequency modulation radio, normally used for air-to-ground, or ground-to-ground communication.

FO - forward observer. The grunt artillery spotter who identified the target to ARA ships.

FOD - foreign object damage. When something got into the air intake of a turbine engine that wasn't supposed to get there, it would usually cause FOD.

freedom bird - the large, jet aircraft that flew returning servicemen home.

freq - radio frequency.

FSB - fire support base.

gaggle - or flock, it commonly referred to a loose formation of aircraft.

GCA - ground controlled approach radar. In really bad weather, these guys could talk an aircraft all the way to the ground.

gen - slang for generator

GI - a US soldier. Also slang for "gone insane".

go home - depending on usage, it could either mean returning to base after a mission, or finishing one's tour and returning to the U.S.

gook - slang for a Vietnamese person.

Greenwich Mean Time - or Zulu time, is the time recorded in aircraft log books. Actually it's the time of day at the zero degree meridian which is located somewhere near the British Isles.

Griffin - call sign of C Battery, 4th of the 77th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division.

groundspeed - an aircraft's speed relative to the ground. When bucking a headwind, groundspeed would be less than the indicated airspeed of an aircraft.

grunt - an infantryman.

gyrenes - Marines.

hardstand - a term applied to a paved area.

high-speeds - jets.

highers - or uppers, were people of higher rank to which some decisions had to be referred.

Hiller - one of the training helicopters used at Fort Wolters.

hootch - term applied to living quarters that were usually constructed of plywood with tin roofs.

Huey - the helicopter that became the workhorse of the Vietnam conflict. It came in any number of configurations and models.

I&I - slang for R&R; stood for intoxication and intercourse.

IFR - instrument flight rules, which usually meant flying without visual reference to the ground.

II-S - a student draft deferment.

IG - inspector general, or a tough, annual inspection.

inop - inoperative; doesn't work.

IP - instructor pilot.

jarheads - Marines.

JP-4 - jet or turbine fuel.

jump-qualified - someone who was qualified to jump out of perfectly good airplanes.

jury-rig - to haywire something together; to make something work using whatever was available.

KP - kitchen patrol; assigned to temporary work in the kitchen.

Land of the big PX - slang for the United States.

latrine - head, susie, bathroom, outhouse,.....

lima charlie - meant "loud and clear" when telling someone how well you heard them on the radio. "Five-by-five" meant the same thing.

LOH - light observation helicopter; pronounced, "loach" and rhymes with coach.

low-level - referring to how high above the ground the aircraft was flying. In training, this was anything less than 100 feet above the ground; taking heavy fire, it was with the skids in the trees or brush.

Lt - abbreviation for lieutenant.

LZ - landing zone; where helicopters landed while loading or unloading troops or whatever they carried....

M-14 - semi-automatic rifle used in training. Seldom seen in Vietnam, unless you were a Marine..

mayday - call that went out on the radio when everything went to hell in a handbasket (somebody was in deep trouble).

med-evac - who was called when a casualty had to be evacuated, or hauled back to the hospital for attention.

mg - machine gun.

mid-air - usually slang for a mid-air collision between aircraft.

mikes - commonly used in radio talk for "minutes, meters," or some word beginning with "m". You had to figure out the word from the context of the transmission.

minigun - a six-barreled machine gun that had a very high rate of fire.

Molotov cocktail - a container filled with a specially prepared mixture containing gasoline and carrying a fuse. They would burst into a ball of flame when thrown against a target.

Montagnards - Vietnamese mountain people.

MP - military police.

MPC - military payment certificates. Often called funny

money.

nav lights - the navigation, or "clearance", lights on the outside of an aircraft.

NCO - non-commissioned officer, like a sergeant.

NDP - night defensive position.

NG - National Guard.

ninety-day wonder - a 2nd Lieutenant who had come through a college ROTC program.

Nomex - the name applied to fire-retardant flight suits.

non-commissioned officer - see NCO.

NVA - North Vietnamese Army. These troops were considered vastly superior to Viet Cong units, and were usually better equipped and trained.

one-eighty - to reverse one's course, or turn 180 degrees.

Ops - operations. The nerve center of a flight unit.

outprocessing - what everyone had to do before they could leave any duty station.

overrevving - or overspeed, going beyond the red line rpm on either the rotor system or the engine. This could contribute to structural failure.

overspeed - see overrevving.

PBR - patrol boat river, used by the Navy for patrolling the inland waters in Vietnam.

PFC - private first class.

piasters - Vietnamese money. The exchange rate varied, but was something like 250 piasters per US dollar.

plexiglass - what the aircraft windows or canopies were made of.

POL - This stood for petroleum, oil, lubricants. Usually referred to a refueling area.

poontang - also called sex, nookie, and lots of other terms.

post mortem - after death; after the fact; after the action.

postflight - after the flight; when pilots were supposed to check for bullet holes or other damage....

PRC-25 - a backpack radio widely used in Vietnam.

pre-flight - a check of the aircraft made before it was flown.

prelanding - an instrument check made prior to landing an aircraft.

pre-takeoff - a final check of instruments prior to taking off.

PT - physical training.

pugil sticks - These were sticks about four feet long with large, padded ends which were used for hands on hand-to-hand combat training.

PX - a military store.

R&R - rest and recuperation, or relaxation; a vacation from combat.

RA - regular army.

rear - any area not on the front line. Posts near the populated areas were commonly referred to as "rear areas".

recon - short for reconnaissance.

repo - short for replacement. "New guys" coming in-country were often called "repos".

RLO - real live officer. Anyone equal to, or above the rank of lieutenant. Warrant officers were not RLO's.

roger - word used to acknowledge a radio transmission.

ROTC - Reserve Officers Training Corps. This was a course of studies pursued by prospective officers while in college.

rotorwash - wind from a hovering helicopter's rotor blades.

RPG - rocket propelled grenade. Also called B-40's or B-41's. Total disaster when they struck a helicopter....

RVN - Republic of Vietnam.

salal - a shrub common to the Pacific Northwest. Grows to several feet in height with hard, shiny leaves.

sampan - Vietnamese boat, in a variety of shapes.

ship-to-ship - a term used to describe normal radio traffic between helicopters.

short-timers - those that had less time to go in-country than you.....

sidearm - pistol on the hip.

side-slipping - practiced to avoid enemy fire or lose altitude; the ship was flown out of trim.

sierra - phonetic alphabet for s; commonly used to mean "south".

single-ship - all by yourself; no wingman around.

sitrep - situation report; what was going on.

skivvies - underwear, shorts, briefs, jockies.....

slick - a ship whose primary mission was to ferry infantry from one location to another.

slipstream - the air passing by an aircraft caused by the aircraft's forward motion.

slope - slang for Vietnamese person.

snoose - chewing tobacco; or very commonly, Copenhagen, in the round cardboard box with the tin lid.

SOI - signal operating instructions; the book for converting codes to radio frequencies.

stagefield - where the training choppers converged to practice.

stand-down - an infrequent day off from combat for an entire unit.

STRAC - very military; very sharp; spit and polished.

TAC - short for TAC officer; the real officer who ran the show in flight school.

TI - technical inspector; the man who could ground an aircraft because of damage.

tie-down - usually a ring in the deck or the back wall of the helicopter, used to fasten things to. Also the metal hook with attached line that was used to tie down the main rotor blade on a helicopter.

Toro - call sign of B Battery, 4th of the 77th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division.

translational lift - what you needed to make a helicopter fly, instead of just hover.

UH-1C - The C model of the Huey helicopter. Had a bigger engine and a wider rotorblade than the B model. Usually used for a gunship...

UHF - ultra high frequency; another radio the pilot had to listen to in the air. Used for air-to-air communication, or landing and takeoff instructions.

USO - United Service Organization; put on the Bob Hope show.

VC - short for Viet Cong; the bad guys or enemy.

VHF - very high frequency; one of the radios carried aloft. Used for air-to-air communications.

WAC - Women's Army Corp

whirly-birds - slang for helicopters.

wilco - will comply

willy peter - white phosphorus shells that made white smoke.

wingman - who was supposed to be covering your tail.

wingnut - Air Force pilot.

WOC - warrant officer candidate; those aspiring to become

Army helicopter pilots were WOC's.
WSP - Washington State Patrol
WSU - Washington State University in Pullman, Washington.
WW II - World War II, in case you missed history lessons. Otherwise known as the last
"real" war.....
XO - executive officer; the 2nd in command after the CO.
z's - sleep, snooze, or catnap.
zipperhead - also zip, a slang term for a Vietnamese person.
Zippo - the one reliable lighter in Vietnam.
zoomie - Air Force pilot.